

## An Investigation on the Comprehension of English Idioms Among Moi Primary School Children in Nairobi

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### ABSTRACT

The competence in identifying and comprehending the meaning of idiomatic expressions developed at an early age. However, second language learners reach the comprehension skill differently within the age and at pace. There are many unresolved questions regarding the age which children start to comprehend L2 idioms. The objective of this study was to investigate the age at which children in Moi primary school in Nairobi were able to identify and comprehend the meaning of English idioms. The 60 participants were selected using purposive sampling. The children were divided into three age groups: 5-8 years old, 9-12 years old, and 13-16 years old. The participants were balanced in gender and level of formal education. They were asked to identify the correct non-literal meaning of the 20 idioms presented. It was reported that the group with an age range from 5-8 years old scored the lowest among the other. The findings showed that as early as five years of old (preschool age), children begin to understand some kinds of idiomatic expressions and that such ability slowly develops throughout childhood. At the age of 9, children mainly interpreted idioms literally. By the age of 12, they started to understand the non-literal meanings of idiomatic expressions correctly and continued to expand until the age of 16. It implied that age is a factor in the comprehension of idioms among children. Therefore, exposure to language input is vital in the process of early acquisition. The study provides pedagogical observation on early language acquisition. This study also assists the language teachers and language practitioners and material developers in decision making that lead to the development of a better curriculum.

### INTRODUCTION

Idioms can be found in all of the languages. There are a large number of idioms, and they are used very commonly in all languages. Idioms are the building blocks of a language and civilization that provide interesting insights into the use of words, languages, and their speakers' thought processes. It is estimated that there are at least 25,000 idiomatic expressions in the English language. This study used Larson's (1984) definition of idioms as "a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words" (p. 20). It implies that an idiom is a form of figurative language that can have both, a literal and a figurative meaning. For example, *Alex spilled the beans*, might refer to someone tipping out the contents of a jar of beans (literal) or revealing a secret (figurative).

So what makes idiom difficult? The answer is its meaning. Idioms are not easy to understand - especially for non-native speakers, because their meanings are usually metaphorical. This characteristic of idioms makes them strange and difficult to understand for English learners. ESL learners will need to familiarize themselves with the meaning and usage

of each idiom. Learning to use common idioms and expressions will make ESL learners sound more native. Thus, it is a good idea to master some of these expressions. Idioms comprehension particularly challenging for young children whose first language is not English. L2 idioms proficiency presents a distinctive challenge because idiomatic expressions comprise stereotyped structure with conventionalized meanings, allowing only limited usage variability (Gibbs, 1987; Gibbs, 1991). For example, *She has him eating out of her hand*, the expression occurs on a narrow range of possible intonational contours (Bolinger, D., & Bolinger, D. L. M., 1986, p. 280).

The frequent occurrence of idioms in everyday language has made the comprehension of idioms for ESL students essential. Idioms come up in written and verbal forms. Thus, idioms have an important pragmatic function in the language because learning a language is not simply developing a linguistic system and familiarizing with the meaning of each word. Gass and Selinker (2001) indicated the significance of idioms, considering that non-native speakers are inclined to find lexical errors more unsettling than grammatical

errors when communicating with native speakers. Gass and Selinker (2001) suggested the importance of formal education regarding metalinguistic input required by idioms. Metalinguistic skills, among other factors, such as exposure to input, inferences from context, and text comprehension in general, are suggested to play a role in idiom acquisition and comprehension (Vulchanova, Vulchanov & Stankova, 2011).

In short, idioms develop as an essential part of any language and occurs in a context. Together with metalinguistic competence, cultural background, and knowledge of the world will continuously serve as a backdrop to a speaker's understanding of language (Nippold, 2006). Figurative language is by the majority of researchers acknowledged as "the most powerful source for linguistic innovation" (Leverato & Cacciari, 1992, p. 130). Thus, second language learners cannot help but learn idioms, not only for academic purposes but also for daily communication. However, there are many unresolved questions regarding the age which children start to comprehend L2 idioms. Finding a way to enhance L2 learning is of high importance. This would be possible if there is an awareness of the processes and the factors involved in comprehending idioms. Such awareness can help the language teachers together with language practitioners and material developers in decision making which would, in turn, lead to the development of a better curriculum. Previous studies on idiom comprehension among children were still scarce. The present study was an attempt to fill such a gap and hence provide an empirical knowledge in idiom comprehension, which will help language practitioners and curriculum developers come up with a better curriculum. In this study, the focus will be to investigate the comprehension of English idioms by Moi Primary children as the ability to comprehend figurative expressions precedes the production in language acquisition (Leverato & Cacciari, 1992).

