

# **The Investigation of Taiwanese University EFL Learners' Idiom Familiarity and the Affecting Factors in Idiom Comprehension**

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## **Abstract**

This study aimed to investigate Taiwanese university EFL students' idiom comprehension from two aspects: how efficiently they can comprehend the meaning of English idioms, and if the three factors (learners' proficiency, idiom types, and context) play significant roles in affecting their idiom comprehension. One hundred and seven sophomores who majored in English at a private university in southern Taiwan participated in the study. The mix-method approach was used for the research design.

Regarding learners' guessing efficiency, the results revealed that the learners' difficulty was evidenced by (a) their 52.2% wrong guesses in the task items containing unfamiliar idioms, (b) only a mean score of 29.97 (out of 100) achieved in their attempts at guessing idioms reported as unfamiliar, and (c) their failure to recognize the familiar idioms in 5.0% of the total number of the task items. Regarding the impact factors of learners' guessing ability, the results indicated that the higher proficiency learners significantly made more accurate guesses in the meaning of unfamiliar idioms. In terms of context factor, learners' guessing performance in the contextual idioms was significantly better than in the isolated idioms. For the factor of idiom type, learners significantly performed better in the ET (English idioms which have exact Chinese translation equivalents) and PT (English idioms which have partial translation equivalents in Chinese) groups than in the NET (English idioms which cannot be translated literally into Chinese and whose literal translation make no sense in Chinese) and FF (false-friend) groups in guessing the meaning of unfamiliar idioms. Finally, data from the think-aloud task (TA) gave us an insight into the learners' problems and difficulties with idiom comprehension. Some pedagogical implications for classroom teachers to improve idiom teaching in EFL situations are also included.

**Keywords:** Idiom comprehension, Idiom type, Learner proficiency, Contextual support, Affecting factor analysis, English teaching and learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of the Study**

Language competence continually develops from childhood all the way into adulthood, irrespective of country or culture. Although all of the changes that occur are subtle, one aspect of language that reflects this subtle growth is the understanding of figurative expressions (Nippold, 1998). These expressions commonly occur in spoken and written communication such as conversations, newspapers, advertisements, poems and commercials (Gibbs and Beitel, 1995; Nippold, 1998). For the researcher, observing how effective linguistic communication can be is a very interesting research topic. Sometimes people convey large amounts of meaning and information with only a few words—idioms. John-Laird (1993) states that “it is difficult to speak spontaneously without lapsing into idiomatic usage” (p. 3); in addition, McDevitt (1993) also argues that “idioms are an important part of any language and may be said to be an indicator of one’s fluency in that language” (p. 4). Idioms, therefore, play a significant role in a foreign language as well as in the first language. Foreign language learners learn not only vocabulary and grammatical structures of the target language but also idiomatic phrases to integrate themselves into the culture of the target language.

Mastering English idioms is not easy for EFL learners, who may see them as a stumbling block (Cooper, 1999). According to Buchwald (1992), foreigners often misinterpret what Americans say since they take everything Americans say literally. Thus, English idioms are probably the most problematic aspect for EFL learners to comprehend and interpret in their L2 learning. To sum up, non-native speakers of English, even if they understand standard literary American English, may feel frustrated and confused when they hear idiomatic expressions, since the true meaning of the idiom generally cannot be determined by the knowledge of its component parts. Therefore, learning idiomatic phrases and expressions of a specific language is important, not only for the acquisition of that language itself, but also its social communication and culture. Unfortunately, studies aiming at the teaching of idioms to EFL students have not been able to catch the attention of many EFL teachers. Idioms are thus often ignored during the process of teaching and learning. This is to be regretted as it handicaps EFL learners’ command of the target language in the long run. Few studies to date have investigated whether Taiwanese college-level EFL students share the problem of comprehending idioms and where exactly their difficulties lie.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Idioms such as *play with fire* and *pull someone's leg* are expressions that abound in English and are easily produced and understood by native speakers. Given the commonness of figurative expressions, it is important to know how people learn their meanings. Especially for EFL learners, this information can be used to facilitate figurative understanding in non-native speakers who have difficulty in this area. When EFL learners' language knowledge of idioms is developed, then they are able to use the language appropriately, and their language proficiency is definitely enhanced. Thus, the purpose of the study was to investigate Taiwanese university students' English idiom comprehension ability in the following aspects: how efficiently they can comprehend unfamiliar idioms, and which factors play a significant role in affecting students in comprehending these culturally coded linguistic forms. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How efficiently can Taiwanese university EFL students comprehend the meaning of unfamiliar idioms?
2. Do the three factors (learners' proficiency, idiom types, and context) play significant roles in affecting students' comprehension of unfamiliar idioms?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Traditionally, idioms are described as fixed expressions, as phrases or sentences whose figurative meaning is not clear from the literal meaning of their individual constituents. As a consequence, most authors have drawn a fundamental distinction between literal and figurative language and have assumed that idioms and their figurative meanings must be stored separately in the mental lexicon, and that this meaning must be learnt as a whole unit. For linguistic theories, which are mainly concerned with literal language, idioms have always caused serious problems. This is why, over the last four decades, linguists and psycholinguists have developed a number of hypotheses to describe the special grammatical characteristics of idioms and to explain their processing and representation (Abel, 2003).

## **Non-native Speakers' Idiom Processing**

Numerous research studies on native speakers' processing of idiomatic expressions have been done in the past; however, research which looked into the representation and processing of idiomatic expressions by L2 learners has not received the same interest from applied linguistic researchers. Several researchers (i.e. Cooper, 1999, Liontas, 2002, Bortfeld, 2004), confirmed the lack of research on non-native speakers' processing of figurative language. In other words, we know very little about how EFL learners process unknown English idioms.

