

Strategies and Difficulties of Understanding English Idioms: A Case Study of Saudi University EFL Students

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate difficulties face Saudi EFL students in learning and understanding English idioms, and examines the strategies they utilize to understand idioms. The subjects were 85 male and female Saudi English major university students at the Department of English in Aljouf University. Two data collection instruments, questionnaire, semi-structured interview were employed as well as the Nation's Vocabulary Level Test to measure the students' language proficiency level. The results showed that students have difficulty to understand idiomatic expressions. Moreover, the findings revealed that most frequently used strategies were guessing the meaning of idioms from context, predicting the meaning of idioms, and figuring out an idiom from an equivalent one in their mother language. Furthermore, the results illustrated that low-proficiency students face more difficulties than high-proficiency students, though the differences were not significant. The results also showed that, the greater the vocabulary knowledge, the greater the use of idiom-learning strategies, especially for idioms that require a wider knowledge in vocabulary. This study concludes with teaching implications and recommendation for further research in learning and understanding idiomatic expressions.

Keywords: vocabulary level test, idioms, idiomatic competence, figurative meaning, idioms learning strategies

1. Introduction

Brown (2001) stated that vocabulary is considered to be "the building block of language" (p. 377) and that it deserves that teachers should allocate specific class time, as vocabulary learning is a priority if one needs to communicate productively. The field of teaching vocabulary has shifted from teaching separate words lists to teaching chunks of language, which is seen to be more beneficial and natural in language learning. Broadly speaking, there is a worldwide demand for learning English due to that language's supremacy in international business, technology, and science (Ababneh & Al-Momani, 2011). According to Cooper (1998), a language is full of idiomatic expressions, which include similes, metaphors, phrasal verbs, and figurative speech. Additionally, Cooper (2001) estimated that a person is expected to use about 20 million idioms' in "over a lifetime of 60 years" (p. 255). Beloussova (2015) argued that understanding and using idioms fluently could be seen as a sign of language proficiency, as it could be an effective way to help students enhance their communication skills in the daily context. Thus, investigating how idiomatic expressions are dealt with and processed in L2 is an issue worth examining further, since it could give language teachers a better idea of the difficulties that L2 learners face in understanding English idioms. It could also illuminate some of the strategies that language learners use in order to find out the meaning of unknown idioms and to interpret figurative language. However, it seems that teachers and students have not given them much attention.

In fact, Ellis (1997) argued that sufficient knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in L2 is an essential indicator of the language learner's communicative capability. Moreover, Liu (2008) demonstrated that a great number of L2 learners are eager to learn more idioms due to the fact that these learners have had much exposure to the target language and therefore have learnt to appreciate the value of idioms, including their richness and usefulness in communicative tasks. McDevitt (1993) stated that idioms are frequently used in everyday situations. Thus, they are an important part of any language and might be considered an indicator of a speaker's fluency in that language. Consequently, in order to understand idioms, learners are required to go beyond simple word-by-word comprehension and integrate figurative meaning. Idioms are very common in both written and spoken language.

The field of idioms is considered an important area of linguistics by many researchers. Many scholars believe that mastering idioms is a sign of proficiency for EFL/ESL learners. No doubt that further studies should be conducted to enrich the field's understanding of idioms. In fact, figurative language is an area often ignored in vocabulary teaching, and yet it is of crucial importance and should be considered (Lazar, 1996).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Importance of Idioms

Thawabteh (2011) illustrated that idioms are one of the universal aspects of all languages; they are considered to be an intrinsic part of human communication. Further, they baffle beginner learners to a great extent. They may cause not only linguistic but also cultural and technical problems for non-native speakers; hence, these problems might affect communication negatively. Dixon (1994) stated that idioms are essential to successful communication, whether in listening, speaking, reading, or writing. According to Cowie, Mackin, & McCaig (1983), the accurate and appropriate use of idioms is a distinctive mark of native-level command of the language, and it is a reliable measure of the proficiency of foreign learners. It is a fact that ignoring idioms would cause a learner various problems. The authors added that foreign language learners must learn not only the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the target language but also the idioms to integrate into the culture of the target language.

Furthermore, Lundblom & Woods (2012) emphasised the importance of understanding idioms. They believe that idioms are clearly presented in academic settings; consequently, failure to comprehend idioms could affect academic performance, written composition, reading comprehension, and vocabulary, especially because the occurrence of idioms in classroom language increases as students advance in age and grade. Several language researchers have common believe that a sound knowledge of idioms is required or English language proficiency and fluency, and a lack of such knowledge can cause significant misunderstanding (Liu, 2008; Shirazi & Talebinezhad, 2013; Wray, 1999, 2002). Thus, it becomes clear that idioms are very important in EFL/ESL contexts where L2 learners' language proficiency might be assessed on the basis of their understanding of idiomatic expression. This means that the more idioms one knows, the more native-like one's English will sound. Additionally, by learning idioms, one accordingly learns about the culture of the community that speaks the language (Al-kadi, 2015).

2.2 Definition of Idioms

Defining idioms is not easy. In the body of literature, several criteria have been suggested to define idioms. Larso (1984) defined an idiom as "a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words" (p. 20). Alexander (1987) defined idioms as "multi-word units which have to be learned as a whole, along with associated sociolinguistic, cultural and pragmatics rules of use" (p. 178). Richards and Schmidt (1990) defined an idiom as "an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from separate parts" (p. 246). Baker (1992) defined idioms as "frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form, and in the case of idioms, often carry meaning which cannot be deduced from their individual components" (p. 63). As Marlies (1995) defined it, "an idiom is an expression whose overall figurative meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its parts" (p. 283).