## IMPORTANCE OF IDIOMS

The English language is full of idioms and other figurative aspects of a language. Therefore mastery of English idioms enables students to learn the English language easily. Understanding the lexicon of English demands more than just knowing the denotative meaning of words. It requires its speakers to have also the understanding of the connotative word and more, an understanding of figurative language. Idioms fall into this final category (Nunan, 2003, p. 23). Research by Roberts and Kreuz (1994) on figurative language points out that among the areas that are quite challenging to learners of the English language is idiom comprehension. Mastery of an L2 idioms presents a unique difficulty in part because idiomatic expressions are made up of stereotyped forms associated with conventionalized meanings, allowing only narrow ranges of variability in usage (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994, p.11). Words in the idiom are often not used with their usual meanings; for instance, *she has him eating out of her hand*. The expression occurs on a narrow range of possible intonational contours (Bolinger, D., & Bolinger, D. L. M., 1986, p. 28). Therefore learning on how idioms are comprehended and sorting out the challenges involved in comprehending out

the meaning of idiom will not only be a depository towards the learning of English language easily but also it will lead to higher performance in English language examinations.

In addition, idioms are an essential feature of a language, as they are applied to communicate ideas concisely and effectively (Gibbs, 1995, p. 23). Idioms contain a significant role in a second language as well as in the first language. Gibbs (1995) claimed that idioms are regularly used in each language that disregarding them will lead to numerous problems for the students regarding fluency and competency in a language (p. 28). Second language students acquire not only the grammar construction and lexicon of the target language, but also the idioms to incorporate into the culture of the second language. Dixon (1994) considered idioms as crucial in language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It is out of this importance of idioms that linguists and psycholinguists proposed some theories to explain the process and conception of idioms (Dixon, 1994, p. 11).

Moreover, mastery of idioms has an important role in the teaching and learning process of English (Wood, 2002, p. 15). Therefore, idioms usage in and outside the classroom are widely believed to help teachers and students promote an innovative environment of communication. On this regard, the types of activities employed in the classroom are found to be the most important aspects that help in the success of using idioms in and outside the classroom. Since the use of idioms has a great influence in the teaching and learning process of a foreign language, it could be one of the ways to give students better conditions to improve communicative skill in the daily context.

Idioms are culture-based. Idioms preserve the history, culture and tradition of its native users (Rizq, 2015). Idioms that are derived from human physical experiences are, in general, culturally equal. That is, idioms that are based on human physical experiences, such as "anger" being associated with "heat" are easier to recognize and understand by non-natives. Due to the strong similarities across different cultures in basic physical experiences such as, being sick or well, hot or cold, idioms that are derived from such images are often the same and fairly easy to understand (Ellis, 1997). However, idioms that are derived from specific domains are usually different across cultures because these domains are not equally important across cultures. Mastery of idioms is considered to be a vital sign of communicative competence and intercultural awareness (Boers, Eyckmans & Demecheleer, 2004; Ellis, 1997; Kovecses & Szabo, 1996; Littlemore & Low 2006). Idioms help in broadening learner's knowledge of the culture and history of a language. Mastery of a language is incomplete without an understanding of the culture of that language. Therefore, idioms are vital to attaining mastery of a foreign language.

In summary, mastery of idioms should not be neglected and should not be taken for granted. Idioms are used daily and repeatedly by the native speakers of the English Language. Idioms are a part of every language's vocabulary and are based on that language's history, heritage, and culture. Mastery of idiomatic expressions helps non-native speakers of a language become more fluent, and sound more native-

like. It increases the vocabulary and lexicon of the English Language learner and leads to a better understanding of the culture and customs of that particular language. English language teachers should teach idiomatic language to their students and not overlook such a vital issue because becoming more native-like in the English Language is by learning idiomatic expressions, understanding their meanings and using them frequently parallel to English Language native speakers.

