Iraqi Third Year College Students' Recognition of English Idioms: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

An idiom is a group of words whose meaning put together is different from the meaning of individual words. English is a rich language when it comes to idioms, they represent variety. For foreign learners, idioms are problematic because even if they know the meaning of individual words that compose an idiom the meaning of it might be something completely different.

The present study investigates Iraqi third year college students' recognition of idioms. To achieve this, the researchers have conducted a test which comprises three questions. Certain conclusions are reached here along with some suggestions and recommendations.

تمييز المصطلحات الانكليزية من طلاب الجامعة العراقيين المرحلة الثالثة: دراسة مقارنة

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المستخلص

أن المصطلح هو مجموعة كلمات عندما توضع معا يكون معناها مختلفا عما لو كانت متفرقة.تُعد اللغة الانكليزية غنية بالمصطلحات التي تمثل تنوعا في اللغة. يواجه الطلبة دارسو اللغة الانكليزية لغةً أجنبية صعوبات في أستخدام المصطلحات وذلك لان معرفتهم بالمفردات المكونة للمصطلح لاتعد كافية. تستقصي الدراسة الحالية مقدرة طلبة المرحلة الجامعية الثالثة على تمييز المصطلحات,ولهذا الغرض وضع أختبار مكون من ثلاث أسئلة. ومن ثم التوصل الى مجموعة من النتائج والتوصيات والمقترحات بناءا على هذه الدراسة الحالية.

1. Introduction
1.1 The Problem of the Study:

Idioms are vocabulary items whose meanings cannot be detected from the meaning of their individual components. This usually poses a problem for foreign learners, because even if they know the meaning of individual words that compose an idiom the meaning of it might be something completely different, i.e., the meaning of individual words in an expression has nothing to do in the comprehension of the whole meaning. Idioms as Manser (1992: xi) says provide an opaque connection between the surface sense of words and their individual meaning.

Idioms are problematic because of their non-literal nature, the unusual word grouping, or the fixed word order. Al- Haddad (1994:218) adds four more factors, these are: insufficiency of teaching techniques followed in this area, inadequacy of the criteria of textual frequency, the foreign learning situation in which English is learned, and lack of cultural assimilation on the part of the students.

Idioms are also problematic when we bear in mind that they are usually culture –specific.

1.2 Aims of the Study:
   The present study aims at:
1. finding out whether third year college students at the Department of English, and those at the Translation Department, College of Arts, Al- Mustansiriyah University are able to recognize English idioms or not.
2. comparing their responses about English Idioms.

1.3 Hypothesis:
   The following hypotheses will be investigated:
      1. Students of both English and translation departments have the ability to recognize English idioms properly.
      2. There is no statistically significant difference in recognizing English idioms between students at the Department of English and those at the Department of translation.

1.4 Limits of the study:
      The present study is limited to third year students/morning classes at the Department of English and Department of Translation / College of Arts, Al- Mustansiriyah University during the academic year (2012-2013).

1.4 Significance of the Study:
      English is a rich language when it comes to idioms; idioms represent variety. Idioms are vocabulary items that do not follow logical or grammatical rules; without them English would lose much of its variety and humour. The present study sheds light on this subject; it shows definitions, types, and importance of idioms.

2. Theoretical Background
2.1 What is an Idiom?
               If natural language had been designed by a logician, idioms would not exist. They are a feature of discourse that frustrates any simple logical account of how the meanings of utterances depend on the meanings of their parts and on the syntactic relation among those parts.

                                             (Johnson-Laird, 1993: vii)
      An idiom is a group of words whose meaning put together is different from the meaning of individual words. The meaning, sometimes, is easy to understand; and sometimes it is difficult to understand. According to Seidl and McMordie (1988:2), an idiom can be defined as a "number of words which when taken together have a different meaning from the individual meanings of each word".
       Nattinger and De Carrico (1992:32) state that idioms may be defined as"complex bits of frozen syntax, whose meanings are more than simply the sum of their individual parts".
       Gramley and Pätzold (1992:71) share the same idea by stating that an idiom is defined more narrowly as a "complex lexical item which is longer than a word but shorter than a sentence, and which has a meaning that cannot be derived from a knowledge of its component parts".

Crystal (1985:152) provides another definition as follows:

> A term used in the grammar and lexicography to refer to a sequence of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted so that they function as a single unit from a semantic point of view, the meaning of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the 'idiomatic expression' as a whole. Some linguists refer to idioms as 'ready-made utterances.

Ready-made utterances are defined as "expressions learned as unanalysable native wholes and employed on particular occasions by speakers" (Lyons, 1968:177).

