

# **Jordanian EFL Learners' Comprehension of Color Idiomatic Expressions: The Role of L1 Transfer**

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## **Abstract**

Learning language is always a challenge. A more daunting task is learning those culturally bound aspects of language. The present study examines the ability of Jordanian EFL learners to comprehend culturally bound color expressions. It also investigates whether L1 transfer plays a role in their processing of color idioms. To achieve this goal, I designed a multiple-choice test (MCT) that consisted of 20 items. Each item contained a color idiomatic expression within its contextual meaning. The main assumption underpinning my present study is that native language transfer plays a facilitating role in learners' ability to comprehend color idioms. The findings have revealed that idiomatic expressions with an equivalent conceptual basis and an equivalent linguistic form were the easiest. The most difficult were those with (1) a similar conceptual basis and a different linguistic form and (2) culture-specific expressions which have a different conceptual and linguistic basis. The study is expected to propose some pedagogical implications that may assist EFL teachers to familiarize their students with color idiomatic expressions in English.

**Keywords:** color idiomatic expressions, L1 transfer, L2 idiom comprehension

## **Introduction**

An idiom is a figurative way to encapsulate our intended meaning in one decomposable expression; the parts of which do not contribute directly to the total meaning of the expression. Many researchers (Fraser, 1970; Hockett, 1959; Katz & Postal, 1963; Strässler, 1982) have expressed different notions of idiomaticity but all agree that the meaning of an idiom cannot be derived from its grammatical structure. Due to their prevalence in everyday language, mastery of idioms is considered an integral part of language learning, especially for EFL learners. Foreign language acquisition does not only require learners to master the four basic skills which are the pinnacles of language but also to acquire other unique aspects that offer insights into the culture of the language being acquired. Idioms are therefore viewed as lexical items but of a peculiar nature as their meanings are not deducible from the individual words of which they are composed. It follows that for learners to be able to successfully decode the meanings of idioms, knowledge of the target culture must be integrated into language teaching and learning (Taki & Soghady, 2013).

Several studies have shown that developing familiarity with idioms in an L2 context is a daunting task for L2 learners (Abel, 2003; Al-Houti & Aldaihani, 2018; Cieśllicka, 2006; Sadeghi, Dastjerdi, & Ketabi, 2010; Taki & Soghady, 2013; Vasiljevic, 2015). Cieśllicka's (2006) experimental study reported that idioms pose a great difficulty for second language learners and that the literal meanings of idiom constituent words receive priority over their figurative interpretation in the course of processing L2 idioms. Furthermore, an issue that inspired a plethora of research was the strategies employed in accessing the figurative meanings of idioms by L2 learners (e.g., Cooper, 1999; Wang & Shang, 2006). Cooper (1999) explored the online processing strategies employed by non-native speakers of English and found out that models of L1 idiom processing did not apply to the comprehension of L2 idioms. The results also revealed that the participants followed a heuristic approach to comprehend

idioms by employing a variety of strategies through trial and error to arrive at the figurative meaning of the idiom being processed.

Utilizing L1 as a strategy in decoding L2 idioms is an issue that has generated a lot of interest in the role of L1 (Irujo, 1986; Hussein, Khanji & Makhzoomy, 2000; Taki, 2013; to mention a few). In addition to reliance on L1 to process L2 idioms, the level of transparency has been found to play a significant role in facilitating the comprehension of these idioms. Lack of correspondence between the literal and the figurative meanings of an idiom leave L2 learners stranded cognitively on an island which is beyond reach (e.g., Abel, 2003; Al-Mohizea, 2000; Gibbs, 1986; Laufer, 2000). Al-Mohizea (2000) found that Saudi learners' understanding of body-parts idioms was facilitated significantly by the level of the transparency of idioms.

Motivated by the findings of the relevant literature on L2 idiom processing, the present study aims to investigate the ability of Jordanian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) to comprehend English color idioms as culturally loaded expressions. It also attempts to investigate whether L1 conceptual and linguistic knowledge have a facilitating role in the comprehension of these expressions. The results of the study are expected to be of relevance to users of English as an international language in that it can provide insightful perspectives to EFL teachers on how to integrate such expressions in their teaching practice.

