

# Investigating the Process of English Idioms in the Mental Lexicon by Postgraduate Yemeni Learners

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## ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the interpretation of English idioms by the students in the Center for English and Translation Studies, Aden University, Yemen. It aims to explore the ways that students use to process the meaning of English idioms. In this respect an interview has been done where English idioms are presented out of and within context. The findings show that context has a significant role in processing the meaning of English idioms and reveal that students use different strategies of thinking in trying to find a suitable meaning of English idioms.*

**Keywords:**

## Introduction

English idioms consider to be one of the most difficult expressions that learners face. These expressions have their individual meanings that can be interpreted figuratively. This research attempts to explore the process of thinking to find suitable meanings of idioms. Foreign / second learners deal with different kinds of figurative language as idioms that are problematic. Because they have figurative meanings as well as literal ones, they belong to the culture of language. They cannot be processed literally from their words since they have idiomatic meaning and must be dealt with as one single expression.

## The Statement of the Problem

English idioms are one of everyday language aspects talking. They have literal meanings from their individual word meanings and have figurative meanings that used for giving the functional meaning of the specific use.

Therefore, the difficulty of using and understanding English idioms came from their figurative meaning that is different from their individual word meanings. So, second and foreign language learners misinterpret and misprocess the meaning of English idioms.

## Research Questions

This research attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- What strategies do students use to think in trying to find a suitable meaning of an idiom in the mental lexicon?
- 2- Does contextualization help in processing idioms?

## The Significant of the Study

This study involves its significance from those important expressions and takes into account the importance of them to both teachers and learners. This study tries to investigate in depth the English idioms problems. It attempts to identify the strategies the learners use to process the meaning of English idioms. To the best of my knowledge such processes have not been investigated thoroughly.

## Methodology

The process of English idioms is best investigated through the qualitative method. This method helps to identify how students think to get the idiom meaning and what strategies they use to do so. Therefore, interviews are performed. The interviewees are asked to describe the process they use while trying to find a suitable meaning of idioms.

## Procedures

The main aim behind the interview is to investigate how learners of English think in getting the meaning of English idioms and what strategies they use therefore. Eight subjects were interviewed about four idioms. The idioms are from the most frequently used ones. The four idioms are: *go the extra mile*, *give the green light*, *beat around the bush*, and *kick the bucket*. The subjects were interviewed one at a time. First, the idioms are presented out of context and the interviewees were all asked to say if they are familiar with these

idioms, to describe how they think in order to find a suitable idiomatic meaning of them, and why they think in this way. Then, the idioms presented in context and the interviewees were also asked to expound how they think to interpret the idiom in context. In this sense the interview focused on the idioms as well as the users.

### Review of Literature

Comprehending an idiom is one of the most difficult aspects for foreign and second learners. The meaning of an idiom is not the meaning of the sum of its individual words and often does not have equivalents in other languages. This study examines how postgraduate students at the Center for English and Translation Studies think in getting the meaning of English idioms and what strategies they use therefore. There is an urgent need to conduct a study on English idioms in foreign language learning since most studies paid attention to native speakers.

### The Definition of an Idiom

Different definitions have been tried to define idioms from the work of specialization in linguistics. According to McCarthy and O' Dell (2002), "idioms are expressions which have a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words" (p.6). This definition basically explains the idiom; its meaning cannot be induced from its parts. Likewise, Baker (1992) defines idioms as "frozen patterns of language which allow literal or no variation in form and often carry meanings which can't be deduced from their individual component" (p.63). In addition, Cater (1987) explains idioms as "special combinations with restricted forms and meanings that cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of the words which make them up" (p.65). Here is a definition from another pragmatic perspective by Kay (1997) who construes that an idiom is "something language user could fail to know while knowing everything in the language" (cited in Doverkova 2010, p.7). This means whatever a speaker has knowledge in grammar and vocabulary; he might fail in interpreting an idiom in a proper way.

