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The Role of L1 in L2 Idiom Comprehension

Saeed Taki
Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch, Iran

Muhammad Reza Namy Soghady (Corresponding author)
Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch, Iran

***Abstract*—The present study investigated the role of first language (L1) transfer in Iranian EFL learners' second language (L2) idiom comprehension. It was also sought to understand whether there is any significant difference between learners of different proficiency levels and their use of L1 in decoding L2 idioms. To do this, the participants of different levels of language proficiency were asked to participate in this study. The L2 idioms were categorized based on their similarity to L1 into three groups of identical, similar and different. A think-aloud protocol analysis was performed and participants were asked to verbalize their thoughts as they read the target idioms in order to detect the strategies they used. The results showed that the most favoured strategy used by learners of different levels was translation. Translation to L1 (Persian) was also the most-frequent strategy in decoding similar, identical and different types of idioms. It was also revealed that generally the participants of different levels were significantly different from each other in using strategies.**

***Index Terms*—foreign language learning, learning English, learning strategies, idiom learning, translation**

I. Introduction

Learning another language fully needs a lot of perseverance and also systematic practice. Children first language has been compared to learning a foreign language (for example, Fine 1988). These children must acquire new vocabulary, pronunciation, pragmatics, grammar, cohesion, coherence, etc. Idiom learning is an area bound to challenge many of the L2 learners.Cooper (1999) states another point of view as expressions whose meanings are not understood from the literal meanings of their constituent elements. Gibbs (1986) classifies idioms into transparent and obscure according to compositionality; transparent idiom is a kind of idiom whose idiomatic meaning can be predicted by the lexical items. There is a close relationship between the literal meaning and figurative meaning in transparent idioms. In contrast, the obscure idioms refer to idioms in which the relationship between literal meaning and figurative meaning is obscure. *To kick the bucket* is one of the obscure idioms.

Irujo (1986) categorized the idiom items into three types in terms of the similarity between L1 and L2: identical, similar, and differentidioms. Identical idioms are idioms in L2 which has first language equivalents. They are the easiest for L2 learners to understand and produce since one-to-one correspondence was found between L1 and L2. Similar idioms refers to the idioms had similar meaning or form in the first language. Irujo (1986) found that L1 knowledge may assist L2 learners in comprehending idioms which are identical and similar to L1 equivalent. Different idioms which have no similar L1 equivalents were the hardest to understand and produce.

As for comprehension strategies employed by learners, Cooper (1999) conducted a study by means of think-aloud protocols to collect learners' perceptions and attitudes duringcomprehending idioms. Non-native English speakers' use of online processing strategies was measured in this study. Eight major strategies were identified and used by L2 learners: the most frequently used was guessing from context, others were discussing and analyzing the idioms, using the literal meaning; using background knowledge; referring to an L1 idioms, requesting information; repeating or paraphrasing the idiom.

In addition, a number of studies investigating the idioms comprehension by EFL Chinese learners have been developed recently (Chen, 2004; Huang, 2007; Wang & Zhang, 2006; Zuo, 2008).

Chen (2004) studied the comprehension of English color idioms by Chinese EFL learners. The result showed that strategy use varied with idiom types; that is, more difficult the idioms are, more strategies are adopted by learners. Also, the advanced learners tended to use more diversified strategies to figure out the meanings. Zuo (2008) investigated how Chinese EFL learners comprehend unfamiliar English idioms in reading and what strategies they employ in the process. The results showed that the idiom comprehension performance and strategy use were influenced by both idiom types and learners' L2 proficiency.

Knowledge of idioms is necessary for understanding a native speaker's speech because a native speaker's language is full of idiomatic expressions. Danesi (1994) declares an average native speaker produces about 3000 metaphors a week.