An idiom can also be defined as a fixed expression whose meaning cannot be taken as a combination of the meanings of its components parts (Ifill, 2002). Such a definition is similar to that of Moon (2006), who considered an idiom to be a fixed sequence of words that has a meaning beyond that of its constituent parts. According to Mitsis (2004), an idiom is as a continuum of nonliteral expressions that starts with usual collocations, continues with stable or fixed collocations and metaphorical collocations, and ends with idioms of absolute abstract meaning. Langlotz (2006) stated that an idiom is an institutionalised construction that is composed of two or more lexical items and has the composite structure of a phrase or semi-clause. Additionally, it is considerably fixed and collocationally restricted.

Al-kadi (2015) defined idioms as being "not literally translatable, as their meanings are unpredictable from the usual meaning of their constituent parts, particularly idioms of socio-cultural, historical, or political backgrounds" (p. 513). It could be concluded that an idiom should be defined as "a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2012, p. 870).

2.3 Previous Studies

Since idioms are considered to be figurative expressions that do not mean what they literally state, and since they are so frequent in spoken and written discourse, understanding and being able to produce them present L2

learners with a special challenge with regard to learning vocabulary. The scarcity of well-conducted empirical L2 studies on topics related to idioms in the language-learning process illustrates the profoundly limited amount of research interest that this area has received so far. It is obvious that L2 learners have some difficulties in becoming more fluent in the target language, and that they apply different strategies to overcome these difficulties and to comprehend the meanings of idioms.

Irujo (1986) demonstrated different types of difficulties in learning idioms appropriately in a language-learning context. Generally, students often do not know whether to consider the idiomatic or the literal meaning of idioms in specific contexts. Such confusion might be caused by the fact that idioms generally differ in their level of formality, and most idioms have literal counterparts. For instance, the absence of exact counterparts between Arabic and English pose a high level of difficulty for Arab EFL learners; the idioms in Arabic and English are different. McPartland (2000) argued that the easiest idioms to learn are those that have exact counterparts in the learner's mothertongue, and the most difficult idioms are those that have no analogue in L1 and whose meaning cannot be derived from the combined meaning of their constituents words. Further, Mantyla (2004) argued that L2 learners face difficulty recognizing unfamiliar idioms. Another problem is the lack of exposure to idioms, which ranges from the omission of idioms in speech addressed particularly to those learners so as not to cause confusion to the omission of idiomatic expressions the target language materials and syllabi (in addition to the shortage of exercises designed to teach idioms).

According to Hussein, Khanji, & Makhzoomy (2011), the difficulty of learning idioms comes from the fact that idioms are arbitrary and nonliteral. The arbitrariness of idioms makes them incomprehensible based on the meaning of their constituents, and hence they cannot be taught systematically. Similarly, Buckingham (2006) maintained that "idioms' arbitrary language-specific nature makes them difficult for learners to understand and acquire, resistant to translation" (p. 35). Pimenova (2011, pp. 117-119) pointed out that the difficulty of learning idioms could be related to five major challenges: (a) unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar idioms; (b) no analogous idioms in L1; (c) cultural differences; (d) lack of experience dealing with idioms; (e) lack of the broad context for a given idiom. Saleh & Zakaria (2013) mentioned that one of the main challenges of L2 idiom learning is that idioms are often unpredictable in terms of meaning.

Moreover, L2 learners apply different strategies while processing idioms in spite of the lack of sufficient input in the classroom setting and the lack of language contact. Hence, in the literature, different hypotheses have been presented in order to explain how idioms are processed. The idiom-list model by Bobrow & Bell (1973) indicates that when L2 learners encounter an idiom, they first interpret it literally. If a literal meaning does not fit the context in which the expression is used, they search for the idiom in their mental lexicon and then choose its figurative meaning. The second model for idiom processing is the lexical representation model by Swinney & Culter (1979). This model treats idioms as long words that are retrieved from the mental lexicon along with all other words. In the simultaneous processing of both literal and figurative meanings, context determines the winner. The third model is that of Gibbs (1980) and Schweigert (1986), which is the direct access model. This model is similar to the lexical representation model. In it, learners usually disregard the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression, and the figurative meaning is directly derived from the mental lexicon. Cooper (1998, p. 255) illustrated three competing hypotheses regarding how idioms are processed, and these are developed into a systematic plan for teaching idioms in the classroom: (1) "The literal first hypothesis consists of two modes: one that processes the idiom's literal meaning and one that processes its figurative meaning. The former is normally the active one, whereas the latter comes into play when the literal meaning does not fit into the speech context. (2) The simultaneous processing hypothesis claims that idioms are stored and retrieved in the mental lexicon as chunks. Literal and figurative meanings interact, and the interpretation that best fits the context is stored out. (3) The direct access model makes use of the figurative meaning of an idiom, as the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression is very rarely relevant".

Researchers differ in how they view the strategies through which idioms are processed, stored, and retrieved. Nelson (1992) argued that language learners directly access the figurative denotation of idioms, whereas Liontas (2002) claimed that language learners understand idiomatic expressions primarily by processing them literally, and only subsequently by retrieving the figurative explanation. This means that the literal processing of idioms must precede accessing their figurative meanings. Cooper (1999) investigated the comprehension strategies that L2 learners use when trying to figure out the meanings of English idioms in one- or two-sentence contexts. He found that guessing from context, discussing and analysing the idiom, and using the literal meaning were the most commonly used strategies. Bulut & Yazici (2004) demonstrated that L2 learners rely on the literal meaning conveyed in the context and guess what it means. Additionally, contextual clues are useful to learners in understanding unknown idioms. Palmer & Brooks (2004) indicated that the interpretation of figurative language

is mainly related to the background knowledge a learner uses to interpret the expression from context. They added that figurative language interpretation is based on an individual learner's schemata; direct or explicit instruction is thus often needed to provide the knowledge necessary to understand not only the figurative language but also the surrounding context. Overall, guessing from context was the most successful strategy (Zyzik, 2009).