### Types of Idioms

According to Flavell (1981), idioms can be divided into four types. They are: transparent, semi-transparent, opaque, and semi-opaque idioms.

#### Transparent Idioms

This type includes idioms whose meaning can be extrapolated from the individual words of the idiom. Hence, transparent idioms are not difficult to be processed, individual words have a direct meaning but the combination requires figurative sense. For example, *to see the light* means to understand.

#### Semi-transparent Idioms

Idioms of this type carry often a metaphorical meaning. The component of an idiom contributes in processing the idiomatic meaning. For example, *breaking the ice* (relieving the tension) in which the word *break* stands for the idiomatic sense of abruptly changing uncomfortable social situation, and the word *ice* stands for the idiomatic sense of social or interpersonal tension (Glucksberg, 2001, p.74). In addition to the metaphorical sense, this type can also have a literal counterpart. Such as in the expression *spill the beans* that might be interpreted as a slop or spread the beans somewhere.

#### Semi-opaque Idioms

This type is not easy to be processed but it may be possible to guess their meanings from their formation. Thus, the expression is divided into two parts: part with a literal meaning and other part with an idiomatic meaning. The part of the literal meaning may help to some extent in explaining the other. For sample, the idiom *gives someone a piece of one's mind*; the part *a piece of mind* may infer that an idiom has been communicated. *Black* in the expression *black market* helps to infer that it stands for the system by which people illegally buy and sell.

#### Opaque Idioms

The idiom of this type is the most difficult one because the meaning cannot be derived from its individual words. According to Glucksberg (2001), the individual words of opaque idioms restrict the interpretation as well as the use of a single unit; for example, the idiom *kick the bucket* in *kicked the bucket all day* is unacceptable kicking is a discrete part. Therefore, there is no relation between the literal and idiomatic meaning at all. This is certainly because the presence of cultural items. These cultural-specific items affect the comprehensibility of idioms. For example, *to burn one's boat* means to make retreat impossible.

### Idiom Comprehension

The processing of idioms and their storage in the mind have taken an interest topic in psycholinguistic research. That is to say, here was a shift from idiom (i.e. language) to users, who they access, and remember

idioms (i.e. Language processing) two views on idiom comprehension have been varied: the storing and linguistic processing of idioms. The storing model assumes that idioms are understood by memory retrieval and not by linguistic processing. The main question of storing studies was whether idioms are stored separately in a list of their own, or together with other lexical items of the mental lexicon. In the linguistic processing model, idioms can be interpreted through the normal linguistic processing with the help of discourse context. Studies on idioms processing have concentrated on the literal/ figurative distinctive meaning and have observed which one is processed first, or whether the literal and figurative meaning may perhaps be processed simultaneously when facing an idiom. These major views on idiom comprehension of native and non-native and factors that affect on the comprehension process are discussed below.

### **Idioms Processing in L1**

#### **Idiom List Model**

One of the first studies on the comprehension process of idioms was Bobrow and Bell(1973). The main assumption behind this model, idioms are stored and retrieved in memory as single lexical items, thus during the idiom comprehension it indicates that an idiom is processed literally first, if the meaning fails, it is interpreted idiomatically by accessing the meaning in memory.

#### **Lexical Representation Model**

Swinny and Cutler (1979) challenged the list of a mental idiom. They argued that idioms were stored together with other words as long words in the lexical, not separately. Furthermore, this model claims that idioms are processed literally and idiomatically at the same time. Through this process, the figurative and literal meanings appear and the suitable interpretation is taken.

#### **Direct Access Model**

After Swinny and Cutler's (1979) model, Gibbs (1980) refuted the lexical representation model in favor of the direct access model. This model suggests that the literal meaning of the idioms is not of such importance in comprehension because the meaning of idioms is conventional. An idiom is processed idiomatically first and only if the meaning does not match the sentence then it will be processed literally.