II. Statement of the Problem

Learning a foreign language has been compared to L1 acquisition many times but there are some differences (Fine, 1988). L2 learners do not start from point zero. They have their L1 to turn to. This comparison leads us to contrastive

analysis (see chapter two) which is going to determine similarities and differences between the two languages (Fisiak, 1981). Production of the foreign language needs not only to have a good command of language skills but to acquire other language features such as idioms. An idiom is a combination of lexical items and has a meaning which is distinct from the individual lexical items and this idiomatic meaning is usually understood based on the conventional use of speakers in the speech community. Thus, idioms are culture specific. To understand the meaning of idioms, it needs to learn about the target culture and also the intercultural differences. Learning to use idioms is, in fact, an essential but complex task for ESL students who lack of cultural references. Metaphors also play a great role in the composition of the idioms and comprehending them needs the knowledge of these metaphors. One who wants to comprehend the L2 idioms, he/she should persevere and practice for a long time. Iranian EFL learners rarely use idiomatic expressions and metaphors when they use language. It seems that this problem refers to their inability to process L2 idioms. Also, those who use idiomatic expressions and metaphors in their speech production have difficulty in using the idioms in appropriate context. Furthermore, some metaphorical and idiomatic concepts are affected by L1 that adds to their problems in idiom and metaphor comprehension.

In addition to the above-mentioned problems, Iranian EFL teachers scarcely introduce L2 idiomsto students despite the fact that mastery of these is difficult since idiomatic expressions contain such forms in which words are not often used with their usual meanings. Another factor that places a burden for L2 learners to decode the meanings of the idioms is that since there are not always one to one correspondences between L1 and L2, the idioms cannot be easily comprehended from the meaning of their parts. Here in this study, the researcher sought to find about the challenges L2 learners confront while decoding L2 idioms.

III. Research Question and Hypothesis

With regard to what was said above, this study tried to seek an answer to the following question:

1. Do Iranian EFL learners turn to their L1 to decode the idioms in English?
2. Do intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced L2 learners go through the same process to understand L2 idioms?
3. Are identical, similar and different idioms decoded in the same way?

According to the above questions, the following null hypothesis was posed to be tested in this study:

1. Iranian EFL learners do not turn to their L1 for assistance in order to access the idiomatic meaning of the idioms in English.
2. Intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced learners do not go through the same strategies to decode identical, similar, and different idioms.
3. Iranian EFL learners did not decode the idiomatic meaning of identical, similar and different idioms in the same way.

IV. Methodology

A. Participants

Forty five Iranian EFL students from different levels of education ranged from high-school students to MA holders with the age range of 18-35 participated in this study. They were studying English in Iranian English centres and universities located in the city of Shiraz. The participants were from three levels of proficiency; intermediate (n = 15), upper-intermediate (n = 15) and advanced (n = 15).

To make sure that all participants were in the same range of exposure to English each participant was provided with an interview about their English learning background. The interview revealed that no participants from the three levels of proficiency had any special advantage over another.

B. Instrumentation

This study made use of the following materials for data collection.

1. The Quick Placement Test

Quick Placement Test (QPT) was used to differentiate the participants' English proficiency, and divide them into three levels of English language skills for the study. It is reliable and valid test and it consists of 60 questions. There were five questions related to their knowledge of different signs and notices used to indicate particular meanings, five cloze passages (25 questions), 20 multiple-choice questions which assessed the participants' knowledge of grammar, 10 multiple choice questions related to the knowledge of vocabulary.

2. Idioms Lists

In order to provide acceptable and standard idioms for the study, the researcher got help from 5 dictionaries and references to collect three lists if idioms from three different levels of proficiency:

1) Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2007) which is an English -English reference (7th Edition)
2) Oxford Idioms Dictionary which is an English-English idiom reference (2002)
3) Longman Exam Dictionary which is an English to English reference (2006)
4) FarhangMoaser which is an English-Persian reference (Bateni, 2005)

5) FarhangMoaser Millennium Dictionary which is very comprehensive English-Persian dictionary
6) An English-Persian Dictionary of the origin and stories of English idioms (Golshan, 2009)
Some explanations about the two lists of idioms are as below:

a. List one: this list was used for think-aloud protocol. It contained 12 idioms from the three different levels (4 from identical idioms, 4 from similar idioms, and 4 from different idioms). In order not to let the subject know about the idiom group (identical, similar, and different), the researcher offered idioms in a mixed and disorganized way.

b. List two: this list contained the whole 30 carefully selected idioms. They were all out of context. The participants were asked to answer them in their first language (Persian).

