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Difficulties and Strategies in Understanding English Idioms

The Case of Master One Students of English at Bejaia University

*Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
a Master's Degree in Linguistics*

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents for their love and support.

To my sisters and brother

To my late grandparents, whose memory continues to inspire me

To my sister, not by blood Kahina

To Said

And to everyone who believed in me.

Melissa

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my amazing family: my father, whose support never wavers, to my loving mother, to my brothers Zahou, Housseem, and Tarek, and to my wonderful sister, Ritou.

To my oncle dada Lyazid

A special feeling of gratitude to my friends and all those who supported me throughout this thesis.

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Abstract

This study aims to examine difficulties faced by Algerian Kabyle EFL learners and the strategies they employ to comprehend English idioms. The participants in the study were 30 Master One students of English at the university of Bejaia, Algeria. The participants were selected using a convenience sampling technique. A questionnaire and an idiom recognition test were used as instruments to collect the data. The results of the study showed that the Kabyle EFL learners faced several difficulties in comprehending English idioms, including the lack of cultural background, the non-literal nature of idioms, the absence of contextual clues, limited exposure to idiomatic expressions and unfamiliar vocabulary. Moreover, the findings showed that standard idioms were the most difficult for Kabyle EFL learners to understand, followed by informal idioms, while slang idioms were found to be the easiest type. The findings also revealed that Kabyle EFL learners used four strategies to interpret English idioms which are : guessing from the context, referring to an L1 idiom, using background knowledge and using the literal meaning of the idiom. This study is significant as it offers valuable insights for improving idiom instruction and enhancing learners' comprehension and learning of idioms.

Keywords : Algerian Kabyle EFL Learners, Idiom comprehension difficulties, Idiom comprehension strategies.

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List of Abbreviations

IRT : idiom recognition test

EFL : English as a foreign language

L1 : first language

i.e : that is

TA : Think-Aloud

RP : repeating or paraphrasing

DA : discussing and analyzing

RI : Requesting information

GC : guessing from the context

LM : literal meaning

BK : background knowledge

Chapter One

General Introduction

1. Background

Language is the universal medium for communication that enables people to exchange ideas and thoughts. People can use language either literally or figuratively. Literal language involves words that convey their exact meaning. Conversely, figurative language utilizes expressions that go beyond their literal interpretations to reach an unexpected meaning. Among the various forms of figurative language, idioms stand out as phrases whose meanings have little or no relationship with the words that make them up (Cooper, 1999). The idiom *to let the cat out of the bag*, for example, does not mean to literally let the cat out of the bag, but it means to unintentionally reveal a secret.

Idioms exist nearly in every language, they somewhat add a unique flavor to the conversation. English language, which has emerged as the global lingua franca, is full of a wealth of idiomatic expressions and understanding it requires not only mastering the language itself but also gaining insight into its associated culture. Idioms are non-separate aspects of both the English language and culture (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021).

The present study examines the difficulties faced by Algerian Kabyle EFL learners and the strategies they employ in understanding English idioms. Idioms are frequently encountered by EFL learners during their learning process, thus, understanding them is important for successful communication (Yağiz & Izadpanah, 2013). According to Saleh and Zakaria (2013), a good mastery of idiomatic expressions represents a sign of language proficiency.

English idioms are challenging for learners who are not immersed in the target language. Many EFL learners tend to avoid using them in both spoken and written communication

because of the fear of misusing them. This hesitation stems from the figurative nature of idioms (Ghazala, 2003).

In order to overcome these challenges, learners tend to adopt a variety of strategies to help them decipher the meaning of English idioms. These include guessing the meaning of the idiom from the context, referring to similar idioms that exist in learners' first language, relying on their background knowledge, and at times interpreting the idiom based on its literal meaning (Cooper, 1999).

Numerous studies have been carried out on the strategies and challenges faced by EFL learners in comprehending English idioms (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016 ; Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021 ; Cooper, 1999 ; Kriengphan, 2017 ; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013). However, in the Algerian context, such studies are rare, thus, the present study fills this gap by examining the strategies and difficulties faced by Algerian Kabyle EFL learners.

2. Statement of the Problem

Although a considerable body of research has investigated the strategies and difficulties faced by EFL learners in understanding English idioms in diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016 ; Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021 ; Cooper, 1999 ; Kriengphan, 2017 ; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013), its relevance to North African, particularly Algerian, contexts remains very limited. This may be due to limited attention given to idioms' learning in the Algerian academic context (Azzoui, 2022). Despite the recognised importance of idiomatic and figurative language in language learning, Algerian EFL pedagogy has largely neglected this essential area, consequently, research on idiom comprehension among Algerian EFL learners is very scarce. Additionally, the limited exposure to idioms poses a further obstacle to the overall comprehensive language development among Algerian EFL learners, especially Kabyle EFL learners who represent a distinct sociolinguistic group within, the

Algerian context due to their bilingual or sometimes multilingual background which may influence how they process idioms. This gap is significant given that idiomatic expressions play a crucial role and are integral to natural language use and effective communication and comprehension. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this critical research gap in the literature by exploring a context that has received little attention. It aims to contribute not only to a better understanding of the EFL learners' difficulties and strategies in idiom processing but also to enrich the broader field of EFL teaching curriculum design in Algeria.

