Strategies Used by Iraqi EFL Students To Process English Idioms

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Abstract

Idioms are considered to be a type of phraseological units which are largely figurative in nature and widely used in human languages. In fact, the level of command of idioms serves as an important indicator of language proficiency. Many non-native learners of English do their best to be fluent and have a native-like proficiency; this entails, among other things, a good mastery of multiple words expressions in general and idioms in particular. Perhaps the most difficult part in learning idioms for EFL learners is learning both literal and figurative meanings of these expressions. The present research attempts to investigate the strategies used by Iraqi EFL learners of English to identify the meaning of unfamiliar idioms. To achieve the aim of the present research, it is hypothesized that there is no statistically significant difference among EFL university students as far as the guessing strategies are concerned. To examine the validity of this hypothesis, a sample was chosen from the second–year students at the Department of English (College of Education for Humanities / University of Mosul) during the academic year 2012-2013. The sample consisted of 39 students. Since the present research requires preparation of two tools, the researchers designed an idiom familiarity questionnaire and a questionnaire to identify the strategies used by the subjects to infer the meaning of idioms. The results reveal that there is statistically significant difference among EFL university students as far as the guessing strategies are concerned.

Keywords: Idioms, L2 Idioms Comprehension and guessing strategies.

The Problem

Iraqi University students of English have problems in comprehending English unfamiliar idioms appropriately and adequately; this may be ascribed to the fact that these expressions are highly interactive items that are loaded with extra meanings. People do not use idioms randomly or without motivation, but they use them with the intention of communicating more than what is said or written, i.e. there is a considerable difference between the literal meaning and the idiomatic meaning of the idiomatic expressions. Cooper (1999:
233) supports the idea that English idioms are difficult for English native speakers, and then they would be much more problematic for ESL/EFL learners. Although idiomatic expressions are of great popularity in English, they are rarely found in curriculum of English departments in Iraqi Universities.

**The Aim**

The present research aims at investigating the major strategies Iraqi EFL students employ in processing English unfamiliar idioms while they are exposed to written materials.

**Hypothesis of the Study**

To achieve the aim of the present research, the following null hypothesis is posed. The Alpha level is set at 0.05:

There is no statistically significant difference among the ratios of subjects in the strategies guessing questionnaire.

**The value**

The importance of this study lies in the fact that it can contribute to a better understanding of idiomatic expressions by Iraqi EFL students, since most of the studies on English idioms have concentrated on how native speakers understand them.

**Procedures of the Study**

The procedures followed in this study are as follows:

1. A questionnaire containing 90 idioms which are not of a specific semantic category and whose meanings are not transparent will be presented to 39 students who are randomly selected as the sample of the research from the second–year students at the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul for the academic year 2012-2013. The students will be asked to guess the meaning of the given idioms and the idioms that are identified will be excluded.

2. The subjects will be taught how to discover and understand idiomatic meaning by experimenting and evaluating possible answers through a trial and error manner, embedding the idioms within contextual examples and remembering expressions in L1 language that are identical or similar enough to the L2 idioms.

3. At the end of the experiment, a strategies guessing questionnaire in which a list of six strategies for L2 idioms processing will be presented to the sample of the study. The strategies guessing questionnaire aims at specifying the strategies the subjects use to comprehend the given idioms. The subjects are required to choose only one strategy for each idiom, i.e. only the strategy that led directly to the response. If none of the strategies is selected the subject is asked to mention the strategy that he/she used. The researchers have adopted Cooper’s model (1999) in designing the
strategies guessing questionnaire and modified his list of strategies depending on related studies.

The Nature of Idioms

According to Baker (1992: 63), idioms are "frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components". These expressions are so common and inherent in human language. A significant part of LI everyday linguistic repertoire is formed by idioms and idiom-like constructions. Furthermore, the level of command of idioms serves as an important indicator of L2 proficiency. In other words, fluent and native-like language entails a good mastery of idioms (Liu, 2008: xiii).