Indeed, most of the existing research in the area of second language learners' idiom processing has been concerned with language transfer, the effect of L1-L2 idioms in terms of lexical, pragmatic, or semantic similarities on L2 learners' comprehension of such idioms. In fact, as Cooper (1999) pointed out, only a few research studies in the EFL context have dealt with idiom processing outside the circle of L1-L2 idiom similarity and the impact it can have on foreign language learners' comprehension and interpretation of target language idioms. In addition, non-native speakers' idiom comprehension strategies have also hardly been studied.

While some researchers have suggested that non-native speakers comprehend idioms by direct retrieval of their figurative meanings, others have claimed that non-native speakers first process idioms literally only and then access their figurative readings (Liontas, 2002). In addition, Kecskes (2000) argued that owing to the lack of metaphorical competence in L2, non-native speakers are more likely to rely on literal meanings of figurative utterances and on their first language conceptual system when producing and comprehending figurative phrases.

Research in the foreign and second language teaching area has shown that L2 speakers, similar to L1 speakers, apply some strategies while processing unfamiliar idioms, despite the lack of sufficient input in the classroom setting and the lack of language contact. In order to interpret the meaning of idioms, L2 speakers recall the strategies acquired during their first language acquisition, and they rely on the literal meaning conveyed in the context and guess at the intended meaning (Bulut, 2004). According to Katja's (2004) study, the results suggested that English idioms were fairly difficult for Finnish EFL students: the easiest were the idioms that had an identical equivalent in Finnish. However, the tendency to seek assistance in the mother tongue at times led to erroneous interpretations.

Matlock and Heredia (2002) suggested that the role of literal and figurative meanings in the processing of L2 idioms will be determined by the L2 learner's proficiency in the language. Accordingly, they have proposed that L2 learners of the

beginning-level must first establish direct connections between literal and non-literal meanings of figurative expressions. Following from this assumption, Matlock and Heredia (2002) envisaged idiom comprehension at early stages of L2 learning as consisting of three steps. In the first step, an L2 idiomatic expression is translated literally into L1. Next, the learner accesses the literal meaning of the expression and attempts to make sense of it. Finally, in the third stage, the figurative meaning is accessed. On the other hand, at more advanced stages of L2 learning the non-native speaker may process figurative expressions in the same manner as a native speaker, without having to access their literal meanings first. This suggests it is very likely that the status of literal and figurative meanings in processing idiomatic expressions will be different for native speakers and for non-native speakers.

### **Interlingual Transfer of Idioms**

In L2 learning, interlingual transfer (i.e. transfer from any other previously learned language or mother tongue) is a major cognitive strategy that learners fall back on when their linguistic means are insufficient to achieve their communicative goals. Without a doubt, the influence of the mother tongue and the existence of interlingual transfer are indisputable, especially in the EFL context where learners' exposure to the target language is confined to a few hours per week of classroom instruction, such as English learners in Taiwan. Therefore, interlingual transfer is a strategy that is readily available to the learners to compensate for inadequacies when they attempt to communicate in the foreign language.

Deviations resulting from interlingual transfer have been recorded at all linguistic levels, (Gass & Selinker, 1994; Odlin, 1989). Generally speaking, foreign language learners cannot understand and use idioms unless they attain an advanced level of proficiency in the target language. Even then, EFL learners' ability to comprehend and produce idioms hardly reach a native speaker' level (Baker, 1992; James, 1998). In other words, EFL learners usually only manage to express themselves in plain non-idiomatic language.

After years of formal EFL classroom instruction in junior high and high schools, many Taiwanese college students hardly attain an intermediate level of proficiency. Through the study of Arabic EFL learners' positive and negative interlingual transfer of idiomatic expressions in their English writing assignments, Mahmoud (2002) found that the small number of idioms used and the high frequency of negative transfer were indicative of the problems encountered in learning and using idioms. In addition, facing the problem of low proficiency in EFL on the one hand and the urge to achieve 'idiomaticity' in it on the other hand, college students seem to arrive at a compromise

by falling back on the interlingual transfer strategy. Therefore, his pedagogical implication was that adult EFL learners could be made aware of the transfer strategy and its outcome, and cases of positive and negative transfer could be discussed with them so that they know when to transfer and when not to. Moreover, with the belief that the low-proficiency foreign language learners can be encouraged to use interlingual transfer, Mahmoud (2002) suggests that more exposure to the target language through reading and listening is vital—the language course should aim at idiomatic phrases as well as fluency and accuracy.

Irujo (1986) examined the effect of idiom similarity of L1 and L2 on advanced EFL learners' comprehension and production of idioms. Her aim was to find the role of transfer in a group of Spanish-speaking Venezuelan advanced EFL learners' comprehension and production of idioms. She classified the English idioms into three categories: (1) identical idioms: those with the same form and meaning as their Spanish equivalents; (2) similar idioms: those similar to their Spanish equivalents; and (3) different idioms. In terms of comprehension, Irujo found that identical idioms were the easiest to comprehend; similar idioms were comprehended almost as well as the identical idioms were, while different idioms were the most difficult for the participants to comprehend. Irujo concluded that both positive and negative L1 knowledge transfer was shown in the case of identical or similar idioms when the learners' first language was close to the target language; therefore, L1-L2 idiom similarity could be an influential factor in second language learners' idiom comprehension, but is not necessarily so.

### **Previous Studies on Idiom Comprehension**

Some researchers in recent years have claimed that conceptual metaphor can facilitate the learning and comprehension of idioms which was based on the Conceptual Metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The research results suggested that metaphorical and metonymical understanding played an important role in idiom comprehension (Gibbs, 1992; Hamblin & Gibbs, 1999).

In a series of Bortfeld's (2002) experiments, native and nonnative speakers of English were asked to form mental images of familiar American English idioms. Even when given explicit instructions to base their images on the phrases' literal meanings, both groups of speakers reported images that reflected fusions of the phrases' literal and figurative meanings. In a subsequent rating task, non-native speakers were judged to have produced more natural sounding sentences using the target idioms after the imaging task than they did before the task. In a second experiment, non-native English speakers were asked to form images of unfamiliar American English idioms both

before and after being told the phrases' figurative meanings. The result shows non-native speakers' images did not noticeably change between the first and the second imaging session, Bortfeld's (2003) study indicated that their images were not dependent on explicit knowledge of the phrases' figurative meanings.