Many idioms have two meanings, a literal and an idiomatic one. When there is such a situation only the context can give a clue as to which meaning is intended. When a literal meaning does not make sense in terms of the world as we know it, the likelihood is that we are dealing with an idiom (Gramley and Patzold, 1992:73).

Johnson-Laird (1993: viii) suggests that "if a compositional interpretation is non-sensical in the context of the utterance, then the listener is supposed to check whether an idiomatic sense is listed and whether it makes better sense".

2.2 The Importance of Idioms

Idioms have special importance in language due to their pervasiveness. Seidl and McMordie (1988:12) state that idioms "are not only colloquial expressions, as many people believe. They appear in formal style and in slang, in poetry, in the language of Shakespeare and the Bible".

Johnson-Laird (1993: vii-ix) gives three reasons that make idioms important:

- The first reason is, although the origin of idioms is mysterious in the logical account of language, and there is no obvious reason why speakers of a language should use expressions which have meanings that cannot be understood compositionally, it is not easy to speak spontaneously without passing into idiomatic usage.

- The second reason is that they are considered the poetry of daily discourse:

  > Speakers –some more than others-invent words and phrases to force us to pay attention, to amuse us, to astonish us, and to challenge us. And they create new ways to convey old meanings for the sheer joy of invention. But the creation of idioms also reflects new conceptions of the world, new ways in which individuals construct mental models of the world, and new ways in which to convey their contents vividly. It is through idioms…that the truly creative nature of human expression reveals itself. (ibid)

- The third reason which is really surprising is that idioms are easy. Although idioms are transparent to native speakers they are a course of perplexity to those who are acquiring a second language. Native speakers have the ability to speak in riddles which are neither constructed nor interpreted in the normal way. Yet, they use them so readily that they are usually unaware of their special character, while non-native speakers fail to do so. These riddles are called idioms.

2.3 Why Idioms are Used

    Every part of the language has its own function; otherwise, it would not have emerged. Different purposes lie behind the use of idioms in language. Al-Fahad (1997:101-102) summarizes these purposes as follows:

1. Idioms are used sometimes to alleviate the effect of certain information on the part of the addressee.
   For example:
   John *passed away* is used instead of John *died*.
2. They are used to add more effectiveness to the text especially when the idiom has a special force in language, i.e., they are taken from religious, cultural, legendary text.
   For example:
   To rise from the ashes.   (legend)
3. They are used to add an aesthetic touch to the text especially when the idiom is based upon a living metaphor, metonymy or any other literary device.
   For example:
   To sail in the same boat.
4. They are used to attract the attention of the addressee to certain issues since the interpretation of any idiom needs some time from the addressee. ***For example:***
   To have one's back to the wall.

2.4 Restrictions of Idioms

    According to Baker (1992:63), some grammatical and syntactic restrictions of idioms can be identified, i.e., the following changes cannot normally be done to an idiom because the meaning would be changed.

1. Addition: Adding any word to an idiomatic expression may alter its meaning, or remove its idiomatic sense. For instance, adding the adverb *very* to the adjective *red* in *red herring*.
(*very red herring) affects the figurativeness of its meaning completely.

2. Deletion: Deleting the adjective *sweet* and the article *the* from the expressions *have a sweet tooth* and *spill the beans* would totally change their meanings.
Hence, (*have a tooth) and (*spill beans) have no idiomatic sense.

3. Substitution: Idioms accept no replacement of words even if those words are synonyms. For example, *the long and short of it* means the basic facts of a situation. The adjective *long* cannot be substituted by another adjective, like *tall*, despite they have nearly the same meaning.

4. Modification: Any change in the grammatical structure of an idiom leads to the destruction of the idiom meaning. For instance, the expression (*stock and barrel lock)is no more idiomatic because of the altered order of the items in the expression lock, stock and barrel completely.

5. Comparative: Adding the comparative form *-er* to the adjective *hot* in the expression *be in hot water* changes the conventional sense of the idiom which has the meaning of be in trouble.

6. Passive: The passive form *some beans were spilled* has a different meaning
from its active one.

2.5 Types of Idioms
   Fernando (1996:35-36) groups idioms into three sub-classes: pure idioms, semi-idioms, and literal idioms.
A. Pure idioms
      A pure idiom is a type of conventionalized, non-literal multiword expression whose meaning cannot be understood by adding up the meanings of the words that make up the phrase. For example, the expression *spill the beans* is a pure idiom, because its real meaning has nothing to do with beans.