#### **Idiom Key Model**

The idea of separate lexicon of idioms and being stored as long words were further challenged. Cacciari and Tabossi (1993) mention the idiom key (a piece of information that shows the idiom or the point at which the idiomatic meaning is activated).

They argued that the idiomatic meaning of an idiom is realized in the mental lexicon when the idiom key appears in the phrase. For example, the idiom *yummy, yummy, yummy* may be identified and recognized by the second *yummy*, whereas the idiom *hit the nail in the head* cannot probably predicted until *head* appears (Glucksberg , 2001, p.17). The position of the key varies; it has no special formal properties, which makes detecting it more difficult. This difficulty of idioms adds a burden to non-native speakers.

#### **Factors that Affecting Idioms Comprehension**

There are three major factors influencing the idiom interpretation process: semantic transparency, familiarity and as well as the role of context.

#### **Semantic Transparency**

According to Nippold and Taylor (1995), semantic transparency refers to the relative correspondence between the literal and figurative meaning of an idiom (cited in Hermann, 2008). The meaning of the transparent idiom is closely related to the image created by that idiom. For example, the idiomatic expression *a piece of cake* may create an easy task. In comparing to the meaning of an opaque idiom that creates unhelpful image in interpretation. For example, *hold your horses* as a literal image plays no role with the idiom's meaning be patient, slow down. According to Mantyla (2012), the more transparent idioms are among the easiest ones that non- native participants have fewer problems in processing their meaning.

The transparency of idioms can be discussed in other terms of their compositionality. Compositionality refers to "the degree to which the individual word meanings of an idiom contribute to the idiomatic interpretation" (Gibbs 1989 cited in Titone & Connine 1994, p.1127). Furthermore, idioms that are compositional are able to accept modification, such as *he broke the ice, she breaks the ice, after the ice was broken*, etc. these modifications are possible since each part of the idiom is meaningful (Hermann, 2008, p.6). Non-compositional (expressions for which individual word meanings do not contribute to the idiomatic meaning) idioms are not able to reserve the same alteration. For example, the non-compositional idiom *on the fly* does not be composed into *on the flied* (Glucksberg, 2001). More compositional idioms are likened to transparent idioms and non-compositional are equated with opaque idioms (Hermann, 2008). Nippold & Rudzinski (1993) examined the effect of transparency on idiom comprehension by employing an explanation task. Results demonstrated that idioms which are high in transparency were easier to comprehend than the more opaque expressions.

## Familiarity

Nippold and Taylor (1995) define familiarity as "the frequency of which an idiom occurs in a language"(cited in Hermann, p.7). However, the more frequent a word or an expression is, the more likely it is to be familiar. It seems that more familiar idioms are easier to comprehend than less familiar ones. Familiarity levels on idiom comprehension had been established in a previous study by Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) where adolescents judged how frequently they had heard or read the idiom. The idiom presented high, moderate and low familiarity levels. Results from the study found that high familiar idioms were easier for the students to comprehend than those that were less familiar.

## The Role of Context

Context has an effect on idiom comprehension. Therefore, transparent idioms that cannot be understood by young children can be understood when they presented in context. Both children and adolescents find it easier to interpret idioms presented in context than idioms presented out of context (Cain, Towse & Knight 2009, p.282). Moreover, Nippold and Martin (1989) examined idiom interpretation out of and in context using 475 adolescent aged 14 through 17 years. The test consisted of 20 idioms presented in a written form in which the students asked to explain. 10 idioms occurred in context, while 10 presented in isolation. Results showed that there was greater accuracy for idioms in context than isolation.

In addition, Moon (1998, p. 178) claims that context always solves the difficulty of idiom ambiguity. Context really does help in interpreting idioms but not always. It may help the learners to realize that the expression should not be interpreted literally but it does not mean that often lead learners to correct meaning of more than one possible metaphorical interpretation. Moon (ibid, p. 185) adds that ambiguity of idioms may not exist only when idioms are isolated but may also exist even in context if idioms are unfamiliar. It seems that context may help in working out the meaning but, at the same time it may lead also to produce incorrect interpretation.