In order to choose appropriate and common idioms, the researcher consulted some colleagues (who were certified teachers in Department of Education) on the issue.

3. Think-Aloud Protocol

Think-aloud protocol (TA) was initially a method of direct observation, developed by Newell and Simon, to investigate cognitive problem-solving strategies, such as reading. Think-aloud protocols (TA) have been widely used to explore L1 and L2 students' cognitive processes in reading research. For these studies using TA protocols, the aim is to develop reading strategies and to discover or describe strategies used in reading comprehension tests.

In order to investigate the comprehension processes, the think-aloud (TA) protocol was applied in the study. During the process of the task, participants were asked to verbalize their thoughts while reading every stimulus sentence and idiom. Researcher gathered participants' thoughts and analyzed the strategies participants used.

V. Results

A. Analysis of Think-aloud Protocol Results

To figure out similar idioms many of the participants translated the words of idioms into their L1 to decipher the idiomatic meaning of the idioms. Some of their translations which were wrong and led to misunderstand are presented in Table 5.1.

TABLE 5.1.
SUMMARY OF PROTOCOL ANALYSIS ON SIMILAR IDIOMS

Idioms	Protocol	Inference
To be all ears	From all ears I understood "hamehgoosh" so it means "saraapaagooshbudan" we have in Farsi	**TA – MA**
To give a green light	Green light means "cheraaqesabz" I think means "ok daadan" I have heard in Farsi before.	**TA – PA – MA**
To have a heart of stone	The phrase "Heart of stone" means "qalbiaz sang" we have the exact match in Farsi which is "sangdelbudan"	**TA – MA**
To be on the tip of the tongue	From translating every single word we can get the exact meaning in Farsi. It is "budannokezaban"	**TA – MA**

D=Consult a Dictionary **ME**=Metaphor Search **IS**= Incorrect Schema **S**=Schema Search **PA**=Paraphrase **MA**=Search for an Exact or a Similar Match **IT**=Incorrect Translation **TA**=Translation Attempt

As some of the idioms had some differences, there were traces of metaphor search in this stage. Here are some examples of think-aloud protocol in similar idioms Table 5.2.

TABLE 5.2.
SUMMARY OF PROTOCOL ANALYSIS ON SIMILAR IDIOMS

Idioms	Protocol	Inference
One swallow does not make the summer	Swallow means (parastu) summer means (tabestan) it means "bayekparastutabestansakhtenemishe that in Farsi a similar one refers to "baa ye golbahaarnemishe. It is a kind of metaphor.	**TA – ME – S – PA**
Do not look a gift horse in the mouth	Gift horse means "asbehedyeh" and at university I read the exact meaning that is "tudahaaneasbepishkeshironegahnakon" the Farsi equivalent is " dandaaneasbepishkeshironemishomaarand". "To look here in the mouth" here is a metaphor for "counting thr teeth in Farsi"	**TA – PA – MA – PK – ME**
To get up on the wrong side of the bed	I knew from my university period. I know exactly what it means. But if I want to analyse the way we can get across the meaning, the phrase "wrong side" can be implied as " dandeh \chap" so the meaning is clear. It means "azdandeh chap bolandshodan".	**TA – PK – ME**
Any port in storm	The phrase "any port" means "harbandari" and "in storm" means dartufaan" so we can conclude the similar equivalent in Farsi which is "kafshkohnehdarbiabaanne'matast", although I knew before.	**TA - PK - ME - PA**

D= Consult a Dictionary/ **ME**=Metaphor Search/ **IS**= Incorrect Schema/ **S**=Schema Search/ **PA**=Paraphrase/ **MA**=Search for an Exact or a Similar Match/ **IT**=Incorrect Translation/ **TA**=Translation Attempt

There were some mistranslations in the process of decoding similar idioms, while there were no mistranslations in the process of understanding identical idioms. Table 5.3 shows some cases of these mistranslations in full details.

