

Towards Idiomatic Competence of Yemeni EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract—This study investigates how Yemeni EFL undergraduates recognize, comprehend, and use English idioms. It attempts to find out the link between English proficiency and idiomatic competence of a sample of 63 sophomores recruited from the Department of English at the Faculty of Education, Taiz University. Three idiom tests and a questionnaire were used to answer three research questions: a) To what extent are Yemeni EFL undergraduates able to process English idioms? b) What strategies do they use to learn idioms? c) What challenges do they encounter in acquiring idiomatic expressions? Findings of the study show that high-scoring students in the idiom tests outperformed their low-scoring counterparts in achievement tests of listening and speaking skills. The study highlighted some major challenges that face Yemeni EFL learners and the strategies they tend to use in order to tackle those challenges. Some implications and recommendations were suggested accordingly.

Index Terms—idiom, idiomatic competence, EFL learners, Yemen

I. INTRODUCTION

A language, in essence, is a vessel that contains and exposit culture, thoughts, and history of a given nation. In all languages, there are several devices to convey and perceive cultural aspects, ideas, and abstract meanings showing how people interact culturally and pragmatically. One major linguistic device is using idioms. English language, a case in point, is known as a language of idiomaticity. It is rich in metaphors, similes, phrasal verbs, and figurative speech, conventionally referred to as “idiomatic expressions” or as some linguists call a register that makes a significant portion of academia and everyday communicational English. Cooper (1998, p.255) estimates that “over a lifetime of 60 years, a person would use about 20 million idioms”.

As idioms are omnipresent in all languages, they are part and parcel of human communication. Despite their pervasiveness in English language, they baffle the novice learners to such a large extent. They might cause not only linguistic but also cultural and technical problems to non-English speakers who learn English as an L2, and these problems may jeopardize communication (Thawabteh, 2011). This brought about a common belief among several language researchers that a sound knowledge of idioms is inevitable for English proficiency and fluency (Wray, 1999, 2002; Liu, 2008; Shirazi & Talebinezhad, 2013; Lontas, 2002; Sinclair, 1987), and a lack of knowledge of idioms most frequently poses big misunderstandings. Such idiomatic knowledge involves, according to (Zwiers, 2007, cited in Guduru, 2011, p.540), “cognitive processes, complex relationships, and abstract concepts, which are difficult to see, point to, touch, or act out.” Thus, ESL/EFL learners cannot help but learn idioms, not only for academic purposes but also for day-to-day communication.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. What Is an Idiom?

In the body of literature, several attempts have been made to define an idiom. According to Larson (1984, p.20), an idiom is a “string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words.” This is quite similar to the dictionary definition that an idiom is “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). Some researchers approached it from different perspectives. They attempted to define the content of idioms. To mention a few, Carter (1998) used the term “fixed expressions”, Moon (1997) picked up the term “multi-word items”, Howarth (1998) prompted for the term “phraseology”, Gläser (1984) adopted the term “phraseological unit”, and more recently Yi (2006) referred to idioms as “multiword expressions”. However, some others preferred the traditional term “idiom”. To elaborate, Mitsis (2004) defined an idiom as a continuum of non-literal expressions starting with usual collocations continues with stable or fixed collocations, metaphorical collocations, and the continuum ends with idioms of absolute abstract meaning. This continuum provides a spectrum of idioms where there is a possibility for transparency, semi-transparency, opacity areas in the gamut of an idiom. In a word, idioms vary from familiar to unfamiliar and from transparent to opaque idioms. Idioms, by definition, thus, are 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.

Linguistically speaking, idioms, by their very nature, have certain linguistic features. They operate on three aspects of language: form, meaning, and usage, i.e. they have syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions. At the syntactical level, idioms are thought of as fixed expressions, inseparable units. For instance, an idiom like *it rains cats and dogs* is fixed and cannot be descended, i.e. there is not a possibility to make any of its nouns (cats & dogs) singular or alter the sequence of the words. In addition, it is impermissible to transform it in any other form. One more example is the idiom *kick the bucket*. It cannot be transformed to the passive form, *the bucket was kicked*. Similarly, phrasal verbs, which constitute an integral part of English language, are irreversible, similar to idioms in nature as they consist of a sequence of words, linguistically are taken as "single lexemes." A good example to illustrate the point is the phrasal verb "put off" which is a single semantic unit, having a single verb word equivalent, "postpone." Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005, p.10) contend that idioms must be fixed in their lexical structure, and they must be, at the same time, semantically reinterpreted units and/or semantically opaque. Fernando and Flavell (1981, p.48) summarize the syntactic and semantic features of an idiom as a construction of words with the following five properties:

- a. Its meaning is not the compositional sum of its constituents.
- b. It is a unit that has either a homonymous literal counterpart or at least individual constituents that are literal, although the expression as a whole would not be interpreted literally.
- c. It is transformationally deficient in one way or another.
- d. It forms part of a set of expressions in a given language.
- e. It is institutionalized.

