

# Learners in a Tight Corner: An Investigation of Figurative Idiomatic Competence and Learner-related Factors

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## Abstract

Idioms play an indispensable role in communication. Knowledge of idioms is considered an indicator of proficiency. This study is aimed at investigating English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' knowledge of frequently used idioms and the effect of learner-related factors. The participants were 218 female EFL college students at the College of Basic Education (CBE) in Kuwait. A test was designed and used as the data collection instrument to assess the students' knowledge of frequent idioms. The test scores reveal a substantially low overall knowledge in this area. The results show that Kuwaiti EFL learners have difficulty comprehending common idiomatic expressions. Additionally, the study is aimed at determining whether students' knowledge of idioms is linked to age, year of study, and/or Grade Point Average (GPA). A statistically significant difference in knowledge of frequently used idioms is evident when GPA is taken into account.

**Keywords:** EFL students, figurative knowledge, idiomatic competence, idiom learning, learner-related factors

## 1. Introduction

Language is bland without idioms. The English language is particularly known for its wealth of idioms, which are common in all types of language, informal and formal as well as spoken and written (Nippold & Martin, 1989). About 70% of the speech of adult native speakers consists of idiomatic expressions (Altenberg, 1990; Cowie, 1992; Moon, 1998). Given their pervasiveness, idioms are an important aspect of vocabulary learning. In addition to single words, a learner's lexicon must also contain multiword units such as collocations and idioms. According to Zyzik (2009), "there is a general consensus that the vocabulary of a language is much more than a list of individual words" (p. 1). Idioms are significant for ESL/EFL learners in terms of achieving effective communication. Familiarity with a wide range of idiomatic expressions will foster understanding of figurative expressions in language.

Idioms are one of the most difficult aspects for non-native speakers, according to many researchers (Cedar, 2008; Cooper, 1998; Cornell, 1999; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Moon, 1998; Sparado, 2013). ESL/EFL learners often find themselves in a "tight corner" when faced with idioms. Idioms are difficult because they are part of a figurative language whose meaning cannot be readily determined from the literal meaning of its constituents. Khan and Can Daşkin (2014) pointed out that EFL/ESL learners' lack of knowledge of idioms might cause communication breakdowns. Learners sometimes misunderstand the intended meaning of the idiom because it is not derived from the literal meanings of the components involved. For example, the English idiom "to get cold feet" is interpreted figuratively as "to be afraid to do something" rather than as the literal meaning of getting cold feet. Learners who try to discern the meaning of idioms literally will only become confused. Additionally, idioms are difficult because they are deeply embedded in the culture of the target language. Furthermore, learners struggle with their proper usage (Irujo, 1986b), which could be attributed to their nature because they have fixed syntactic structures and figurative meanings.

Good knowledge of idiomatic expressions is synonymous with a high degree of proficiency in the language (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers, & Demecheleer, 2006; Howarth, 1998; Ohlrogge, 2009; Weinert, 1995; Yorio, 1989). Generally, it is associated with sounding more natural and native-like (Clarke & Nation, 1980; Fernando, 1996; Schmitt, 2000; Wray, 2000). As Cooper (1999) stated, "avoiding the use of idioms gives language a bookish, stilted, unimaginative tone" (p. 86). In addition, a lack of idiomatic competence will make language learners' spoken and written English sound foreign (Watson, 1998). According to Gibbs (1995), learners cannot be considered competent speakers without mastery of a large amount of idiomatic expressions.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Idiom learning and teaching have been the focus of many studies (Cooper, 1999; Lennon, 1998; Prodromou, 2003; Zyzik, 2011). Understanding idioms is essential, and “failure to grasp the meanings of idioms can impinge upon an individual’s understanding of language in social, academic and vocational settings” (Nippold & Martin, 1989, p. 59). A lack of awareness is prevalent among Asian teachers regarding the role idioms play in communicative competence (Tran, 2013). A dearth of research is evident on the idiomatic competence of EFL learners in Asia (Tran, 2013). In particular, the idiomatic knowledge of Arab EFL learners has not been investigated thoroughly, and no research has been conducted on Kuwaiti learners’ knowledge of English idioms. Tackling this issue in the Kuwaiti context specifically is necessary, given the importance of idioms. Moreover, few researchers have focused on learner-related variables such as year of study and age and their link to idiomatic competence (Aljabri, 2013; Al-Khawaldeh, Jaradat, Al-Momani, & Bani-khair, 2016; Katsarou, 2011).