TABLE 5.3.
SUMMARY OF PROTOCOL ANALYSIS ON IDENTICAL IDIOMS

Idioms	Protocol	Inference
One swallow does not make the summer	The word "Swallow" means "chelcheleh" and the whole idiom may mean "ye chelchelehtaabestaanraanemisaazad.	**TA – IT - IS**
Do not look a gift horse in the mouth	From the meaning of every single word we can understand that the idiom means "be dahaanasbehedyehnegahnakon"	**TA – PA – IT – IS**
To get up on the wrong side of the bed	What is wrong side here? I think it means "samtenaadorost" so it means "aztarafenadorostetakhtbolandshodan" or it may mean "bad azkhaabbolandshodan"	**TA – IT – IS – ME**
Any port in storm	"hichbandaridartufaan" it means no hope left "omidinist"	**TA – ME – IS – IT**

D= Consult a Dictionary/ **ME**=Metaphor Search/ **IS**= Incorrect Schema/ **S**=Schema Search/ **PA**=Paraphrase/ **MA**=Search for an Exact or a Similar Match/ **IT**=Incorrect Translation/ **TA**=Translation Attempt

As Table 5.3 revealed there are some traces of L1 interferences in translating these idioms. Some of them did not understand the metaphorical aspect of the idioms, for example, when a participant translates "any port" into "hichbandari" it shows mistranslating and misunderstanding the exact meaning of the idioms. As idioms were different, the participants went through more complicated strategies and faced more challenges to decode the meaning of idioms. When you check tables 4.2 and 4.3 you see that almost all the participants went through their L1 at some points to reach the meanings of both identical and similar idioms.

When confronted with different idioms, advanced participants were somehow unable to decode the idioms. They used translation and other complicated strategies for understanding the different idioms but seemed no use and they got stuck. Some of their mistranslations are presented below in Table 5.4.

TABLE 5.4.
SUMMARY OF PROTOCOL ANALYSIS ON DIFFERENT IDIOMS

Idioms	Protocol	Inference
Out of blue	Means "birunazaabi" because the word "out" means "birun"	**TA – IT – IS**
To face the music	Means "bemusiqialaaqehneshaandaadan". Face means "ru be rushodan" and this may mean "alaaqehdaashtan"	**TA – IT – IS – ME**
To be right on the money	From the words we can imply that it means " to be rich".	**TA – IT – IS – ME**
To pay on the nail	I don't know and I haven't heard of that but to guess;"pardaakhtanruyemilkh" it may mean "to have a difficult work"	**TA – ME – IS – IT**

D= Consult a Dictionary/ **ME**=Metaphor Search/ **IS**= Incorrect Schema/ **S**=Schema Search/ **PA**=Paraphrase/ **MA**=Search for an Exact or a Similar Match/ **IT**=Incorrect Translation/ **TA**=Translation Attempt

As it can be seen, almost all of their translations were wrong and misleading. This caused their very low function in understanding this group of idiom. Only few of the subjects mentioned that they have learnt from their university periods. Another interesting point is that two of the participants simultaneously translated the word "nail" as "suzan" or "needle" in English. One of them translated the idiom as "be andaazehsaresuzankharjkardan" or in English "to spend a bit" and the second translated as "be sakhtipardaakhtkardan" or "to pay very hard".

B. The Relationship between Different Item Types and Strategy Use

The process of different idiom types was significantly something odd. As it is indicated in Table 4.5, all of the participants translated the idioms word for word and unfortunately, nearly all of them mistranslated and misunderstood. The frequency of strategies used in decoding different idioms was the lowest comparing to other groups of idioms (Identical, Similar). We can conclude that there was a lot of interference of L1. Almost all of the translations were inappropriately offered except those which have been left blank.

TABLE 5.5
DIFFERENT IDIOM TYPES AND THEIR FREQUENCY USE

Idioms		Frequency	Percent
Identical	**D**	7	3.9
	ME	39	21.7
	IS	23	12.8
	S	13	7.2
	PA	3	1.7
	MA	85	47.2
	IT	35	19.4
	TA	141	78.3
	PK	29	16.1
	Hyp	3	1.7
Similar	**D**	9	5
	ME	56	31.1
	IS	47	26.1
	S	9	5
	PA	4	2.2
	MA	6	3.3
	IT	88	48.9
	TA	129	71.7
	PK	18	10
	Hyp	2	1.1
Different	**D**	10	5.6
	ME	17	9.4
	IS	57	31.7
	S	2	1.1
	PA	2	1.1
	MA	3	1.7
	IT	134	74.4
	TA	140	78.8
	PK	5	2.8
	Hyp	0	0

Table 5.6 shows the frequency of different strategies employed by advanced, upper-intermediate and intermediate learners. Regarding this table, advanced learners have revealed some interesting results. The description of results is provided below.

