

The Relationship between Reading Comprehension and Figurative Competence in L2 Learners

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Abstract—Though many L2 studies have explored the development of figurative language competence (e.g., Cain, Oakhill, & Lemmon, 2005; Li, 2010), few studies have examined the relationship between idiom comprehension and L2 learners' reading comprehension in consonance with their proficiency levels. This study aimed at assessing the relationship between comprehending opaque and transparent idioms and L2 learners' ability to comprehend a text. It was hypothesized that an L2 learner's proficiency level and figurative competence were interwoven. To do so, 49 Iranian senior B.A. students of English were divided into 2 groups of skilled and less-skilled reading comprehenders in line with the results of a TOEFL test. They were presented with 30 short texts, ending with idiom fragments (e.g., *Paul broke the . . .* for the idiom *to break the ice*) and asked to select the appropriate words from among the 3 options: idiomatic, literal, and figurative. Later, the same texts were given to 185 freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors to cross-examine their figurative competence. Results revealed that the skilled readers were superior to the less-skilled ones in comprehending both the opaque ($F = 25.107, df = 48, \alpha = 0.05, p = 0.00$) and the transparent idioms ($F = 23.313, df = 48, \alpha = 0.05, p = 0.00$). Also, from among the 4 university levels, the seniors' performance differed greatly from that of the freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, who did all approximately the same on the idiom test ($F = 38.909, df = 184, \alpha = 0.05, p = 0.00$). Findings may contribute to exploring the process of idiom understanding by demonstrating a link between idiom comprehension and text comprehension. Thus, the growth of one might affect the progress of the other.

Index Terms—figurative competence, idiom comprehension, opaque idioms, reading comprehension, transparent idioms

I. INTRODUCTION

As stated by Cooper (1999), most English speakers utter about 10 million novel metaphors and 20 million idioms during their lifetime. This is about 3000 novel metaphors and 7000 idioms per week. That is why idioms have long caught the acute eyes of both linguists and psycholinguists (e.g., Gibbs, 1991; Levorato, 1993; Nippold & Duthie, 2003; Nippold & Taylor, 2002). As long as idioms are extremely omnipresent in every aspect of L1 speakers' use of language, and as some researchers (e.g., Ellis, 1997; Yorio, 1989) contend, L2 learners need to equip themselves with adequate skills, knowledge, and fitting use and comprehension of idioms. Therefore, idioms are indispensable indicators of L2 learners' fluency that help them integrate into the social communication and cultural aspects of an L2 because idioms are fixed expressions that save effort in processing and act as discursal time-buyers (Lennon, 1998).

Idiom is highly a heterogeneous community that stretches on a "continuum of compositionality." At one end of the spectrum stand the "transparent idioms," whereas the other end nestles the "opaque idioms." Transparent idioms (e.g., to give somebody the green light) are figurative expressions whose meanings can be effortlessly derivable due to the crystalline connection between the literal meanings of the expressions and their idiomatic interpretations (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001). On the other hand, the constituent words comprising opaque idioms (e.g., to pull someone's leg) do not make a significance contribution towards the decoding of the idiomatic meaning. Transparent idioms are easier to comprehend which does not bear comparison with the comprehension of opaque idioms. This study adopts a subjective approach towards the classification of transparent and opaque idioms.

Exposure hypothesis is a view that accounts for idiom acquisition. It suggests that the ability to understand the idiomatic meaning is solely achievable via mere exposure and the familiarity of idioms. If so, the comprehension of idioms should not undergo any changes when presented out of context. In addition, exposure hypothesis cannot provide a reliable assumption for the developmental view of idiom comprehension (Cain, Oakhill, & Lemmon, 2005). By contrast, global elaboration model (GEM) contends that idiom understanding is associated with academic achievements

in reading (Nippold, Moran, & Schwads, 2001). That is, the ability to interpret a phrase to the story context is coupled with the ability to comprehend an idiom which can be merely realized through the inclusion of reading texts.