Many researchers have demonstrated the effectiveness of mnemonic strategies. According to Clark & Paivio (1991), a strategy that is mnemonic and whose effectiveness has been established is encouragement of "dual coding". This strategy helps learners to form and process lexical understanding which have imagistic as well as symbolic/propositional components. On the other hand, many researchers have investigated the role of L1 in L2 idiom processing. This strategy is a double-edged sword, as L2 learners who rely on their own L1 in L2 idiom processing can potentially hinder their understanding of L2 idioms. Conell (1999) termed this phenomenon the "interlingual factor" (p. 6). According to Irujo (1986), the use of L1 may assist L2 learners in their comprehension of L2 idioms that are identical or similar to L1 equivalents. At the same time, idioms that have no similar or identical L1 equivalents cause difficulty for L2 learners. Pimenova (2011) explored the idiom comprehension strategies used by EFL Indian learners of English with dissimilar first language (L1) as well as challenges that English and Russian learners faced during a think-aloud reading task. The results revealed that learners could transfer their L1 strategies to L2, but they do not always know whether L1 strategies will be effective when reading a foreign text.

Rohani, Ketabi, & Tavakoli (2012) conducted a study to find out the effect of context on the strategies used by EFL learners to process idioms. Seventy intermediate English major students (16 males and 54 females) at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman participated in the study. The subjects were assigned to four groups: ten subjects in the same class made up the first two groups for the think-aloud process, and the remaining sixty subjects were divided into two groups of thirty to answer the questionnaires. The results showed both inter- and intra- group differences, confirming the effect of context on the strategies used in processing unknown idioms. The subjects used different strategies such as referencing context, focussing on key words, referencing background knowledge, and visualisation. Another study by Saleh & Zakaria (2013) investigated difficulties that forty Libyan students face in understanding idiomatic expressions. They examined the strategies used by the students to improve their understanding and use of idiomatic expressions. The findings showed that the subjects faced a number of difficulties, and they were all related to no decomposable idioms that their constituents were difficult because they were low frequent vocabulary or they were not known for the participants him/herself. In addition, the participants used many strategies to understand idioms. The most successful strategy was guessing from the context, and the next most successful strategy was referring to a similar L1 idiom.

Tran (2013) explored the competence of figurative idiomatic of language learners and their perceptions of idiom learning in an EFL context in Vietnam. The results revealed that the subjects have poor idiomatic competence. His efforts also uncovered the paradox between students' situation of using and learning idioms and their desires to learn. He claimed that figurative idioms should be taught along with the skills for negotiating idiomatic meaning. Further, learners have to be exposed to a variety of idioms that are not exclusively from traditional English-speaking countries but also from the countries of the outer- and expanding-circle context. Gahorei & Tabatabaei (2013) examined the perceptions of Iranian EFL learners towards learning English idioms and explored the effect of using two different methods of teaching them. The results showed that subjects who were exposed to the idioms via etymology and movie clips performed well and had positive attitudes towards learning idioms. In the same vein, Tadayyon & Ketabi (2014) conducted a study on Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards learning English idioms. Their study indicated that Iranian EFL learners have positive attitudes towards learning English in general and towards learning idioms in particular.

Smadi & Alrishan (2015) investigated the strategies utilised by Jordanian university EFL graduate students in translating idioms into Arabic. Ninety students participated in the study. They took a translation test that consisted of 16 idioms in different categories. The results showed that, in translating idioms, Jordanian EFL students use strategies such as paraphrasing, which was the most efficient strategy, followed by literal translation, regardless of their awareness of the use of these strategies. Al-Khwaldeh, Jaradat, Al-momani, & Bani-Khair (2016) examined students' perceptions of the importance of learning idioms, their most frequently used idiom-learning strategies, and the difficulties they faced when trying to learn idioms. The study was a survey research type. The participants in the study included 150 undergraduate English language learners at Hashemite University in Jordan. The results illustrated that the students encounter difficulties when learning idioms. Further, the students apply a number of strategies, with the most effective being the inference of meaning from context.

With regard to teaching vocabulary, time should be devoted to instruction on idioms. Learning idioms is one of

the fundamental aspects of language learning, and it is often postponed until the learners reach more advanced levels.

2.4 Idioms in the Saudi EFL Context

Keeping in view the teaching and learning of English in the Saudi context, the students speak their native language at home and during their interactions with their friends, peers, classmates, and even teachers. For this reason, there are obviously fewer chances to learn English in general and idioms in particular. Nevertheless, English is recognised as the most important foreign language in Saudi Arabia. It is taught as a major at the university level. The precollege curriculum includes obligatory English language courses as a school subject. Although advanced English major students are supposed to develop sufficient knowledge of English idioms, the introduction of idioms in the EFL syllabus is disappointing. According to the researcher, who has experience in teaching students at the university, idiom acquisition has been a neglected area in the local EFL teaching/learning environment, where idioms are selected and taught on a random basis using ad hoc teaching methods. In some university syllabi, idioms are introduced in listening and speaking courses as well as courses focussing on reading comprehension and writing skills. In many cases, students fail to use and/or interpret idioms. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is partially because idioms are not integrated into the language curriculum. Furthermore, L2 research into idiom learning/acquisition in the Saudi EFL context has not received adequate attention. This is probably due to a traditional emphasis on the acquisition of the English grammatical system at the expense of some other aspects of linguistic proficiency, including idiomatic competence. In summary, the teaching of idioms in the Saudi EFL context has generally resulted in the improper use of idiomatic expressions by EFL learners. Generally speaking, the lack of idiomatic competence is one of the factors that limit Saudi EFL learners' English proficiency.