### IDIOM COMPREHENSION

Glucksberg (2001) proposes a typology of idioms based on the degree of compositionality and semantic transparency. It opts for the compositional approach to idiom structure in which the literal meanings of idiom's constituents map onto the components of idiomatic meaning. According to Glucksberg (2001), compositional idioms may be opaque or transparent. Transparency indicates the extent to which the meaning of an idiom may be inferred from the meanings of its constituents. Glucksberg (2001) argued that the traditional view of Idiom Representation and Processing (IRP) has failed to account for opaque and transparent idiom classes in terms of processing. IRP treated idioms as lexical items that are listed and retrieved as chunks from the lexicon. The comprehension process of a given idiom depends on how long the retrieval process takes. IRP does not account for the differences in terms of difficulties realized in the processing of opaque and transparent idioms. IRP claimed that the meaning of an idiom is in no way recovered from the meanings of its individual constituents and that idioms behave as syntactic as well as semantic units. It implied that there is nothing in the meanings of 'the', 'kick', and 'bucket' that tells us that *kick the bucket* means DIE. According to Glucksberg (2001, p. 71), idioms in the case of which there is no relation between the figurative meaning and its constituents' meanings are non-compositional idioms. The examples of these are idioms such as *cheesecake*, meaning 'pinup art' and *lemon*, meaning 'product hopelessly flawed, impossible to repair' (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 73).

Compositional idioms, according to Glucksberg (2001), maybe opaque or transparent. Transparency indicates to what extent the meaning of an idiom may be inferred from the meanings of its constituents. In the case of fully transparent idioms, such as *spill the beans* and *smell a rat*, can be seen one to one relation between the idiom's constituents and the components of the metaphorical meaning. In this example, the word "spill" corresponds directly to the act of revealing, and the word "beans" maps directly onto secrets. In addition, in opaque idioms, such as *kick the bucket*, the relation between the idiom's constituents and its idiomatic meaning may not be evident. However, individual constituents' meanings constrain how language users interpret and use the idiom (Glucksberg, 2001).

Idiomatic expressions such as *kick the bucket* behave as predicative metaphors. The word "kick" means *to strike something with one's leg*. In the idiom *kick the bucket* stands for an abrupt and swift action which maps on the manner of death and contributes to the metaphorical meaning of the

idiom *to die suddenly*. A similar mapping may be observed in the idiom *fly off the handle*. Another class of idiomatic expressions in Glucksberg's (2001) classification, called quasi-metaphorical idioms. For instance, idiom such as *skating on thin ice*, act as simple metaphors. It refers simultaneously to a hypothetical situation, which is an ideal exemplar of a situation of a particular sort, and to a real situation described in terms of the hypothetical, ideal one. The features of the ideal exemplary situation directly mapped onto the situation in reality.

Semantically transparent idioms, such as *spill the beans*, according to Glucksberg (2001), when heard for the first time, is opaque to the hearer. It implies that the hearer is not able to infer the figurative meaning of the idiom from the meanings of its constituents. However, as a result of frequent use in a metaphorical context, the idiom's components become polysemous as they acquire their idiomatic meanings as secondary, literal senses. Thus the components of the idioms *spill the beans* have at least two interpretations: the literal meaning, which is context-free; and the idiomatic meaning, which is activated in idiomatic contexts.

### PREVIOUS STUDIES

Many studies have carried out on idioms and have documented their empirical findings in various sources. The sources include textbooks, newspapers, journals, websites, and research papers. Relevant previous studies regarding idioms comprehension among second language learners are explained in the following.