Idioms and Idiomaticity

Carter (1987 cited in Meryem, 2009: 11) defines idioms as special combinations with restricted forms and meanings that cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of the words which make them up. In order to understand idioms, the distinction between idioms and idiomaticity should be clarified. Fernando (1996: 30) highlights that idioms and idiomaticity are closely related, but they are not identical. The basis of both is the habitual co-occurrence of specific words together. According to Fernando (1996: 30), "idiomaticity" implies how native speakers of a language successfully connect words, or units of language, in a native-like manner, for instance word combinations, such as "catch a bus" and "strong coffee", indicate idiomaticity, but they are not idioms since they are unrestricted in their variants: catch a tram, black coffee. These variations are idiomatic expressions exemplifying idiomaticity, but they are not idioms. Fernando (1996:31) states that while habitual co-occurrence produces idiomatic expressions, only those expressions which become conventionally fixed in a specific order and lexical form, or have only a restricted set of variants, acquire the status of idioms and are recorded in idiom dictionaries.

Idiom Processing and Comprehension

Compared to the large body of research on idioms processing and comprehension in the first language, there is a lack of research on how idioms are processed in L2. The studies that do exist do not, for the most part, attempt to identify a unique system for processing idioms in L2. They focus, rather, on strategies non-native speakers use to comprehend idioms (Cieslicka, 2006:118).

L2 Idiom Processing and Comprehension

The L2 idiom processing does not completely resemble any of the well-established models in LI idiom processing; instead L2 learners use a variety of strategies applying a heuristic model of idiom processing (Zhang, 2009: 18). Other things that should be taken into
account while processing L2 idioms are the context in which the idiom is embedded and the literal meaning of the expression (Cooper, 1999: 254).

**The Heuristic Model**

According to Coryell (2012: 24), this model was first introduced by Cooper (1999). In teaching, heuristic implies that learners are encouraged to learn, discover, understand, or solve problems on their own by experimenting, by evaluating possible answers or solutions, or through trial and error (Cooper, 1999, 254-255). As a procedure, heuristic means that an idiom is interpreted by discovery and experimentation in a trial-and-error, rule-of-thumb manner rather than following a planned route specified by an algorithmic approach.

**Major Strategies Employed in L2 Idiom Processing**

As it is supposed by the heuristic model of idiom processing, L2 learners are capable of inferring the meaning of idiomatic expressions through the use of an interpretative approach in which they experiment different strategies depending on the transparency/opaqueness, decompositionality, and or familiarity of idioms (Coryell, 2012: 25).

Cooper (1999) uses the think-aloud research method to investigate the kind of strategies L2 learners employ in the comprehension of unfamiliar idioms. The results reveal that a number of strategies have been used to comprehend idioms. According to Bulut and Celik-Yazici (2004: 110), Cooper (1999) classifies those strategies into two categories: "preparatory" and "guessing". The first category comprises three strategies: repeating or paraphrasing the idiom, requesting information and discussing and analyzing the idiom. The second category consists of four strategies: guessing from context, using the literal meaning, using background knowledge, referring to an L1 idiom to understand L2 idioms. Moreover, the type of the idiom (formal, conversational, or slang) does not affect the comprehension of the idiom.

In the present research, Cooper’s second category has been adopted and modified since Cooper (1999) states that the guessing strategies are the ones that lead to the correct answers more than the other strategies.

❖ **The Strategy of Using Contextual Information**

Contextual information provides clues to infer the meaning of unknown words. This is clearly an effective strategy which helps learners in vocabulary learning. Henceforth, such contextual clues seem to have a considerable effect on L2 idioms comprehension particularly in understanding opaque idioms whose meaning cannot be
inferred from the individual word meanings (Zarei and Rahimi, 2012: 24).

In this strategy, L2 learners discuss the situation in which the idiom is embedded and clearly make reference to the situation to infer the meaning of the expression (Cooper, 1999: 246). For example, the occurrence of kicked in the context of an old and sick man, for instance, renders the literal action of "kicked the bucket" in favour of its figurative meaning "die" (Tabossi and Zardon, 1993: 148).

According to both Cooper (1999) and Bulut and Celik-Yazici (2004), this strategy is not only the most frequently employed strategy; it is also the most effective one in terms of assisting subjects in arriving at the correct meaning of idioms. In addition, Cooper (1999) and Bulut and Celik-Yazici (2004) discover that the strategy in question always appears to be the first strategy consulted in the heuristic model. Following this, they hypothesize that L2 learners usually will not resort to other strategies until they realize that the strategy of using contextual information fails to help them arrive at a meaningful interpretation of the unknown idiom, i.e. context serves to restrict the number of potential interpretations (Leung, 2008: 72).