2.5 Research Questions

Given the important role assigned to idioms in L2 acquisition and the difficulties EFL learners face in their learning, this study aims to investigate the difficulties that Saudi EFL learners experience in learning idioms as well as the most frequently used idiom-learning strategies they use to overcome such difficulties. In addition, the effect of language proficiency on learning and comprehending English idioms will be examined. Thus, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1). What sort of difficulties do Saudi EFL students encounter in learning idioms?
- 2). What are the strategies that Saudi EFL students use to facilitate understanding of idioms?
- 3). Are there any differences between low-proficiency and high-proficiency students in learning idioms and the strategies they use to do so?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The subjects of the study included 85 male and female English major fourth year students at the Department of English at Aljouf University in Saudi Arabia. The reason behind targeting year four students because they were exposed to English language in the college minimum for four years since English is the medium of instruction in the Department of English and they have gained experience in learning English language. Their age ranged between 21-24 years old. They were selected randomly to participate in the study and upon their willingness.

3.2 Instruments

To achieve the goals of the study, three data-gathering instruments were used in the study: the VLT, a questionnaire, and a semi structured interview. The instruments were administered in the order in which they are described in the following subsections.

3.2.1 Vocabulary Proficiency Test

Nation's multiple-choice receptive levels test was used for our study. It is a new version of Nation's (1983, 1990) vocabulary level tests (VLTs) developed by Schmitt (2000). Nation (2001) commended Schmitt's new versions of the VLT and considered them a "major improvement to the original test" (p. 416). This test was used to measure the students' level of English lexical proficiency to enable us to see if there is a relationship between their proficiency level and their understanding of idiomatic expressions.

The VLT was originally designed by Nation (1983, 1990) in an attempt to provide guidance for teachers regarding the areas where ESL/EFL learners need help, though recently it has been used as a measure of vocabulary size. It first appeared in 1983 and was later republished in Nation's 1990 book. It helps L2 teachers

to make placement judgements and to assess learners' proficiency and vocabulary gains due to instruction (Beglar & Hunt, 1999; Read, 1988; Schmitt et al., 2001). It samples five word-frequency levels—2,000, 3,000, 5,000, AWL (Academic Word Level), and 10,000—and it has four 'equivalent' forms. Read (1988) validated the VLT by administering the test twice to 81 learners at the beginning and the end of a three-month course. He corroborated the assumption that learners would do better at the initial levels of the test than at the final levels. That is, learners are likely to know more high-frequency words than low-frequency words (Read, 2000). Beglar & Hunt (1999) examined the equivalence and validity of the four forms of the 2000 and AWL levels by means of classical item analysis and then proposed two revised forms, each consisting of 27 items. They also validated those revised forms using Rasch item analyses. As a result, they claimed that the two revised forms have greater content validity than the original forms and that they are adequately equivalent. Several factors prompted us to employ this test. For instance, according to Read (2000), Nation's test has proven to be a good diagnostic measure of vocabulary level. Read also suggested that the VLT is essentially the standard vocabulary test for EFL research. Nation (2001) stated that "the test is designed to be quick to take, easy to mark and easy to interpret" (p. 21). The VLT measures breadth of vocabulary, but Qian (2002) concluded that depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge are closely and positively associated with each other. Further, the VLT tests vocabulary words from different word frequency levels, which, being chosen randomly, represent the entire vocabulary at each of these levels (Laufer et al., 2004). Hence, Nation's (2001) VLT was used to establish the subjects' English lexical proficiency.

3.2.1.1 The Design of the Test

The test is in five parts, representing five word frequency levels in English: the first 2,000 words, 3,000 words, 5,000 words, the AWL (i.e., beyond 5,000 words), and 10,000 words. According to Nation (1990, p. 261), the 2,000- and 3,000-word levels contain the high-frequency words that all learners need to know in order to function effectively in English. For instance, it is difficult to read unsimplified texts unless they know these words. The 5,000-word level represents the upper limit of general high-frequency vocabulary that is worth spending time on in class. Words at the university level should help students in reading their textbooks and other academic reading material. Finally, the 10,000-word level covers the more common lower-frequency words of the language. A representative sample of 60 words was taken from each of the five levels to construct the test versions. Because the words that were selected constituted representative samples, a learner's score at each level represents the proportion of all the words known at that level. So, if a learner scores 15 out of 30 on the 1,000-word level, that means that student knows approximately 50% of the words at that level, or about 500 out of the total 1,000. The 60 words from each level were grouped into blocks of six words according to part(s) of speech. The words in each block were then checked to make sure that they were not similar in form or related in meaning. Hence, if the learners had partial knowledge of a word, they should be able to choose the correct answer. The aim of the VLT is to get as accurate a record as possible of what the learners know, including words that they have not yet fully learned the meaning of. Three words in each block of six were randomly chosen as the words to be tested. The other three in the block were distractors. Words from the first 1,000 words were used to make definitions for the target words from the second 1,000 words, and words from the first and second 1,000 words were used to define words from all the remaining levels. The definitions thus made use of words that were more frequent than the words being tested. It should be noted here that in the academic level of the version we used, there are 72 words and 36 definitions, whereas there are only 30 definitions and 60 words in the other levels.