Gibbs (1987) investigated how metaphoric transparency influenced the analysis of idioms among young children. From kindergarten through fourth-grade children were participated in the study. These children were requested to describe the meanings of ten opaque and ten transparent idioms. Then, the children were required to select from two plausible answers (forced-choice task), the best explanation of the idiom. A partial part of the respondents perceives the idioms through supportive story contexts, while the other part perceived the idioms through isolation. The findings revealed that the transparent idioms were less complicated to describe than the opaque idioms. However, the discrepancies between opaque and transparent idioms were unclear. The frequency of correct idiomatic explanations increased with grade. Children at all ages were sensitive to the need for figurative interpretations of idioms at the end of idiomatic story contexts, even though the kindergarten and first graders were less capable of explaining the meanings of these expressions. Without supporting context, children, especially younger ones, had great difficulty in explaining the figurative meanings of different idioms verbally and generally preferred to give idiomatic phrases literal interpretations.

Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) broadened Gibbs' metaphoric transparency study to older children and adolescents. The study used an explanation only task according to the proposition that compared to the forced-choice task. The explanation only task was more subtle to the factors that influenced the idioms interpretation. One hundred fifty students, with 50 each from grades 5, 8, and 11 participated

in the study. The students were required to describe 24 different idiomatic expressions. These expressions were given toward the end of a four-sentence paragraph with a supportive context. The findings showed that idioms that were easy to explain have higher transparency than opaque idioms. The findings were in line with Gibbs' study on the explanation task.

In another study conducted by Nippold and Taylor (1995) investigated the transparent idioms comprehension through a forced-choice task. Similar idioms and stories used in the previous study of Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) were adopted in Nippold and Taylor (1995) study. A total of 150 students, with 50 each from grades 5, 8, and 11 were selected. The respondents were given a forced-choice task with four possible options. The respondents then required to select the best answer that explains every idiom. The findings showed that transparent idioms were less challenging for the respondents to comprehend compared to opaque idioms.

In summary, Gibbs (1987) discovered that during the forced-choice task, the distinction between transparent and opaque idioms become less noticeable. However, Nippold and Taylor (1995) argued that the distinction in their findings occurred since the forced-choice task in the Gibbs (1987) research was too simple. Thus, the differences in types of idioms could not be observed. Gibbs (1987) study used two possible answer choices, while Nippold and Taylor (1995) study presented the respondents with a set of four plausible answer choices. Nippold and Taylor (1995) claimed that the differences would be exposed when using a more difficult task. This study relates to the study by Nippold and Taylor in the sense that the criteria used in selecting idioms for this study are the same. The study also used multiple-choice tests.

Another study conducted by Levorato, Nesi, and Cacciari (2004) investigated the relationship between text comprehension and idiom comprehension. The subjects were 101 second-graders and 98 fourth-graders from an Italian Elementary School. The results of both experiments showed that the ability to understand a text indicated the children's understanding of idioms in context. For verification, possible improvements in children's comprehension skills that might produce an increase in figurative language understanding, experiment 3 is carried out. A group of poor comprehenders who participated in Experiments 1 and 2 are tested eight months later. The results of Experiment 3 showed that children's general comprehension skills improved their performance on an idiom comprehension test.

Some studies regarding idioms comprehension among children were conducted by Caillies and Le Sourn-Bissaoui (2012) and Lundblom and Woods (2012). These studies examined the contribution of the theory of idioms (Caillies & Le Sourn-Bissaoui, 2012) and methods in improving idioms comprehension (Lundblom & Woods, 2012). Caillies and Le Sourn-Bissaoui (2012) examined the contributions of both second-order false-belief understanding and working memory to the understanding of unfamiliar non-decomposable idioms in children aged 6, 7 and 8 years old. They assumed that, in order to process these idioms, children would have

to be able to (a) take a double perspective (Perner & Wimmer, 1985), (b) maintain both literal and figurative meanings as being different from the expression itself, and (c) take the context into account. Six-, 7- and 8-year-old children performed three, second-order false-belief tasks and three working-memory tasks, and listened to 15 non-decomposable idioms inserted into a context, before performing a multiple-choice task. Results indicated that non-decomposable idiom understanding was explained by theory-of-mind skills.