❖ The Strategy of Using the Literal Meaning of the Idiom

Cooper (1999: 249) states that in order to be capable of using this strategy, EFL students should be aware of the metaphorical aspect of idioms and concentrate on the literal meaning of the expressions as a key to the figurative meaning. This is in line with theories of L1 processing that propose that idioms are motivated by metaphorical connections between literal and figurative meanings (Coryell, 2012: 26). An illustration of this strategy is presented by Cooper (1999: 249) as he discusses a subject who was able to interpret burn the candle on both ends by understanding that wax would melt more quickly if burned on both ends and making a metaphorical connection to working too hard.

Kecskes (2000 cited in Cieslicka, 2006: 120) has suggested that, due to the lack of metaphorical competence in L2, second language users are less likely to rely on literal meanings of figurative utterances when comprehending figurative phrases.

❖ The Strategy of Using Students' Background Knowledge

The use of pragmatic knowledge, or knowledge of the world in general is particularly important in dealing with figurative L2 idioms. L2 students rely on such knowledge to explain and clarify idioms and their context. Students, for example, may remember that they have learned the idiom in a language class or they have heard it for the first time on TV or in a song or that they might have heard their friends and acquaintances using the expression (Cooper, 1999: 250).
Leung (2008: 319) states that when interpreting the meaning of a figurative idiom, L2 learners have to first understand its literal meaning. In working out the meaning of the idiom literally within a given context, L2 learners will find that the literal meaning doesn’t make sense and then move on to reinterpret the idiom using pragmatic knowledge, aiming at finding the idiom’s intended meaning.

Coryell (2012: 26) points out that the use of background knowledge often overlaps with the use of the literal meaning of an idiom to work out its figurative meaning. For example, Cooper (1999) cites the following extract from the think-aloud transcription of a subject who was guessing the meaning of the idiom *to roll up his sleeves* in order to illustrate this strategy:

"When I make an image of this phrase, to roll up his sleeves, I think of somebody who is trying to get ready to do something, to work, so I think that’s what it means". (Cooper, 1999: 243)

On one hand, the subject was making use of the idiom's literal meaning in order to figure out its intended meaning. On the other hand, the subject was also drawing on his/her common world knowledge about the scenario to roll up one's sleeves, an action that someone normally does before starting to work.

The use of pragmatic knowledge is often extended to metaphorical association. Such an extension of the use of pragmatic knowledge was suggested by Abdullah and Jackson (1998) as they concluded that in processing idioms that were different in form but similar in meaning and function to L1 idioms, L2 learners relied completely on pragmatic knowledge and metaphorical association. For example, with the idiom *to give someone the cold shoulder*, the subjects inferred that the word *cold* could be metaphorically associated to *unwelcome* since *cold* meant the opposite of *warm* (Leung, 2008: 73).

**The Strategy of Using LI Linguistic Knowledge**

Most of the previous research on L2 idiom processing (cf.; Irujo, 1986 and Abdullah and Jackson, 1998) has been concerned with transfer, i.e. the effect of L1 idioms lexical or pragmatic similarity on L2 learners' comprehension of idioms. When trying to figure out the meaning of L2 idioms, non-native language learners may remember expressions in their native languages that are identical or similar enough to the L2 idioms. Such expressions can aid in their interpretation (Cooper, 1999: 250). However, L2 learners' reliance on their own L1 in L2 idiom processing may assist or hinder their understanding of L2 idioms, i.e. the transfer from L1 idioms to L2 idioms can be a positive one which assists understanding or a negative one which hinders understanding (Leung, 2008: 74).
The extent of the influence of L1 varies according to whether the L2 idiom has a comparable counterpart in L1 and, if there is a counterpart, to what degree the L1 counterpart resembles or differs from that in L2 (Coryell, 2012: 24).

Irujo (1986: 288) believes that there is a positive transfer from L1 to L2 in terms of L1-L2 identity and similarity, i.e. the use of L1 may assist L2 learners in their comprehension of L2 idioms which are identical or similar to L1 equivalents and idioms that have no similar or identical L1 equivalents cause difficulty for L2 learners. Abdullah and Jackson's (1998 cited in Leung, 2008: 76) findings are in line with Irujo’s in the sense that there is positive transfer from L1 to L2 given that the counterparts are identical in form and meaning.

In addition, there is also negative transfer in idioms that are identical in form but different in meaning. Mahmoud (2002: 3) provides a number of cases of negative transfer, in which the error could be attributed to the fact that a completely different form is used in Arabic to express the same meaning of the English idiom (See Table 1):

- in the seventh sky (= on cloud nine).
- he was an ostrich (= chicken-hearted).
- drink from the sea (= go and fly a kite).
- as their mothers born them (= in their birthday suits).
- a ring in her finger (= under her thumb).