## Idioms Processing in L2

Earlier studies on the process of idioms naturally concentrated on their process in the native speakers' mental lexicon. However, the attempts to understand how idiomatic expressions are processed in the mental lexicon of second /foreign language learners and whether or not their interpretation processes differ from the monolinguals is an interesting area to psycholinguistic and applied linguistic research (e.g., Schraw et al.1988; Abel 2003; Cieslicka 2006; Yeganehjoo 2012).

Schraw, Trathen, Reynolds, and Lapan (1988) compared native and non-native speakers' understanding of idioms and the influence of familiarity. The study examined whether familiar idioms were more likely to receive figurative interpretations than less familiar ones among the two groups. Results revealed that figurative interpretations of idiomatic expressions were rated as more familiar and understood better by native speaker rather than non-native speaker. Schraw et. al. (1988) came to conclude that this occurred because native speakers have developed a process of lexicalization (i.e. the idiom is comprehended as one word like unit) for idiomatic meanings in their lexical memory. Non-native speakers, however, are more likely to use word by word strategy to interpret idiomatic meanings. Schraw et. al. (1988, p.44) claimed that "lexicalization is the basis of recognition in idioms and familiarity contributes solely to preferences for figurative interpretation". In other words, non- native speakers have not reached the lexicalization process yet. They rely on the literal interpretation of idioms. Schraw explained this by giving an example: when attempting to paraphrase the meaning of the idiom *chew the fat* which means have a long friendly conversation, one non-native speaker suggested that lifting weights helped chew fat of the body. The key here that non-native speakers look for its literal meaning.

In addition, (Cieslicka, 2006, p.116) stated that due to poverty in idiom input in the L2 lexicon and low frequency of idiom use by second and foreign language learners, the idiom figurative process in L2 lexicon is limited; therefore, L2 learners rely more on the literal meaning of the idiom's constituents, whereas native speakers rely more on lexicalization.

Abel (2003) mentions the 'Model of Dual L2 Idiom Representation' that is based on two levels of idiom process: lexical and conceptual processes. The lexical one is processed at the mental lexicon, while the conceptual is represented at the general cognitive level and is nonlinguistic. She stated that opaque idioms were assumed to have a figurative process, while transparent idioms were processed by means of both the literal meaning of the idiom's constituents and the conceptual representation by which world knowledge is organized. For instance, the conceptual metaphor is activated in some idioms to generate the idiomatic meaning, such as *anger is like fire* that could be used to comprehend the idiom he was spitting fire (Abel, 2003). The overall premise of this model is that opaque idioms are typically lexicalized, and unknown transparent idioms are semantically analyzed.

## Research Paper

Accordingly, the impact of factors such as compositionality, frequency, and familiarity of idiomatic expressions in the use of language on the process of idioms could lead to different processes in L2 lexicon from L1 (Able 2003; Cieslicka 2006). That is to say, whenever the compositionality of an idiom is high, the reliance on the lexical entry of its individual constituent words to get the meaning appears and the idiom entry as a whole decreases. Likewise, the familiarity of idiomatic expressions shows the close relationship between the individual word meanings and the whole idiomatic meaning on compositional idioms (Abel, 2003), and the more frequently used or heard idioms prove the idiomatic in the L2 learner's mental lexicon. Additionally, the meaning of the constituents of idiomatic expressions in L2 remains literally in the learner's mental lexicon compared to its idiomatic meaning during idiom comprehension, even if the figurative meaning of the idiom is a part of the L2 learner's competence (Cieslicka, 2006). The reason for this is that teaching the meaning of L2 words uses their literal sense more frequently than the use of their figurative sense. In the same way, most studies on L2 idiomatic expressions (e.g. Irujo, 1993). From a different viewpoint (Yeganehjoo, 2012, p.90), argue that "idioms processing in L2 lexicon is a dynamic process and differ from one person to another and from one stage of learning to another". While it is possible to say that some researchers have assumed that L2 learners comprehend idioms by direct retrieval of their figurative meanings (e.g. Nelson, 1992), others have suggested that L2 learners process idioms literally and have not yet reached a level to access their figurative meaning (e.g. Schraw 1998; Cieslicka, 2006). Furthermore, other scholars claimed that L2 learners process idioms simultaneously i.e. both figurative and literal meanings are activated at the same time (e.g. Abel, 2003).