Lundblom and Woods (2012) investigated improving idioms comprehension through classwide peer tutoring. Four 7th-grade female students (mean age: 12 years, 6 months) participated in a multiple baseline single-subject study during their general education intensive reading class. Three sets of idioms were taught to examine the effects of classwide peer tutoring (CWPT) intervention on idiom comprehension. Following the implementation of CWPT, comprehension of most idiomatic phrases increased and remained largely stable as indicated through visual analysis. Teaching idioms with CWPT was flexible, effective, and time-efficient in a general education classroom setting. Speech-language pathologists collaborating with educators should provide evidence-based interventions as guided by educational standards and curriculum. Response to intervention provides a framework to implement a classroom intervention for all students to facilitate idiom understanding.

In addition, Kurnia (2016) investigated about idiomatic expression in speaking skills. The data of this study was validated by applying a percentage formula. They were analyzed based on observation and a multiple-choice questionnaire. The results of this research exposed that students with the best idiomatic mastery and best speaking skill are 13.89% students within the predicate excellent, the second-best is 77.78% students within the predicate good, the third is 8.33% of the fair predicate or fair. The conclusion that was drawn is that students who master more idiomatic expressions speak natural English better than those who masterless.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive research design to find out data that conform to the research objectives. Contrary to exploratory research, a descriptive study is systematic, fixed format, and structured (Kothari, 2004; Orodho & Kombo (2002). According to Feinberg, Kinnear, and Taylor (2012), descriptive research is appropriate when the research objectives include (1) portraying the characteristics of a given phenomenon and determine the frequency of occurrence, (2) determining the degree to which variables are associated and (3) making predictions regarding the occurrence of a given phenomenon. In addition, descriptive research renders itself to analysis using statistical tools. Therefore, this study employed statistical methods of data analysis.

### Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in selecting the participants of this study. The researcher specifies the characteristics of

a population of interest and then tries to locate individuals who have those characteristics (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The participants were chosen according to some characteristics: they are age 5-16 years old, have learned English for at least two years, and do not have any known history of language impairment or pervasive developmental disorders. The study involved sixty (60) participants. All the participants were children from Moi primary school in Nairobi, divided into three age groups, 5-8 years old, 9-12 years old, and 13-16 years old. There were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls in each age group. Although these children's general linguistics skills were not assessed in the study, the school administrator claimed that they did not have any history of linguistics impairment. Table 1 below illustrates the participants of the study.

### Instrument

The participants were given a cloze test with twenty idiomatic expressions with a high frequency of occurrence in the English language were selected for the study. Most of the idioms were either semi-transparent or transparent. The reason behind the selection of these types of classes of idioms is basically because the L2 language command of students at the lower primary is considered to be weak (Nippold, 2000). Therefore out of the twenty idioms used in this study, there were only three opaque idioms used. This is because of the potential implication in terms of the comprehension ability of these children, which is weak since English is not their first language. The number of transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque idioms in the cloze test can be seen in Table 2.

### Instrument Reliability

This study applied the test-retest together with the internal reliability of the instruments in ensuring reliability achievement. The idea behind test/retest is to get the same score on, for example, in test 1 and test 2. Therefore, in ensuring reliability in this research, the researcher conducted the following: 1) the researcher administered the cloze-test in two separate times and did a computation of results; 2) the first test was done to detect any inconsistencies in terms of comprehension of idioms. The aim was to find out any inconsistencies in terms of comprehension of items and hence rectify them before the second test was done; 3) the time in which the test was administered also remained the same as the first test.

The questions in the cloze test were objectively crafted in a manner that they measure the same concept, i.e. comprehension ability. The basis of internal consistency is that ques-

tions in a questionnaire have to measure the same concept. For example, you could write two sets of three questions that measure the same concept (say class participation). After collecting the responses, run a correlation between those two groups of three questions to determine if the instrument is reliably measuring that concept. In ensuring internal consistency in the reliability of this research on comprehension of idioms, the researcher selected items in the questionnaire objectively. Each question in the cloze test or in the questionnaire was meant to respond to a given objective.

### Procedures

The figurative meaning of transparent and semi-transparent idioms might be more straightforward for children to interpret, unlike those with obscure/opaque origin. The idioms used in this study were selected from primary English textbooks (Davies, Kalliovalkama, Lehtonen, Nikkanen, Sutela, Säteri, & Vuorinen, 2002abc) and some from the English dictionary of idioms (Moon, 1995).