3. Aims and Research Questions

The current study aims at exploring the difficulties faced by Algerian Kabyle EFL learners. Additionally, It seeks to identify the type of idioms that EFL learners find most difficult to understand. It also investigates the strategies they employ to comprehend these expressions. This study answers the following questions :

1. What kind of difficulties do Algerian Kabyle EFL learners face when trying to understand English idioms ?
2. What type of English idioms is most difficult for kabyle EFL learners to understand ?
3. What strategies do Algerian Kabyle EFL learners use to comprehend English idioms ?

4. Significance of the Study

Idioms are a linguistic area that is often overlooked in traditional language instruction despite its importance in achieving language fluency and cultural competence (Zakaria, 2013). Given that idioms are deeply embedded in native English communication, they pose significant challenges for non native speakers particularly those learning English as a foreign language.

In light of these challenges, the present study holds a particular significance as it addresses a noticeable gap in EFL research and pedagogy within the Algerian context. By identifying the

specific challenges Kabyle EFL learners face and the strategies they employ, the findings can improve both teaching and learning. On one hand, teachers can use the results to design more effective lessons by teaching idioms in meaningful contexts, focusing on common learners' difficulties and introducing helpful strategies such as using background knowledge or interpreting context clues. On the other hand, learners will become more aware of these strategies and apply them actively when encountering idioms in reading, listening or even in conversations. This can lead to better idiom comprehension and more natural use of English idioms in real life communication.

5. Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study is that it involved Kabyle participants from Bejaia university only, so the findings cannot be generalized to all Kabyle EFL learners. Additionally, this study examined the category of idioms that was difficult to understand based on the level of formality only (standard, informal and slang), however, idiom difficulty can also be measured based on other criteria such as the level of transparency. Another limitation lies in the use of convenience sampling. Since participants were selected based on availability and willingness rather than random sampling. As a result the insights gained from the study may reflect the specific characteristics of the group involved, limiting the extent to which the results can be applied to other educational contexts. Gender imbalance among participants can also be considered as a limitation, with the significantly higher number of female students compared to males. This may affect the generalizability of the findings, as gender-specific perspectives or learning experiences may not be equally represented.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Background

1.1 Definitions of Idioms

Idioms are used in both oral and written language. The ability to use them naturally and correctly reflects a high level of language proficiency, especially for non-native speakers (Saleh & Zakaria, 2013). Due to their complexity, there was no agreement on a stable definition of an idiom, thus, many definitions were given to this word by different linguists and scholars as an attempt to provide a comprehensive view of this aspect of language. Cooper (1999) stated that idioms are groups of words that possess a figurative meaning that cannot be easily predicted by analyzing the meaning of the their constituents. De Caro and Edith (2009) supports this view, defining an idiom as "a combination of words that has a meaning that is different from the meaning of the individual words" (p.127). In other words, idioms convey meanings beyond the literal interpretation of their components, making them an essential part of language.

Although Cacciari (1993) acknowledged that defining an idiom is a controversial task, she emphasized its distinction from literal language. While literal expressions communicate ideas directly, idiomatic language conveys meanings that are not immediately apparent from the components an idiom consists of (Cooper, 1999). This contrast highlights how idioms enrich communication by adding depth to language. Similarly, Cacciari and Tabossi (1988) describe an idiom as a fixed expression whose meaning cannot be derived by understanding and analyzing their parts. That is to say, eventhough being familiar with the vocabulary which constitutes idioms, understanding them is still challenging. Occasionally, a non-native speaker

of English might understand each word in the expression *once in a blue moon*, yet, he may struggle to grasp its overall meaning which refers to an event that occurs infrequently or seldom.

Arishan and Smadi (2015) further referred to idioms as culture-bound phrases that are unique to specific languages. Apridayani et al. (2024) shared a similar view, emphasizing the complex nature of idioms, they suggested that the linguistic and sociocultural contexts are required to understand their meaning. For Ghazala (2003), idiomatic expressions are special and metaphorical set phrases whose meanings and structures cannot be altered. In other words, the meanings and forms of idioms are fixed.

The definitions above seem to share some similarities. Ghazala (2003) argued that most idioms are metaphorical and fixed expressions whose meanings cannot be understood literally.

1.2 Characteristic Features of Idioms

Idioms are part of figurative language, which differs from the literal one. Different researchers have identified a variety of features that are necessary for an expression to be considered as an idiom.

1.2.1 Figurativeness

Idiomatic expressions do not convey literal meanings most of the time. In other words, their interpretation cannot be fully grasped from the compositional meaning of their constituent words. With regard to this aspect, Irujo (1986) stated that idioms "do not mean what they say" (p. 236). The idiom *face the music* doesn't mean to literally face the music, it means to confront one's actions. This figurative nature of idioms makes them difficult and challenging for language learners.

1.2.2 Fixedness of Form

An idiom is like a puzzle, where each word represents a puzzle piece that fits in only one correct place to form a clear picture. If the words are rearranged, the meaning is lost. This is why idioms are said to be "fixed expressions" (Baker, 2011). In other words, changing the sequence makes the idiom a random collection of words. For example, one cannot say 'it is raining dogs and cats' to mean heavy rains, it should be *it is raining cats and dogs* instead. Moreover, when dealing with idioms, one cannot add, delete and substitute words or change the grammatical structure (Baker, 2011).