TABLE 4.6.
DIFFERENT GROUPS OF LEARNERS AND THEIR FREQUENCY OF STRATEGY USE

Level		Frequency	Percent
Intermediate	**D**	18	10
	ME	18	10
	IS	50	27.8
	S	9	5
	PA	0	0
	MA	16	8.9
	IT	95	52.8
	TA	136	75.6
	PK	6	3.3
	Hyp	1	0.6
Upper-intermediate	**D**	8	4.4
	ME	0	0
	IS	58	32.2
	S	1	0.6
	PA	0	0
	MA	38	21.1
	IT	100	55.6
	TA	151	83.9
	PK	10	5.6
	Hyp	1	0.6
Advanced	**D**	0	0
	ME	62	34.4
	IS	19	10.6
	S	14	7.8
	PA	9	5
	MA	40	22.2
	IT	62	34.4
	TA	123	68.3
	PK	36	20
	Hyp	3	1.7

Regarding the above data provided in different tables specifically Tables 5.5 and 5.6, it was found that the participants turned significantly to their L1 in order to decode English Language idioms. Thus, the first null hypothesis of study was rejected.

In order to find whether there were any differences between participants at different levels and their frequency of strategy use, 7 one-way ANOVA test were performed. The results are summarized in the following tables:

TABLE 5.7
ANOVA ON D= CONSULT A DICTIONARY

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.904	2	.452	10.176	.000
Within Groups	23.844	537	.044		
Total	24.748	539			

The results showed that theparticipants at different levels were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 10.17$, $p < .001$) from each other in using dictionary to decode idioms.

TABLE 5.8
ANOVA ON ME=METAPHOR SEARCH

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.615	2	2.807	18.130	.000
Within Groups	83.156	537	.155		
Total	88.770	539			

The results of ANOVA on using metaphor among three groups showed that participants of different levels were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 18.13$, $p < .001$) from each other in using metaphor search to decode idioms.

TABLE 5.9
ANOVA ON IS = INCORRECT SCHEMA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.715	2	2.357	13.698	.000
Within Groups	92.417	537	.172		
Total	97.131	539			

The results of ANOVA showed that participants of different levels were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 13.69$, $p < .001$) in using incorrect schema to decode idioms.

TABLE 5.10
ANOVA ON S=SCHEMA SEARCH

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.478	2	.239	5.713	.004
Within Groups	22.456	537	.042		
Total	22.933	539			

The results of ANOVA showed that participants of different levels were not significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 5.71$, $p > .001$) in using schema search to decode idioms.

TABLE 5.11
ANOVA ON PA=PARAPHRASE

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.300	2	.150	9.421	.000
Within Groups	8.550	537	.016		
Total	8.850	539			

The results of ANOVA showed that participants of different levels were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 9.42$, $p < .001$) in using schema search to decode idioms.

TABLE 5.12
ANOVA ON MA=SEARCH FOR AN EXACT OR A SIMILAR MATCH

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.970	2	.985	6.992	.001
Within Groups	75.667	537	.141		
Total	77.637	539			

The results of ANOVA showed that participants of different levels were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 6.99$, $p = .001$) in using Search for an Exact or a Similar Match strategy to decode idioms.

TABLE 5.13
ANOVA ON IT=INCORRECT TRANSLATION

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.737	2	2.369	9.788	.000
Within Groups	129.950	537	.242		
Total	134.687	539			

The results of ANOVA showed that participants of different levels were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 9.78$, $p < .001$) inincorrect translation of idioms.

Another series of ANOVA analyses were performed in order to find whether there was any significant difference between different types of idioms namely, identical, similar, different, and the use of different strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners.