Other cases of negative transfer are Arabic and English use of similar words and structures to express slightly or completely different meanings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table (1): The Negative Transfer</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Idiom</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red-faced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pull one's leg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stretch one's legs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>head over heels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Using the Mental Imagery to Deduce the Idioms Meaning**

According to Pimenova (2011: 84), mental imagery is defined as seeing a set of mental pictures or images in a person's mind while figuring out the meaning of idiomatic expressions, i.e. students make use of their imagination to comprehend the idioms' meanings visually. Little attention has been paid to the role of this strategy in the process of understanding figurative language. However, in some theoretical frameworks, imagery is regarded as an important component in discovering the figurative meaning of idioms (Janyan and Andonova
Gibbs and O’Brien (1990 cited in Janyan and Andonova, 2000: 693) believe that children and non-native speakers of a language who are not experienced in that language may form mental images as a way of understanding idioms. Kovecses (2010: 233) believes that an idiom is not just an expression that has a meaning that is somehow special in relation to the meanings of its constituting parts, but it arises from our more general knowledge of the world embodied in our conceptual system. According to Kazemi, Araghi, and Bahramy (2013: 46), mental images L2 students form in order to understand unknown idioms are structured by their conceptual system that has a metaphoric basis, i.e. students know what the idioms really mean because of the influence that conceptual metaphors have on their mental images. Consequently, this conceptual system provides a motivating link between an idiom and its figurative meaning. It is because of this motivation that the meanings of idioms are not seen as arbitrary and henceforth can be better grasped by L2 students.

Janyan and Andonova (2000: 694) state that although this strategy can be helpful in figuring out the meaning of idioms, the effect of this strategy is particularly salient in the processing of transparent idioms. For example, the idiom "swims like an axe" can be understood by L2 students through imagining an axe in water and "see" the axe sinking immediately. The next step could be realizing that the idiom could be referring to a person who cannot swim.

Focusing on (a) Key Word (s).

Knowing a particular word or words in L2 unfamiliar idiom can aid in figuring out its meaning. This strategy is adapted from Rohani, Ketabi, and Tavakoli(2012) and Bulut and Celik-Yazici (2004). According to Rohani et. al. (2012: 110), L2 student may choose specific word or words within a given idiom as a key to its figurative meaning, the key word is selected by students because it is familiar. For example, students manage to understand the idiom "To be up to creek without a paddle" because they know what "paddle" means so "without paddle" gives an idea that you are in trouble (Bulut and Celik-Yazici, 2004: 110). Gibbs (1994: 288) believes that the idea that certain words in an idiomatic expression are more important or key in determining the figurative meaning of these expressions seems very plausible. What constitutes the key word in an idiom is an empirical issue; students process an idiom in a literal manner until some special or key word triggers some kind of figurative processing.

Methodology

The Population and Sample of the Research

The population of the present study consists of the second year students at the University of Mosul, College of Education for
Humanities, Department of English for the academic year 2012-2013. The total number of the population is 193 students. The sample of the research was randomly chosen from the population. The total number of the sample subjects was 39 students. The reason behind choosing the second year students lies in the fact that second year students study reading comprehension for the second year. Added to that, they are intermediate learners of English, i.e. they have adequate knowledge about idioms and they are not beginners who do not have any idea about idioms.

The Instruments of the Research

For the purpose of achieving the objectives of the present research and testing the hypothesis, the researchers designed a questionnaire to examine the subjects' familiarity of idioms and a strategies guessing questionnaire.

1. A Questionnaire to Examine the Subjects' Familiarity of Idioms

In order to select the idioms to be included in the strategies guessing questionnaire, the researchers designed an idiom familiarity questionnaire which contained 90 idioms that represented a mixture of different semantic categories of idioms. The researchers chose idioms whose meanings were less transparent as transparent idioms do not present a challenge and therefore do not require extra attention from students. The questionnaire was administrated on 12th, March, 2013 to the subjects and lasted about an hour. In this questionnaire, the subjects were asked to give the meaning of idioms. In order to avoid anything that may affect the results of the research, any idiom the subjects were able to explain its meaning was excluded from the research. Idioms used in the questionnaire were chosen from dictionaries of idioms, namely Oxford Dictionary of Idioms by Siefring (2004), McGraw-Hill’s Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs by Spears (2005), A Book of English Idioms by Collins (1961), The Free Online Dictionary by Farlex. Based on the results of the familiarity questionnaire, the participants were unable to give the meaning of most idioms in the questionnaire, only 10 idioms were given nearly accurate answers, so they were excluded. The total number of idioms used in the strategies guessing questionnaire was 10. These were chosen randomly from the 80 idioms which the subjects were unable to provide their meaning.