1.2.3 Culture-specificity

Each language reflects the culture of its native speakers and idioms embody this deep connection by preserving the cultural heritage of a specific speech community. Thus, language learners may face difficulties in understanding the idiomatic expressions used in other languages since they are directly tied to culture. An idiom in one language may have a close equivalent in other languages that appears similar but carries a completely or partially different meaning (Irujo, 1986). For instance, the English idiom *has the cat got your tongue ?* is used to prompt someone to speak, especially when their silence is frustrating. In contrast, French has a similar expression *donner sa langue au chat* (to give one's tongue to the cat'), but it conveys an entirely different meaning which is to give up (Baker, 2011).

1.3 Classification of Idioms

Linguists did not agree on one standard classification of idioms, thus, they were classified into different categories :

1.3.1 Semantic Classification

This kind of classification is based on figurativeness and the extent to which individual words contribute to the semantic interpretation of an idiom. Fernando (as cited in Stranškiene, 2009) categorized idioms into : Pure idioms, semi idioms and literal idioms. Pure idioms, also called opaque idioms are non-literal multi-word expressions that are opaque in the sense that their meaning is not clear from their constituent parts. They are conventionalized expressions which allow minimal to no variation. For example, the idiom *to spill the beans* does not literally refer to the action of spilling the beans but it means to reveal a secret.

Semi-idioms, on the other hand, possess a combination of literal and non-literal elements. This means that within the idiom, some words retain their dictionary definitions, while at least one other word carries a non-literal sense. Consequently, these idioms are considered "partially opaque". This is exemplified in *foot the bill* which means to pay the bill.

Finally, literal idioms, also known as transparent idioms, are idioms whose meanings can be understood by looking at the individual words that make them up. The form of literal idioms cannot be changed. Examples include *on one hand* and *on the other hand*.

1.3.2 Syntactic Classification

This categorisation is based on the syntactic and grammatical structure of idioms, Healey (1978) suggested the following 21 types of idiomatic expressions categorized according to their internal structure and functions within a sentence :

- Idioms that function as nouns, such as *heartbreak*.

- Idioms that function as noun phrases : *the long and the short of it*.
- Idioms that function as adjectives : *cold-blooded*.
- Idioms that function as intensifiers and precisors : *as...as can be*.
- Idioms that function as prepositions : *in with* (it means friendly with).
- Idioms that function as adverbs of manner : *hand to mouth*.
- Idioms that function as adverbs of time : *donkey's year*.
- Idioms that function as adverbs of frequency : *once for all*.
- Idioms that function as adverbs of place : *far and wide*.
- Idioms that function as adverbs : *at a stretch* (it means without stopping).
- Idioms that function as quasi-auxiliaries : *had better*.
- Idioms that function as an equational compliment : *as free as the breeze*.
- Idioms that function as intransitive verbs : *smell a rat*
- Idioms that function as ambitransitive verbs : *run out*.
- Idioms that function as transitive verbs : *make ...out* (it means to understand).
- Idioms that function as optionally ditransitive verbs : *take ...down* (it means to cheat).
- Idioms that function as clauses without tense : *the coast be clear* (it lacks will).
- Idioms that function as complete clauses : *time will tell*.
- Idioms that function as sentence introducers : *by the bye*.
- Idioms that function as conjunctions : *on the off-chance that*.
- Idioms that function as sentences : *a stitch in time saves nine*.

Palmer (1981) introduced another type of idioms in English known as phrasal verbs, which are the most commonly occurring idioms in English. This type consists of a verb plus an adverb. The meaning of the phrasal verb *put down*, for example, cannot be understood from the verb or the adverb separately. Other combinations may include the combination of a verb plus a preposition as in *look after*, or a verb plus an adverb and preposition, like *do away with*.

1.3.3 Classification based on the Level of Formality

Formality refers to the degree to which a language is serious and polite. Murar (2009) identified two types of idioms according to the level of formality which are : formal and informal. The use of these types reflect social relationships in conversations. Formal idioms (or standard idioms) typically reflect a more reserved or impersonal relationship between speakers. They are commonly used in official or formal contexts, such as government communications or ceremonial events. They give a serious tone to the conversation.

Informal idioms, (also called colloquial or conversational idioms), however, reflect a close, intimate relationship between speakers. They are more common in relaxed communication such as conversations between friends.

Makkai et al. (1995) introduced another type of idioms known as slang idioms. They are generally used among teenagers in informal settings. Slang idioms often carry rude, humorous or provocative connotations. The expressions *to have a big mouth* and *to get sacked* are examples of slang idioms

1.4 Idioms and Culture

Different scholars defined culture in varying ways, however, all the definitions share some points (Liu, 2012). According to Tylor (1871), culture "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p.1). This means that culture is concerned with all aspects of human life, including beliefs, traditions, lifestyle, art, values, religion and attitudes. Culture is the feature that distinguishes one group of people from another (Hofstede et al., 2010). That is to say, people from different cultures have varied practices, beliefs and behaviours known as cultural differences.

Language and culture are deeply interconnected (Yağiz & Izadpanah, 2013). On one hand, language reflects people's cultural beliefs, values and traditions. Culture, on the other hand, is important to succeed in communication. Language users should have cultural awareness in order to be able to transmit messages successfully (Goshkhteliani, 2013). Knowing the vocabulary and the grammar rules of a foreign language is not enough to be fluent in that language ; the person needs to master its culture as well (Hamane, 2018). Words which are linguistic signs, have a cultural significance (Hamane, 2018). In other words, culture is important in the interpretation of words.