The scores of the five levels in the above table show a more or less consistent pattern of declining scores from the most to the least frequent English words. We can observe clear differences among the tests. The results show that our subjects did better in the 2,000-word level (mean = 14.18) than other levels. The differences between the scores were corroborated through one-way repeated measure ANOVA, which showed significant differences among the scores ($F=359.750$, $p=.001$). To determine the differences among the test scores, the Bonferroni adjusted comparisons multiple was used, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Post hoc paired comparison following repeated measures ANOVA showing the p value of differences in the test scores

Level	2,000	3,000	5,000	Academic	10,000
2,000		$p=.001$			
3,000			$p=.001$		
5,000				$p=.001$	
Academic					$p=.001$

This pattern therefore supports previous work on the validity of Schmitt's version of the VLT, as it showed a declining pattern across four of the five vocabulary levels.

3.2.1.2 The Procedure of the Proficiency Test

The VLT was distributed to the subjects in their classrooms. The instructions were translated into the subjects' L1 (Arabic). The VLT was introduced as a list of 150 questions without showing them the end of each level so they would try to answer as many questions as possible. It took the students between 35 to 60 minutes to complete the VLT.

3.2.1.3 Data Analysis

Nation (2003) stated that, although other people use it for this purpose, it is not the purpose of his VLT to measure the total size of a learner's vocabulary, as it samples vocabulary at certain frequency bands only, not across the whole range of bands. We correlated the subjects' individual total scores with the dependent variables to determine the effect of the VLT.

3.2.2 Questionnaire

An important investigation tool is the questionnaire, which usually asks students to report on their typical idiom-learning strategies. The questionnaire was constructed based on a careful examination of previous questionnaires such as those of Rohani et al. (2012), Saleh & Zakaria (2013), Angel (2014), Al-kadi (2015), and Al-Khawadeh et al. (2016). The questionnaire for this study comprised three parts. The first part related to general background information. The second part consisted of eight statements related to the difficulty of learning idioms. The third part comprised 23 statements focussing on strategies to be used in learning idioms. We took responsibility for distributing the questionnaires to the students. The students already knew the purpose of the study, as we had visited them before to complete the VLT. The researcher assured them that participation in this study is voluntary and will not affect their grades.

3.2.2.1 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis of the data was performed using the SPSS program. Responses regarding difficulties learning idioms and strategies used to understand idioms were scored on a 5-point scale: (1) *never*, (2) *seldom*, (3) *sometimes*, (4) *often*, and (5) *always*. The statistical methods employed for the analysis of the data were descriptive statistics, and correlation. The reasons for choosing these data analysis methods stemmed from the research design, the purpose of which was to determine whether or not there are statistically significant relationships (at a level of $p < .05$) between the independent and dependent variables in the questionnaire items and to determine if Saudi EFL students' vocabulary scores have the dominant effect on the difficulties they face when learning idioms and on the idiom-learning strategies they use.

3.2.3 Semi Structured Interview

The interview is a further step on the way to gathering objective evidence on difficulties with learning idioms and the strategies used to understand idiomatic expressions. A major advantage of the interview is its adaptability, instructiveness, and the direct response it can elicit from informants. The researcher has some control over the course of the interview, although the interviewee is allowed to negotiate what is being discussed (Nunan, 1992). In this way, more information can be picked up from the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee. In this type of interview, the researcher needs to listen carefully to the participant's responses and follow his or her lead.

A semi structured interview was used in this study as a supplement to the questionnaire. The semi structured interview was conducted using a schedule of questions very much like the questionnaire, with some additional questions asking the respondents to provide more information concerning learning and understanding idioms. The questions were open, and the responses were taped for later transcription. We designed an interview guide that was closely based on the questionnaire.

3.2.3.1 Procedure

The researcher interviewed 20 students (6 males, 14 females), and each interview lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. At the beginning of each interview there was a brief conversation in Arabic to help to create a relaxed atmosphere. Each subject was informed that he or she could choose the language of interview (Arabic or English) and that they could be taped. The researcher followed the interview guidelines and checked that the wording of the questions was easy to understand.

3.2.3.2 Data Analysis

Although our attention was drawn to some interesting points, what the subjects said in the interviews was less significant than the researcher had expected. Less data was collected from the interviews than from the questionnaire. Therefore, and due to the lack of space, the information elicited from the interviews with the students was neither coded nor quantified. It was used primarily as supplementary or supportive evidence for the interpretation of the results of the questionnaire.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, the results will be presented in two subsections. The first subsection concerns the difficulties that Saudi EFL students encounter while learning English idioms, and the second one concerns the strategies they use to facilitate their learning and understanding of English idioms. The effect of vocabulary level will also be discussed.

4.1 Difficulty of Learning Idioms

The first research question in the present study sought to answer the question, *What sort of difficulties do Saudi EFL students encounter in learning idioms?* The analysis of the data was based on the students' responses to the eight statements in the questionnaire.