2. Strategies Guessing Questionnaire

Participants usually use certain strategies in the process of comprehending idioms. These strategies represent cases which participants rely on in interpreting idioms (Cooper, 1999: 244). In the present research, a questionnaire has been used to identify the
strategies Iraqi EFL students resort to while guessing the meaning of unfamiliar idioms.

**Constructing the Items**

In the light of the available literature and sources that deal with the guessing strategies used to infer the meaning of L2 unfamiliar idioms, the researchers modified the list of strategies identified by Cooper (1999) depending on some studies such as Rohani et al., (2012), Xiao and Wenzhong (2006). The researchers chose ten idioms out of the 80 idioms which the subjects were unable to provide their meaning in the idioms familiarity questionnaire. Each idiom was embedded in a sentence and the subjects were required to select the correct definition of the idiom from four choices presented under each sentence. A list of six guessing strategies was presented after each item and the subjects were required to select the strategy they rely on when guessing the meaning of the idiom. In this questionnaire, the subjects were directed to choose one strategy for each idiom, i.e. only the one that led directly to the response and this is in line with the Cooper’s original model.

**The Experiment Application**

After preparing the instruments of the research and the lesson plan, the researchers presented an introductory lecture to the subjects of the research on 31st, March, 2013. During the lecture, the researchers informed the subjects about the different strategies that can be used to infer the meaning of the unfamiliar idioms, i.e. using contextual information, using the literal meaning of the idiom, depending on background knowledge, using LI linguistic knowledge, using the mental imagery to deduce the meaning and focusing on (a) key word(s) in order to make them familiar with these strategies. The practical application of the experiment began on 1st, April, 2013 and it lasted until 30th, April, 2013, i.e. it lasted for four weeks, 2 lectures a week to come to the sum total of 8 lectures. The following procedures were used for conducting the lesson:

**The Teaching Materials**

The researchers used 70 idioms out of the 80 idioms the subjects were unable to give their meanings in the idiom familiarity questionnaire as teaching materials throughout the experiment. The researchers embodied these idioms in context in order to aid the subjects in understanding the meaning of the idioms and make them familiar with the use of idioms within context as idiomatic expressions can be better comprehended through context.

**The Lesson Plans**

After reviewing the models of teaching plans in previous studies (See, Kömür and Çimen (2009), Fotovatnia and Khaki (2012) and Husna, Jufri and Fitrawati(2012), the researchers designed a daily
lesson plan for teaching idioms to the sample of the study. The lesson plan adopted the KWL strategy as such a strategy provides opportunities to practice different pragmatic abilities the subjects need in their attempt to comprehend idioms. In the first lecturer, the subjects were made familiar with this strategy. The researchers gave a detailed verbal explanation about this strategy illustrating that it consisted of three steps: brainstorming and categorizing everything the subjects know about the topic, questioning to set purpose to read, and examining answers to those questions. A copy of the KWL chart was presented to the subjects explaining that each of the KWL three steps was recorded on the related column of this chart.

The Application of the Strategies Guessing Questionnaire

After teaching the subjects the 70 idioms via the KWL strategy, the researcher administrated the strategies guessing questionnaire on 8th of May, the time needed to answer its items was about 20 minutes.

Results and Discussion

The Null Hypothesis: This hypothesis states that:

"There is no statistically significant difference among the ratios of the subjects in the strategies guessing questionnaire"

It is concerned with identifying the major strategies used by the subjects in inferring the meaning of idioms. The chi-square formula is used to examine this hypothesis. Table 2 illustrates the results obtained in this respect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Strategy</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>X^2 cal.</th>
<th>X^2 tab.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>24.846</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is obvious from Table 2 that the calculated value of X^2 is more than the tabulated one at 0.05 level of significance and the degree of freedom is 5. That is to say, there is statistically significant difference in the ratios of the strategies used in inferring the meaning of idioms, which means that the null hypothesis is rejected. Also, it is
clear from Table 2 that the strategy number Three has gained the highest ratio as it has been 0.41. This means that this strategy is used more frequently than the other ones, i.e. 16 subjects out of 39 subjects relied on this strategy in inferring the meanings of the unfamiliar idioms (See Figure 1).