Idioms are considered as lexical units and studied as part of language (Goshkhteliani, 2013). Contrary to some researchers who argued that idioms are difficult to understand when the person is not proficient in the language, others indicated that people do not necessarily have to be fluent in the language but they just need to have some cultural knowledge about idioms (Kovecses, 2002 ; as cited in Yağiz & izadpanah, 2013). Hence, in order to comprehend idioms, one should have both the linguistic and cultural knowledge. According to Goshkhteliani (2013), idioms have cultural implications, i.e. their meaning is linked to culture. For example, the idiomatic expression *above the salt*, which dates back to the midieval period is used as a symbol of honor and high rank. In England, salt had a great value. When it is put in the center of the table, only the royal family used to sit above the salt. This shows how idioms are deeply linked to culture.

1.5 Figurative Language and Idioms

There are two types of language : literal and figurative. Literal language refers to words that mean exactly what they say, without any hidden meanings or symbolism. It is straightforward and based on dictionary definition. Whereas figurative language involves the use of words and expressions that convey meanings that are not apparent from the analysis of

words. In other words, literal language is the usage of words according to their direct meaning while figurative language is the use of words that do not reflect their exact or literal meaning. Similes, metaphors, metonymies, ironies and idioms are examples of figurative language.

According to Lazar (1996), idioms are conventionalized expressions which are full of figurative meanings. Idioms are used not only in writing but also in daily conversations. Many linguists argued that metaphors led to the creation of idioms (Gibbs & O'Brien, 1990 ; as cited in Kilani & Bediar, 2021). This means that metaphors serve as the foundation for idioms. For instance, the idiomatic expression "it is a piece of cake" which means 'something easy' was a metaphor and after repeated usage, it became an idiom. In this regard, a metaphor is considered as an idiomatic expression (Kövecses, 2002)

1.6 Difficulties in Understanding Idioms

Idioms constitute an important part of the English language and culture. However, these expressions can be challenging not only for learners but also for native speakers (Al-khawaldeh et al., 2016 ; Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021 ; Jamshed et al., 2024). There are various obstacles that can prevent EFL learners from understanding idioms (Kriengphan, 2017).

Unfamiliar vocabulary is one of the primary challenges EFL learners face with regard to idiom comprehension. Idioms contain words that are difficult to understand and which are rarely encountered by language learners, thus, they struggle to interpret them (Saleh & Zakaria, 2013 ; Aljabri, 2013).

The figurative meaning of idioms is an obstacle that hinders their comprehension. Idioms cannot always be interpreted by relying only on the meaning of their individual constituents. Their understanding requires the analysis of their figurative meaning (Cooper, 1999). Most of the time, the figurative meaning of an idiom is completely different from the literal one (Abdul Wahab, 2002 ; Aljabri, 2013 ; Jamshed et al., 2024). For example, the meaning of the idiomatic

expression *to break the ice* is to initiate a conversation in a social setting. This interpretation is totally different from the meaning of its individual words.

Another difficulty faced by language learners in comprehending idioms is the lack of knowledge about the foreign language culture (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021). According to Aoumer and Douib (2014), idioms are linked to culture. For instance, the English idiomatic expression *To go to the bar to bury one's sorrows*, which means to look for recovery from emotional pain by drinking alcohol, reflects the cultural values and beliefs of the English society. This idiom can be interpreted easily if the learner has sufficient cultural knowledge.

Generally, language learners need context in order to understand idioms (Kriengphan, 2017). The absence of contextual clues is seen as one of the major challenges that learners face when trying to interpret an idiomatic expression (Jamshed et al., 2024). Context helps in deciphering the hidden meaning of idioms. According to Aljabri (2013), idiom comprehension is easier when associated with a given context.

Limited exposure to idiomatic language is another factor that limits learners' ability to understand idioms. According to Ortony et al. (1985), understanding figurative expressions is related to the degree of exposure to them (as cited in Aljabri, 2013). In other words, the more the learners are exposed to idioms, the more they will be able to understand them.

During their learning journey, learners rarely encounter idiomatic expressions because teaching focuses on university programs only (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021). This can be one of the reasons why learners struggle to understand idioms. The exclusion of idioms from the course syllabus makes idioms difficult to understand (Kriengphan, 2017).

1.7 Idiom Comprehension Strategies

English idioms are found in both spoken and written language. To comprehend these challenging expressions, EFL learners tend to make use of various strategies.

Cooper (1999) identified two types of strategies that language learners employ to interpret idiomatic expressions. The first type is known as preparatory strategies which includes repeating, paraphrasing or discussing the idiom without offering an interpretation. The second type is called guessing strategies which includes guessing from the context, which means that the learners take advantage of contextual clues such as the surrounding words and the situation in which the idiom appears to infer the meaning of the idiom. Using the literal meaning is another strategy that is effective in processing English idioms. In many cases, the literal meaning may contribute to the interpretation of an idiom. The learners rely on the surface meaning of the individual words without an in-depth analysis. Guessing strategies also include using background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom, which means that the learners use their existing knowledge to interpret an unfamiliar idiomatic expression. The last strategy is referring to an L1 idiom, which means that the learners often draw on the idiomatic expressions that exist in their L1 when attempting to understand English idioms. This strategy can be beneficial, especially when there are identical or similar idioms in the two languages.

The framework of Cooper (1999) comprised the most common strategies used by learners to to comprehend English idioms.