TABLE 5.14
ANOVA ON D = CONSULT A DICTIONARY

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.026	2	.013	.282	.755
Within Groups	24.722	537	.046		
Total	24.748	539			

The result of ANOVA, as is shown in Table 5.14, indicated that different types of idioms did not significantly differ from each other in using dictionary ($F_{2, 537} = .28$, $p > .001$). Thus, different types of idioms were received the same attention in terms of using dictionary.

TABLE 5.15
ANOVA ON ME=METAPHOR SEARCH

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.248	2	2.124	13.495	.000
Within Groups	84.522	537	.157		
Total	88.770	539			

The result of ANOVA, as is shown in Table 5.15, indicated that different types of idioms were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 13.49$, $p < .001$) from each other in metaphor search.

TABLE 5.16
ANOVA ON IS= INCORRECT SCHEMA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.393	2	1.696	9.718	.000
Within Groups	93.739	537	.175		
Total	97.131	539			

The result of ANOVA, as is shown in Table 5.16, indicated that different types of idioms were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 9.71$, $p < .001$) from each other in incorrect schema strategy use.

TABLE 5.17
ANOVA ON S=SCHEMA SEARCH

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.344	2	.172	4.094	.017
Within Groups	22.589	537	.042		
Total	22.933	539			

The result of ANOVA, as is shown in Table 5.17, indicated that different types of idioms were not significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 4.09$, $p > .001$) from each other in schema search strategy use.

TABLE 5.18
ANOVA ON PA= PARAPHRASE

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.011	2	.006	.338	.714
Within Groups	8.839	537	.016		
Total	8.850	539			

The result of ANOVA, as is shown in Table 5.18, indicated that different types of idioms did not significantly differ from each other in using paraphrase ($F_{2, 537} = .33$, $p > .001$). Thus, different types of idioms were received same attention in terms of using paraphrase.

TABLE 5.19
ANOVA ON MA = SEARCH FOR AN EXACT OR A SIMILAR MATCH

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	24.026	2	12.013	120.329	.000
Within Groups	53.611	537	.100		
Total	77.637	539			

The result of ANOVA, as is shown in Table 5.19, indicated that different types of idioms were significantly different from each other ($F_{2, 537} = 120.32$, $p < .001$) in search for an exact or a similar match.

TABLE 5.20
ANOVA ON IT=INCORRECT TRANSLATION

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	27.270	2	13.635	68.165	.000
Within Groups	107.417	537	.200		
Total	134.687	539			

The result of ANOVA, here, indicated that different types of idioms were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 68.16$, $p < .001$) from each other in incorrect translation strategy use.

TABLE 5.21
ANOVA ON TA=TRANSLATION ATTEMPT

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.493	2	.246	1.347	.261
Within Groups	98.211	537	.183		
Total	98.704	539			

The result of ANOVA, as is shown in Table 5.21, indicated that different types of idioms did not significantly differ from each other in using translation to decode those items ($F_{2, 537} = 1.34$, $p > .001$). Thus, different types of idioms were received same attention in terms of using translation to L1 as a strategy to detect the meaning of idioms.

TABLE 5.22
ANOVA ON PK = PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.604	2	.802	9.487	.000
Within Groups	45.389	537	.085		
Total	46.993	539			

The result of ANOVA, here, indicated that different types of idioms were significantly different ($F_{2, 537} = 9.48$, $p < .001$) from each other in receiving prior knowledge of participants.

Totally, the results of different statistical analyses provided statistical support to test the null hypotheses of this study.

VI. Discussion

Data was collected using think-aloud protocol analysis. The results of data analysis revealed that Iranian EFL learners significantly used their L1 to decode L2 idioms. All the three groups of participants did not go to same process to decode the idioms. For example, advanced subjects did not use dictionary but intermediate subjects used to satisfy their needs. The more differences there were among the three groups of idioms, the more translations and strategies were used by the participants to decode the idioms, the less similarities between the lexical items in L1 and L2 are found and the more challenges L2 learners confronted in decoding the idioms.Thus, the first null hypothesis of study was rejected.