Pragmatic knowledge of idioms is even more complex. L2 learners get puzzled when using idioms in appropriate contexts. For one thing, meanings of many idioms cannot be inferred from the meanings of their constituents. Since idioms are language-specific conventionalized expressions, they need to be slotted in their appropriate contexts which generally vary in formality from slang and colloquialism to those used in very formal situations (Irujo, 1986). It is widely accepted that if learners rely on their L1 to use idioms in their L2, they will be successful in only very few instances. In most cases, this strategy leads to incorrect and often funny interpretations. A good example is this: "*kick the bucket*," which has a humorous meaning (pass away), is neither used on the demise of somebody nor in a condolence to grieving people. Another example is "*pull one's leg*" which jokingly means "to fool or trick someone" has nothing to do with physically pulling someone's leg. One more example is the old-fashioned expression "*so long*" which is now simply replaced by "goodbye." Add to that the expression "*shape up or ship out*," which means "either you improve your behavior/performance or leave" might be said by an employer or a supervisor to his/her employee, but not used in other social contexts. That is to say, certain idioms are used only in certain situations and not applicable in some other ones.

In a nutshell, idioms are better thought of as fixed structures of fixed meanings. This bond of fixedness generates non-literal metaphorical meaning which is not the sum of the meanings of its parts or its constituents. Such structures tend not to have straightforward meanings. They generally depend on the context in which they occur and they convey meanings that common words may not substitute. This necessarily requires a good command of cultural and linguistic proficiency.

B. Idiomatic Competence vs. Communicative Competence

As recent research has shifted emphasis on communicative competence and the social role of language, there is a great concern about linguistic appropriateness rather than accuracy (Shirazi, & Talebinezhad, 2013). Today there is a wide agreement among language learning theorists and researchers that the number of idioms acquired is positively correlated with the degree of success on communicative tasks, suggesting a close connection between idiom acquisition and communicative abilities (Wray, 1999, 2002; Liu, 2008; Shirazi & Talebinezhad, 2013). Liontas (2001, 2002) postulates that idioms form a large part of natural communication, and a knowledge of idiomatic expressions increases conversational fluency. This was reinforced by an earlier proclaim that idiomaticity would allow learners to produce English more confidently and "with less effort" (Sinclair, 1987, 159). It becomes clear, thus, that idioms are quite essential in the ESL/EFL contexts where L2 learners' English proficiency could be assessed on the basis of their good grasp of idiomatic expressions. In other words, the more idioms one knows, the more native-like one's English will sound, and by learning idioms, one consequently learns a big deal of the culture of the community speaking the language in question. Researchers like Ellis (1997) and Yorio (1989) suggest that adequate knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in L2 is an important indicator of L2 communicative competence. That is why in most rubrics of language skills (e.g. writing) using idioms is assessed as an indication of a good masterpiece.

C. Idiom Teachability

Idiom teachability has been a subject of controversy, investigated from different perspectives. One of the debatable issues is whether idioms are acquired in social contexts or learnt in formal settings in the same way that grammar and vocabulary are taught in schools and universities. In the literature, there is no clear-cut answer to this disputable issue. However, researchers generally assert that there is no limited or specific time to learn idioms. Some language researchers like Nippoland (1991, as cited in Cooper, 1998, p.259) maintain that "there seems to be no clear point in human development when it can be said that idioms have been mastered."

As a matter of fact, idioms are taught at an advanced level of ESL/EFL learning/teaching programs where learners expectedly stumble upon difficulties in recognizing, comprehending, and using idioms. For EFL learners who lack exposure to the target language and culture, acquiring idioms means learning both language and cultural conventions (Chen & Lai, 2013). The difficulty of teaching idioms, according to Hussein, Khanji and Makhzoomy (2011) stems from the fact that idioms are arbitrary and none-literal. The arbitrariness of idioms makes them incomprehensible from the meaning of their constituents, and hence they cannot be taught systematically. Buckingham (2006, p.35) maintains that “idioms’ arbitrary language-specific nature makes them difficult for learners to understand and acquire, and resistant to translation”. Accordingly, the easiest idioms to learn and teach, McPartland (2000) argues, are those which have exact counterparts in learner’s mother-tongue, and the most difficult ones are those which have no analogue in L1 and whose meaning cannot be derived from the conjoined meaning of their constituents. In her perceptive article on learning and teaching idioms, Irujo (1986) postulates that the difficulty of idiom acquisition is because idioms are frequently omitted in the speech addressed to L2 learners; and native speakers tend to use simple, concrete, everyday vocabulary while addressing L2 learners. In Pimenova’s (2011, pp. 117-119) viewpoint, the difficulty of learning idioms could be attributed to five major challenges:

- a. Unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar idioms.
- b. No analog idioms in L1.
- c. Cultural differences.
- d. Lack of experience dealing with idioms.
- e. Lack of the broad context of a given idiom.