Several studies were conducted in the Taiwanese EFL context. Based on Krashen's (1982) idea that linguistic input is crucial to language acquisition and Swain's (1985) postulate that linguistic output should be viewed as being as important as linguistic input, Huang (2007) investigated the effectiveness of input and output instruction via pictures in Taiwanese college students' comprehension. Idioms were taught with not only metaphors and metonymies but also visual aids. The participants were divided into three groups with different ways of idiom teaching: the first group was taught with the underlying metaphors and metonymies, the second with the underlying metaphors and metonymies plus visual input, and the third with the underlying metaphors and metonymies plus visual output. The results showed that the three groups all positively increased their idiom comprehension and improved their understanding of the underlying metaphors and metonymies. Also, the visual output group outperformed the other two groups in idiom comprehension and retention in memory. Finally the ability to comprehend conceptual metaphors and metonymies was correlated with the complexity of the conceptual metaphors underlying idioms.

Another similar study done by Feng (2007) investigated the utility of conceptual metaphors and metonymies in enhancing the idiom comprehension of EFL learners. Her results showed that in the pre-test, participants were not aware of the connection of the underlying metaphorical and/or metonymical knowledge and the figurative meanings of idioms. However, the underlying knowledge, including two kinds of metaphors and metonymies, of idioms could be to some extent taught to learners, which in turn facilitated and increased their comprehension of unfamiliar idioms. In addition, the ability to comprehend conceptual metaphors and metonymies was connected not only to universal and cultural knowledge but also correlated with the participants' language proficiency.

To explore L2 learners' comprehension processes when they attempt to interpret idiom meanings, some researchers have also investigated the comprehension strategies and techniques which were used by the learners. How do EFL learners process unknown idioms? As previous studies suggested, they are likely to use all the clues available to derive the meanings of the idioms, such as contextual information, the individual words of the idiom, L1 knowledge, world knowledge, and so on. Cooper (1999) examined the on-line processing strategies used by EFL learners with varying backgrounds of L1, and identified seven strategies: 1) guessing from contexts, 2) discussing and analyzing the idiom, 3) using the literal meaning, 4) requesting

information, 5) repeating or paraphrasing the idiom, 6) using background knowledge, 7) referring to an L1 idiom. Another similar study done by Chen (2004) with an idiom comprehension test and a think-aloud task investigated Chinese EFL learners' strategy use. The result showed that the number of strategies used by the participants increased as idioms increased in difficulty, and the statistics indicated that strategy use by the advanced learners was more diversified and more effective.

While previous studies have provided enlightening theoretical and practical insights into L2 idiom comprehension, only a few researches have been done regarding idiom comprehension of college EFL students in Taiwan. As Lionats (2001) points out, in light of the pervasiveness of idioms in both written and spoken discourse, research into idiom understanding and interpretation must be text-situated and context-based. Therefore, the current study aimed to examine Taiwanese college EFL learners' idiom familiarity and the factors in their idiom comprehension.

## THE METHODOLOGY

### Participants

One hundred and seven sophomores who major in English at a private university were selected as the participants for the study. They were non-native speakers of English who on average had at least ten years of EFL instruction since elementary school. The study was conducted during the fall semester of 2011 while the participants were enrolled in the course Intermediate English Listening.

### The Instrumentation

At the beginning of the semester, a 25-item GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) reading-section test was administered in order to determine the students' levels of English language proficiency. Based on the test scores, 42 participants were assigned in a high-level group and 65 were in a low-level group, according to the mean performance and the standard deviation of the vocabulary test ( $M = 36.78$ ). To protect all participants' anonymity throughout the study, the researcher applied S initial (which stands for every Student) and a number given to every participant indicating his or her order in each group as High: S1-S41, and Low: S42-S107. Then all participants were asked to complete the Idiom Familiarity and Interpretation Task I and II—items came from the book *English Idioms in Context*.

The first test only showed 16 isolated underlined idioms, while the second test had the same sixteen idioms but underlined in 16 written sentences. At first, all

subjects were asked to rate their familiarity with each sample idiom in a four-point scale ranged from 1 (never heard of that idiom) to 4 (very familiar with that idiom). Next, all subjects were asked to define each underlined idiom in the written texts, and write down their meanings as their interpretations. Since students were able to figure out the meanings of the sample idioms in a contextual situation on the second test but not on the first test, the purpose of the Idiom Familiarity & Interpretation Tasks I and II also intended to check if 'context' could help learners' recognition with the idioms. Students' written answers were graded by two Taiwanese English teachers.

In order to investigate college EFL students' on-line idiom comprehension process, a think-aloud technique was also used at the same time while the idiom tasks were implemented. The researcher randomly selected 15 students among the participants to conduct the think-aloud protocols. While doing the think-aloud task, unlike the other participants who were only asked to write down their interpretation for each idiom on the sheets, they were asked to verbalize their thoughts while performing the two idiom tasks. While these participants spoke aloud what they thought about the meaning of each idiom and how they figured out the idioms (such as literal transfer or background information), all their utterances were voice-recorded by the monitors. In the case when there was a silent span of more than ten seconds, the monitor would prompt the participant. These verbal protocols then were transcribed word for word for further analyses. Finally, all subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire for the idiom survey, including their personal information and 18 questions regarding their opinions and attitudes toward English idioms.