2. Related Studies

Numerous studies have investigated the strategies and difficulties faced by EFL learners in comprehending English idioms.

Cooper (1999) investigated the online processing strategies used by learners of English. The participants were 18 non native speakers of English whose ages ranged from 17 to 44 with different native languages. All of them have lived in the US for an average of 5.1 years and studied English for approximately 7.3 months to increase their proficiency in this language. To gather the data, the researcher used an idiom recognition test (IRT) and asked the participants to give the meanings of 20 idioms taken from 'A Dictionary of American Idioms' which categorized them into three different levels : standard, informal and slang. All the idioms were given within a context. The results of the study revealed that the participants used different strategies to interpret the English idioms. The most common ones were guessing from context, using the literal meaning and discussing or analysing the idiom, while referring to L1 idioms, requesting information, repeating or paraphrasing, using background knowledge and other strategies were used less frequently.

Abdul Wahhab (2002) conducted a study on the challenges faced by students of English at Yarmouk university in interpreting English idioms. To reach the aim of the study, the researcher made use of two tests : a recognition test which consisted of 48 items and a production test which consisted of 36 completion sentences. 50 fourth year EFL learners participated in the recognition test ; whereas, 70 students took part in the production test. The results of the study showed that idioms present a challenge for EFL learners, and this is related to several reasons including the non-literal nature of idioms, unconventional grouping of words, fixed word orders, cultural differences and insufficient cultural assimilation. In addition, the researcher found that the unfamiliarity with idioms, the degree of idiomacity, the absence of an equivalent

idiom in the students' native languages and the presence of textual signals that correlate target idioms with the sentence constituents are among the factors that influence the performance of the students.

In their study, Saleh and Zakaria (2013) investigated the challenges faced by Libyan EFL learners in understanding English idioms and the strategies they use to process them. Forty Libyan students studying in Malaysia participated in the study. A questionnaire was used to collect the data. The findings revealed that the cultural, figurative and non-decomposable nature of idioms in addition to the lack of exposure to idiomatic expressions were the reasons why idioms were difficult to comprehend. In addition, it was found that guessing from the context and drawing comparisons to idiomatic expressions in the students' first language were the main strategies that were used by the participants to process English idioms. Moreover, the participants used other strategies such as paraphrasing the idiom, looking at its literal meaning and discussing it.

Al-Khawaldah et al. (2016) explored the strategies and difficulties faced by Jordanian EFL learners in understanding English idioms. A total of 150 BA English students studying at the Hashemite University took part in the study. Their age ranged from 20 to 24 years. The researcher used a questionnaire and a test to collect the data. The findings of the study showed that Jordanian university students struggle in understanding and utilizing English idiomatic expressions despite their advanced level, and this can be related to several factors such as insufficient cultural knowledge and the exclusion of idioms in the course syllabi. In addition, it was found that contextual clues, the literal meaning of the idiom and the use of L1 idioms helped in deducing the meanings of idioms.

In a similar vein, Kriengphan (2017) conducted a study on the difficulties faced by Thai EFL learners in comprehending English idioms and the types of strategies they employ to

process them. The study involved 25 first year high proficiency students from a public university in Bangkok. For the collection of the data, the researcher used a questionnaire and a test. The results of the study revealed that lack of cultural context, the absence of contextual clues, the unfamiliar vocabulary and insufficient instruction are the main reasons why the participants struggle in understanding English idioms. Moreover, the researcher identified different strategies used by the learners to comprehend idioms. They are as follows : guessing the meaning from the context, using the literal meaning, using the background knowledge and using L1 idioms to understand L2 idioms. The study concluded that unfamiliar opaque idioms were the most difficult to understand followed by unfamiliar transparent and familiar opaque idioms. Familiar transparent idioms were the easiest ones for the graduate students.

Alhaysony (2017) examined the difficulties that Saudi EFL learners face in understanding and learning English idiomatic expressions and the strategies they use to comprehend them. The participants in the study were 85 male and female students studying at Aljouf university. A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used as tools to gather the data. The findings of the study showed that the non-literal meaning of idioms, the absence of equivalents in students' first language, the lack of cultural background, the lack of experience dealing with idioms and the exclusion of idioms from the lessons were the main reasons why idioms were difficult to understand. In addition, the results showed that the most frequently used strategies were guessing the meanings of idioms from the context, predicting the meaning of the idioms, using the literal meaning and referring to L1 idioms.

Orfan (2020) investigated the challenges Afghan EFL learners face in understanding English idiomatic expressions and the approaches they use to comprehend them. The study involved 337 students enrolled in 4 universities in Afghanistan. They were all in the process of completing their bachelor's degrees at the time of the data collection. The researcher used a questionnaire consisting of 28 items to gather the data. The findings revealed that the

participants struggled to arrive to the meanings of idioms because of their limited cultural knowledge and their little experience with idioms. and because these expressions were not frequently taught in the classroom. The absence of equivalents of English idioms in the learners' native language was another obstacle that hinders idiom comprehension. Moreover, inferring the meanings of idioms by connecting them to the first language, incorporating the idiom into sentences and using them in real life conversations were the strategies used by the participants to understand and learn English idioms.