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Comparison of Native and Non-native Speakers’ Use of Idioms

Learners’ knowledge of formulaic language does not match their overall knowledge of L2 vocabulary (Steinel, Hulstijn, & Steinel, 2007). Additionally, learners’ knowledge of formulaic language differs from native speakers’ knowledge (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997; Jabboori & Jazaa, 2013; Mäntylä, 2004). For instance, Jabboori and Jazaa (2013) compared native and non-native speakers’ competence and use of idiomatic expressions. The non-native speakers were advanced English speakers who were either PhD or MA holders in linguistics and English language. The results indicated that native speakers were better than the advanced speakers in their competence and use of idiomatic expressions. Learners struggle with proper usage of idioms (Irujo, 1986b), and even advanced ones avoid using them for fear of committing errors (Abdullah & Jackson, 1998; Irujo, 1993; Kellerman, 1979; Laufer, 2000). This is often described as avoidance error. Avoidance is a strategy that learners use with forms that they know but are difficult for them. Laufer (2000) pointed out that “avoidance is an indicator of difficulty learners may have with the avoided form, not of its ignorance” (p. 186). According to Baştuğ and Salihagić (2014), learners, even those who have mastered some idioms, “are reserved when it comes to idioms usage in the real-world communication” (p. 73). In their study, the analysis showed that students, even those who have relevant knowledge of idioms, do not use them regularly while speaking or writing. The analysis revealed that students are aware of the importance of idioms in language and their insufficient usage. Tran (2013) also examined the frequency of using figurative idioms in students’ communication. Students were asked how often they used 50 frequent idioms selected from American corpus-based studies and from books on idioms. The results indicated that the selected frequent idioms were never or rarely used in the students’ conversations. Laufer (2000) investigated avoidance of idioms, showing that as a category, idioms were not avoided in L2. However, some types of idioms were avoided more than others. There was, in effect, a degree of L1–L2 similarity in the use of idioms. Her study indicated that avoidance of idioms was not a uniform phenomenon. Laufer (2000) suggested that idioms, as a category, might not present problems to advanced L2 learners. On the other hand, Adkins (1968) showed that Spanish-Americans and Mexican-Americans did not comprehend idioms. The students were handicapped in their ability to understand them. Adkins (1968) concluded that efforts must be made to upgrade students’ knowledge, particularly of common idioms. Hussein, Khanji, and Makhzoomy (2000) studied the problems language learners encounter when attempting to comprehend English idiomatic expressions and translate idioms from Arabic to English. The results reflected the students’ poor competence in the use of idioms. Conversely, Salamah (2015) investigated idiom comprehension and translation. The subjects of the study were Saudi female students from the English language program at King Saud University. The researcher administered two sets of tests. Each set was administered to a group of students. The findings demonstrated that the EFL learners in the study did face difficulties in translating English idioms into Arabic. However, they did not face difficulties in the comprehension of English idioms.

### 3.2 Factors Affecting Idiom Comprehension

Research has shown that various factors affect the comprehension of idioms. These factors can be idiom-related (e.g., familiarity and transparency) or learner-related factors (e.g., age). Various authors have claimed that idioms presented in context facilitate idiom comprehension, unlike those presented in isolation (Ackerman, 1982; Cacciari & Levorato, 1989; Gibbs, 1991; Kemper, 1986; Levorato & Cacciari, 1995; Liontas, 2001). A number of researchers have examined the role of familiarity and transparency in idiom understanding (Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Nippold & Tylor, 1995; Schweigert & Cronk, 1992, 1993; Titone & Connine, 1994). Nippold and Tylor (1995) showed that idiom familiarity and transparency play a role in idiom comprehension.