B. Semi-idioms
      A semi-pure, on the other hand, has at least one literal element and one with a non-literal meaning. For example, *foot the bill* (i.e. pay) is one example of a semi-idiom, in which *foot* is the non-literal element, whereas the word *bill* is used literally.

C. Literal idioms
      Literal idioms, such as *on foot* or *on the contrary* are semantically less complex than the other two, and therefore easier to understand even if one is not familiar with these expressions. These expressions may be considered idioms because they are either completely invariant or allow only restricted variation.

      Halliday (1985, as quoted by Fernando, 1996:72) groups idioms into ideational, interpersonal and relational idioms.

A. Ideational idioms
      Ideational idioms either signify message content, experiential phenomena including the sensory, the affective, and the evaluative, or they characterize the nature of the message.

These expressions may describe:
  - actions (*tear down*, *spill the beans*),
  - events (*turning point*),
  - situations (*be in a pickle*),
  - people and things (*a red herring*),
  - attributes (*cut-and-dried*), evaluations (*a watched pot never boils*)
  - emotions (*green with envy*).

B. Interpersonal idioms
      Interpersonal idioms, on the other hand, 'fulfil either an interactional function or they characterize the nature of the message'; they can, for instance, initiate or keep up an interaction between people and maintain politeness (Fernando, ibid: 73).

 These expressions include:
  - greetings and farewells (*good morning*),
  - directives (*let's face it*),

- agreements (*say no more*),
- "feelers" which elicit opinions (*what do you think?)* and
- rejections (*come off it*).

C. Relational idioms

Halliday (1985:74 in ibid) distinguishes relational (or textual) idioms, which ensure that the discourse is cohesive and coherent. Examples of relational idioms are *on the contrary*, *in addition to* and *on the other hand*.

3. The Test
3.1 Test Construction

The researchers have constructed a test that comprises three questions chosen from the book ***English Idioms in Use*** by Michael McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell (2002). The types of the three questions are a completion question, true-false question and circling the correct word question. Question one includes eight items, question two comprises four items and question three consists of eight items. The test is corrected according to the one-zero basis. One mark is devoted for each correct item and zero mark is devoted for the incorrect item. The whole test items are twenty. (See Appendix 1).

3.2 Test Validity

Validity means the extent to which a test measures what is intended to measure (Downie, 1967:92). In order to ensure the face validity, the test items have been exposed to a jury of experts in language and linguistics to judge whether the test items are suitable or not for the proposed purpose. The jurors are asked to read the test, add, delete or change the items,; after that, the jurors have agreed upon its validity and suitability (see Appendix 2).

3.3 Pilot Test Administration and Item Analysis

On the 18th of February 2013, a pilot administration of the test was carried out. The test was tried out on a sample of 20 students who were selected randomly from third year students at the Department of English and Department of Translation / College of Arts, Al_Mustansiriyah-University. The purpose behind this pilot study was to:

1. estimate the time needed to answer the test;
2. provide information about the ease of administering the test;
3. check the clarity of instructions;
4. analyze the test items in the light of students' responses to determine their effectiveness in terms of their difficulty level and discrimination power; and
5. calculate the reliability coefficient of the test.

The pilot study revealed that the time needed to complete the test was 45 minutes. As for the clarity of the instructions, they were clear. After arranging students' scores from high to low for the purpose of item analysis, the researchers have divided them into two groups: upper and lower. By using the item discrimination formula, it was found out that the discrimination power of the test items ranged between 0.06-0.73, whereas by adopting the item difficulty level formula, it was found out that it ranged between 0.133-0.866. This shows that some of the test items need to be replaced or deleted, but because of their importance for the discrimination between good and weak students, they were left as they are. This is supported by Ebel (1965:359) who states that the researcher should include items

of this kind in the test, regardless of their low discrimination and should review the reasons for including them when low discrimination is not due to technical weakness in the items or to inappropriate difficulty.

3.4 Test Reliability

The concept of reliability refers to the degree of consistency of the test measurement (Oller, 1979:4). In order to find out the test reliability, the items were divided into two halves (odd and even). Using the Pearson correlation formula, it is found out that the test reliability is 0.754. After applying the Spearman Brown formula, it was found out the test reliability is 0.859. This shows that the test is quite reliable and acceptable.

3.2 Population and Sample Selection
A. The Population

The population of the present study comprises 100 Iraqi EFL students of the Department of English and Department of Translation / College of Arts, Al-Mustansiriyah University, during the academic year (2012-2013). Students are distributed into two sections, one section for each department.