## **Literature review**

An inevitable aspect of linguistic competence is to master those aspects that are language-particular. Learning idiomatic expressions poses a great burden on the EFL learner's shoulders who must struggle not only with a different linguistic system, but also with a completely different culture-centered conceptuality. Due to their pervasiveness in everyday interaction, researchers have started to show keen interest in the study of color idiomatic expression across cultures (Abel 2003; Allan, 2009; Al-Mohanna, 2014; Btoosh, 2014; Kim, 2013; Rabab'ah & Al-Saidat, 2014; Yao, 2010). Certain other studies tackled the translatability of these expressions by EFL/ESL learners (Awwad, 1990; Aladel, 2014; Hasan, Al-Sammerai, & Abdul Khadir, 2011; Li, 2011; Rakhieh, Al-Saidat, Alshammai, & Rabab'ah, 2014; Salim & Mehawesh, 2013). A few studies, however, investigated the comprehension of these expressions among EFL learners (Sadeghi, Dastjerdi, & Ketabi, 2010; Saleh & Zakaria 2013; Titone & Connine 1994). Saleh and Zakaria (2013) examined the difficulties faced by Libyan EFL learners when processing L2 idioms. It was found that Libyan learners used a variety of strategies though there was a lack of sufficient input in the classroom setting. To interpret the meanings of idioms, they utilized the strategies they acquired during their first language acquisition.

According to Asl (2013) and Wray (2000), EFL learners are not always provided with content-rich curriculum that properly and sufficiently addresses idioms. This is attributed to the fact that some facilitators tend to teach English adopting a grammar-focused approach. Similarly, Khan and Daşkin (2014) examined the extent to which idioms are incorporated in materials designed by EFL teacher-trainees. Their findings revealed that teacher-trainees hardly used figurative language expressions in their instructional materials and that those who utilized such expressions did not integrate them efficaciously/judiciously enough to enhance learners' communicative competence.

In one of the most relevant studies of the intrinsic difficulties that figurative language entails, Boers, Eyckmans, and Stengers (2007) pointed out that EFL learners often lack the ability to disambiguate the figurative meaning in the way native speakers may do. Therefore, they adopted a very innovative approach to introduce idioms to learners by associating an idiom with its etymology. It was assumed that the etymological association would help enhance retention. The results revealed that knowledge of the origin of idioms can help learners

comprehend their figurative meaning as well as facilitate recall. Language learners are also at a disadvantage when it comes to their perception of idiom compositionality. Experimental research has shown that compositionality plays a significant role in their comprehension, with non-decomposable idioms being processed more slowly than analyzable idiom phrases (Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989).

Another frequently reported feature of idiomatic competence of EFL learners is the heavy reliance on L1 as a strategy to decode idioms. The role of L1 has generated a keen interest among researchers regarding whether it facilitates or hinders the comprehension of L2 idioms (Abdullah & Jackson, 1998; Al-Mohizea, 2000; Bulut & Yazici, 2004; Fontiveros-Malana, 2018; Hussein, Khanji, & Makhzoomy, 2000; Irujo, 1986, 1993; Shehata, 2008; Zibin, 2016a). Zibin (2016a) investigated the comprehension of figurative language expressions by Jordanian EFL learners using a multiple-choice test to examine the impact of their L1 (i.e. Jordanian Arabic) conceptual and linguistic knowledge on their comprehension of these expressions. Her results showed that expressions with different conceptual bases in both languages posed the greatest challenge to the participants. In contrast, expressions with equivalent or similar conceptual bases were the easiest to comprehend. In the same vein, Abdullah and Jackson (1998) examined the comprehension of idioms by 120 advanced Syrian learners of English using a multiple-choice test and an English-to-Syrian Arabic translation test. Their findings revealed that the degree of similarity to L1 had a significant impact on the participants' performance. Learners scored high in the comprehension of cognate idioms and attributed this to positive language transfer. In contrast, language transfer played a negative role when processing idioms which were identical in form but different in meaning (false cognates) in Syrian Arabic.