In light of GEM, it is unsubtly predicted that skilled readers are much better able to monitor their understanding of idioms in comparison with less-skilled readers. More specifically, skilled readers make use of various reading skills when they face an idiom, especially an opaque one, such as: (a) the ability to build up inferences moving from the single word level to the sentence level (Oakhill & Yuill, 1996); (b) the ability to choose the most appropriate meaning of a word from among its several possible meanings (Perfetti, 1999); and (c) the ability to suppress the meanings of the constituent words of an idiom irrelevant to the figurative meaning (Gernsbacher & Faust, 1991).

However, almost all that has been proposed by GEM has been boundlessly applied to L1 contexts and has not been systematically carried out on L2 learners. This study is regarded to enjoy a sense of novelty because only few previous L2 studies (e.g., Irujo, 1986b; Lontas, 2001, 2002) mainly focused on idiom comprehension by taking the principles of GEM into account. Thus, this study aims at filling this gap by taking the view that L2 learners' idiomatic comprehension might be pertinent to their reading comprehension proficiency.

II. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

As Gibbs (1980) claims, idioms are the most vital parts of every human language because speakers can express their feelings and experiences better through uttering idioms. That is why the expression to blow your sack is a better representative of one's anger than its literal paraphrase (i.e., to be very angry). A unified definition for idioms has always been a disputable issue. Fernando (1996) defines idioms as "conventionalized multiword expressions often, but not always, nonliteral" (p. 38). Also, Sprenger, Levelt, and Kempen (2006) believe that if there is any relationship between an idiom and its constituent words, it will generally be indirect. Another definition by Saeed (2003) introduces idioms as a group of words that collocate until they are transformed into a fossilized term. Each component word of the collocation is redefined to make an idiomatic expression.

Coming across any figures of speech, specifically idioms in this study, one has to break the walls of literal interpretation and penetrate into the communicative intent of the speakers and dig out their original meaning to let full comprehension take place. However, most idioms can be interpreted both figuratively and literally. What can differentiate between these two correct interpretations is the context in which they are used.

There are two broad views on the representation and processing of idioms called "traditional (noncompositional) views" and "current (compositional) views." According to the traditional views, idioms are regarded as lexical items which exist as chunks and are not recognized by linguistic processing but by memory retrieval. The word noncompositional is implied here to indicate the lack of contribution of idiom constituent in the determination of its meaning. For instance, according to this view, the components of an opaque idiom, such as to kick the bucket have no role in clarifying the idiomatic meaning of this expression. Contrary to the traditional view, the current view believes that idioms are not mainly regarded as noncompositional strings, that is, the relationship between the literal and the idiomatic meaning is not entirely arbitrary. These two general perspectives gave rise to some hypotheses mentioned below.

According to idiom list or literal first hypothesis (Bobrow & Bell, 1973), idioms are stored in an idiom lexicon as whole chunks which are distinct from the general lexicon. Swinney and Cutler (1979) proposed the lexical representation hypothesis which contrasts with idiom list hypothesis. It emphasizes that idioms are located as a single lexical unit in the general lexicon with other lexical units. Gibbs (1980) puts out the direct access hypothesis (i.e., figurative first hypothesis) to oppose Bobrow and Bell's account. He maintains that after hearing the idiomatic string, the idiomatic meaning will be directly retrieved from the mental lexicon without resorting to the literal sense. Cacciari and Tabossi (1988) criticized the ambiguity of Swinney and Cutler's (1979) lexical representation hypothesis as well as Gibbs' (1980) perspective on idiom interpretation. They based their view on the nonexistence of idioms in the mental lexicon. Moreover, different idioms are processed differently according to this hypothesis. As for the predictable idioms, their idiomatic meaning is motivated when the last component of the idiom string emerges. On the contrary, when unpredictable idioms are heard, their literal meaning is activated first and the idiomatic one is accessed later. On the other hand, the contemporary views of current perspectives focuses on decomposability, that is, if the individual components of an idiom do not contribute to its idiomatic meaning, the idiom is called opaque (e.g., to kick the bucket), but if this contribution takes place, the idiom is termed transparent (e.g., to get away from murder).