## Results and Discussion

### The Processing and Strategies Used by Subjects to Get the Idiom Meaning

The researcher followed the subjects' thought processes in coming up with the given idioms and discussed how they process the idiom meaning.

The first idiom presented to the interviewees was '*go the extra mile*' which according to the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (2004) means "be especially assiduous in your attempt to achieve something'. It was somewhat familiar to two interviewees, while six had never heard or seen it before. The interviewees who were unfamiliar with it all had difficulties in trying to infer a possible meaning. The first interviewee was unfamiliar with the idiom and described how he thought of its meaning as being gone to another area to look for something or to continue looking for something, especially to look for a place. He could not find out the correct meaning even when the idiom displayed with its context, when he was asked why he did not get the meaning of doing more effort, he vindicated that to the ambiguity of the words extra mile that brought to his mind a meaning of an area of a place and it was the first time to see this idiom. This interviewee tried to use the literal meaning to figure out the idiomatic one but he could not reach it.

The second interviewee was also unfamiliar with it. He explained how he thought about getting this idiom meaning as 'go through the road' based on its literal meaning. He attributed this to the idea that the surface meaning came immediately to his mind and could not imagine a meaning beyond the surface one. In situational context, he described how he thought and depended on some words in the context 'president and developing' to infer the meaning 'to do something'. In conclusion, the first and the second interviewees above were processing the idiom by trying to explain it literally, a way which is in accordance with the claims (Schraw 1988; Cieslicka 2006).

Two interviewees described in what way they used to work out the meaning of English idioms through several processes; first, seeking out a similar expression in Arabic if there is no one; second, pass through the English idiom again word by word and try to get the closest expression in Arabic, if there is no; third, they interpret the idiom depending on its constituent (i.e. Compositionality). But if idiom's constituents are unfamiliar, it will be a problem not to know the literal or the idiomatic meaning of an idiom. That is to say, if the lexical meaning is not available in the non-native speaker, idiomatic meaning cannot be recalled. The processes are also used in the case of idiom context if the context does not help or is not clear enough to decode the meaning of an idiom.

The fifth interviewee expounded his way of thinking to come up with the meaning of the idiom '*go the extra mile*' by relying on the word 'extra'. This key word helped him to get the idiomatic meaning to do more or to do best. The sentence context helped him to make sure and confirm his way of thinking to work out the meaning of to do the best.

The sixth interviewee expounded his strategy of how he thought in trying to find a suitable meaning. He relied on a key word, but the word he relied on was not the word 'extra' as the former interviewee. The word was 'mile', he thought that the word mile too far a distance that required from someone to work hard and deduced the idiomatic meaning from relying on the key word in the idiom. This is in line with the

assumptions of (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1993).

According to the seventh and eighth interviewees, they were familiar with the idiom and explained their way of thinking to get the meaning. One said that he made up an imaginary picture of the meaning by imagining a point or an aim which is difficult but not impossible. This point or aim required one to roll up sleeves and to do more effort to reach or to achieve this aim. The other explained his way of thinking and said that he put in his mind a long distance in which someone had not to stop and must double his effort to achieve goals. They also found it not difficult to comprehend the meaning of this idiom when it was in context.