Familiarity is a measure of how frequently an idiom is used in language. Transparency is a measure of the relatedness between the nonliteral and literal meanings of an idiom. Idioms that were higher in familiarity and transparency were easier for students to understand than those that were less familiar and more opaque. Other studies also showed that the most familiar idioms were easier to understand than less familiar ones (Schweigert & Cronk, 1992, 1993; Titone & Connine, 1994).

Irujo (1986b) listed some of the reasons why idioms are difficult for language learners. First, the nonliteralness of idioms makes them difficult. Although idioms have literal counterparts, often they are used in a nonliteral way. For the idiom *spill the beans*, for example, “a native speaker will quickly realize which meaning is intended, while the second language learner is left trying to figure out where the beans come from and how they were spilled” (Irujo, 1986b, p. 236). The second reason for the difficulties involved in learning idioms is lack of exposure. According to Irujo (1986b), native speakers omit idioms in speech addressed to language learners because they prefer to use simplified language lacking these phrases. When learners are exposed to idioms, it is usually in a passive manner such as when watching television. These noninteractive situations do not provide room for meaning clarification or gaining feedback on use. Another problem is the correct use of idioms in appropriate situations. Many idioms have grammatical constraints, which make them challenging for language learners. It is true that some idioms (flexible idioms) tolerate grammatical transformations; however, many idioms (frozen or fixed idioms) do not tolerate changes. Moreover, learners often rely on their first language when using idioms, which can lead to incorrect outputs. Finally, idioms are often ignored in second language teaching materials.

Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) explored the effects of transparency and familiarity, comparing high school students to university students. They revealed that adolescents “judge idioms as less familiar” than adults do. They found that idiom explanation improved gradually with age. In addition, they found a significant effect of familiarity and transparency on comprehension. The adolescents were 20 twelfth-grade students attending a public high school, while the adults were 20 university students. All 40 students were native speakers of General American English. A familiarity judgment task and transparency judgment task were employed. The data suggested that adolescents rated the idioms as less familiar but more transparent than did the adults. Knowledge of idioms is related to chronological age, education, and literacy level (Nippold & Martin, 1989). High school students were less familiar with idioms because of their age and “fewer instances of literate behavior such as reading and analysing the meaning of words and expressions” (Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993, p. 731).

Katsarou (2011) investigated the degree of identification and comprehension success of Greek EFL high school students reading English texts containing idioms. The overall success of idiom comprehension by these learners was fairly low, with a mean of accurately inferred responses of 37.3%. Hence, the study findings demonstrated the learners’ difficulty in successfully inferring the meaning of idioms even within the texts’ context. Furthermore, the success in the idiom comprehension task correlated significantly positively with interlingual similarity. Identical L1–L2 idioms and similar L1–L2 idioms were most easily comprehended. In addition, semantic transparency played a role. Transparent idioms were the most successfully comprehended English idioms. The author also examined the relationship between idiom comprehension success and learner-related variables. These variables were learners’ L2 language proficiency, gender, motivation, and field independence/dependence. The findings revealed nonsignificant correlations.

Only a few studies have been focused solely on learner-related variables and idiom comprehension (Aljabri, 2013; Al-Kadi, 2015; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Lihui, 2007; Nippold & Martin, 1989). Lihui (2007) investigated the comprehension of English idioms by Chinese EFL learners at different proficiency levels. The study provided evidence that the level of target language proficiency plays a role in comprehension of L2 idioms. Advanced learners performed better than intermediate learners and utilized actively different strategies to decipher unfamiliar idioms, particularly those that differed from L1 idioms. Aljabri (2013) investigated EFL students’ judgments of English idiom familiarity and transparency. The researcher also examined the subjects’ ability to comprehend 20 idioms and the difference between two undergraduate levels (Level 1 and Level 4). Results showed that Level 4 students rated the idioms higher in familiarity and comprehended them with greater accuracy than did their Level 1 counterparts. Aljabri (2013) attributed the findings to age, level of literacy, and amount of education. Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) conducted a study on Jordanian students’ idiomatic competence to determine whether differences existed among university students in different academic years. The results showed that Jordanian students have poor knowledge of idioms despite the fact that most of those in the study were advanced third- and fourth-year university students majoring in English. Furthermore, the results of the test revealed a difference in idiomatic knowledge among students in different academic years. Third- and fourth-year students scored more correct answers in the idiom test than did first- and second-year learners. The