## **Data Analysis**

The purpose of the study was to investigate EFL students' familiarity with idioms: if language proficiency, idiom type, and context play significant roles in impacting learners' idiom comprehension and their guessing efficiency of unfamiliar idioms. The data gathered from the two idiom tasks in which the recorded protocols of participants were transcribed verbatim (including the idioms without contextual and with contextual support) was processed by ATLAS.ti, the qualitative data analysis software. The transcripts were analyzed for two things: one was the methods the participants applied in deciphering the meaning of each idiom; the other was the meaning they arrived at for each idiom. In addition, the correlations between the participants' correct or incorrect responses regarding the idiom meanings and the idiom types were examined. With reference to earlier L2 idiom processing studies (i.e. Irujo, 1986; Liontas, 2001), the degree of L1-L2 similarity was taken as one criterion in

classifying English idioms in the present study. Four idiom types are identified, according to whether the idiom can be directly translated from English to Chinese:

Table 3.1 *Four types of L1-L2 Idiom Translation Relationship*

	Translation Relationship L1-L2 Idiom	Abb.
1	English idioms which have exact Chinese translation equivalents	ET
2	English idioms which have partial translation equivalents in Chinese	PT
3	English idioms which cannot be translated literally into Chinese and whose literal translation make no sense in Chinese	NET
4	English idioms which cannot be translated literally into Chinese, yet whose literal translation makes sense in Chinese and denotes a different meaning other than the target idiom's meaning (false-friend)	FF

The next step in coding was to score the participants' comprehension of the sixteen idioms in two idiom tasks. A correct answer to the meaning of each idiom was granted 2 points, a partially correct meaning was granted 1 point, while wrong comprehension or indication of not knowing the meaning of the idiom was marked 0.

## RESULTS

This study, focusing on the question of how familiar the EFL students are with English idioms, aimed to examine: (1) how efficiently they can comprehend the idiom meaning, and (2) if the learners' proficiency level, idiom types, and context play significant roles in affecting their comprehension of idiom meaning. Among 107 participants, 22 were male (20.6%) and 85 were female (79.4%). The first part of the *Student Questionnaire: Attitudes toward Learning English Idioms* is concerned with students' personal information, and the results are shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 *Participants' Personal Information (N=107)*

Item	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
1. Gender		
Male	22	20.6
Female	85	79.4
2. Off-campus English Lesson		
Attended	16	15.0
Not attended	91	85.0
3. On-campus English Lesson		
Attended	78	72.9
Not attended	29	27.1
4. Interest in English		
So-so	23	21.5
Some	53	49.5
A lot	31	29.0
5. Daily English learning		
Seldom	5	4.7
Yes, on the Internet	24	22.4
Yes, material reading	34	31.8
Yes, cram school	8	7.5
Yes, TV/movies	76	71.0
Yes, songs	78	72.9
Yes, other activities	3	2.8
6. Best skill in English		
Listening	33	30.9
Speaking	15	14.0
Reading	41	38.3
Writing	14	13.1
Translation	4	3.7
7. Worst skill in English		
Listening	20	18.7
Speaking	33	30.9
Reading	3	2.8
Writing	38	35.5
Translation	13	12.1

Table 4.1 illustrates that among the 107 respondents, only 16 (15.0%) had attended after-school off campus English lessons, but 78 (72.9%) had attended extracurricular English lessons offered by the school. Regarding their interest in learning English, 84 students (78.5%) showed positive attitudes. In terms of their self-learning of English in daily life, five students replied that they seldom learn English (4.7%). The majority stated that they watched English TV programs and movies as their way of self-learning English (71.0%) or listened to English songs (72.9%), while nearly one-third (31.8%) stated that they read English materials such as magazines or novels, and 22.4% preferred learning English on the Internet. From

students' self-report regarding their best and worst English skills, the findings indicated that their receptive skills (listening and reading) were better than their productive skills (speaking and writing).

Items 8 and 9 were concerned with EFL learners' learning motivation and learning difficulty in reading and listening. As the results shown in Table 4.2, most of their motivation came from the belief that learning English was helpful for their job-hunting and employment in the future (84.1%)—those with better competence in English could have better competitiveness in their career. Also, 65.4% of the participants' motivation was to go abroad/travel to a foreign country, and 45.8% stated their desire for making friends with foreigners—of course, a good English conversation skill is definitely needed. In addition, nearly half of them (53.3%) were motivated in English learning since they enjoyed learning foreign languages.

Table 4.2 *Participants' English Learning Motivation and Difficulty (N=107)*

Item	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
8. English learning motivation		
Helpful for academic achievement	39	36.4
Helpful for future job and employment	90	84.1
Enjoy learning foreign languages	57	53.3
Go abroad or travel to foreign country	70	65.4
Make friends with foreigners	49	45.8
Passive learning motivation	5	4.7
9. The biggest difficulty in listening or reading		
Lack of vocabulary	54	50.4
Poor grammar	26	24.3
Classroom teaching is useless	5	4.7
Hard to understand English	22	20.6

In terms of EFL students' learning difficulty in listening and reading, half of the participants (50.4%) blamed their lack of vocabulary, and nearly one-fourth (24.3%) attributed their learning difficulty in English to their poor grammar. Only five students thought English teaching in their classroom was useless.

Research question one intended to assess the guessing efficiency of the university EFL students. Therefore, the items were also required to be analyzed in terms of the subjects' familiarity (i.e. their previous knowledge of the meaning of the sample idioms). Evaluating a subject's guessing efficiency had to be done by rating that subject's responses to the meaning of idioms that he or she reported as 'unfamiliar'. As such, each answer had to receive a 'correctness' rate as well as a familiarity report, based on the subject's reports of their familiarity toward each idiom). Therefore, each subject's answer was either one of the following situations:

1. Familiar and Correct (FC is assigned if the subject reports a given idiom as familiar and confirms his or her familiarity with that idiom by providing a correct answer for that idiom meaning);
2. Familiar and Partially Correct (FPC is assigned if the subject reports a given idiom as familiar and provides a partially correct answer for that idiom meaning);
3. Familiar and Wrong (FW is assigned if the subject reports a given idiom as familiar but provides a wrong answer for that idiom meaning);
4. Unfamiliar and Correct (UC is assigned if the subject reports a given idiom as unfamiliar but he or she provides a correct answer for that idiom meaning);
5. Unfamiliar and Partially Correct (UPC is assigned if the subject reports a given idiom as unfamiliar but he or she provides a partially correct answer for that idiom meaning);
6. Unfamiliar and Wrong (UW is assigned if the subject reports a given idiom as unfamiliar and he or she provides a wrong answer for that idiom meaning).