![Figure 1: The Frequency of the Strategies used by Subjects in the Strategies Guessing Questionnaire](image)

**Guessing strategies**

The present research has shown that the subjects employ a heuristic model in solving the linguistic problem of finding the meaning of idioms. According to Cooper (1999: 255), this heuristic model is distinct from any well-known L1 idiom processing models because although these models adequately describe some of the specific strategies, they are too limited in scope to account for the strategies used by L2 learners in guessing the meaning of idioms. Concerning the strategies used in the present research, the results affirm that there is a statistically significant difference in ratios of the used strategies in the strategies guessing questionnaire. A rank ordering of these strategies as reported in percentages shows that the strategy number 3, namely depending on previous knowledge has gained the highest ratio which is 0.41. The strategy number 1, namely using contextual information to guess the meaning of unfamiliar idioms comes in the second rank in strategies frequency order with 0.28, the strategy number 6, namely focusing on (a) key word (s) to make the meaning clear in the third rank with 0.10. Both strategies 4 and 5 have gained similar ratios with 0.08 and finally strategy number 2, namely focusing on the idiom’s literal meaning to make the meaning clear with 0.05. The question raised here is why both guessing strategies, 1 and 3 have received the highest ranking orders in the strategies guessing questionnaire.

Concerning the strategy number 3, a possible answer for the previous question would be that after teaching the subjects how to discover and understand the idiomatic meaning by experimenting and evaluating possible answers trough a trial and error manner, the subjects have become able to make use of whatever background
knowledge they possess about idioms, such as pragmatic and real life situations knowledge. As for pragmatic knowledge, the students have been enabled to distinguish different functions that are important in inferring the meaning of idioms. As such, the researchers managed to activate the subjects' pragmatic abilities. For example, when the subjects have been asked by the researchers about the basis of choosing this strategy to guess the meaning of the idiom, "Go fly a kite" in: *Ben told his brother, "I can't talk to any one right now! Go fly a kite"*, one of them replied as follows "Go fly a kite! ... oh, I know this idiom, it functions as an order so, Ben orders his brother to leave him alone because he is so busy". The student has been taught to activate his pragmatic knowledge to recognize the function of the idiom.

According to Cooper (1999: 250), background knowledge may have the form of remembering real-life situations. Any idiom learned in classes, heard on TV or in a song or might have been heard from friends and acquaintances using the expression is regarded as prior knowledge, which suggests that the multiple exposure to unfamiliar vocabulary items, idioms in this case, may indeed lead to cumulative gain of knowledge, which in turn may help the subjects in guessing the meaning of idioms. A particularly good example of the processes involved in using background knowledge has been provided by the subjects when the researchers asked them about the basis of choosing this strategy in inferring the meaning of the idiom "green thumb" in: *"John can keep any plant alive with his green thumb"* in the strategies guessing questionnaire. Some of the subjects reported that they think that John probably can keep any plant alive, i.e. he has a good gardening skill and this is what their teacher mentioned once in the class.

Concerning strategy number (1), embedding the idioms within a context seems to have a considerable effect on the subjects' comprehension of idioms; the subjects have become able to discuss the situation in which the idioms have been embedded and clearly made reference to the meaning of the expression. For example, when the subjects have been asked about the basis of choosing this strategy in inferring the meaning of the idiom "let the cat out of the bag" in: *"By mistake, Pam let the cat out of the bag when she revealed the surprise"*, some of the subjects answered that they have not heard this idiom before, so they could not understand its meaning at once. Then they interpreted the situation in which the idiom was embedded and clearly made reference to its meaning. This was done by checking the words appearing before and after the idiom: mistake, revealed and surprise. By substituting these words with their synonyms, i.e. error, uncover or unveil and something unknown, the idiom may mean
revealing a secret by mistake. In relation to strategy number 6 which has come in the third rank ordering of the strategies used by the subjects, the results have affirmed that the subjects have paid attention to the idiom's constituents as the source of figuring out its meaning. The subjects have focused on one or more of the idiom constituents as a way to figure out its meaning; such key words have been selected by the subjects because they have been familiar with them. Let us consider the following example: when the researchers asked the subjects why they chose this strategy to guess the meaning of "Have a mountain to climb" in: "After a bad start to the season, the team has a mountain to climb if they want to win the match", some of the subjects reported that they had not encountered this idiom before. However, they have been able to infer its meaning as they read it focusing on the words "mountain" and "climb"; the meanings of these words made the subjects think that this idiom might mean "facing a very difficult task". As it is obvious from the results that strategies number 1 and 3 proceed this strategy in their frequency of use. This may be ascribed to the fact that not all idioms contain words which are familiar to the subjects. Also, most of the idioms used in the research were highly figurative in their nature and culturally specific which led the subjects to rely more on the other strategies, i.e. using contextual information and using their background knowledge to figure out the meaning of idioms.