B. The Sample

The sample has been chosen randomly from the population mentioned above. After excluding those students who were chosen randomly for the pilot study from both departments, the total number of the sample was 80 forty students in each department.

4. Results, Conclusions, Recommendations and Suggestions
4.1 Results

A. In order to find out whether students of both English and translation departments have the ability to recognize English idioms properly, the t-test formula for one sample is used. As shown in Table 1, the calculated t-value is 2.396 which is somehow higher than the tabulated value 2.00 with very little noticeable progress (i.e. 0.396) at level of significance 0.05.

Table (1) t-Test statistics for the responses of all students of the English Department and Translation Department in Recognizing English Idioms

N	$\bar{x}$	SD	Computed t-value	Tabulated t-value	d.f	Level of Significance
80	10.75	2.805	2.396	2.00	79	0.05

B. In order to find out whether there is a statistically significant difference between students' responses of the English Department in recognizing English idioms and that of the Translation Department, the t-test formula for two independent samples is used. As shown in Table 2, the mean score of the English Department is 7.42 and that of the Translation Department is 11.42. By using the t-test formula for two independent samples, it is found that the calculated t-value is 5.961 which is higher than the tabulated value 2.00 at level of

significance 0.05.Thus, the second hypothesis presented earlier is rejected.

Table (2) t-Test Statistics for Comparing the Responses of Students of the English Department and Translation Department in Recognizing English Idioms

Group	N	$\bar{x}$	S^2	Computed t-value	Tabulated t-value	d.f	Level of Significance
English Department	40	7.42	11.45	5.961	2.00	78	0.05
Translation Department	40	11.42	6.551				

Table (3) The Responses of Students of the English Department and Translation Department in Recognizing English Idioms

	Translation Department			English Department	
Item No.	Correct Answers	Percentage	Item No.	Correct Answers	Percentage
1	30	75%	1	27	67.5%
2	28	70%	2	19	47.5%
3	17	42%	3	15	37.5%
4	23	57.5%	4	10	25%
5	25	62.5%	5	14	35%
6	28	70%	6	14	35%
7	34	85%	7	30	75%
8	24	60%	8	20	50%
9	28	70%	9	35	87.5%
10	19	47.5%	10	29	72.5%
11	29	72.5%	11	25	62.5%
12	23	57.5%	12	29	72.5%
13	12	30%	13	16	40%
14	8	20%	14	17	42.5%
15	19	47.5%	15	10	25%
16	8	20%	16	9	22.5%
17	2	5%	17	5	12.5%
18	15	37.5%	18	13	32.5%
19	3	7.5%	19	2	5%
20	22	55%	20	33	82.5%

Table 3 reveals that some participants tend to use English idioms correctly while others tend to use it incorrectly; below are **the top five percentages** used by the sample of the study:

The highest top five percentages of **Translation Department** were (85%) on item no. (7)

My _____ when the handsome man smiled at me.

(75%) on item no. (1)

I'm _____ of traffic jams. I'm going to start using the train.

(72.5%) on item no. (11)

Road Rage is when people get angry and violent because of problems and   arguments while driving.

(70%) on items no. (2 and 6)

_____, I think Janna might have the best personality for the   job, but, on the other, Mina has more experience.

It's been a long, hard struggle, but I think at last we can see_____.

and (62.5%) on item no.(5)

I'd like you each to tell us why you have decided to do a creative writing course; Marie, would you_____ please?

whereas that of the **English Department** were (87.5%) on item no. (9)

If a street has a dead end, you can't drive down it and out the other end.

(82.5%) on item no. (20)

The wonderful smells from the kitchen are really making my eyes\ mouth\ nose water.

(75%) on item no. (7)

My _____ when the handsome man smiled at me.

(72.5%) on items no. (10 and 12)

If someone keeps you on your toes, they keep you very excited.

If you follow in someone's footsteps, they are your boss and you are below them.

and (67.5%) on item no. (1)

I'm _____ of traffic jams. I'm going to start using the train.

These correct responses might have occurred due to exposure to the English language or they might have been transferred positively from the Arabic language.

Here are the **lowest bottom five percentages** used by the sample of the study:

The lowest bottom five of **Translation Department** were (5%) on item no. (17)

Granddad was exhausted after his long walk and said he had passed his sell-by day\ time\ date.

(7.5%) on item no. (19)

Having such a sweet mouth \ tongue\ tooth makes it very difficult for her to lose weight.

(20%) on items no. (14 and16)

Watching that cookery programme on TV has really watered\ wetted\ whetted my appetite for trying some new recipes.