Table 2. Difficulty of learning idioms

Difficulty	Descriptive statistics		Inferential statistics	
	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background behind the idioms.	4.28	.978	.038	.451
2. Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of experience dealing with idioms.	4.30	.934	-.047	.263
3. Idioms are difficult because they are not part of the courses' syllabi.	4.35	.763	.041	.571
4. Idioms are difficult because they are not taught well in class.	3.65	.823	.035	.643
5. Idioms are difficult because the cultural courses I studied were not efficient.	4.00	.664	.046	.275
6. Idioms are difficult because they have unfamiliar words.	3.20	.742	.013	.951
7. Idioms are difficult because they have no analogue in Arabic.	3.62	.821	.037	.412
8. Idioms are difficult when they have no context.	3.11	.762	.028	.637

This part introduces the findings obtained from the questionnaire on the difficulties that the participants face in understanding idioms. As shown in Table 2, all students seem to have difficulties understanding idioms. This could be related to the fact that idioms are arbitrary and nonliteral (Hussein et al., 2011). The findings indicate that idioms were difficult because they are not part of the courses' syllabi. This finding is supported by Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016). In other words, and to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there are no courses that are specially designed for learning idioms; instead, idioms might occasionally be explained in other courses. This result supports other researchers' findings that the majority of Arab English-language learners face hardship in acquiring, understanding, and using idioms (Al-Kadi, 2015; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013). Another difficulty could be ascribed to the lack of experience dealing with idioms as well as the lack of cultural background behind the idioms. Similarly, most of the participants pointed out that idioms are marginalised in their EFL courses and that the cultural courses they took were not sufficient, as they are not taught well in the class. This indicates that students were deprived of opportunities to learn idioms properly in the classroom. This corroborates Saleh & Zakaria's (2013) findings. Moreover, the results illustrated that the participants seem to have difficulty understanding idioms with no analogue in their L1 (Arabic). This is in line with Pimenova's (2011) findings that L2 idioms with no analogue in the mother tongue are more difficult to grasp and to use. Besides that, the responses indicated that idioms with unfamiliar words and those without context seem to be difficult (Al-Kadi, 2015; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013).

The students' interview responses supported the above findings, as they demonstrated that they face a number of difficulties when learning English idioms, especially those with no counterparts in the Arabic language. The students also claimed that, in addition to the above difficulties, they face difficulties due to time limits for English classes, because of which their teachers do not pay much attention to idioms. Further, the students believed that it would be better if there were much focus on teaching idioms, and if this focus starts in the early stages of language learning in intermediate and high school education.

Overall, it could be concluded that the findings of the current study confirm the findings of other researchers such as Nakhallah (2010), Hussien et al. (2011), Thawabteh (2011), and Chen & Lai (2013) that EFL learners might find it really difficult to recognise the structures of idioms, understand the meanings of idioms, and translate these meanings into their native language. Thus, idioms should be given more attention in the teaching and learning process.

4.2 Strategies for Learning Idioms

Students learn differently from one another. In this subsection, the answer for the second research question will be presented: *What are the possible strategies that Saudi EFL students use to facilitate their understanding of idioms?*

Table 3. Strategies for learning idioms

Strategies	Descriptive statistics		Inferential statistics	
	All participants		Vocabulary level	
	Mean	SD	r	p
1. I can predict the meaning of idioms.	4.48	.992	.131	.012
2. I use verbal (textual or audio) information to help activate my knowledge of idioms.	3.89	.765	.354	.001
3. I learn idioms by focussing on the animated pictures/visualisation.	3.80	.983	.127	.001
4. I learn idioms by drawing on the animated picture.	3.00	.826	-.115	.062
5. I learn idioms through memorisation.	3.99	.855	-.084	.104
6. I learn idioms by using key words.	3.20	.864	.253	.001
7. I can figure out an idiom from an equivalent one in my language.	4.43	.925	.078	.123
8. I translate the literal meaning into my L1 (first language) to understand idioms.	4.25	.816	-.216	.063
9. I learn idioms through group discussion.	3.44	.794	-.194	.001
10. I learn idioms through retelling, elaboration, and paraphrasing.	3.50	.688	.103	.050
11. I learn idioms with clear literal meaning.	4.08	.877	.132	.061
12. I learn idioms with rich illustration.	4.00	.928	.316	.001
13. When facing a difficult idiom, I ignore it.	3.53	.885	-.152	.003
14. I learn only familiar idioms with familiar vocabulary.	4.17	.789	.098	.065
15. I learn idioms by using them in sentences.	2.80	.683	.127	.015
16. I learn idioms that have multiword combinations.	3.40	.773	.194	.001
17. I learn idioms that are used in different media.	3.70	.784	.152	.003
18. I learn idioms by communicating in English outside the classroom.	2.40	.756	.218	.002
19. I learn idioms by readings from different sources.	3.76	.923	-.102	.071
20. I up look up unknown idioms in the dictionary.	4.14	.843	-.151	.082
21. I guess the meaning of idioms from the context.	4.55	.771	.105	.091
22. I use many different strategies when learning idioms.	4.37	.851	.113	.080
23. I want to know what other strategies I can use to make better sense of idioms.	3.65	.722	.210	.074

As can be seen from Table 3, the participants' responded that they tend to use different strategies to process English idioms—the highest mean score was 4.55 and the lowest was 2.40. This indicates that different learners might use a wide variety of idiom-learning strategies. It is obvious that the majority of the students rely on context in order to guess the meaning of idiomatic expressions. Hence, guessing the meaning of idioms from the context was the most frequently used strategy. This result indicates that context plays a crucial role in understanding idioms. It also supports other researchers' findings about the importance of including context when teaching and learning idioms in general (Asl, 2013; Irujo, 1986; Rohani et al., 2012; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013; Sridhar & Karunakaran, 2013). The second most frequent strategy was predicting the meaning of the idiom with mean frequency rating 4.48. This means that students have a positive attitude towards idioms, even though they face a number of difficulties in learning them. Moreover, the participants mentioned that the easiest and the most understandable idioms are those that have some sort of an equivalent meaning in their mother language. This might be attributed to the fact that one can comprehend idioms very easily if they have a good knowledge of idioms in their mother language and if there is a similarity between both the mother and target languages. This result is in line with the findings of other researchers such as Liu (2008), Chen & Lai (2013), Moein & Khosravi (2014), and Violetta (2015).