It was also found that Iranian EFL learners of different levels were significantly different from each other in their use of strategies to comprehend different types of idioms. Also, metaphorical aspects of language are a strategy that mostly advanced participants turned to in order to comprehend the idioms. All the nine strategies were marked and used very differently among the three different levels of proficiency. According to the results of seven ANOVA analyses, Iranian EFL learners of different levels used significantly different strategies in decodingidentical, similar, and different idioms. Therefore, the second null hypothesis was not rejected.

With regard to the third research question, the results of descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVAs showed that the identical, similar and different idioms were not almost decoded in the same way. Different learners of different levels used different strategies in the same way to decode different types of idioms. The three groups of idioms were not decoded in the same ways. For instance, identical idioms were comprehended by translating the words of the idioms, while different idioms were not possible in this way and it needed the knowledge of metaphorical language. Thus, the third null hypothesis of this study was not rejected.

A number of studies (e.g., Griffin & Harley, 1996; Mondria&Wiersma, 2004; Schneider et al, 2002) have investigated the process of learners' L2 idiom comprehension. Schneider et al. (2002) found that learners who used more processing on the way they learned idioms, they remembered it better. Regarding the use of different learning strategies in idiom comprehension, Cooper (1999), used online processing of L2 idioms by asking participants to report the strategies they applied during comprehension and learning through think-aloud protocol. A rich context was also provided for learners. It was found that the use of context was the major strategy employed by the participants to understand the meaning of L2 idioms. Liontas (2002) used similar strategies to access online processing information, but the rich context was not provided for learners. It was found that a number of different meaning making strategies were used in the L2 processing of idioms.

VII. Conclusions

Nearly all of the participants of this study translated the idioms word for word into their L1 and tried to find Farsi equivalents for the idioms. Mostly their translations were helpful in decoding identical idioms and unable to decode the different idioms. Advanced participants performed better than the other two groups even in decoding different idioms. Advanced subjects were able to understand few of the different idioms. This means that once the number of similar lexical items in different idioms decreased, even advanced participants encountered problems in decoding different idioms. Upper-intermediate participants, also, first translated the idioms word for word even more than the advanced participants but their translations were less useful than that of the advanced ones. Intermediate participants as well as other groups translated the idioms into L1 and they used dictionary more than upper-intermediate but advanced subjects did not use dictionary at all.

Strategies were used differently among the different levels of proficiency. Advanced subjects used translation of their own but they did not consult a dictionary. On the other side, they turned to other strategies like metaphorical aspect of the language and schema to decode the different idioms. Once their L1 translations were not helpful, they did not give up immediately. They reflect on the idioms and searched deep into their mind. Upper-intermediate subjects performed less successful than the advanced subjects. They turned to the metaphorical aspect of the language less than the advanced ones. Once their L1 was unable to help, they did not persist a lot to find the idiomatic meanings of the idioms. L1 dependence is almost noticeable in this stage. Very few of them turned to their schema or the metaphorical aspects of the idioms.

Now to discuss our research hypotheses, we can conclude that hypothesis one is rejected because all of the participants depending on their levels of proficiency turned to their L1 for help. The first part of hypothesis two is rejected because very few of the participants were able to understand the different idioms. Nearly all of them got stuck in different idioms comprehension but the second part of hypothesis two is confirmed due to advanced participants who turned to other strategies to decode the idioms. The last hypothesis but not the least one is also rejected because almost all the participants from the three levels of proficiency utilized different strategies to comprehend the idioms. They used more than two or three strategies even in case of intermediate participants.

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Saeed Taki is currently an EFL teacher in English department at Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch, Iran. He holds a Ph.D in TEFL and his main areas of interest include cultural studies and critical discourse analysis, and foreign language methodology.

Muhammad Reza Namy Soghady was born in Khafr-Jahrom, Iran, on Jun 22, 1980. He received his B.A. in TEFL from Kazeroon Azad University, Fars, Iran in 2007. He furthered his university studies on English education for an M.A. degree in TEFL and earned his M.A. degree from Shahreza Azad University, Isfahan, Iran in 2012.

As an EFL teacher, He has been teaching English to Iranian EFL learners in several language schools since 2002. He is currently teaching English courses at different universities and language schools in Khafr-Jahrom. He also is the founder of three language schools in Khafr – Jahrom. This paper is based on his Master's thesis.