According to Boers and Demecheleer (2001), only responses with unfamiliar reports, regardless of the rates that were assigned to them, were to be examined in order to assess the participants' guessing efficiency. That is, the findings related to the guessing efficiency would be based on the number of the items containing the unfamiliar idioms, whether the participants' guesses were correct, partially correct or wrong. In other words, the number of answers which were assigned as FC, FPC, and FW were excluded and would not be calculated in the subject's total score.

Table 4.3 *Number of Items with the Rates Assigned to Subjects' Answers*

Reported as Familiar Idioms			Reported as Unfamiliar Idioms		
FC	FPC	FW	UC	UPC	UW
200	66	86	403	247	710
11.7%	3.9%	5.0%	23.5%	14.4%	41.5%
Total: 352 (20.6%)			Total: 1360 (79.4%)		
Total Number of Items: 1712 (100%)					

All participants completed 1712 items in idiom task I. Table 4.3 represents the participants' overall performance in guessing: the correctness rate that each of the 1712 items received. As shown in Table 4.3, approximately one-fifth of the subjects (20.6%) were already familiar with the meaning of the sample idioms in the idiom task I. Thus, their guessing efficiency was to be assessed only of their answers to the remaining items (reported unfamiliar idioms). The number of such items, 1360, represented roughly four-fifths (79.4%) of all the 1712 items done by the participants.

Table 4.4 *Number and Rate of the Items Containing Reportedly Familiar Idioms*

Correct	Partially Correct	Wrong
200	66	86
56.8%	18.7%	24.5%
Total: 266 (75.5%)		Total: 86 (24.5%)
TOTAL: 352 (100%)		

Table 4.4 shows the number of sample idioms that the subjects reported as familiar and it also presents the rate assigned to the subjects' answers. Participants provided correct or partially correct answers for 75.5% of the sample items in which they reported those idioms as familiar. Despite this fact, they provided wrong answers for 24.5% of the items in which they reported the sample idioms as familiar. Although the participants reported their familiarity with sample idioms 352 times out of a total of 1712, they provided correct or partially correct meanings of these reportedly familiar idioms only 266 times, which represents 75.5% of all the reported familiar idioms. However, there were 86 times when the participants failed to prove their familiarity with the sample idioms. Failing to prove one's idiom familiarity refers to their inability of providing correct or partially correct meanings of the sample idioms that they reported as familiar.

To assess the participants' familiarity with the sample idioms presented in the task, it should be noted that the subjects mistakenly reported some of the idioms as familiar, although they were not indeed familiar with such idioms. Accordingly, two types of familiarity can be distinguished: *Reported Familiarity* and *Measured Familiarity*. The first type refers to being familiar with an idiom as reported by the subjects, whether they were truly familiar with that idiom or not; that is, *Reported Familiarity* refers to what the participants believe they are familiar with, whether they proved that familiarity or not. The second type, *Measured Familiarity*, refers to the subjects' familiarity as measured by the task; that is, as evidenced by the participants' correct and partially correct answers as to the meanings of idioms that they reported as familiar. As shown in Table 4.5, among the 16 sample idioms, although the participants reported being familiar with an average of 3.3 sample idioms, they could prove their idiom familiarity with only an average of 2.5 idioms.

Table 4.5 *Average Number of Familiar Idioms*

	Subject (N)	Correct Item	Average Number
Reported Familiarity	107	352	3.3
Measured Familiarity	107	266	2.5

The distinction between the two types of familiarity is needed because it shows that the participants missed the chance of learning by guessing the meaning of the idioms. In other words, the subjects did not attempt to make guesses because they mistakenly believed that they were already familiar with the meaning of such idioms. Therefore, these items are excluded from the calculation of the subjects' total scores. Regarding the subjects' Measured Familiarity, the participants were familiar with only 266 items (i.e. 200 correct + 66 partially correct answers), not with the idioms in the 352 items because the subjects mistakenly reported their familiarity with the 16 sample idioms. In other words, without providing correct or partially correct answers to these items, the participants failed to confirm their familiarity with the idioms in 24.5% of the reportedly familiar items, or 5.0% of all the task sample idioms.

Table 4.6 *Number and Rate of the Items Containing Reportedly Unfamiliar Idioms*

Correct	Partially Correct	Wrong
403	247	710
29.6%	18.2%	52.2%
Total: 721 (47.8%)		Total: 710 (52.2%)
TOTAL: 1360 (100%)		

In terms of unfamiliar idioms, the participants failed to make correct or partially correct guesses in more than half (52.2%) of the 1360 items containing unfamiliar sample idioms. On the other hand, as shown in Table 4.6, the participants made correct or partially correct guesses for less than half (47.8%) of the 1360 items containing unfamiliar sample idioms. Moreover, the participants' grades in percentages of the highest possible grade are presented in Table 4.7. The result indicates that the participants achieved a mean score of 29.97 (out of 100) in their attempts at guessing the meaning of the idioms reported as unfamiliar. That is, the participants scored 29.97% of the possible highest grade.

Table 4.7 *Descriptive Statistics of Guessing Scores in Idiom Task I*

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Score (Out of 100)</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Task I Score	107	9.59	29.97	4.29

In conclusion, regarding college EFL learners' guessing efficiency for the meaning of idioms, the results indicate that the subjects in the current study seem to have difficulty comprehending unfamiliar idioms by guessing their meaning. Such difficulty is evidenced by 1) the subjects' wrong guesses in more than half (52.2%) of the items containing the unfamiliar idioms, 2) the participants' mean score of 29.97 (out of 100), and 3) the participants' failure to recognize familiar idioms as such in 5.0% of the total number of the task items.