marks of the third- and fourth-year students ranged from 9–12/20 compared to their first- and second-year counterparts, who scored marks ranging from 0–6/20. Al-Kadi (2015) used idiom tests to measure the idiomatic competence of 63 Yemeni students recruited from the Department of English at the Faculty of Education, Taiz University. The participants were considered to be high-intermediate and advanced English learners. The participants were divided into two groups: those who scored 50 and more (high scoring) and those who scored 49 and lower (low scoring) based on the results of the idiom tests. Both groups performed relatively poorly in the idiom tests (average = 63% and 39%, respectively). Al-Kadi (2015) compared the scores of the participants in the idiom tests to the scores in listening and speaking in their BA program. The high-scoring learners in achievement tests were those who scored high in the tests. This reflected a link between communicative abilities and idiomatic competence. Previous studies (e.g., Liu, 2008; Wray 1999, 2002) also showed a correlation between idiomatic and communicative competence.

As illustrated, very few studies have been focused on idioms in foreign language learning. An even smaller number have been devoted to Arabic learners of EFL/ESL. The Kuwaiti context has been ignored. Additionally, studies focused purely on learner-related variables are scarce. Hence, the present study constitutes an attempt to fill this research gap. This study differs from others in that it is an exploration of frequently used idioms. Authors of many previous studies, particularly those conducted in the Arab world, failed to mention whether frequency was taken into consideration. Therefore, poor idiomatic competence could have been a result of frequency effect.

The purpose of the present study is to examine students' knowledge of frequently used idioms. Specifically, this study is aimed at investigating Kuwaiti EFL undergraduate college students' idiomatic competence in frequently used idioms. The researchers set out to determine whether the students' idiomatic knowledge is linked to age, year of study, and/or GPA. The present study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Do Kuwaiti EFL college students know frequently used idioms?
- 2) Do Kuwaiti EFL students differ in their knowledge of frequently used idioms based on age?
- 3) Do Kuwaiti EFL students differ in their knowledge of frequently used idioms based on year of study?
- 4) Do Kuwaiti EFL students differ in their knowledge of frequently used idioms based on their GPA?

#### **4. Methodology**

##### *4.1 Participants*

The participants of the study were 218 female EFL undergraduate students studying at the CBE (College of Basic Education) in Kuwait. The participants were English major students, and all of them were native speakers of Arabic. Their age ranged between 18 and 41 years old. They were selected randomly to participate in the study.

##### *4.2 Instrument*

A test was designed to assess the students' knowledge of frequent idioms. A total of 27 frequent idioms were selected for the test. These were chosen from among the 300 most common idioms as carefully chosen through frequency analysis of Collins COBUILD data. The selected idioms can be used in both British and American English without any variation. The selected idioms cover various structural patterns and span the spectrum of idiomaticity. The selected English idioms were an equal mix of identical idioms, similar idioms, and different idioms depending on whether they have equivalents in Arabic. The designed test consisted of three parts:

- 1) Matching task: match the meanings and the idioms (9 items/idioms).
- 2) Multiple-choice task: choose the appropriate idiom for each situation (9 items/idioms).
- 3) Gap-fill task: complete the idioms based on the meanings (9 items/idioms).

##### *4.3 Procedure*

To establish the validity of the test, specialists in the English language and literature department were asked to review it. They judged the selected idioms as highly familiar. A pilot study was conducted on 35 female EFL undergraduate students that were excluded from the main study to verify the reliability and validity of the instrument.

Before taking the test, the participants were asked to provide some background information including age, year of study, and GPA. Consequently, the idiomatic test was distributed to the participants at the CBE. Students were asked to submit the test whenever they were finished and could go at their own pace. A Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.77 was calculated, suggesting that reliability of the instrument was satisfactory.