Most of what is known about idiom processing and comprehension originates from investigations on children who progressively try to develop their L1 figurative competence (e.g., Arnold & Hornett, 1990; Levorato & Cacciari, 1995; Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Titone & Connine, 1994). However, it is worth appreciating the efforts of those who have tried to offer suggestions on the process of teaching and learning idioms in L2 situations through the conduction of some studies (e.g., Abel, 2003; Duquette, 1995; Irujo, 1986a; Lattey, 1994; Lennon, 1998; Mäntylä 2004; McCaskey, 1994; Otier, 1986; Richards, 1996; Sadeghi, Vahid Dastjerdi, & Ketabi 2010). The findings that have been reported to date have not specifically focused on the relationship between idiom comprehension and the ability to comprehend a reading text. Thus, the present study is predominantly an attempt to find out the relationship between comprehending transparent and opaque idioms and reading ability of L2 learners with different levels of reading comprehension by presenting the following questions:

1. Do the skilled text comprehenders outperform the less-skilled ones in comprehending opaque idioms?
2. Do the skilled text comprehenders outperform the less-skilled ones in comprehending transparent idioms?
3. Does L2 learners' proficiency level make a significant difference in their figurative competence?

It is hoped that the findings of this study may be attributed to L2 pedagogy because, technically speaking, any possible relationship between the ability to comprehend a reading text and idiom understanding may drop some handy hints about what strategies L2 learners need to hinge on to have a better idiomatic understanding.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

A total number of 185 Iranian freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior B.A. students of English, including 115 females and 70 males, aged 18-30, were randomly selected from Islamic Azad University of Khorasgan and Shahrekord University. The rationale behind choosing the participants from four levels of university was to study the relationship between their English proficiency and their figurative competence.

B. Materials

The skilled and the less-skilled readers were selected based on the results of a TOEFL test. The participants were also presented with 30 texts (see Appendix A), including 14 short texts and 16 conversations with one idiom embedded in each and one multiple-choice question following each. The 30 idiomatic expressions, their definitions, and their classification into transparent and opaque idioms are shown in Appendix B.

The criterion for counting an expression as an idiom was *NTC's American Idioms Dictionary* (2000). The texts were extracted from three sources: *Live Idioms in the Context* (2004), *English Idioms in Use* (2002), and *101 American English Idioms* (1994). As for the selection of the conversations, the books *Speak English Like an American* (2004), *Basic Idioms in American English* (1981), and *101 American English Idioms* (1994) were consulted. Each text was followed by one multiple-choice question designed by five English native speakers. Some options of the multiple-choice questions were also driven from among the examples given for the entries in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2002).

C. Procedure

Prior to the experimental phase, a list of 35 idioms was given to 20 English teachers and two English university professors, and they were requested to divide the idioms into two groups of 15 opaque and 15 transparent idioms. After the classification of the idioms was made, one multiple-choice question was designed for each reading text, including three choices: idiomatic, figurative, and literal choices, among which the idiomatic choice was the correct answer. The figurative choices (e.g., *to break the morale*) were provided by five native speakers of English settling in London because they were neither idiomatic expressions nor literal ones and could not be profoundly found in reliable sources. After piloting ($r = 0.78$) the texts via Cronbach's Alpha, a group of 185 participants, including 32 freshmen, 54 sophomores, 50 juniors, and 49 seniors were presented with 30 texts to have their figurative competence cross-examined.

In addition, for the sake of determining the relationship between idiom comprehension and reading proficiency of the participants, the same 49 seniors were presented with a paper-based TOEFL test. After the results were revealed, the participants were divided into 25 less-skilled and 24 skilled readers who were presented with the reading texts.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, both the skilled and the less-skilled reading comprehenders showed a significant difference in comprehending the transparent idioms ($F = 23.313$, $df = 1$, $\alpha = 0.05$, $p = 0.000$) and the opaque ones ($F = 25.107$, $df = 1$, $\alpha = 0.05$, $p = 0.000$).