The children were assessed individually in a private room at their schools. Each child was required to explain the idioms' meaning by choosing one of the three alternative answers. They were asked to classify the appropriate non-literal meaning of 20 idioms uttered with a regular tone and an average speech rate by the examiner. In the alternative answers that the children heard, three potential explanations were given, one accurate, one literal, and one explicitly wrong. Then, the children were required to select the one that they consider to be accurate. A zero (0) score is given in case of missing out the option (after 10 seconds) or selecting incorrect answer (literal or completely inaccurate), while a score of one (1) is awarded for providing the correct answer. Therefore, the maximum total score is 20.

### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This study investigated the age factor that influences the comprehension of idioms among children. The participants in this study were 60 students, divided into three groups with an age range from 5-8 years old, 9-12 years old, and 13-16 years old. The three groups were given a list of twenty idioms that consist of ten transparent idioms, seven semi-transparent idioms, and three opaque idioms. The participants were required to choose the correct explanation of the idioms. Table 3 illustrates the results of the test.

As shown in Table 3, the results of the test reported that the group with an age range from 5-8 years old scored the lowest among the other. Idioms such as *break somebody's heart*, *give someone a hand*, *hang out*, and *hit the roof* received the lowest score (0) in this age range group. This implies that the children in this age range have no idea about the meaning of these idioms. Idioms like *face the music*, and *piece of cake* received the highest score (7) in this age group. This implies that seven children are familiar with these idioms.

Meanwhile, 16 participants in the 9-12 age range group answered correctly in idioms *piece of cake*, 14 gave the correct answer in idioms *caught red-handed*, and 13 correct

**Table 1.** The participants of the study

Age group	Male	Female	Grand Total
5-8	10	10	20
9-12	10	10	20
13-16	10	10	20
Total	30	30	60

**Table 2.** The number of transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque idioms in cloze test

Idiom classification	Transparent	Semi-transparent	Opaque
General idiom items/20	10	7	3
Total			20

**Table 3.** Results of idiom tests

NO	IDIOM	SCORE/20	SCORE/20	SCORE/20
		5-8	9-12	13-16
1	To be "on the right track"	6	12	16
2	To "take charge"	5	13	16
3	to "make up one's mind"	5	11	17
4	To be "at one's fingertips"?	6	9	11
5	To be "cold-hearted"?	3	7	10
6	To "bite the dust."	3	9	12
7	To "beat around the bush"	4	9	14
8	To "keep someone at one's toes"?	1	8	11
9	To "break somebody's heart"?	0	6	8
10	To do "at the top of one's lungs"?	4	9	10
11	To "roll up one's sleeves"?	2	7	7
12	To "give someone a hand"?	0	5	8
13	To "cross someone's mind"?	5	9	11
14	When "money talks"	2	5	8
15	To "hang out"	0	6	11
16	To "take advantage of"	4	7	13
17	To "hit the roof"	0	7	9
18	To "face the music"	7	13	17
19	To be "caught red-handed"	5	14	17
20	To be a "piece of cake"?	7	16	18

answers received in idiom *face the music*. However, idioms like *money talks* and *give someone a hand* have only

5 participants answered correctly. Idiom such as *a piece of cake* came out as the highest number (18) of correct answers among the group of 13-16 years old age range. Idiom like *roll up one's sleeves* received the lowest score (7) in this group. Idioms with the highest score implied the number of participants who are familiar with the meaning. On the other hand, the lowest scores showed the number of participants were not familiar or have never heard of such expression before. The findings were similar to Gibbs (1980) study. According to Gibbs (1980), the correct responses were given because the children were familiar with the idioms. The findings suggested that such items must be stored in a certain way and do not depend on on-line processing. In addition, most of the correct answer in the two older groups (9-12; and 13-16) consisted of elaborate expressions, either in the form of definitions or synonyms, which were not redundant with the idiom. A summary of the findings using ANOVA and a Tukey's Multiple Comparisons using raw data on individual idiom comprehension task is presented in Table 4 below.