Research question two intended to examine if the three factors—learner proficiency (high and low level), idiom types (ET, PT, NET, and FF), and context (with and without contextual support)—can affect college EFL learners’ correct or incorrect guessing for the unfamiliar English idioms’ meanings.

### **Learner Proficiency Factor**

First of all, the learner proficiency factor was tested to see if any relationship existed with the learners’ performance in guessing idiom meanings. Two hypotheses were made:

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no difference in the ability of guessing idiom meaning between low-proficiency learners and high-proficiency learners.

H<sub>A</sub>: There is a significant difference in the ability of guessing idiom meaning between low-proficiency learners and high-proficiency learners.

Table 4.8 *Descriptive Statistics of Two Groups’ Total Guessing Scores*

Group	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
High Proficiency	42	28.48	8.11	1.25
Low Proficiency	65	16.42	5.13	.64

The participants were divided into two groups based on their performance in the vocabulary test. The ones whose scored higher than the mean score ( $M = 36.78$ ) were assigned to the high-proficiency group, and the others were assigned to the low-proficiency group. To explore whether the factor of learner proficiency made any difference in the subjects performance in idiom interpretation, the total scores of the two idiom interpretation tasks were collected. According to the descriptive statistics in Table 4.8, it seems that the participants of the high-proficiency group ( $M = 28.48$ ,  $SD = 8.11$ ) performed better than the low-proficiency group did ( $M = 16.42$ ,  $SD = 5.13$ ).

To determine whether the analysis of variance between the two groups of participants (high-proficiency and low-proficiency) reached the significant level, the independent samples *t*-test was conducted. Before the *t*-test, the variances of the two populations were checked by Levene’s test to verify whether they were significantly different. As Table 4.9 shows, since the result of Levene’s test for Equality of Variances showed that  $F = 7.41$ ,  $p < 0.05$  level ( $p = 0.008$ ), the equal variances not assumed were accepted. Therefore, the result  $t(62.26) = 8.60$ ,  $p = 0.00 < 0.05$  means that a statistically significant difference was found between the mean scores in total scores received by the two groups of participants. We reject the null hypothesis of no differences in guessing ability between the high-proficiency and low-proficiency level learners. To sum up, the results indicate that there was a statistically significant

relationship between college EFL learners' proficiency and their ability in guessing idiom meaning—a learner who had better English proficiency made more accurate guesses as to the meaning of unfamiliar English idioms.

Table 4.9 *Independent Samples Test of Two Groups' Total Guessing Scores*

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	7.41	.008	9.44	105	.00	12.06	1.28
Equal variances not assumed			8.60	62.26	.00	12.06	1.40

### Idiom Type Factor

In terms of idiom type, according to whether the idiom can be translated directly from English to Chinese, four types of idioms were identified as ET (English idioms which have exact Chinese translation equivalents), PT (English idioms which have partial translation equivalents in Chinese), NET (English idioms which cannot be translated literally into Chinese and whose literal translation make no sense in Chinese), and FF (English idioms which cannot be translated literally into Chinese, yet whose literal translation makes sense in Chinese and denotes a different meaning other than the target English idiom's idiomatic meaning; they are so-called 'false-friend'). Table 4.10 shows the 16 sample idioms used in the present study (two interpretation tasks) and their type groupings.

Table 4.10 *Sample Idioms Divided into Four Types*

Idiom Type	Idiomatic Expressions	
ET	swallow the bait (#9) fall between two stools (#11)	show one's true colors (#12) tighten one's belt (#13)
PT	find one's feet (#4) cost one an arm and a leg (#5)	turn the tables (#7) lift a finger (#10)
NET	face the music (#1) chew the face (#2)	cook one's goose (#6) take the biscuit (#14)
FF	pull one's leg (#3) move heaven and earth (#8)	eat one's words (#15) make one's bed (#16)

According to the participants' answers for both idiom task I and II, the idiom which received the highest correctness was *show one's true colors* (#12), followed by *cost one an arm and a leg* (#5) and *tighten one's belt* (#13). In other words, the

subjects wrote down the more accurate meanings on these three idioms than the others. It is noted that both *show one's true colors* and *tighten one's belt* belong to ET (exact equivalence), and *cost one an arm and a leg* is part of PT (partial equivalence). On the other hand, the idiom which received the lowest correctness was *eat one's words* (#15), followed by *pull one's leg* (#3) and *take the biscuit* (#14). It is noted that both *eat one's words* and *pull one's leg* belong to FF (false-friend), and *take the biscuit* is part of NET (no equivalence).

The idiom type factor was tested to see if any relationship existed with the learners' performance in guessing idiom meanings. Two hypotheses were made:

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant difference in learners' performance of guessing idiom meaning among the four idiom type groups of ET, PT, NET, and FF.

H<sub>A</sub>: There is a significant difference in learners' performance of guessing idiom meaning among the four idiom type groups of ET, PT, NET, and FF.

Table 4.11 *Descriptive Statistics of Guessing Scores Based on Idiom Types*

Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
ET	4	168.25	54.50	27.25
PT	4	134.75	50.31	25.15
NET	4	86.50	55.20	27.60
FF	4	57.50	31.22	15.61
Total	16	111.75	62.06	15.52

To evaluate if the factor of idiom type affected college EFL learners' performance in idiom interpretation, the descriptive statistics are shown in Table 4.11. Compared with their means from the four type groups, the highest mean scores were performed by the ET type group ( $M = 168.25$ ,  $SD = 54.50$ ) while the lowest mean scores of the four groups were performed by the FF type group ( $M = 57.50$ ,  $SD = 31.22$ ). In addition, the mean scores of the NET type group was also lower than the mean scores of the overall performed scores ( $M = 111.75$ ,  $SD = 62.06$ ).