Translating the literal meaning of idioms into L1 to understand them was the fourth most frequently used strategy. This indicates that student's rely heavily on their L1 to understand English idioms. This might be because of the students' low vocabulary size. This result is in line with the findings of Saleh & Zakaria (2013)

and Al-Kadi (2015). The next most frequently used strategy was learning only idioms that have familiar words. Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) claimed that there is no point in teaching infrequent or highly colloquial idioms that include complicated vocabulary to EFL learners. Because of their lack of vocabulary, students reported that they look up unknown idioms in the dictionary. The results indicate that literal meanings of idioms are activated mostly. Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) argued that the idioms' figurative denotations' are not activated as quickly as the literal ones and that retrieving the literal meaning always comes prior to retrieving the figurative meaning when processing idioms.

Moreover, EFL learners apply other strategies to overcome difficulties in learning idioms. These strategies include learning idioms with rich illustration and learning idioms through memorisation. This is supported by other researchers such as Rohani et al. (2012), Al-Kadi (2015), and Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016). Additionally, according to the responses to the questionnaire, it is apparent that learning idioms through the use of verbal information and by focussing on animated pictures/visualisation were used with high means scores. This means that exposure to different contexts (both spoken and written) expands students' knowledge of idioms and helps them retain this knowledge for later use. Qualls et al. (2003) claimed that contextual cues are imperative for understanding unfamiliar idioms in either spoken or written contexts, particularly if idioms are more figurative in nature.

As shown in Table 3, the other strategies that students reported using include learning idioms by reading different types of texts and engaging with various types of media. Thus, students should invest time reading different books and engaging with media to learn new idiomatic expressions. In fact, idiomatic expressions are best learned in interactive situations, and media language usually contains idioms along with contextual clues that could easily help learners remember the meaning of idioms clearly (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Irujo, 1986; Nation, 2001). Interestingly, the results revealed that the majority of students seem to be interested in what other strategies they can use to make better sense of idioms. Thus, students need to be taught how to recognise and use idioms appropriately. Students also reported that they ignore idioms when facing difficulty. This might be related to the fact that the students are not aware of the importance of learning idioms, which in turn is due to the lack of a specific course on idioms. Thus, teachers should pay more attention to idiomatic expressions, and they should not ignore complicated ones. Instead, they should equip their students with specific strategies for understanding difficult idioms. The participants tended to rely less frequently on each of the remaining strategies, including learning idioms through retelling, elaboration, and paraphrasing as well as learning through group discussion.

Using key words and drawing are other strategies that the learners sometimes use. In other words, students tend to focus on key words in order to comprehend the meaning of idiomatic expressions. Fu (2003) demonstrated that drawing might be one of the strategies that L2 learners (especially beginners) may use to express their understanding of what they are learning. Respondents reported that they seldom use idioms in sentences in order to learn them, and communicating in English outside classrooms was even less common. These findings are consistent with those of Guduru (2012) and Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016). It is worth mentioning that idiom comprehension can definitely be increased if students show an interest in using the target language both inside and outside the classroom. The greater interest in learning idioms, the higher the level of language proficiency. This result lends support to previous studies (Irujo, 1986; Mantyla, 2004; Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Nippold & Taylor, 1995).

The interview results are also in line with what was found in the questionnaire findings. The students also mentioned some additional strategies that were not included in the questionnaire. For example, they tend to learn idioms by requesting information either from their teacher or their peers, particularly the meaning of unfamiliar words. They also use internal cues and contextual cues, and draw on their background knowledge. Moreover, the students pointed out that they sometimes try to learn idioms by identifying their structures. Further, they guess the overall meaning of an idiom by breaking it into parts and guessing the meaning of its constituent words. Thus, as the results indicated, the students need to be instructed on how to recognise and use idiomatic expressions appropriately.

4.3 Vocabulary Level and Learning Idioms

The results of the VLT showed differences between the idiomatic knowledge of the high- proficiency and low-proficiency students. This subsection will point out these differences by answering the third research question: *Are there any differences between low-proficiency and high-proficiency students in learning idioms and the strategies they use to do so?*

As shown in Tables 2 and 3 above, there are clear differences among students with different language proficiency levels. These findings are consistent with the fact that recognising, producing, and using idiomatic

language is an aspect of proficiency (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Angri, 2014; Tran, 2003).

As far as vocabulary levels are concerned, the results showed that there is a negative correlation, which indicates that those with greater vocabulary face fewer difficulties understanding and using idioms. In other words, low-proficiency students reported facing difficulties in understanding idioms more frequently than high-proficiency ones, though the differences were not significant. This leads to the fact that the majority, if not all, of Saudi EFL students face difficulties when learning and understanding idioms, regardless of their language proficiency. This could be because students lack familiarity with the component words of idioms and/or because of inadequate linguistic knowledge.

On the other hand, according to the Pearson correlation, there is a positive significant relationship between vocabulary level and the use of different strategies in learning idiomatic expressions. This result indicates that the larger the student's vocabulary, the more strategies he or she uses. It is apparent that students with a large vocabulary use most of the strategies (16 out of 23) more frequently than students with a smaller vocabulary (they use only 7 strategies more frequently). However, our focus will be on those strategies that showed significant relationships.