These challenges were echoed in the studies of Nippold and Rudzinsky (1993) and Irujo (1986) where it is reported that idiom familiarity, transparency, and context could facilitate idiom comprehension. Opacity, or lack of transparency, refers to the difficulty in explaining the link between the lexical structure and the actual meaning of the idiom. As for lack of experience, idioms are taught at an advanced level as L2 learners make mistakes/errors due to L1 interference. For instance, a high level of difficulty for Arab EFL learners is the absence of exact counterparts in their mother tongue (Arabic) as the idiom systems in Arabic and English are distinguishable. Arab learners of English (e.g. the Yemenis) cannot fail to realize this complexity.

In the context of classroom teaching, EFL/ESL teachers have been always trying hard to find appropriate methods and techniques to teach idioms and they still do. Addressing the issue of idiom teaching, some language researchers have come up with several suggestions. For instance, Wu (2008) suggested designing a variety of collaborative activities for students to use English idioms to interact with peers and share fun in learning. The author suggested situations where idiom could be taught integrating the four language skills, such as teaching idioms in story contexts or with rich illustrations, group discussion, retelling and rewriting, dialogue writing and role-play. For Guduru (2012, p. 488), the following can be put forward as useful methods for learning/teaching English idioms.

- a. Memorization
- b. The keyword method.
- c. Using idiom Notebook.
- d. Learning idioms through conversations.
- e. Learning idioms through idioms.
- f. Display on notice boards.

However, it is hard to believe any of these strategies/techniques is a watertight method to adopt for all ESL/EFL contexts. Some other researchers suggested some other techniques. For instance, Azar and Talebinezhad (2013) propose teaching idioms through poetry as an authentic source of contextualization for idiomatic expressions, namely metaphoric aspects of language. The authors argue that through poetry teaching, students are exposed to authentic materials filled with concepts and idioms, comprehending meaning rather than understanding words in isolation, and hence improving their metaphorical competence. Similarly, Rohani, Ketabi and Tavakoli (2012) recommend learning/teaching idioms in a context. Goshkhetliani and Megrelidze (2013) suggest a lingua-cultural approach to teaching English idioms, as idioms reflect national specificity of the native speakers and a big deal of idioms are of folk, biblical, mythological origins. The authors argue that knowing the culture and literature of the target language greatly helps L2 learners understand and interpret idioms more efficiently. Chen and Lai (2013), likewise, suggest a teaching method that considers both language and culture, providing L2 learners with dependable clues in comprehending and learning idiomatic expressions. These techniques of idiom teaching were discussed elaborately in Cooper’s (1998, p.265) study and it would be useful to quote his concluding words, “students seem to benefit most from a plan of instruction that incorporates a wide range of activities that appeal to various intelligences, for they are given a greater chance to succeed in learning idiom than with an instructional plan that is restricted to only linguistic exercises”.

D. Idioms in Yemeni EFL Context

English is recognized as the most important foreign language in Yemen. It is taught as a Major at the university level. Pre-college curriculum includes a compulsory English course as a school subject. Although advanced learners majoring in English Language Studies are supposed to get adequate knowledge of English idioms, the introduction of idioms in the EFL syllabus is vulnerable and disappointing. As a teacher of English for about eight years, I have realized that idiom acquisition has been a neglected area of English in the local EFL teaching/learning environment where idioms are

selected and taught on a random basis, adopting ad hoc teaching methods and techniques. In some university syllabi (e.g. Taiz University), idioms are deduced in courses like *Spoken English*, and *Writing Skills*. In many cases, students fail to use and/or interpret idioms. I believe, and many other researchers would agree, that this is partially because idioms are not integrated into the context-sensitive environments of the language curriculum. Cooper (1998, p. 255) asserts that “since idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, they require special attention in language programs and should not be relegated to a position of secondary importance in the curriculum.”

Likewise, L2 research into idiom learning/acquisition in the Yemeni EFL context has not received adequate attention. This is probably due to a traditional emphasis on the acquisition of English grammatical system at the expense of some other aspects of linguistic proficiency including the idiomatic competence. Irujo (1986) contends that many L2 materials either ignore idioms entirely or relegate them to the “other expressions” section of vocabulary list, without providing exercises for learning them. As far as the local EFL context is concerned, the problem of idiom misuse is obviously noticed when learners of English provide funny translations where slips of literal translation take place. Some Yemeni learners, for instance, translate some L1 expressions into English literally, such as “*from my eyes!” which means “with a pleasure” or the expression, *any service?, which simply means “how can I help you?” They assume that such expressions which are direct transfer from Arabic would be understood by (native) speakers of English. To conclude, overlooking idiom teaching in the Yemeni EFL context has resulted in improper use of idiomatic expressions by EFL learners. Generally speaking, lack of idiomatic competence is one of the factors that limit the Yemeni EFL learners’ English production. Therefore, this study comes as a small-scale attempt to investigate the idiomatic competence in terms of idiom recognition, comprehension, and use. It investigates the link between oral communication skills and idiomatic competence of Yemeni EFL at the undergraduate level.