The argument whether mother language has any effect on learning a foreign language has caused considerable controversy in the field of second language acquisition. One of the most influential constructs that has evolved substantially in this field is Contrastive Analysis (CA) theory. Formulated in Robert Lado's (1957) *Linguistics Across Cultures*, the key endeavour of the theory is to highlight those areas that pose great difficulty for learners and create barriers to effective learning. In the strongest formulation of the CA hypothesis, it is proposed that a careful comparative analysis of the target language and the native language would provide a springboard to a successful description of these areas of difficulty. The prediction is that those constructions that are similar in the two languages will be easy to master and those that are different will be difficult. Lado (1957, p. 158) emphasizes that "The basic premise of CA hypothesis is that language learning can be more successful when the two languages – the native and the foreign – are similar".

Several studies have been conducted to validate the claim by CA that difference is difficulty (Al-Khreshah, 2010; Faghih, 1997; Kharma, 1983; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Mompeán-González, 2001). Pedagogically, this prediction of areas of potential difficulty is claimed to help in designing materials that address the target language in a systematic fashion. In contrast, the weak version of the CA hypothesis has an explanatory rather than a predictive power (Al-Khreshah, 2016, p. 332). The assumption is that researchers observe errors made by learners in the classroom and then utilize the differences between the linguistic systems of the TL (target language) and NL (native language) to diagnose these errors. Errors were thus viewed as the result of "transfer" from learners' mother language. However, in the 1960s the CA hypothesis gained adverse criticism as an amazing array of empirical evidence revealed that not all second language learners' errors can be attributed solely to first language transfer (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 42). A detailed analysis of these errors revealed that some errors are due to learners' developing knowledge of the target language linguistic structures rather than to first language transference. This finding led a number of researchers to adopt a different approach to analysing learners' errors. This came to be known as "error analysis". According

to Lightbown and Spada (2006), error analysis was not an attempt to predict errors. Rather, it aimed at pinpointing and describing errors in an attempt to figure out how second language learners' process second language data (p. 43). It has as its core construct the attempt to diagnose errors after they have been made. In this sense, it intersects with the explanatory function or the weak version of CA hypothesis as both recognize the importance of interference across languages.

Many error analysis studies have been conducted taking many aspects of different languages in general and idiom errors in particular but to my best knowledge, the comprehension of color idiomatic expressions by Arabic-speaking EFL learners has received little attention if any. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge the gap by attempting to answer the following questions:

- 1) To what extent does similarity to L1 facilitate the participants' understanding of English color idiomatic expressions?
- 2) Does conceptual or linguistic mismatch between idiomatic expressions in L1 (i.e., Jordanian Arabic) and L2 have an impact on the participants' comprehension of color idiomatic expressions?

## Method

To ensure a minimum threshold of English proficiency, 69 advanced Jordanian EFL learners, third- and fourth-year majoring in English Language and Literature at the Hashemite University took part in the current study. Their mean age was 21.5 years. Gender of the participants was not considered as an independent variable in the present study as most of the participants were female (7 males and 62 females). This is attributed to the fact that women outpace men in higher education in Jordan. At the time of data collection, the participants were assumed to have completed 90 to 100 credit hours of advanced English courses, e.g., linguistics, semantics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, drama, literary criticism and syntax. This guarantees that they have the requisite competence to complete the MCT.

The study referred to McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms (2007) and The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (2004) to extract color idioms and their contexts in English with minor modifications.

A 24-item multiple-choice test was designed to conduct the present study. Each item contained a culturally bound color idiom within its contextual meaning.