The data obtained that vocabulary size has a significant relationship with predicting the meaning of idioms ($r = .131, p = .012$). This means that those with a larger vocabulary tend to use this strategy more than those with a smaller vocabulary. Furthermore, VLT score has a positive relationship with learning idioms with rich illustration ($r = .316, p = .001$). This indicates that those with a larger vocabulary learn idioms with rich illustration more than those with a smaller vocabulary. The reason for this could be that students' vocabularies are not large enough to allow them to figure out the meaning of idioms from context, as their VLT scores were very low. Another possible reason is that those who have a smaller vocabulary face a lot of unfamiliar words in idiomatic expressions. On the other hand, high proficiency students have vocabulary problems, but not as many as low-proficiency students. Therefore, they rely on rich illustration more frequently than low-proficiency students do.

Further, the Pearson correlation indicated a relationship between vocabulary size and the use of either verbal or visual information in order to help the students activate their knowledge of idioms ($r = .354, p = .001$; $r = .127, p = .001$, respectively). This is in line with Angel (2014). It could be argued that students should be encouraged to use such strategies, since that may lead to greater understanding of idiomatic expressions. Similarly, as shown in Table 3, concerning vocabulary proficiency, the correlation indicates that those with greater vocabulary knowledge learn idioms more frequently than those with lower vocabulary knowledge ($r = .152, p = .003$). Additionally, vocabulary size was found to have a significant positive correlation with learning idioms that have multiword combinations ($r = .194, p = .001$), suggesting that the larger the vocabulary, the more frequent the use of idioms with multiword combinations. This result is congruent with Katsarou (2012), who found that those who have a larger vocabulary size use such strategy more frequently than those with a smaller vocabulary size. According to the Pearson correlation ($r = .253, p = .001$), there is a significant positive relationship between learning idioms by using key words and vocabulary size. This could mean that high-proficiency students are more concerned with the meaning of key words in idiomatic expressions than low-proficiency students. This might be because the former have rich vocabulary more than the ones with low vocabulary knowledge.

Moreover, as shown in Table 3, vocabulary size has a significant relationship with learning idioms by using them in sentences. The Pearson correlation ($r = .127, p = .015$) suggests that the larger the vocabulary, the more frequently idioms are used in sentences. Further, there is a significant relationship between vocabulary size and learning idioms by communicating in English outside the classroom ($r = .218, p = .002$). This result indicates that the larger the vocabulary, the more communication in English outside the classroom. This result is not surprising, as those high-proficiency students have a greater ability to communicate in English than low-proficiency students.

The results revealed that vocabulary size failed to show any significant relationship with the use of the 7 strategies that were reported to be used more frequently by low-proficiency students than by high-proficiency students. There were two exceptions: ignoring idioms when facing difficulty and learning idioms through group discussion. This indicates that both high- and low-proficiency students use the five strategies almost the same amount. However, according to the Pearson correlation, there is a significant negative relationship between vocabulary size and the use of these two strategies (ignoring: $r = -.152, p = .003$; group discussion: $r = -.194, p = .001$). The results indicate that the smaller the vocabulary, the higher the frequency of either ignoring idioms or sharing in group discussion.

4.4 Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The current study investigated the difficulties that Saudi university EFL students face when using and understanding English idioms as well as the strategies that they use in order to figure out the meaning of such expressions. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of students face a number of difficulties when learning and understanding idioms. Thus, teachers should adopt different methods of teaching idioms in order to help students overcome such difficulties. Students should also be made aware of the fact that improving their idiomatic knowledge could help them express their views in beautiful and flowery language and become more proficient. Additionally, students are in need of improving their communication skills through idiom-based learning. Further, Saudi EFL students face different difficulties because of the lack of cultural background behind the idioms. This result affirms the importance of teaching the cultural context of the language. Hence, students should learn not only popular idiomatic expressions and L2 expressions with analogues in L1; they should also learn L2 idioms whose conceptual metaphors do not have analogues in their mother tongue. It is worth mentioning that the results pointed to different reasons behind the difficulty of learning and understanding idioms. For example, idioms are not part of the courses' syllabi. Additionally, idioms are not taught well in class. Based on such findings, curriculum designers should pay more attention to idiomatic expressions and include them in different courses. EFL English textbooks should also present more idioms. In addition, teachers should help in raising students' awareness of idioms' origins. Teachers should also improve their cultural knowledge through teacher instruction and many other procedures.

Moreover, the results illustrated that guessing from context is the most frequently used strategy in learning idioms. This highlights the importance of teaching and learning idioms in context, as it helps in guessing meaning of the target idioms by limiting the amount of unfamiliar figurative language. This indicates that teachers should equip learners with appropriate skills to utilise the context in guessing the figurative meaning of idioms. Moreover, the results showed that students rely on translating the literal meaning into L1 as a way to understand English idioms. This indicates that teachers and syllabus designers should consider the fact that students find it easy to learn idioms that have conceptualisation in both first and foreign or second language. Therefore, it seems that, if possible, teachers should try to highlight connections between the learners' first and target languages, because they rely on their first-hand knowledge and experience of idioms anyway when trying to understand idioms in a foreign language.

It would be very interesting to carry out further research on the difficulty of idioms and strategies for learning them by using a large sample of individuals from different backgrounds and different universities. Further, it would be worth investigating the differences between the same idioms' literal and figurative meanings according to the context.

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