The second idiom presented to the interviewees was '*give the green light*' which according to Oxford Dictionary of Idioms implies to get 'permission to go ahead with a project'. It was a semi-transparent idiom, it was familiar to four interviewees, while four were unfamiliar with it. The four interviewees who were familiar with it told the meaning immediately by saying to allow or to give permission. Three of these who were unfamiliar with it used semantic analysis of the constituents of an idiom. They explained their ways of thinking to get the meaning 'to allow or to give permission' by understanding the same equivalent idiomatic expression in their mother tongue (Arabic) and the same use of metaphorical meaning. So, their familiarity with the two corresponding idioms in English and Arabic created the meaning figuratively and in a simultaneous fashion. This correspondence leads learners at this stage to be able to reach lexicalization as the same as native speakers and this is not in accordance with (Schraw et. al. 1988) when he assumed that foreign learners had not reach lexicalization yet. Foreign learners can develop lexicalization, especially in idioms that are identical or familiar in the two languages L1 and L2. The fourth interviewee was familiar with it and told the meaning 'to allow'. He described how he thought in trying to get the meaning by imagining and relating it to traffic lights. The interviewees from these who were unfamiliar with it explained how they thought to get the meaning by using semantic analysis of the constituents of an idiom and then corresponding the meaning with the same idiomatic expression in Arabic. They finally inferred the meaning 'to allow'. This way of trying to analyze unfamiliar idioms with reference to compositionality is in accordance with (Glucksberg, 2001). Only one had not heard or seen it before and he explained how he thought 'I consider each individual word and make up the meaning in my language'. He corresponded the meaning with Arabic, but he added 'I do not know how and in what cases to use it'. In other words, he was unfamiliar with the metaphorical use of the idiom.

The third idiom presented to the interviewees was '*beat around the bush*' which according to Oxford Dictionary of Idioms means 'discuss a matter without coming to the point; be ineffectual and waste time'. It was a semi-opaque idiom that had a similar idiom in Arabic. It was familiar to four interviewees, while four had not heard of it before. The four who were unfamiliar with it had difficulties to find out a suitable meaning. These four described how they thought in trying to get the meaning of this idiom as follow: he first said that he started relating the first word of an idiom 'beat' to the second word 'around' and tried to produce a meaning of 'win a race' and then made a relation between the second word 'around' to the last word 'the bush' to make up the meaning of 'a race in a ground of intensive trees'. Finally, he came to the meaning of an idiom 'win a race in a ground of intensive trees'. He also explained his way of thinking to process the meaning of this idiom in its situational context by thinking of the whole idea of the context and trying to match the meaning of an idiom to its context. He finalized the meaning as 'you always win but why should not you reach the last step'. When he was asked why he did not get the meaning of 'to avoid a topic', he replied that the words of an idiom did not help him enough and he was not sure which metaphorical meaning to think.

The second interviewee required further information and asked about the meaning of 'bush' immediately. He was told the meaning of 'bush' and expounded that he looked at the words of the idiom and try o guess the meaning. He believed that the meaning was very difficult because the constituents of the idiom did not help to create a meaning and he was unfamiliar with it. In a context, he expounded how the words 'should not' and 'point' helped to interpret the general idea of the context and processed the meaning of the idiom as 'you are not straightaway'. The third interviewee came to the conclusion that the idiom meant 'someone destroys something'. In context, he concluded that the idiom implied 'you are in the incorrect way'. When he was told the meaning of an idiom 'to avoid the topic', he said if he had more time and thought t well it was possible to come to the meaning. The fourth interviewee said 'I have a problem in the meaning of 'bush' and 'beat' that have more than one meaning'. He also considered it difficult even in a context. This implies that the familiarity with the literal meaning of the constituents helps to lead to figurative ones and the unfamiliarity with the literal meaning creates the problem of not to find the figurative one. The other four who were familiar with it had no difficulty and they explained that they have recognized the same

equivalent in Arabic. Only one said 'i have heard of it several days ago but i forget it's meaning', and continued expounding that he remembered it's meaning with the help of context.