E. Questions of the Study

The proposed study addressed the following three research questions:

1. To what extent are Yemeni EFL undergraduates able to process English idioms?
2. What strategies do they use to learn idioms?
3. What challenges do they encounter in acquiring idiomatic expressions?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Design

This study was designed of two parts. The first one was assigned for idiom tests, with a purpose to measure the participants’ existing idiomatic competence. Their scores in the idiom tests were compared to their scores in listening and speaking in their BA program. According to the results of the idiom tests, the participants were divided into two groups: high-scoring (those who scored 50+) vs. low-scoring (those who scored 49-). The second part of the study investigated, through a questionnaire and informal interviews, how the participants recognize, comprehend and use idioms, difficulties, and strategies that they have to handle in learning/acquiring idioms. A questionnaire was administered to compare the difficulties, learning styles, strategies and idiom intake of both groups.

B. Participants

The participants were sixty-three male and female EFL sophomores enrolled in a 4-year English program at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Taiz University. They voluntarily took part in the study. They were divided, according to the *idiom test* results, into two groups: high achievers (n= 39) vs. low achievers (n=24). Aged between 19 and 22, the learners in question were assumed to be socio-linguistically homogeneous. Their level in English language was estimated to be between high intermediate and advanced. They took up two Spoken English courses in the first year (viz. Spoken English 1, Spoken English 2) and other two courses in the second year (viz. Spoken English 3, and Spoken English 4). According to the course syllabus, this series of courses in listening and speaking varies from intermediate to advanced levels. Before entering university, the participants had no previous knowledge of idioms except that they all had the same modules of English course at the school level. Their exposure to L2 is restricted to L2 being a subject of study, i.e. English input is available to these learners basically within classroom contexts.

C. Instruments

Tests

Three tests of 125 idioms were administered during three class sessions. The students in focus completed each test at the same time on the same day. The first test (multiple choices) is a completion test consisting of 40 idioms with a focus on idiom structures. All the sentences/idioms in the test were different with some idioms known to the students. These idioms/idiomatic expressions were adopted from the book, *Speak English like an American* by Gillett (2004). The second test is a multiple-choice test comprising 60 idioms with a focus on idioms’ meaning and usage. These idioms/idiomatic expressions were adopted from a PhD dissertation entitled, *The effects of Transfer on the acquisition of idioms in a second language*, by Irujo Suzanne (1984). The third test is made up of 25 idioms with a focus on idiom translations. Informants were asked to translate those idioms into their L1 (Arabic). The purpose of these three tests was

to compare the overall results of the idiom tests with the academic transcripts of the participants. All the three tests were modified in such a way to fit in with the study under investigation. They include different idiomatic expressions (collocations, phrasal verbs, metaphors, etc.). 25 of these idioms are similar and the rest are dissimilar to L1 (Arabic). Prior to test-taking, the participants were given some instructions on how to go about each test.

Questionnaire

The researcher developed a questionnaire with a flashback on the literature review. The rationale of this questionnaire was to look into idiom learning difficulties, strategies, and learning styles of both groups (high vs. low achievers). It was also used to reinforce the results obtained from the idiom tests. Results could help the researcher to compare the responses of both groups. Rubin (1975) argues that strategies of successful learners, once identified, could be made available to less successful learners. Similarly, Carton (1971) supports the notion that a successful learner usually uses useful learning strategies that ultimately help him/her to cope with their learning situations.

D. Description of the Course

The participants were assessed in terms of oral performance (listening and speaking skills). They took up a course of *Spoken English* at the first and second levels as an integral part of their BA program (with a credit of 3-hour lecture every week, 12-15 lectures per semester). According to the syllabus, the course aims to build confidence among learners to speak English and get over their fear and tongue-tiedness while using English. It is taught consecutively, starting with a focus on language functions and negotiating through language items in an appropriate manner. It helps individual learners to make presentations and participate in debates, recitations, declamations and take part in plays and skits. To facilitate these tasks, students are to work in groups and take up small projects that can be reported orally after accomplishing the tasks. Inter-class debates, language games recitation, competitions are also organized. At the end of the course, students sit for oral and written tests. Besides, the course evaluation includes assessing students' performance in classroom discussions, presentations, debates, and the like. As far as the students under scrutiny are concerned, they were taught an advanced course in Spoken English (namely, North Star 5: Focus on Listening and Speaking), an advanced edition written in 2009 by Sherry Preiss.

E. Analysis

Data collected by means of tests and questionnaires were analyzed statistically by using the SPSS program. Frequency of occurrences and percentages were obtained. Results were classified and arranged in tables and figures as explained in section IV below.