Anjarini and Hatmanto (2021) conducted a study to explore the way EFL learners perceive the challenges of learning English idioms and the strategies they employ to address these difficulties. The participants in the study were eight Indonesian students of English studying at a private Islamic university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The learners represented varying levels of English proficiency. The researchers employed interviews as the primary data collection tool. The interviews were conducted either online or in person, depending on the participant's preference. The study found that EFL students faced several challenges in understanding English idioms. They often struggle with the figurative meaning of idioms. Limited exposure to idioms in daily life and the lack of focus on idioms in classroom lessons were other reasons reported in the data. As for the strategies they use to interpret idioms, the participants reported that they often rely on the context, connect the idioms to their mother tongue, ask for someone's else assistance and look for the meaning of the idiom on the Internet.

In her study, Mahboub (2022) examined the difficulties faced by Algerian EFL learners in learning and understanding English idioms. 20 MA students from the university of Biskra took part in the study. The data were collected through the use of a questionnaire which was distributed to the students and an interview which was conducted with two teachers. The results of the study showed that the participants faced many difficulties including the lack of exposure to the idiom, the lack of cultural background and the absence of contextual clues. Moreover, it

was found that the participants employed different strategies to learn and understand idioms. These include finding equivalents to the idioms in the mother tongue, guessing the meaning from the context and memorization.

Aljabri (2024) explored the strategies Saudi EFL learners utilize to understand English idioms and the level of their difficulty when no context is provided. Twenty fourth year students at Umm Al-Qura University participated in the study. An Idiom Recognition Test was used to gather the data. The test consisted of twenty English idioms, which were selected from prior studies and idiom dictionaries. The idioms included both formal and informal expressions, categorized based on their degree of similarity to Arabic. The findings indicated that the participants faced significant challenges in understanding idioms, especially when interpreting the idioms which do not have Arabic equivalents. With regard to the strategies used to interpret the idioms, literal translation was the most frequently used strategy, though it was not always effective. The second most frequently used strategy was referring to L1 idioms. Background knowledge also contributed to the interpretation of the idiom, even though it was the least employed strategy.

Apridayani et al. (2024) examined the difficulties that Thai university students find in understanding English idioms and the strategies they use to comprehend them. The data were collected from 50 students of English (44 females and 6 males) who ranged in age from 21 to 23 years. An online questionnaire, consisting of 24 items was used as an instrument to collect the data. The results of the study revealed that the absence of contextual clues and the limited exposure to idioms in students' everyday life were barriers to understanding idioms. Additionally, it was found that Thai EFL students try to overcome these difficulties by guessing the meaning from the context and providing explanations for each constituent part of the idiom. The study also reported that memorization was another important technique that Thai learners relied on to comprehend idioms.

Chapter Three

Methodology

1. Overview

The current study aims to explore the difficulties faced by Algerian Kabyle EFL learners and the strategies they employ in understanding English idioms. This chapter outlines the methodology employed to examine the strategies and difficulties faced by Kabyle EFL learners in understanding English idioms. It gives details about the participants, the tools and procedures used for data collection and illustrates the data analysis process.

2. Participants

The population of the study consisted of Master One students enrolled in the English department at the University of Bejaia, Algeria. The participants were 30 Master One students (7 males and 23 females) enrolled in the English department at the university of Bejaia, Algeria. Their ages ranged from 20 to 38 years. The participants study different specialities (13 students study linguistics, 11 study didactics and 6 study literature and civilization). The respondents were selected using a convenience sampling technique which means that the researchers selected the participants based on availability. All the participants took part in both the questionnaire and the idiom recognition test. It should be mentioned that participation was voluntary.

3. Data Collection Instruments

To collect the data for this study, a questionnaire and an idiom recognition test were employed. The questionnaire was adopted from Kriengphan (2017). The researchers made minor modifications regarding the vocabulary to better suit the students' proficiency level and

to ensure the clarity of the items. The main aim of the questionnaire was to identify the difficulties faced by Master One EFL students in understanding English idioms. The questionnaire consisted of two sections : the first section gathered personal information about the participants, while the second focused on the difficulties faced by the students in comprehending idioms. This section included six statements and the participants were asked to indicate the extent of agreement with each one of them by choosing one of the following options : strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree or strongly agree (a five-point Likert scale).

The idiom recognition test was adopted from Cooper (1999) who originally used 20 idioms : 8 standard, 8 informal and 4 slang idioms. For the purpose of this study, the researchers selected only 12 idioms (4 from each category) in order to create a balanced representation of idioms across the three types. This adjustment was made to ensure equal distribution and fair comparison between standard, informal and slang idioms.

4. Procedures of data collection

A pilot study was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the idiom recognition test as a data collection tool. Four Master One students were tested individually in an amphitheater and no difficulties were reported with regard to the test.

Before starting to collect the data, the participants were provided with a brief overview of the research objectives and the researchers assured them of the confidentiality of their responses. The participants first completed the questionnaire designed to explore the difficulties that Kabyle EFL learners face in understanding English idioms. They were asked to indicate the extent of the agreement with each statement by ticking only one box among the ones provided. After completing the questionnaire, they proceeded to the Idiom Recognition Test (IRT), which comprised 12 idioms presented with a supporting context. All the idioms were written in bold and underlined so that the participant locate them easily. The Think-Aloud

(TA) Protocol, which is a research method where participants verbalize their thoughts while performing a task, was applied. Before starting the task, the participants were given some instructions. The instructions provided information about the main idea of the TA Protocol. Specifically, the researchers asked the participants to tell EVERYTHING they were thinking from the time they start performing the task until the end. The participants were tested individually and their answers were recorded.