Although the pop group DK1 is bargain\ flavour \ taste of the month at the moment, their popularity is unlikely to last.

(30%) on item no. (13)

Although it was too slow-moving for my taste, I sat through the film to the bitter\ sour\ sweet end.

and (37.5%) on item no. (18)

Staying in a hotel room that Elvis Presley had once used was really the icing biscuit\ cake\ sugar.

whereas that of the **English Department** were (5%) on item no. (19)
 Having such a sweet <u>mouth \ tongue\ tooth</u> makes it very difficult for her to lose weight.
 (12.5%) on item no. (17)
 Granddad was exhausted after his long walk and said he had passed his sell-by <u>day\ time\ date</u>.
 (22.5%) on item (16)
Although the pop group DK1 is <u>bargain\ flavour \ taste</u> of the month at the moment, their popularity is unlikely to last.
(25%) on item no. (15)
 All the effort Mandy has put into training is beginning to bear <u>food\ fruit\ vegetables.</u>
 and (35%) on item no. (5)
   I'd like you each to tell us why you have decided to do a creative writing course; Marie, would you-------------------------------please?

These incorrect responses might be attributed to negative interlingual transfer. When learners face difficulties in a foreign language they seek solutions by going back to their mother tongue.
 This seems to be the case in **item no. (13) "Although it was too slow-moving for my taste, I sat through the film to the <u>bitter/ sour/ sweet</u> end**". The correct choice here is (bitter); students preferred to choose (sweet) instead because they are more accustomed to such a term in Arabic (نهاية سعيدة).

 The same applies to **item no. (19) ″Having such a sweet <u>mouth \ tongue\ tooth</u> makes it very difficult for her to lose weight″**. The correct choice here is (tooth); students chose (tongue) instead because they are more familiar with the term (   ) in Arabic.
 Other reasons behind the incorrect responses are: some items might look synonymous to some students like the case of the following items:
 Item no. (14) "Watching that cookery programme on TV has really <u>watered/ wetted/ whetted</u> my appetite for trying some new recipes".
 Item no. (17) "Granddad was exhausted after his long walk and said he had passed his sell-by <u>day\ time\ date</u>".
 Item no. (18) "Staying in a hotel room that Elvis Presley had once used was really the icing <u>biscuit\ cake\ sugar</u>".
 It is also noteworthy that some of the idioms are cultural specific, this is the case in **item no. (5) "I'd like you each to tell us why you have decided to do a creative writing course; Marie, would you (start the ball rolling) please?"**
 In Arabic there is no exact equivalent for such an idiom; that's why some students (especially at the English Department) faced difficulty with it.

4.2 Conclusions:
The researchers conclude the following:
1. Table 3 shows that students of Translation perform better in recognizing English idioms than those at the English Department in 13 items, while the latter perform better than the former in 7 items. This is due to the fact that translation department students are exposed more to idioms which are usually included in their translated texts, whereas English Department students are less exposed to idioms, this might be due to the fact that they depend on free topics presented by their teachers which may or may not include idioms.

2. Students used to memorize idioms with their literal meanings without knowing their figurative meanings; this is due to the lecture method or the traditional way of teaching (Presentation Practice Production Approach).

4.3 Recommendations:
     The researchers recommend the following:
1. McCarthy and O'Dell (2001:158) suggest certain tips that help learners to have some degree of mastery on idioms. These can be applied by teachers on their students to help them with this subject. These tips are:
(a) Learners have to think of idioms as units, just like single words; they have to record them in their notebooks as a whole.
(b) Idioms are usually informal, humorous, or ironic. Learners should be careful   when using them.
(c) Idioms can be grouped in different ways; learners can choose any way that might be helpful in remembering these idioms.
2. Idioms, sometimes, are culture specific and cannot be translated compositionally. Learners should be aware of this; they have to keep in mind that an idiom in one language cannot be expressed by an equivalent one in another language. Teachers have to emphasize this point and make it clear to students, because once they get this idea, they'll try to figure out some solutions for such a case.
3. EFL instructors are advised to use new trends in teaching rather than the lecture method. Idioms can be taught as a supplementary material to any subject like conversation, composition, comprehension, etc. because idioms help students learn new vocabulary and improve their communicative skills, and they will be able to make dialogues, make sentences and understand texts with idioms.

4.4 Suggestions for Further Research
     In the light of the results obtained, the following suggestions are put forward:
1. A similar study can be conducted in other colleges, and a study in other stages is needed.
2. A similar study can be made to measure the students' ability in using and understanding English idioms.

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