## 5. Data Analysis

Knowledge of frequently used idioms was treated as a continuous variable representing knowledge scores with values ranging from 0–7. On the basis of this test, the participants were divided into three groups: Group 1 (0–6), Group 2 (7–13), and Group 3 (14–27). The first group achieved the lowest marks on the test, scoring below 25%. The second group scored between 25 and 50%. The third group managed to answer over half of the test questions, scoring above 50%. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 23 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY).

Normality of the data was assessed via the z-scores of the skewness and kurtosis of the variable (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012). An absolute value of the z-score greater than 2.58 or less than -2.58 was significant at  $p < 0.01$  and was an indication of non-normality (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012).

A two-sample t-test was used to determine if Kuwaiti EFL students differed in their knowledge of frequently used idioms based on age (RQ2). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine 1) if Kuwaiti EFL students differed in their knowledge of frequently used idioms based on year of study (RQ3) and 2) if Kuwaiti EFL students differed in their knowledge of frequently used idioms based on their GPA (RQ4). For all statistical tests, p-values less than 0.05 indicated significance. Pairwise comparisons were conducted using Tukey's method.

## 6. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics on knowledge of idioms for the 218 participants. The average score of knowledge of idioms was 10.75 (SD = 4.16), with the lowest being 1 and the highest being 22. The z-scores of skewness and kurtosis were 1.88 and -0.55, respectively. Because the absolute values of the z-scores were less than 2.58, we concluded that the score of knowledge of idioms was normally distributed.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Knowledge of Idioms (N = 218)

Mean (SD)	Min	Max	Skewness (SD)	Kurtosis (SD)	Z-score	
					Skewness	Kurtosis
10.75 (4.16)	1	22	0.32 (0.17)	-0.18 (0.33)	1.88	-0.55

Table 2 shows the frequency of the study variables, including age, year of study, GPA, and categorized knowledge of idioms. The majority of participants (72.5%) were less than 25 years old. About half (50.3%) were in the fourth year of study. Nearly 60% (57.9%) of the participants had a GPA between 2.00 and 2.99. It appears that nearly 60% of the participants (59.2%) scored between 25 and 50% on the test for idiomatic knowledge (scores 7–13).

Table 2. Frequency of the Study Variables

Study Variables	Frequency (%)
Age	
Less than 25	158 (72.5)
25 and older	60 (27.5)
Year of study	
2	8 (4.4)
3	44 (24.3)
4	91 (50.3)
5	38 (21.0)
GPA	
Less than 2.00	14 (11.6)
2.00–2.99	70 (57.9)
Greater than or equal to 3.00	37 (30.6)
Knowledge of idioms	
0–6	32 (14.7)
7–13	129 (59.2)
14–27	57 (26.1)

Note: N = 218. 37 missing values for year of study; 97 missing values for GPA.

As indicated previously, the first research question was aimed at discovering whether Kuwaiti EFL students know frequently used idioms. The results of the test reflect the students' poor knowledge of frequently used English idioms in that only 26% of the participants answered over half of the test questions, scoring above 50%. The majority of the students scored between 7 and 13 out of 27. These scores are low, particularly given that the selected idioms belong to the 300 most common idioms and some were presented with contextual clues. The scores show that the participants clearly have difficulty understanding idioms. This finding is in line with the majority of research conducted on Arab EFL learners (Alkadi, 2015; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013). The finding contradicts Salamah's study (2015) in which Saudi female students did not face difficulties in the comprehension of English idioms. The inconsistency can be explained by the fact that Salamah used two sets of tests administered to two different groups of students. The results of the two groups in her study revealed some contradictory findings.

A two-sample t-test and one-way ANOVAs were performed to determine if Kuwaiti EFL students differ in their knowledge of frequently used idioms based on age (RQ2), year of study (RQ3), and GPA (RQ4). The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Knowledge of Idioms by Age, Year of Study, and GPA

		Mean (SD)	Test Statistic	P
Age	Less than 25	10.72 (4.11)	t (216) = -0.151	0.880
	25 and over	10.82 (4.33)		
Year of study	2	12.50 (4.18)	F (3, 177) = 0.516	0.672
	3	11.11 (4.22)		
	4	10.96 (3.84)		
	5	10.58 (4.31)		
GPA	Less than 2.00	8.29 (3.41)	F (2, 118) = 7.602	0.001*
	2.00–2.99	10.09 (3.46)		
	Greater than or equal to 3.00	12.49 (4.62)		

Note: SD = standard error; p = p-value. \* indicates significance at the 0.05 level.