IV. RESULTS

A. Idiomatic Competence vs. Communicative Competence

Table 1 below outlines the scores of the participants' performance in *Spoken English* against their scores in the idiom tests. The average of the high-scoring group was 71% in the achievement tests and 63% in the idiom tests. The average of the low-scoring group, on the other hand, was 62% in the achievement tests and 39% in the idiom tests. Noticeably, the performance of both groups in idiom tests is relatively poor (average = 63%, 39%). Nevertheless, comparing the cumulative scores obtained in Spoken English 1 through Spoken English 4 shows that high-scoring learners are those who scored high points in idiom test1, idiom test 2, and idioms test 3 altogether. This indicates that their oral communicational abilities, in one way or another involves idiomatic competence. This is consonant with the results of some previous studies (e.g. Wray, 1999, 2002; Liu, 2008) in that idiomatic competence positively correlates with communicative competence.

TABLE 1
RESULT OF ACHIEVEMENT TESTS VS. IDIOMS TESTS

	high achievers		low achievers	
	achievement tests	idiom tests	achievement tests	idiom tests
Max. scored points	79%	89%	88%	49%
Min. scored points	53%	50%	44%	14%
Average	71%	63%	62%	39%

B. L2 Learners' Views on Idiom Learning

Probing the informants' views on the importance of idioms in their English learning, the results of Q1 in the questionnaire are shown in Table 2. It shows that low achievers tend to believe that idioms are not of high importance in their English studies (Mean value =4.58). Similarly, the high achievers seem to share the same opinion with a lesser degree (Mean value =4.36). This could be attributed to the negligence of introducing idioms in the syllabus throughout their four-year English program.

TABLE 2
IDIOM SIGNIFICANCE IN EFL LEARNING

How important, do you think, are idioms for your English studies?	low achievers			high achievers		
	No.	Mean	Std	No.	Mean	Std
	24	4.58	.584	39	4.36	.778

Scale: very important= 1, important=2, undecided=3, slightly important=4, not important=5

C. Frequency of Idiom Use in Spoken and Written Discourse

In response to Q2 in the questionnaire, the mean values of *idiom use* in spoken and written English are 2.8750 and 2.7179 of both groups (low vs. high achievers) as indicated in Table 3. That is to say, both groups infrequently use idioms in their English. This could be stemmed from the fact that they believe idioms are not important for their studies as indicated in Table 2 above. Hence, students do not have much care for acquiring and using idioms.

TABLE 3
FREQUENCY OF IDIOM USE

How often do you use idioms in your spoken and written English?	low achievers			high achievers		
	No.	Mean	Std	No.	Mean	Std
	24	2.8750	.8998	39	2.7179	.7930

Scale: never= 1; rarely =2; sometimes =3; often = 4; always =5

D. Sources of Idiom Learning

As Fig. 1 displays, the respondents in both groups stated that they pick up English idioms from different sources, starting with teachers at the percentage of (96%, 87%), books (83%, 59%), the Internet (21%, 10%), and some other sources such as TV programs, games, films, etc. which account for 21%, and 8% of the participants. In spite of diversity of learning sources, the idiomatic competence of the respondents is not satisfactory. Being contextual by nature, idioms in non-native environment is not always meaningful as students fail to use them properly by just reading idiom books or attending English classes. In the local EFL environment, students in focus are taught by local and East-Asian teachers, a learning/teaching environment that lacks authentic exposure to English in general and idiomatic expression in particular.

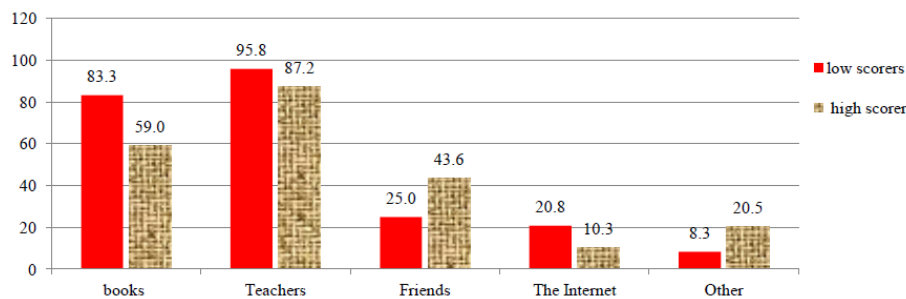


Figure 1. Sources Of Idiom Learning

E. Perceptions of L2 Learners on Idiom Instruction

According to Fig. 2, about half of the high-scoring group think that idioms should be taught at the “intermediate” level, whereas the low achievers believe it should start a little earlier, namely at the “elementary” level (See Fig. 2) below. However, in an informal discussion with EFL teachers, there was a wide consensus that idioms have no limited level to be taught; easy-to-learn idioms are to be introduced at the school level and gradually deduced throughout the entire English program at the tertiary level. This somehow corresponds with Cooper’s (1998) findings that learning idioms is a continuum, starting at an early age with literal figurative expressions and advances to abstract non-literal idioms.