Table 4.12 *ANOVA Result for Guessing Scores on Idiom Types*

	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	29207.50	3	9735.83	4.09	.032*
Within Groups	28569.50	12	2380.79		
Total	57777.00	15			

Note. \* $p < 0.05$

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the relationship between idiom types and subjects' guessing ability of idiom meaning.

The independent variable, the idiom type factor, included four idiom type groups; the dependent variable was the subjects' performance in the two idiom interpretation tasks. To see if the ANOVA was significant, the Tests of Between-Subject Effects were examined and presented in Table 4.12. As Table 4.12 shows, there was a strong relationship between the idiom type factor and subjects' guessing ability since a statistically significant difference was found among the groups of idiom type in the performed scores,  $F(3, 12) = 4.09, p < 0.05$  level ( $p = 0.032$ ).

A post-hoc comparison test was further employed to decide precisely which idiom type group means were significantly different from other group means. Tested by post-hoc multiple comparisons of group means using the LSD (Least significant difference) method, the result revealed that there were statistically significant differences in NET group ( $p = 0.035 < 0.05$ ) and FF group ( $p = 0.007 < 0.05$ ). This means that the participants' guessing ability for the items which belong to NET and FF groups was significantly worse than the other two type groups (ET and PT). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis of no significant difference in learners' performance of guessing idiom meaning among the four different idiom types. That is, the result revealed that two out of four comparisons were significantly different from each other.

Table 4.13 *Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons for Guessing Scores on Idiom Types*

(I) Type	(J) Type	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
ET	PT	33.50	.351	-41.67	108.67
	NET	81.75	.035*	6.58	156.92
	FF	110.75	.007*	35.58	185.92
PT	ET	-33.50	.351	-108.67	41.67
	NET	48.25	.187	-26.92	123.42
	FF	77.25	.045*	2.08	152.42
NET	ET	-81.75	.035*	-156.92	-6.58
	PT	-48.25	.187	-123.42	26.92
	FF	29.00	.417	-46.17	104.17
FF	ET	-110.75	.007*	-185.92	-35.58
	PT	-77.25	.045*	-152.42	-2.08
	NET	-29.00	.417	-104.17	46.17

Note. \*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Participants' performance in the idioms of the FF group ( $M = 57.50, SD = 31.44$ ) had a significantly lower mean score than that of the ET group ( $M = 168.25, SD = 54.5$ ) and the PT group ( $M = 134.75, SD = 50.31$ ), and participants' performance in the ET group ( $M = 168.25, SD = 54.5$ ) had a significantly higher mean score than in the NET group ( $M = 86.50, SD = 55.20$ ) and the FF group ( $M = 57.50, SD = 31.44$ ).

Participants' guessing performance's mean score difference between the groups of PT and ET, between the groups of PT and NET, and between the groups of FF and NET, were not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. To sum up, the idiom type is certain a factor that impacts EFL learners' performance in guessing the meaning of unfamiliar idioms—they can make more accurate guesses when the L2 idiom is translatable and equivalent to their L1.

### Context Factor

Finally, the context factor was also examined to see if the learners' guessing performance for unfamiliar idioms would be different in two situations: idioms shown in isolation and with contextual support.

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant difference in learners' guessing performance for idiom meanings between the idioms shown in isolation and with contextual support.

H<sub>A</sub>: There is a significant difference in learners' guessing performance for idiom meanings between the idioms shown in isolation and with contextual support.

In order to explore whether seeing the idioms with or without contextual support made any difference in learners' guessing performance, the received scores from the Idiom Familiarity & Interpretation Task I (idioms without contextual support) and II (idioms with contextual support) were compared. Their descriptive statistics are presented in Table 4.14. The most relevant for our purposes were the two means. Examination of these means suggested that the mean for idioms with contextual support ( $M = 11.51$ ,  $SD = 4.53$ ) was higher than the mean for isolated idioms ( $M = 9.59$ ,  $SD = 4.29$ ). However, the *t*-test would determine whether or not this difference was real or due to chance.

Table 4.14 *Descriptive Statistics of Idiom Scores*

		<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
Pair 1	Without Context	9.59	107	4.29	.41
	With Context	11.51	107	4.53	.44

Table 4.15 *Paired Samples T-test for Isolated Idiom and Contextual Idiom*

	Paired Differences			<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>			
Pair 1 Without Context- With Context	-1.93	1.48	.14	-13.48	106	.000

Further, a paired-samples *t*-test was used to examine if college EFL learners' performance of guessing meaning for an idiom with contextual support was

significantly better than for an isolated idiom. The result reveals that learners' guessing performance for the contextual idioms was significantly better ( $M = 11.51$ ,  $SD = 4.53$ ) than their performance for the isolated idioms ( $M = 9.59$ ,  $SD = 4.29$ ),  $t(106) = -13.48$ ,  $p < 0.05$  ( $p = 0.00$ ). Therefore, we rejected the null hypothesis of no significant difference in learners' performance of guessing idiom meaning between the idioms shown in isolation and in context. To sum up, the context is certainly a factor that impacts learners' performance in comprehending the meaning of unfamiliar idioms—they can make more accurate guesses when the idiom comes with contextual support than when the idiom is presented alone.

## CONCLUSION

Figurative expressions of English sometimes are difficult for EFL learners; some students who are English majors or who have an intermediate level of general English language proficiency might still be frustrated in figuring out the meanings from the contents which they read or listen to. Mastering these multiword units or 'language chunks' is not easy for EFL learners since the meanings of these texts cannot be determined through an analysis of their individual word meanings. However, a high frequency of figurative language is a feature for native speakers in their daily communication and in mass media. Thus, having such language knowledge is vital for EFL learners to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Moreover, Chen (2010) mentions that this is an era of *Global English*, in which Taiwanese students should equip themselves with enough English vocabulary, enhance their English competence on the go, and use English continually in order to face the challenges of globalization and internationalism. The core of learning English is how to *use* the target language appropriately instead of knowing perfect grammar—that is, the ultimate goal of foreign language learning is to be able to achieve cross-cultural communication with foreigners. However, EFL learners are not considered competent speakers of English until they master the various idiomatic expressions.