In regard to strategy number 4, namely using LI linguistic knowledge to infer the meaning of idioms, the results show that idioms with identical or similar L1 equivalents are more easily understood than those which do not have L1 equivalents. For example, when the researchers asked the subjects about the basis of choosing this strategy in guessing the meaning of the idiom "To put the cart before the horse" in: "You're eating your dessert first! You've put the cart before the horse", some of the subjects reported that they had not encountered the idiom before, but when they started to infer its meaning they remembered an Arabic idiom and tried to connect the Arabic "حضر المعلف قبل الحصان" (Lit. He brought the feeding trough before getting the horse) and the English idiom. The importance of this strategy in figuring out the meaning of idiomatic expressions may be explained as follows: when subjects encounter some idiomatic expressions they may translate them into their mother tongue and try to find identical or similar expressions in Arabic. If the subjects managed to identify identical or similar expressions in Arabic, the process of understanding the idiom's meaning would be more easy. Even if L2 learners are less likely to transfer LI knowledge, this strategy will maintain its importance as L2 learners will perceive the meaning of the idiom as figurative (Cooper, 1999: 238).
Concerning the strategy number 5, namely using the mental imagery to deduce the idioms meaning, the results have affirmed that the subjects have not paid sufficient attention to this strategy. This may be attributed to fact that this strategy is particularly salient in the processing of transparent idioms, while the idioms used in the present research are mainly opaque or semi-opaque. Henceforth, the literal meaning of such idioms does not generally lead to its figurative meaning therefore, no mental image could be created. In the case of strategy number 2, namely using the literal meaning of the idiom to infer its meaning, the findings show that the subjects are less likely to rely on this strategy when comprehending the given idioms because the subjects must have some degree of metaphorical awareness in order to link the literal and figurative meaning of an idiom. Mantyla (2004 cited in Bjornson, 2010: 18) states that if non-native speakers are familiar with the metaphorical nature of idioms, they will often use the literal meaning to aid them in comprehending idioms.

According to Al-Hassan (2008: 99), some of the guessing strategies may be based on inductive or deductive reasoning. For instance, idiom keyword guessing and focusing on the literal meaning of idiom strategies seem to stem from the deductive reasoning, whereas the inductive reasoning seems to be behind the use of contextual information. Rohaniet.al (2012: 107) believe that the background knowledge and forming mental image of the idiom strategies are considered as respondent based strategies, while the strategy of using LI linguistic knowledge is L1 based strategy. The findings obtained from the present research concerning strategies number 1, 3, 4 and 6 are in harmony with the results of studies referred to previously, e.g. Xiao and Wenzhong (2006), Cooper (1999) who emphasized the importance of these strategies to L2 learners in guessing the meaning of unfamiliar idioms.

**Conclusions**

In the light of the findings, the following results have been arrived at:

1. Students show a weak performance in the idioms familiarity questionnaire; this may be attributed to the absence of idioms subject in the curriculum of Departments of English.
2. Iraqi EFL students vary their selection of idiom guessing strategies, which is a clear signal of their different learning styles. Inductive and deductive reasoning seem to be behind the use of different strategies.
3. The findings of the current study indicate that the third strategy in the guessing strategies questionnaire, i.e. using background knowledge to comprehend unfamiliar idiom has gained the highest
ratio followed by the first strategy, i.e. guessing the meaning from contextual clues.

4. The findings of this research add to our understanding of how Iraqi EFL learners process L2 unfamiliar idioms when they encounter these expressions.

5. L2 idioms are not always difficult to understated, some effective guessing strategies can be useful in inferring the meaning of unfamiliar L2 idioms.