In the same vein as several L2 idiom processing studies (e.g., Awwad, 1999; Charteris-Black, 2002; Irujo, 1986; Zibin, 2016a), the degree of L1-L2 similarity was taken as a criterion in classifying English color idioms in the present study. Therefore, adopting a model developed by Charteris-Black (2002), six types of color idioms are identified:

- (1) English color idioms which have equivalent conceptual basis and equivalent linguistic form in Arabic.
- (2) English color idioms which have equivalent conceptual basis and similar linguistic form in Arabic.
- (3) English color idioms which have completely different equivalent linguistic form in Arabic.
- (4) Color idioms which have equivalent conceptual basis in English and Arabic but completely different linguistic forms.
- (5) Color idioms which have completely different conceptual basis and completely different linguistic form but are transparent because they are receptively accessible
- (6) Color idioms which have completely different conceptual basis and completely different linguistic form but opaque because they encode a culture-specific meaning.

The participants were asked to choose one answer that reflects their understanding of the color idiomatic expression. One option was deemed correct and one or more of the other three provided incorrect meanings supported by the context. To assess the role of transferability, the participants were asked to provide an Arabic equivalent to the English color idioms used in the test. The assumption is that if the participants accessed their L1 conceptual knowledge in comprehending English color idiomatic expressions, then they would find those types that have equivalent and similar conceptual bases in the two languages easier to comprehend than those which have different conceptual bases in the two languages.

## Hypotheses

- (1) The participants' performance in the test is expected to be generally poor due to linguistic and conceptual differences between Arabic and English.
- (2) The similarity between the two languages is assumed to play a facilitating role in the participants' understanding of these types of color idioms.
- (3) Since the same group of participants will be tested on several groups of stimuli (6 types of color idioms), a one-way ANOVA will be conducted to test whether the differences between the participants' responses on the six types of color idioms are statistically significant.

## Results and Discussion

summarizes the descriptive statistics of accurate responses on the six types of color idiomatic expression on the test.

Table 1

*Accurate responses on the six types of color idiomatic expressions on the test*

Type	% of correct responses	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	81	3.42	.67
2	82.6	3.30	.75
3	69.6	2.79	1.06
4	47.8	1.91	.98
5	68	2.73	1.00
6	36.5	1.46	1.05
Average	65	15.63	3.65

The results show that the participants' performance on the test was generally very good. However, comparing the scores obtained by the participants demonstrates an apparent dominance of type 1 and type 2 over the other types. This suggests that conceptual and linguistic similarity play a positive role in facilitating the recognition and comprehension of color idioms by Jordanian EFL learners. Thus, confirming the conclusions of Bulut and Yazici (2004) as well as Nippold and Martin (1989). To further discuss the participants' performance on each test item of the six types of color idiomatic expressions, Tables 2-7 summarize the percentage of correct responses for each of the items tested. As anticipated, color idioms with equivalent conceptual basis and equivalent linguistic form proved the easiest: 81% of the participants were able to recognize the idiomatic meaning of the expressions. This provides evidence of activation of both first language conceptual and linguistic knowledge in dealing with items of this type of idioms, and we may, therefore, anticipate that learners would have no difficulty with this type of figurative expressions. Pedagogically, the only task a learner

must face when it comes to acquiring these idioms would be to learn the L2 linguistic equivalents for L2 figurative units (Charteris-Black, 2002).

Like those of type 1, the test items of type 2 did not cause any difficulty to the participants. However, table 3 shows that 58% of the participants had difficulty understanding the idiom *pretty green*. This is quite unpredictable since this idiom has a similar conceptual and linguistic basis in Arabic. This erroneous interpretation of the figurative meaning of the idiom represents what Bulut and Yazici (2004) called *false friends*. According to Bulut and Yazici (2004), L2 speakers sometimes tend to treat idioms which have a perfect match in L1 and L2 as *false friends*. To figure out the figurative meaning of these idioms, they assume that the idiomatic meaning of the L2 idiom does not match with that of L2 and thus will rely on context rather than on the literal meaning of the constituent words. Types 3, 4 and 5 color idioms scored low as compared to type 1 and 2. This lends credence to the main assumption underpinning the present study and other relevant studies (cf. Bulut & Yazici, 2004) that conceptual or linguistic mismatch and conversely parallel idiomatic expressions in the learner's L1 and L2 will have a remarkable effect on processing the idioms.