The results obtained from the current study gives us an insight into the learners' problems and difficulties in idiom comprehension, and it suggests that both idiom type and learners L2 proficiency play an irreplaceable role in L2 idiom comprehension and interpretation. To be specific, NET and FF idioms posed the greatest difficulty in comprehension due to their characteristics of being non-transferable and causing negative interference, while ET idioms were the easiest to comprehend, it means that an increased degree of L1-L2 similarity between the English idiom and its Chinese translation equivalent foreshadows easier comprehension and interpretation.

Based on the research findings, the researcher believes that the gap between L2

and L1 cultures greatly affects L2 learners' cognitive and conceptual system that may lead to misunderstandings by the idiom's literal meaning. During L2 instruction, instead of treating all the idioms in the same way, differential attentions therefore should be paid to different types of idioms. For instance, for those L2 idioms which have L1 equivalents (e.g., ET and PT idioms), due to their easy comprehension, teachers can focus on the productive use of them. On the other hand, for those idioms which cannot be translated directly into the learner's L1 (e.g., NET and FF idioms), as Zuo (2008) suggests, comprehension should be privileged over production in classroom instruction.

Idioms taught in isolation are generally not retained and the full meaning of words can only come from encountering them in a rich linguistic environment; therefore, it is advisable to create a sense of need for idioms by presenting idioms in a natural linguistic context in which learners need to use the idioms they have learned to achieve a certain communicative purpose. Nevertheless, since many idioms are culture-dependent and even culture-specific, they can only be fully integrated into a learner's natural speech patterns after extensive exposure to the type of English which native speakers use with their culture. In order to recognize idioms and understand the context in which they are used, learners should be exposed to real-life language in which idioms are freely incorporated and can be studied in context. Therefore, the researcher expects this study to bring up the idea that both cultural literacy and idiomatic language should be integrated into L2 classrooms. According to the findings of the current study, the following pedagogical implications might be helpful to the improvement of idiom teaching in EFL situations:

1. EFL teachers should encourage students to guess the meaning of idioms during reading but direct teaching of idioms and explicit idiom learning should go along with such encouragement.
2. It is advisable that teachers try to offer more opportunities and practice in class in which students can be exposed to idioms contextualized in authentic language to generate natural, meaningful discourse using those idioms.
3. Students' schemata can be enriched by reading various genres of English and watching English programs to experience real language use in their daily life, so that they will be able to relate background information presented in the idiom with the information stored in their long-term memory and activate and use that knowledge to interpret the idiom's meaning.
4. EFL teachers should pay attention to the conceptual metaphor aspect of idiom learning and introduce the relevant cultural background knowledge related to the conceptual metaphors concerned.

To sum up, in the ESL/EFL classrooms, use of authentic materials will prove that idioms are employed quite often in certain genres, and progressing learners' knowledge of idioms will increase those learners' understanding of these materials. Also, if knowing idioms and using them appropriately truly forms a part of communicative competence, then teachers would do well to introduce them regularly and systematically to their students in a positive motivational way since language learners should learn not only the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the target language, but also the idiomatic phrases with which to integrate themselves into the cultural dimension of language learning.

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## 大學生對英語慣用語熟識度與影響慣用語理解因素之研究

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### 摘要

本研究的目的是要探究台灣的大學生對英語慣用語的熟識度及其理解能力與釋義過程，研究問題共有兩個方向：(1)學生對於不熟悉之慣用語，其猜測及釋義的效率如何？(2)學習者之英語能力、慣用語之型式、及有無前後文提示，這三個因素是否在大學生其慣用語之理解過程中扮演重要的角色？共有一百零七位南部某私立大學應用外語系大二學生參與研究。研究設計是採用混合型之研究方法：量化與質化兩種研究方法都將使用，包含資料收集及統計工具的分析。研究結果發現，學生對於在不熟悉之慣用語猜測及釋義的效率上，研究結果可由三點來證明學生的困難度：(1)學生在其標為不熟悉慣用語的題數中，其猜測及釋義的答錯率達 52.2%；(2)學生在其不熟悉的慣用語中，猜測及釋義的平均分數僅達到 29.97(總分 100)；(3)在所有題數中，學生在其標為熟悉的慣用語中，仍有 5% 的題數是答錯誤的。在影響學生慣用語理解的因素中，研究結果顯示，就「英語能力」因素而言，高成就組學生比低成就組在慣用語的猜測及釋義的準確度表現上高出許多。就「有無前後文提示」因素來說，學生在有前後文輔助的慣用語理解上的表現，也比單單只光看慣用語來猜測及釋義的準確度表現上來的更佳；以上兩個因素在統計上皆達到顯著差異。在「慣用語型式」因素方面的研究結果發現，學生在「可直接轉譯」及「部份可轉譯」這兩種型式的慣用語猜測及釋義的準確度表現上，確實優於「無法轉譯」及「假朋友」(既熟悉但會犯錯的詞彙)型式之慣用語，此結果說明兩語言之相似與相異性對學習者理解的影響。在匯集自學生「邊想邊說」(think-aloud)的研究資料中，對於學生在理解慣用語的問題及困難，提供外語研究者與教學者更深入的了解及省思。最後，研究者就教師在英語教室中提升慣用語教學技巧之運用與學生之慣用語學習策略，在結論中提出建議以供參酌。

關鍵字：慣用語理解、慣用語型式、學習者英語能力、前後文輔助、影響之因素分析、英語教學