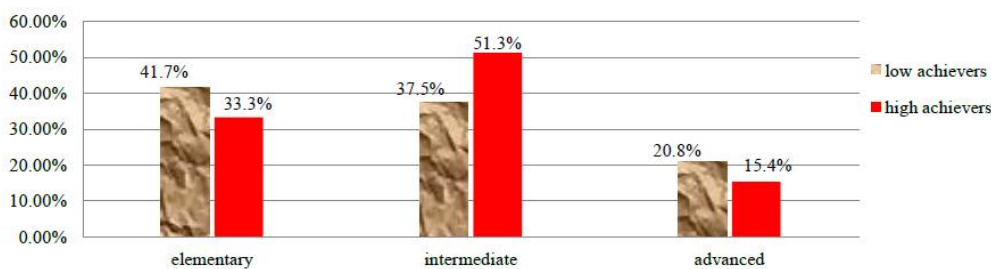


Figure 2. Perceived Level Of Idiom Instruction

F. Motivation of Idiom Learning

Driven by the importance of idioms, 79.2%, of the low achievers vs. 76.9% of the high achievers stated that idioms enhance their English learning. In addition, 69.2% of the high achievers are aware that idioms make an essential part of English language and 66.7% of them stated that idioms help them convey meanings, ideas and thoughts more appropriately. Underachievers, however, seem to be less alert to this importance with a percentage of 50% and 37% (See Table 4). Noticeably, a small percentage of both groups are motivated to learn idioms for achievement tests. This small percentage illustrates that idioms are taught, if so, basically for exam purposes.

TABLE 4
MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING IDIOMS

	low achievers		high achievers	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
a. They improve my English fluency.	19	79.2%	30	76.9%
b. They help me convey meanings mere words cannot.	9	37.5%	26	66.7%
c. They make an essential part of English language.	12	50.0%	27	69.2%
d. They are important for my exams.	6	25.0%	7	17.9%
e. Other	1	4.2%	6	15.4%

G. Strategies of Learning Idioms

The fact that learners are different, they learn differently. They tend to use different learning and coping strategies that help them perform well in L2. In response to Q7 in the questionnaire, the respondents in both groups stated that they use different strategies to process English idioms (See Fig. 3). Prior research supports the notion that a successful learner usually uses useful learning strategies that ultimately help him/her to cope with their learning situations (Rubin, 1975; Carter, 1971). Hence, comparing the learning strategies used in learning idioms by the high achievers may help the low achievers to follow suit, and therefore their idiomatic competence improves exponentially.

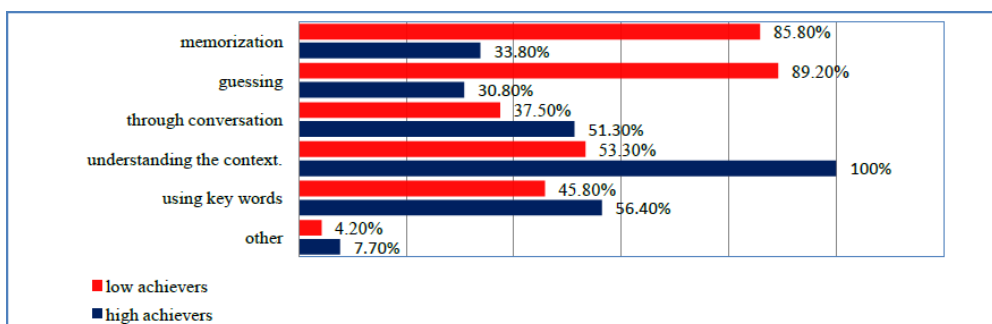


Figure 3. Idiom Learning Strategies

Whereas all high achievers in the sample tend to understand the context in which idioms occur, and 56.40% of them use key words, the low achievers give priority to “guessing” as a learning strategy with a percentage of (89.20%), followed by “memorization” at the percentage of 86% and thirdly “understanding the context” (53.30%). These learning strategies were suggested in the studies of Rohani, Ketabi, and Tavakoli (2012) and Guduru (2012). It is fair to state that some strategies might be more efficient than some others. Hence, low achievers could opt for the strategies used by their peers of high achievements to improve their idiomatic competence.

H. Difficulties of Learning Idioms

Based on the idiom tests and questionnaire, both groups seem to have difficulties to understand idioms without contexts (75%, 74%), followed by idioms of unfamiliar words (63%, 64%). In addition, a dichotomy of idioms in L1 and L2 (i.e. no analogy in Arabic) posits a problem for 26% of the high achievers and 29% of the low achievers (See Table 5). It is to be noted that both groups share more or less the same difficulties in recognizing idioms, particularly those idioms with no similarity in their L1 (Arabic). This confirms Pimenova’s (2011) findings that L2 idioms with no analogue in mother-tongue are more difficult to grasp and use.