The last idiom presented to the interviewees was '*kick the bucket*' which means 'to die'. It was an opaque idiom and had no similar idiom in Arabic. It was familiar to three interviewees. While five had not heard of it before. The five interviewees who were unfamiliar with it had suffered and found difficulties in trying to work out the meaning. The first interviewee explained his way of thinking and concluded that the idiom meant 'to exceed a problem'. He explained that he came up with this meaning because of the meaning of the word 'kick' used to refer to exceeding something in Arabic. When the idiom was shown in its context, he determined the meaning 'her brother was in a problem'. He believed that the meaning was difficult and after he was told the meaning 'died' immediately he remembered its equivalent in Arabic and said ' i forgot it totally but i remember it now'. This asserts what Swinny and Culter (1979) claimed when they mentioned that idioms as stored as long words in the mental lexicon. The second interviewee decided that the meaning was also difficult and in the idiom context came to the meaning ' her brother lost things in the car accident'. He could not come to the correct meaning because it was the first time to see it and unfamiliar with it to figure out the meaning. The third interviewee explained his process and found out the literal meaning 'hit a bucket with a leg' but he could not imagine or reach the idiomatic one. But in context he concluded the suitable meaning 'passed away' due to the help of context he said ' in context i understand the idiom meaning'. The fourth interviewee came to the meaning 'get rid of something'. He expounded that this meaning was the nearest to Arabic, especially the meaning of 'kick' which used in Arabic in such figurative as 'kick disease' or 'kick poverty'. In context, he considered 'the meaning is different from what i thought', he added that the meaning implied ' there is indeed a problem'. The fifth interviewee told the meaning 'bush something away'. In context he decoded the meaning ' paid much money in the car accident'.

To sum up, interviewees find difficulties to come up with a possible meaning of an idiom. L1 has really affected the process of interviewees' thinking, they try to look for corresponding idiom or at least the nearest one, when an equivalent in Arabic is not available, they rely on the individual constituents of an idiom to find out the meaning.

In some cases, they try to relate some constituents of an idiom and use this relation to find out the idiom meaning i.e. discussing the idiom without guessing at the meaning. Sometimes they ask about unclear words, make a mental imaginary of the idiom meaning or depend on key words of the idiom that help in guessing the meaning. In addition, they use the context to get the idiom meaning. At this stage of learning, foreign learners can develop lexicalization of idioms rather similar to native speakers, especially in idioms that are identical or similar in L1 and L2.

It seems that unfamiliar and opaque idioms are more difficult to process than transparent ones. Furthermore, when the informants are unable to recognize the literal meaning of the constituents neither literal nor idiomatic meaning can be processed.

## Conclusion

To conclude, EFL learners used different strategies to comprehend the meaning of idioms: they look for a similar idiom in their mother tongue (Arabic), if there is no one, they pass again through the English idiom word by word and try to find the closest idiomatic one in Arabic( Nasher, 2014, p.79). If that does not help they process the idiom meaning depending on constituents. This way of processing sometimes leads to incorrect meaning, especially with opaque idioms due to the separate relation between the literal meaning and the idiomatic one. In some cases they rely on key words of the idioms to process the meaning. Other times they discuss the idiom individual words or ask about the meaning of ambiguous words of an idiom to figure out the meaning.

It has also been found that learners refer to L1 idioms less frequently when L2 idioms are presented in a supportive context. In other words, in context they process the meaning by trying to match the meaning of an idiom in relation to the general idea of context or focusing on key words of context that help to decode the meaning. They sometimes use L1 idioms to fit a suitable L2 idiom meaning or use the individual constituents meanings of an idiom to form a plausible L2 idiom meaning when the context does not help enough to make a guess.

In processing familiar idioms, foreign learners conform them to their native language or use their knowledge of the real world (ibid, p.79). In some cases they make Imagination of the idiom meaning.

As far as strategies are concerned, the results of the study reveal that the learners used different strategies to process the meaning of English idioms such as guessing the idiom meaning from the context, using first language, using literal interpretation (word by word), discussing and analyzing the idiom without guessing at the meaning, requesting information about the idiom or informing of a particular word of the idiom.

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