As described in Table 4, the summary of the findings was the result of the statistical evaluation using Graph Pad Prism Software version 7.01. The findings showed that at the age of 5-8 years, the mean of idiom comprehension task was 3.450 with a standard error of 0.5303, and a standard deviation of 2.373. On the other hand, 9-12 years old group, the mean of idiom comprehension was 9.100, with a standard deviation of 3.127, and a standard error of 0.6992. Finally, the age of 13-16 years old group received a mean of 12.202, with a standard deviation of 3.563 and a standard error of 0.7967. On this statistical analysis, the P-value of < 0.05 was taken as the criterion of statistically significance. From the statistical analysis, it was clear that age is a factor that influences idiom comprehension. This is due to the statistical mean differences in idiom comprehension between the age differences used. Therefore, the finding suggested that age is an influencing factor in the comprehension of idioms among children. The five years old participants were not experienced until the age of 6. They began to be functional and interpreted idiom literally around the age of 9 and continued to be mature and started to correctly understand the non-literal meanings at the age of 12. Afterwards, they remained steady and continued to expand at least until the age of 16.

According to Tomasello (1992, 2003), exposure to language input is vital in the process of early acquisition. Tomasello (1992, 2003) found that the structures rule primary grammar acquisition are those that individual children are exposed to in caregivers' input. These structures are usually constructed around a verb or word. Some researchers (Loizou, 2006; McGhee, 1971; Schultz & Horibe 1974) proposed that children use readily available phrases with precise, pragmatic functions, such as *if you wish*, *let me know*, *what's up?*, and *not to worry*. Children around 5-6 years old can start to observe the nature and structure of language, i.e. using language to talk about language. According to Levorato & Cacciari (2002), becoming competence user of figurative language needs a lengthy process and closely associated with the ability to reflect on language as a complicated cognitive and interpersonal phenomenon. It implied

**Table 4.** Summary of the findings

Age Bracket in Years	(5-8)	(9-12)	(13-16)
Mean	3.450	9.100	12.201
SD	2.373	3.127	3.563
Std error	0.5305	0.6992	0.7967

that idioms could be comprehended approximately at the age when one can analyze language and are aware of the symbolic and arbitrary nature and can draw interpretations exclusively based on the linguistic context.

## CONCLUSION

Idioms are the building blocks of a language and civilization that provide interesting insights into the use of words, languages, and their speakers' thought processes. Idioms have a literal and figurative meaning. Learning idioms for second language learners is challenging for some reasons. First, the meaning is difficult to understand by the L2 learners because idioms are usually metaphorical. Second, understanding idioms require L2 learners to understand the connotative and denotative meaning of words. Lastly, idioms are culture-based. It can be said that idioms that are derived from human physical experiences are, in general, culturally equal. However, mastery of English would be much easier when the L2 could understand idioms. Enhancing L2 learning would be possible if there is an awareness of the processes and the factors involved in comprehending idioms. This awareness may assist the language teachers together with language practitioners and material developers in decision making that lead to the development of a better curriculum. The present study aimed at investigating the comprehension of English idioms by Moi Primary School children as the ability to comprehend figurative expressions in early acquisition.

This study adopted a descriptive research design that is systematic, fixed format and structured. The participants of the study were selected using a purposive sampling technique where the researchers located the participants according to specified characteristics of interest. The study involved sixty (60) participants. All the participants were children from Moi primary school in Nairobi, divided into three age groups: 5-8 years old, 9-12 years old, and 13-16 years old. The participants were given a cloze test with twenty idiomatic expressions with a high frequency of occurrence in the English language. The cloze test questions were objectively crafted in a manner that they measure the same concept, i.e. comprehension ability. The results of the test reported that the 5-8 years old age group scored the lowest among the others, while 16 of the participants in the 9-12 age group answered correctly on most of the questions. Most participants from 13-16 years old group came out with the highest correct answers. The results implied that age is an influencing factor in the comprehension of idioms among children. The five years old participants were not experienced until the age of 6. They began to be functional and interpreted idiom literally around the age of 9 and continued to be mature and started to correctly understand the non-literal meanings at

the age of 12. Afterwards, they remained steady at least until the age of 16.

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