Table 2

*Type 1: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
Little white lie	73.9
The green light	81.2
Golden opportunity	89.9
A black day	79.1

Table 3

*Type 2: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
On a silver platter	81.2
A green thumb	94.2
Born with a silver spoon in his mouth	97.1
Pretty green	58.0

Table 4

*Type 3: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
Red ink	69.6
Blue bloods	55.1
Redeye	84.1
Blue eyed boy	71.0

Table 5

*Type 4: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
Gray matter	73.9
Showing the white feather	53.6
White sheep	34.8
Silver tongue	29.0

Table 6

*Type 5: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
Golden shake	66.7
Green with envy	63.8
The black sheep	87.0
Go green on me	56.5

Table 7

*Type 6: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
The blues	30.4
Green about the gills	31.9
In the red	23.2
A red-letter day	60.9
Average	36.6

Table 7 demonstrates that the test items of type 6 which have completely different conceptual bases and linguistic expressions in English and Arabic may have contributed to the participants' performance. In the absence of L1 equivalent, it is not surprising that only 37% managed to recognize the figurative meaning of the idioms correctly. This lack of correspondence constitutes a stumbling block to their comprehension of idioms. There were significant differences between type 6 and type 1 color idioms as anticipated which indicates that figurative units with equivalent conceptual bases and equivalent linguistic forms are less problematic for EFL learners than those with completely different conceptual bases and linguistic forms. This finding calls for more attention on the part of foreign language teachers as well as learners to shed more focus on figurative units that do not match in the learner's L1 and L2. It is thus very beneficial to raise learners' cultural awareness of these conceptual bases in an explicit way in the target language. Shokouhi and Isazadeh (2009, p. 6) indicated that the use of real contexts while clarifying the culture of the target language can positively affect the communicative competence and other language skills of EFL learners. This underlying assumption was also emphasized by Zibin's (2016b) study which reported that the lack of cultural background knowledge led to misunderstandings of L2 marked connotations by Jordanian EFL learners. In order to find whether there are any differences between the participants at different levels of academic achievement and their performance, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted. The participants were divided into three groups to examine the relation between academic success as measured by grand point average and performance.

Table 8  
ANOVA

	Type of idiom	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
1	Between Groups	4.263	2	2.131	5.298	.007
	Within Groups	26.549	66	.402		
	Total	30.812	68			
2	Between Groups	11.870	2	5.935	14.649	.000
	Within Groups	26.739	66	.405		
	Total	38.604	68			
3	Between Groups	22.683	2	11.341	13.740	.000
	Within Groups	54.477	66	.825		
	Total	77.159	68			
4	Between Groups	8.730	2	4.365	5.077	.009
	Within Groups	56.748	66	.860		
	Total	65.476	68			
5	Between Groups	5.488	2	2.744	2.838	.066
	Within Groups	63.816	66	.907		
	Total	69.304	68			
6	Between Groups	13.756	2	6.878	7.393	.001
	Within Groups	61.403	66	.930		
	Total	75.159	68			

There were statistically significant differences between the participants' answers on the six types of color idiomatic expressions ( $p < 0.05$ ). For all the idiomatic types the values were significant except for type 5 idiom. Taking type 1 idiom into account, the significant value for between and within groups was 0.007 which is less than 0.05 hence significant. Similarly, for type 2 idiom (0.000), type 3 idiom (0.000), type 4 idiom (0.009) and type 6 idiom (0.001) between and within groups values are less than 0.05 which shows their significance. On the other hand, type 5 idiom, between and within group significant value was 0.66 which is greater than the value of 0.05, hence showing its insignificance. The results of paired comparison indicated that the performance of students with high GPA was better than those with low GPA. Same results have been reported by several studies (Dev & Qiqieh, 2016; Hasan & Akhand, 2014).