5. Data Analysis

For the data analysis, a mixed method was employed. The quantitative analysis provided the percentages and frequencies of the use of idiom comprehension strategies. The kind of difficulties faced by the participants and the type of idioms that the students find difficult to understand were also presented in terms of percentages and frequencies. The qualitative analysis provided information about the strategies employed by the respondents to understand idioms.

The description of L2 comprehension strategies in Cooper (1999) was adopted as a framework for identifying the strategies used by Kabyle EFL learners in comprehending English idioms. Cooper (1999) identified a set of strategies that L2 learners typically employ to derive meaning from unfamiliar idiomatic expressions. Cooper (1999) divided these strategies into two phases (preparatory and guessing strategies)

Preparatory

RP : Repeating or paraphrasing the idiom without giving an interpretation

DA : Discussing and analyzing the idiom or its context without guessing at the meaning

RI : Requesting information about the idiom or context

Guessing

GC (Guessing the meaning of the idiom from the context) : leareners attempt to infer the figurative meaning of the idiom by analysing the surrounding words and the overall context in which the idiom appears.

LM (Using the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning) : learners rely on the literal or the surface meaning of the idioms' components as a clue to its figurative interpretation.

BK (Using background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom) : learners draw on personal experiences and their prior knowledge to decipher the meaning of the idiom.

L1 (Referring to an idiom in the L1 to understand the L2 idiom) : learners refer to similar idiomatic expressions that exist in their first language to help them interpret the idiom in the second language.

However, the focus was on the second part (Guessing) when analysing the data. The strategies involved in this phase reflect different cognitive approaches that learners may use to comprehend English idioms. Therefore, it is more suitable for analysing the data gathered from the idiom recognition test as it aimed to investigate immediate responses of the learners.

Chapter Four

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the analysis of the data and the discussion of the results.

1. Difficulties faced by EFL Learners in Understanding English Idioms

Table 1: The difficulties faced by EFL learners in understanding English idioms

Difficulties in Understanding English Idioms	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Idioms are difficult to understand because they often contain low-frequency or unfamiliar words.	0 (0%)	6 (20%)	8 (26.67%)	12 (40%)	4 (13.33%)
Idioms are difficult to understand because their meaning cannot always be deduced from the meanings of the individual words.	1 (3.33%)	1(3.33%)	6(20%)	14(46.67%)	8(26.67%)
Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background.	1(3.33%)	1(3.33%)	4(13.33%)	14(46.67%)	10(33.33%)
Idioms are difficult without context clues.	0 (0%)	5(16.67%)	5(16.67%)	15(50%)	5(16.67%)
Idioms are difficult because of the lack of exposure to them.	0 (0%)	3(10%)	7(23.33%)	14(46.67%)	6(20%)

Idioms are difficult because they are not included in the syllabi.	2(6.67%)	9(30%)	6(20%)	10(33.33%)	3(10%)
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The table above shows the participants' responses to six statements regarding the difficulties they face in understanding English idioms. Each statement was rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly agree.

Concerning the first statement "Idioms are difficult to understand because they contain low-frequency or unfamiliar words", more than half of the respondents (53.33%) expressed agreement, (with 40 % agreeing and 13.33 % strongly agreeing). 6 participants (20%), however disagreed with the statement and none of them strongly disagreed, while 8 students (26.67%) remained neutral.

The second statement focused on the non-literal nature of idioms, stating that idioms are difficult because their meanings cannot always be deduced from the meanings of the individual words. Only one participant (3.33%) disagreed, and another one strongly disagreed. Additionally, 6 respondents (20%) opted for neutral, indicating indecision towards this statement. The majority, however, supported the view that idioms are difficult because of their non-literal nature, in which, 14 (46.67%) and 10 (26%) participants agreed and strongly agreed, respectively.

When asked whether "Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background". A considerable number of students (46.67%) agreed that understanding idioms requires having good cultural knowledge, while 10 students (33.33%) strongly agreed with this statement. 4 of them remained neutral with a percentage of 13.33 %. Each of the disagree and strongly disagree options were chosen by one participant only.

Responses to the fourth statement “idioms are difficult without context clues” showed that while half of the participants (50%) agreed with the statement, 5 participants (16.67%) strongly agreed. 5 respondents (16.67%) disagreed with the statement, with the same number expressing a neutral stance. No one strongly disagreed with this statement.

Regarding the fifth statement, the researchers wanted to know whether idioms are difficult because of the lack of exposure to them. A large number of respondents expressed agreement, with 14 of them (46.67%) agreeing and 6 (20%) strongly agreeing, showing that approximately two-thirds of the participants (66.67%) believe that limited exposure hinders the students’ ability to comprehend idioms. Meanwhile, 7 participants (23.33 %) remained neutral, and only 3 of them (10%) disagreed with this statement, while none of them strongly disagreed.

The last statement aimed to explore whether idioms are difficult because they are not included in the syllabi. 10 students agreed with this statement, with a percentage of 33.33%, and only one strongly agreed (3.33). 9 respondents disagreed (30%), and 2 of them representing 6.67% strongly disagreed (36.67%). Additionally, 20% of the participants remained neutral.