TABLE 1.
ONE -WAY ANNOVA FOR THE COMPREHENSION OF THE TRANSPARENT IDIOMS

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	140.082 ^a	1	140.082	23.313	.000
Intercept	5908.572	1	5908.572	983.339	.000
Level	140.082	1	140.082	23.313	.000
Error	282.408	47	6.009		
Total	6242.000	49			
Corrected Total	422.490	48			

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

TABLE 2.
ONE -WAY ANNOVA FOR THE COMPREHENSION OF THE TRANSPARENT IDIOMS

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	99.326 ^a	1	99.326	25.107	.000
Intercept	4847.407	1	4847.407	1225.279	.000
level	99.326	1	99.326	25.107	.000
Error	185.940	47	3.956		
Total	5066.000	49			
Corrected Total	285.265	48			

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

As p value is less than α , the first and the second null hypotheses presented below are rejected:

- There is no difference between the skilled text comprehenders and the less-skilled ones in comprehending the transparent idioms.
- There is no difference between the skilled text comprehenders and the less-skilled ones in comprehending the opaque idioms.

In order to measure the potential difference between the mean scores of the four groups, the scores of the idiom test were subjected to statistical analysis, applying a one-way ANOVA (see Table 3):

TABLE 3.
ONE-WAY ANNOVA FOR THE FOUR GROUPS

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	2695.836 ^a	3	898.612	38.909	.000
Intercept	35805.785	1	35805.785	1550.373	.000
level	2695.836	3	898.612	38.909	.000
Error	4180.186	181	23.095		
Total	45584.000	185			
Corrected Total	6876.022	184			

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

As Table 3 shows, the four groups differed from one another regarding their figurative competence ($F = 38.909$, $df = 3$, $\alpha = 0.05$, $p = 0.000$). As p value is less than α , the third null hypothesis presented below is rejected, too:

- L2 learners' proficiency level does not make a significant difference in their figurative competence.

In order to find the pair groups that were significantly different, the scores of the four groups were subjected to post-hoc analysis shown in Table 4:

TABLE 4.
MULTIPLE COMPARISONS OF THE FOUR GROUPS

	(I) Proficiency Level	(J) Proficiency Level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
LST	Freshmen	Sophomores	-1.63	1.072	.131	-3.74	.49
		Juniors	-2.14	1.088	.051	-4.29	.01
		Seniors	-9.93 [*]	1.092	.000	-12.09	-7.78
	Sophomores	Freshmen	1.63	1.072	.131	-.49	3.74
		Juniors	-.51	.943	.587	-2.37	1.35
		Seniors	-8.31 [*]	.948	.000	-10.18	-6.44
	Juniors	Freshmen	2.14	1.088	.051	-.01	4.29
		Sophomores	.51	.943	.587	-1.35	2.37
		Seniors	-7.79 [*]	.966	.000	-9.70	-5.89
	Seniors	Freshmen	9.93 [*]	1.092	.000	7.78	12.09
		Sophomores	8.31 [*]	.948	.000	6.44	10.18
		Juniors	7.79 [*]	.966	.000	5.89	9.70

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

Table 4 shows that the major difference was between the seniors' figurative competence and the other three groups (i.e., freshmen, sophomores, and juniors) because p value is less than α ($\alpha = 0.05$, $p = .000$).

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research was primarily undertaken to seek for the possible relationship between the ability to comprehend a reading text and the ability to understand opaque and transparent idioms in relation to four proficiency levels (i.e., freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) of Persian L2 learners. The findings indicated that the seniors, considered to have the highest proficiency level, outperformed the other three levels in comprehending both the transparent and the

opaque idioms. However, regarding idiom comprehension, and surprisingly enough, the freshmen, sophomores, and juniors did not exhibit significant statistical differences. Hence, it is within a compelling reason to conclude that L2 learners' proficiency level and idiom comprehension are positively associated. That is, the more L2 learners improve their proficiency level, the better they are able to infer that a literal interpretation of an idiom is inconsistent with the surrounding semantic context of the idiom.