## Conclusion

Motivated by the findings of the relevant literature, the overarching aim of the present study was to investigate the idiomatic competence of Jordanian EFL learners moderated by similarity to L1. It particularly aimed to investigate whether the use of the conceptual and linguistic knowledge of the learners' mother language, i.e., Jordanian Arabic (JA), would facilitate their comprehension of English color idiomatic expressions. A multiple-choice test consisting of 24 items divided into six types was designed to measure their figurative proficiency. As anticipated, the findings of the study have shown that color idiomatic expressions which have an equivalent conceptual and linguistic basis were the easiest; the most difficult were those which have a different conceptual basis and a different linguistic form because they reflect a culture-specific content.

In keeping with the findings of previous studies, the present study suggests that highlighting the conceptual and linguistic differences and similarities between L1 and the target



language in classroom curriculum design can facilitate the acquisition of figurative language by EFL learners.

Their figurative proficiency can be further developed by providing them with real world situations that help these expressions stand out from the language around them. This would also help develop their knowledge of L2 figurative phraseology and reduce negative transfer of L1 conceptual or linguistic knowledge. EFL teachers must then be alert whenever an impromptu moment for idiom teaching arises.

It is worth noting that some of the participants' erroneous responses in the present study might have been affected by the context provided for them in the test. Therefore, it is recommended that a study that explores the ability of Jordanian learners of English as a Foreign language to process color idiomatic expressions using a think- aloud protocol is required. This will shed some light on the strategies employed by learners to decode L2 color idioms. To conclude, as most language teachers will attest, foreign or second language learners struggle when processing idiomatic and culturally bound expressions. Based on the findings of the study and the observations of EFL teachers, I suggest some pedagogical implications that may assist EFL learners in comprehending these expressions:

- 1) EFL teachers must highlight idiomatic and culturally bound expressions that are semantically similar between L1 and L2. This will motivate learners to integrate these expressions in their daily writing and speaking activities which will develop their communicative competence in L2.
- 2) In EFL context, teachers must expose learners to detailed interpretations of salient culturally bound expressions that are opaque due to lack of conceptually equivalents in L1. This may enhance their comprehension and production of these expressions and thus reduce native language negative transfer.
- 3) In the EFL classroom, there is a need to shift focus from single -word vocabulary to lexical chunks. According to Lewis (1997), lexical chunks include collocations, fixed expressions, formulaic utterances, sentence starters, verb patterns, idioms, and catchphrases. This can be achieved by creatively engaging learners in communicative tasks and improvisation activities. Such activities can improve their academic attainment and fluency. As Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) concur, "The use of chunks can help students to be perceived as idiomatic language users, disposing of a relatively impressive lexical richness and syntactic complexity" (p. 37).
- 4) Teacher educators should encourage prospective EFL teachers to acquire requisite knowledge that raises their awareness of the potential areas of difficulty for EFL learners in order to address these challenges properly in their teaching practice.
- 5) EFL Curriculum designers and EFL textbook writers should focus on the integration of the culture of the target language in the design of EFL coursebooks as an important parcel of language learning.

In sum and spirit, the present study attempted to shed some focus on one of the most notoriously challenging areas of teaching English as an international language, namely colour idiomatic and culturally bound expressions. It supports the claim that similarities and differences between L1 and L2 may affect learners' comprehension of these expressions. It also lends support to the results of other studies in the vast literature on L2 idioms processing that idiomatic expressions that lack conceptual equivalents in L1 are the hardest to comprehend by EFL learners. Further cross-linguistic research on phraseology, especially figurative expressions is needed as it may offer insightful perspectives on how to approach these expressions by international users of English.

This study has some notable limitations. The number of participants to whom the instrument was administered was relatively low for a quantitative study. Administering the instrument to a larger sample could give a large amount of data that might significantly enhance the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, observations and interviews with students as they respond to the instrument could result in different interpretations of the findings of the study.

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#### **Note on Contributor**

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