TABLE 5
COGNITIVE DIFFICULTIES OF LEARNING IDIOMS

Sources of difficulties	low achievers		high achievers	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
a. Idioms which have unfamiliar words.	15	62.5	25	64.1
b. Idioms which have no analog in Arabic.	7	29.2	10	25.6
c. Idioms which have no context.	18	75.0	29	74.4
d. Other	0	0%	1	2.6

As far as practical use of idioms is concerned, high achievers seem to have fewer problems in comprehending idioms. In response to a question of the practical problems of idiom learning, the group of high achievers stated that “translating” and understanding the “gist” of idioms topped the list of difficulties at a rate of 67% and 44% respectively. Low achievers, on the other hand, stated that they have more striking problems of “recognizing” and “using” idioms in meaningful contexts, which is not very problematic for the high achievers (See Table 6). It is useful to discuss these problems with reference to the learning strategies discussed above; as high achievers make use of effective learning strategies (such as using key words) that probably lessen practical problems of learning idioms.

TABLE 6
PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES OF LEARNING IDIOMS

Major problems	low achievers		high achievers	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
a. Recognizing idioms (structure)	3	42.5	14	15.9
b. Understanding idioms (meaning)	14	58.3	17	43.6
c. Using idioms in sentences of my own (production)	11	45.8	7	17.9
d. Translating idioms	15	62.5	26	66.7
e. Other	1	4.2%	3	7.7%

I. Idioms in Yemeni EFL Context

In response to Q13 in the questionnaire, the respondents in both groups seem to have low self-esteem at English idioms (See Table 7). Expectedly, low and high achievers stated that idioms are hard to learn (Mean scores= 4.1250, 3.1795) and they are unhappy with their current idiomatic competence (Mean scores= 3.6667, 4.0513). They wish that they were taught useful learning strategies to learn idioms (Mean=1.6250, 1.6923) such as learning idioms by means of video-graphics to support their use and incorporating funny contexts, cartoons, and jokes as useful techniques to recognize and comprehend idioms (Mean scores=2.3333, 1.9167; 2.5128, 1.8205 respectively).

Items *f* through *h* in Table 7 are related to idioms in the local EFL curriculum. Coming from the same educational background, the informants in both groups stated that they were not taught idioms at the school level (Mean scores = 2.7500, 2.7436). Similarly, both groups stated that idioms are marginalized in their EFL syllabus (M=4.9167, 3.6923). This probably explains why respondents in both groups are dissatisfied with the status of idiom instruction in the school and university levels (Means scores=4.0000, 3.7692).

TABLE 7
IDIOMS IN LOCAL EFL CONTEXT

Items	low achievers			high achievers		
	No.	Mean	Std	No.	Mean	Std
a. For me, idioms are easy to learn.	24	4.1250	.9918	39	3.1795	.9139.
b. I'm satisfied with my present knowledge of English idioms.	24	3.6667	1.3405	39	4.0513	1.0990
c. I learn idioms better with video-graphics that support its use.	24	2.3333	1.1293	39	2.5128	1.0729
d. I learn idioms better in funny contexts, cartoons, and jokes.	24	1.9167	.7755	39	1.8205	.8847
e. I like to be taught specific strategies in learning idioms.	24	1.6250	.76967	39	1.6923	.97748.
f. I was taught idioms at the school level.	24	2.7500	1.4218	39	2.7436	.9139
g. Idioms are given enough attention in the syllabus in my dept.	24	4.9167	1.1764	39	3.6923	.8631
h. I'm satisfied with the way idioms are treated in my classes.	24	4.0000	1.2510	39	3.7692	1.0628
i. My EFL teachers use idiomatic expressions in their teaching.	24	2.9583	1.33447	39	2.9692	1.1112
j. My EFL teachers encourage me to learn/acquire idioms.	24	3.3333	1.52277	39	3.1795	1.14413

Scale: 1= strongly agree; 2= agree; 3= not sure; 4= disagree; 5= strongly disagree

As reflected in Fig. 1 above, teachers constitute a source of teaching idioms for a good number of learners. Since teachers in the local context play a traditional role as “knowledge-transmitters,” students are likely to be influenced by their teachers’ use of idioms. Items *i* and *j* in Table 7 clearly indicate that both groups likely agree that EFL teachers uncommonly capitalize on using idioms in classroom teaching and they scarcely encourage students to learn idioms (Mean scores= 2.9583, 3.3333; 2.9692, 3.1795 respectively). Arguably, this tendency is transmitted from teachers to their students, as teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and practice inevitably get transferred to the students, and consequently students shrink to bring idioms into recurrent practice. This is in line with Copper’s (1998, p. 257) argument that the “L2’s mastery of idiom interpretation is reflected in an increased use of figurative language by teachers in classroom”.