6. KWL has a positive effect on students' ability to comprehend idioms. It enhanced the students' proficiency of idioms since it has developed their skills to infer the meaning of idioms from the available clues such as background knowledge, context, L1 equivalents, etc… It has proved to be efficient and appropriate to teach idioms.

Bibliography


**Notes**:

1 According to Brenner (2003: 15), generally there are idioms for nearly every occasion, life situation, and human activity and emotion.

2 According to Richards and Schmidt (2010: 282), processing is a general term for the processes by which meanings are identified and understood in communication, the processes by which information and meaning are stored, organized, and retrieved from memory and the different kinds of decoding which take place during reading or listening. While comprehension is the identification of the intended meaning of written or spoken communication, it is an active process drawing on both the information contained in the message (bottom-up processing) as well as background knowledge, information from the context and from the listener’s and speaker’s purposes or intentions (top-down processing).

3 For more details about L1 idioms processing models see Cooper (1999: 234-236).

4 Rule-of-thumb is a general or approximate principle, procedure, or rule based on experience or practice, as opposed to a specific, scientific calculation or estimate. This definition is available at: [http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/rule+of+thumb](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/rule+of+thumb). Retrieved at: 8/30/2013.

5 According to Abbas and Younis (2009: 826), conceptual metaphors are the cognitive devices which provide a link between the concrete knowledge of the world people hold in their memory and the figurative meaning of a given idiom. That means, we have an abstract area in our mind which needs to be brought into our everyday use.


7 For more details about the KWL strategy see Daniels and Bizar (2005: 64-65)

8 Brown (2000, 97) believes that in inductive reasoning, one stores a number of specific instances and induces a general law or rule or conclusion that governs or
subsumes the specific instances. Deductive reasoning is a movement from a
generalization to specific instances: specific subsumed facts are inferred or
deduced from a general principle.

الاستراتيجيات المستخدمة من من العراقيين المتعمرين لغة الانكليزية في
تحديد معاني العبارات الاصطلاحية الانكليزية

مصطلح البحث

العبارات الاصطلاحية هي نوع من التعابير التي تتألف من أكثر من كلمة واحدة.
وتكون مجازية بطبيعتها إلى حد كبير وتستخدم بشكل واسع في اللغات. في الواقع أن
مستوى التمكن من العبارات الاصطلاحية يعد مؤشراً فهماً على مدى البراعة اللغوية التي
يملكها الشخص.

وان الكثير من متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية غير الناطقين بها يبذلون قصارى جهدهم
للتحدث باللغة الانكليزية بطريقة مبتكرة وامتلاك مهارات المتحدثين باللغة الأم، وهذا الأمر إضافة
الي أمور أخرى يتلزم مع تمكنهم من التعابير التي تتكون من أكثر من كلمة بشكل عام
والعبارات الاصطلاحية بشكل خاص.

وربما يكمن الجزء الأكثر صعوبة في تعلم العبارات الاصطلاحية لدراسي اللغة
الانكليزية غير الناطقين بها في تعلم كلا المعنى الحرفي والمجازي لهذه التعابير. تهدف
الدراسة الحالية إلى التعرف على الاستراتيجيات المستخدمة من قبل العراقيين المتعمرين لغة
الانكليزية في تحديد معاني العبارات الاصطلاحية الانكليزية غير المألوفة.

لتحقيق أهداف البحث الحالي، تم افتراض أنه لا يوجد فرق ذو دلالة إحصائية بين
الطلبة المتحللين لغة الانكليزية غير الناطقين بها بقدر ما يخص استراتيجيات استبيان
التحمين.
للتحقق من صلاحية هذه الفرضية فقد تم اختيار عينة من طلبة المرحلة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية (كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/ جامعة الموصل) خلال السنة الدراسية 2012-2013. تكونت العينة من 39 طالب.

وإذا أن الدراسة الحالية تتطلب تهيئة أدواتين، فقد قام الباحثان بتصميم استبيان لقياس مدى معرفة الطلبة بالعبارات الإصطلاحية واستبيان آخر لتحديد الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها الطلاب لاستنتاج معاني العبارات الإصطلاحية غير المألوفة.

كشفت النتائج وجود فروقات ذات دلالة إحصائية بين طلبة الجامعة المتعمرين باللغة الإنجليزية غير الناطقين بها بقدر ما يخص استراتيجيات التخمين. استنادا إلى النتائج المستحصلة، تم تقديم من التوصيات والمقترحات.