The mean scores of knowledge of frequently used idioms were 10.72 (SD = 4.11) and 10.82 (SD = 4.33) for participants less than 25 and participants 25 and older, respectively. There was no statistically significant difference in knowledge of frequently used idioms between participants less than 25 and participants 25 and older ( $t(216) = -0.151$ ,  $p = 0.880$ ). Hence, age did not have an effect on the students' knowledge of idioms. This is not in line with Nippold and Rudzinski (1993). However, those authors compared high school students to university students, whereas the present study features comparison of college students only.

The mean scores of knowledge of frequently used idioms ranged between 10.58 (SD = 4.31, year of study = 5) and 12.50 (SD = 4.22, year of study = 2) for participants in various years of study. There was no statistically significant difference in knowledge of frequently used idioms between participants in various years of study ( $F(3, 177) = 0.516$ ,  $p = 0.672$ ). Conversely, Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) presented the results of a test that revealed a difference in idiomatic knowledge between students in different academic years.

The mean scores of knowledge of frequently used idioms were 8.92 (SD = 3.41), 10.09 (SD = 3.46), and 12.49 (SD = 4.62) for participants with GPA less than 2.00, GPA between 2.00 and 2.99, and GPA greater than or equal to 3.00, respectively. There was a statistically significant difference in knowledge of frequently used idioms among participants with various GPAs ( $F(2, 118) = 7.602$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). The results of pairwise comparisons (Table 4) indicated that the scores of knowledge of idioms for participants with GPA greater than or equal to 3.00 were statistically significantly to a greater degree than the scores of knowledge of idioms for participants with GPA less than 2.00 ( $p = 0.002$ ) and participants with GPA between 2.00 and 2.99 ( $p = 0.007$ ). Hence, GPA and knowledge of idioms appeared to be related. Participants with greater GPAs differed in their knowledge of idioms when compared to other GPAs.

Table 4. Results of Pairwise Comparisons

Comparison	Mean Difference (SE)	P
Less than 2.00 vs. 2.00–2.99	-1.80 (1.13)	0.251
Less than 2.00 vs. Greater than or equal to 3.00	-4.20 (1.21)	0.002*
2.00–2.99 vs. Greater than or equal to 3.00	-2.40 (0.78)	0.007*

### 7. Limitations of the Study

The present study has certain limitations. First, the findings are limited to college students who attended CBE in Kuwait. As a consequence, these results cannot be truly generalizable to all Kuwaiti EFL learners. Second, the results cannot be generalizable to male students because only female students took part in the study. Another possible limitation is the use of only 27 idioms.

### 8. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The aim of this research was to examine idiomatic knowledge and the effect of learner-related factors. Data were collected from 218 female EFL students studying at CBE in Kuwait. An idiomatic test was administered to the students to determine their knowledge of frequently used idioms. The idiom comprehension test scores revealed a remarkably low overall knowledge of frequently used idioms among Kuwaiti EFL learners. Moreover, contextual clues did not contribute to successful comprehension of the English idioms. There was a statistically significant difference in knowledge of frequently used idioms among participants with various GPAs. However, age and year of study did not yield a statistically significant difference.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for future research on idioms. For instance, additional learner-related factors can be considered, such as gender. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate idiom-related variables such as interlingual similarity (Bulut & Çelik-Yazici, 2004; Copper, 1999; Irujo, 1986a) and transparency (Bulut & Çelik-Yazici, 2004; Copper, 1999). To conclude, it is hoped that the findings of this study demonstrate the need to enhance students' idiomatic knowledge. Frequently used idioms should be integrated in the syllabus from the early stages. Idioms should form an integral part of any foreign language course. Familiarizing EFL learners with idioms and improving their knowledge in this area incrementally is necessary.

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