As far as the responses of the participants to the open-ended questions are concerned, the informants in question have generally emphasized the importance of idioms in teaching and learning English. However, they lack confidence in using idioms as they believe idioms would be “slippery” if the context is not obviously stated. They also stressed the fact that raising learners’ awareness of importance of idioms in enhancing language learning should be given a prime importance. Acknowledging the usefulness of social networks, EFL learners believe that the internet tools and applications can compensate the distinct shortage of idiom practice in real life communication and/or classroom instruction.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although Yemeni EFL learners at the undergraduate level tend to use several strategies and have hands on various sources to learn idioms, their idiomatic competence is still quite limited. Findings of the study show that they encounter several learning as well as linguistic challenges in processing English idioms. To begin with, learning challenges can be capsulated into personal and institutional constraints. At the personal level, EFL learners generally pay less attention to English idioms. They consider idioms to be unimportant beyond classroom environment and irrelevant to their L2 competence, contrary to the results of several previous studies (e.g. Ellis, 1997; Liu, 2008; Shirazi & Talebinezhad, 2013; Wray, 1999, 2002) that consider using idioms in spoken and written discourse as a significant indicator of a high level of English proficiency. The low motivation of Yemeni EFL learners could be attributed to the fact that idiomatic expressions are not lively in their EFL teachers' classroom English. Besides, teachers hardly motivate students to pick up some idioms beyond the classroom contexts. As far as the institutional limitations are concerned, the status quo of idioms in the EFL program is imperceptible. Idioms are neither taught at the school level nor given adequate attention at the tertiary level. To remedy these pitfalls, idioms should be given a formal status in the EFL program. They should be infused in the program and carefully incorporated in a sequential series. When designing English courses, suggestions for teaching idioms in previous studies (e.g. Cooper, 1998) should be consulted and made use of.

Linguistic features of idioms are also another challenge for EFL learners. The results of idiom tests indicated that linguistic challenges stem primarily from three dimensions – syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. EFL learners find difficulties in recognizing idiom structures, comprehending their meanings and converting meanings (translating) into L1, a common shared situation in some other contexts as echoed in the studies of Chen and Lai (2013), Hussein, Khanji and Makhzoomy (2011), Mahmoud, (2002), Meryem (2010), Nakhallah (2010), Thawabteh (2011), and Buckingham (2006). To deal with such linguistic difficulties, students in focus have a tendency to use different strategies to recognize and grasp idiomatic expressions, yet their performance is quite unsatisfactory. EFL teachers should enhance and scaffold those strategies and students should be sensibilized to the importance of idioms as they constitute a major characteristic of conversational English. In addition, idiom learning strategies used by high-scoring learners might be useful for the underachievers to learn idiom more efficiently.

The most noteworthy conclusions of the study are threefold. First, the results confirm that students scoring high points in idiom tests are scoring high points in listening and speaking achievement tests, as far as the scope of this study is concerned. This confirms previous claims that there is a positive link between idiomatic competence and English proficiency (e.g. Wray, 1999, 2002; Liu, 2008; Shirazi & Talebinezhad, 2013; Ellis, 1997; Yorio, 1989). This implies that idioms should be given a due attention in the EFL program in Yemen. Second, idioms with analog in L1 (similar idioms) are easier to learn than idioms with no similarity in L1 (Arabic). This comes in concordance with some previous studies such as Wray (1999, 2002) and Liu (2008). This is important for EFL teachers, course and syllabus designers. Quite understandable idioms should be introduced first and idioms which have analogue in L1 (familiar words) should motivate L2 learners to go for more difficult ones. Third, as idioms are not well-defined, there seems to be no specified method or technique to learn idiomatic expressions. Different learners might make a selection of a wide range of learning strategies suggested by several language researchers such as Cooper (1998), Rohani, Ketabi and Tavakoli (2012), and Guduru (2012). The choices of high achievers might be useful for low achievers as well.

Although this study provides some insights into idiomatic competence of Yemeni EFL learners, the findings remains inconclusive to offer a comprehensive picture of the possible factors tied to EFL learners' use of idioms in the Yemeni EFL context. As research on idiom acquisition in general and idiom learning in the local EFL context in particular is scant, this study is just a short-scale attempt investigating the link between the participants' oral proficiency and their idiomatic competence, delving into the strategies, and challenges of idiom learning in the local EFL environment. In the view of foreign language learning, there are bound to be some other factors that may be linked to L2 use of idioms. Further studies might expand the scope of investigation by including other factors such as age, academic rank, years of learning, etc. In terms of methodology, the idiom tests were self-managed; other studies might adopt more reliable tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, etc. Some other task-based activities are also recommended to check the use of idioms and test frequency instead of asking students' perceptions. The informants in this study were recruited from the Department of English at the Faculty of Education, Taiz University. Further similar studies of a larger sample size might be conducted to ensure the validity and generalizability of research findings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to acknowledge the help and support I got from Dr. Taha Ahmed Hassan, the chairman of the Department of English at the Faculty of Education, Taiz University. He assigned the course of Spoken English to be taught by me during the time of the study. This facilitated my task of approaching the students for tests and questionnaire. I am also grateful to all the authors of the relevant work as it provided the background of my study. I cannot forget to thank all the participants who took part in the study. They showed enthusiasm to answer the idiom tests and reply to the questionnaire.

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