The other questions of this study were posed to see if the senior skilled and the less-skilled readers perform differently in comprehending the opaque and the transparent idioms. The results indicated that the skilled readers overrode the less-skilled ones in comprehending both types of idioms, which is in line with those of GEM. As mentioned earlier, GEM, which was suggested by Levorato and Cacciari (1995, 1999), predicts that inadequate reading comprehension skills deteriorate the ability to follow the coherence of the reading text in order to put the required information together which can be used for the deduction of the nonliteral interpretation of idioms. GEM was mostly applied in L1 contexts, but the results of this study can confirm its reliable application for L2 learners because it supports the fact that the ability to choose the idiomatic answers is based on the capacity to construct a coherent semantic representation of the story context. Accordingly, Cain, Oakhill, and Lemmon (2005) maintain that "context might facilitate the interpretation of figurative language by providing the necessary semantic information from which readers can extract or infer the appropriate sense of expression" (p. 67).

To encapsulate, if L2 instructors and researchers hope to make a substantial contribution into the domain of figurative competence, they are requested to abandon to treat idioms as other lexical items which can be learnt by L2 learners on their own. This Cinderella's sister (i.e., idiom) deserves to be positioned more desirably in L2 curricula by its inclusion in natural contexts similar to those of L1. Also, future research could address other variables rather than context and idiom type to widen further views on the way idioms are comprehended.

APPENDIX A SAMPLE TEXT & CONVERSATION WITH AN EMBEDDED IDIOM FRAGMENT

Directions: *Please read the following text. Choose the best choice and mark it (✓) on your answer-sheet.*

Peter decided to clean the house to surprise his mother. When he was dusting, he suddenly knocked over an expensive pot which was very special for his mom. He was so panicked and sad. When his mother got home, he wanted to tell her everything. It was very difficult to break the

1. a) pot b) ice c) morale

Liz: Did you know that Harry was going to take Kathy on south waters?

Tom: Yeah! He was planning on surprising her with the tickets for their anniversary, but someone spilled the

Liz: What a shame! That was supposed to be a surprise.

2. a) waters b) emotions c) beans

APPENDIX B TYPES OF IDIOMS, IDIOMS, & DEFINITIONS

Type of Idioms	Idioms	Definitions
Transparent	To bury the hatchet	To stop fighting or arguing
	To stick to one's guns	To remain firm in one's convictions
	To shed (some) light on something	To reveal something about something
	To break the ice	To get something started
	To leave somebody out in the cold	To exclude someone
	To keep one's fingers crossed	To wish for luck for someone or something
	To step into one's shoes	To take over a job or some role from someone
	To lose one's temper	To become angry
	To burn one's bridges	To make decisions that cannot be changed in the future
	To cost an arm and a leg	To cost too much
	To keep one's chin up	To keep one's spirit high
	To twist somebody's arm	To force or persuade someone
	To give someone the cold shoulder	To ignore someone
	To leave somebody high and dry	To leave someone helpless
	To roll up one's sleeves	To get ready to do some work
Opaque	To give something a shot	To try something
	To kick the bucket	To die
	To give someone the slip	To escape from or elude someone
	To bite the bullet	To put up with or endure something
	To spill the beans	To reveal a secret or a surprise by accident
	To hit the books	To begin to study
	To bite the dust	To fall to defeat
	To make a bundle	To make a lot of money
	To get off one's case	To stop picking on someone
	To pull somebody's leg	To kid, fool, or trick someone
	To blow one's top	To become very angry
	To hit the roof	To become very angry
	To lose one's shirt	To lose all of one's assets
	To hold one's horses	To wait a minute and be reasonable
	To beat around the bush	To waste time

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