The analysis of the table revealed that Master One EFL students at Bejaia university face several challenges in comprehending English idioms. The most common one was the lack of cultural background in which a total of 24 respondents (80%) either agreed or strongly agreed that a person needs to be familiar with the cultural context in which idioms appear to be able to comprehend them. This is may be due to the fact that the cultural features of idiomatic expressions are challenging, and that language cannot be taught without reference to culture. This highlights that the idiomatic expressions reflect the culture of their users. This finding is consistent with the findings of Mahboub (2022) and Orfane (2020) who concluded that the difficulties in understanding English idioms arose mainly from the learners’ lack of cultural background, which is essential to decipher the meaning of idioms. The non-literal nature of

idioms was identified as the second common challenge that Kabyle EFL learners face in understanding English idioms, with a total of 22 participants (73.34%) acknowledging that the meaning of idioms cannot always be deduced from the meanings of their individual words. This suggests that learners struggle with idioms because they are figurative and resistant to word for word translation.

The absence of contextual clues was also perceived as a significant barrier to idioms' comprehension. 20 participants (66.67 %) supported the claim that understanding idioms becomes more difficult when they appear without supporting context. This reflects the learners' reliance on contextual clues to infer the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions.

In addition to the above challenges, limited exposure to idioms was seen as another contributing factor that hinders the learners' understanding of idioms. The data indicated that insufficient interaction with idioms either inside or outside the classroom makes idioms difficult to understand for Kabyle EFL learners. This result is in line with Mahboub (2022)

Additionally, students' unfamiliarity with the vocabulary that constitutes an idiom was another difficulty that Kabyle EFL learners face when attempting to comprehend an idiom. This finding is in line with the findings of Saleh and Zakaria (2013), Kriengfan (2017), and Orfan (2020) who found that learners fail to recognize and interpret each word that makes up an idiom.

At last, the idea that idioms are difficult because they are not included in the syllabi received the least degree of agreement. This finding was supported by Anjarini and Hatmanto (2021) who concluded that students rarely encounter difficulties in comprehending idioms because of the lack of instruction in the classroom. However, these findings are inconsistent with Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) and Alhaysony (2017) who reported that the absence of idioms in the course syllabi was viewed as a significant barrier to the learners' understanding of idioms.

In the current study, the exclusion of idioms from the syllabi is not seen as a primary difficulty in comprehending idioms. Instead, the lack of cultural knowledge about idioms and their non-literal nature are the most common difficulties faced by Kabyle EFL learners.

2. The Type of English Idioms that is Most Difficult for Kabyle EFL

Learners to Understand

Tables 2, 3 and 4 below present the number and percentage of correct and incorrect answers in each category of idioms (Standard, Informal, Slang).

2.1 Standard idioms

Table 2: Number and percentage of correct and incorrect responses to standard idioms

Standard Idioms		Correct	Incorrect
1	To be a little frog in a big pond	13 (10.83%)	17(14.17%)
2	To be suffering from burnout	25 (20.83%)	5 (4.17%)
3	To tighten one's belt	26 (21.67%)	4 (3.33%)
4	To roll up one's sleeves	30 (25%)	0 (0%)
Total		94 (78.33%)	26 (21.67%)

Table 2 above shows the number and percentage of correct and incorrect responses given by the participants to the four standard idioms given in the idiom recognition test. The first idiom *to be a little frog in a big pond* was answered correctly by 13 students, representing 10.83% of the total responses, while 17 students did not arrive to the correct meaning of the idiom (14.17%). Regarding the second idiom *to be suffering from burnout*, it gathered 25 correct answers (20.83%) and 5 incorrect answers (4.17%). When attempting to comprehend the idiom *to tighten one's belt*, 26 students provided correct answers, making up 21.67% of the

responses, whereas 4 students gave incorrect answers with a percentage of 3.33%. The idiom *to roll up one's sleeves* received 30 correct responses (25%), with no incorrect answers reported. Overall, the total number of correct answers across all the four standard idioms was 94, constituting 78.33% of the whole answers, while the total number of incorrect responses for this type was 26 (21.67%).

With regard to the level of difficulty of each idiom, *To roll up one's sleeves* was the most easily understood idiom since all the 30 participants interpreted it correctly, followed by the idioms *to tighten one's belt* and *to be suffering from burnout* (26 and 25 correct answers, respectively). In contrast, the idiom *to be a little frog in a big pond* proved to be the most challenging one, with 17 incorrect and 13 correct answers.

2.2 Informal Idioms

Table 3: Number and percentage of correct and incorrect responses to informal idioms

Informal Idioms		Correct	Incorrect
1	To pull the wool over someone's eyes	27 (22.5%)	3 (2.5%)
2	To have something in the bag	30 (25%)	0 (0%)
3	To have a green thumb	23 (19.17%)	7 (5.83%)
4	To let the cat out of the bag	28 (23.33%)	2 (1.67%)
Total		108 (90%)	12 (10%)

Table 3 above displays the students' performance in identifying the meaning of four informal idioms showing the distribution of correct and incorrect responses for each idiomatic expression. Regarding the first idiom *to pull the wool over someone's eyes*, there were 27 correct responses (22.5%) and 3 incorrect responses (2.5%). Concerning the second expression, *to have something in the bag*, all the answers were correct (25%). As for the third idiom *to have*

a green thumb, 23 students answered it correctly, accounting for 19.17% of the whole responses, and 7 answered it incorrectly (5.83%). When it comes to the last idiom *to let the cat out of the bag*, it was answered correctly by 28 participants (23.33%) and only 2 subjects gave incorrect answers (1.67%). In total, the number of correct answers for this type was 108 (90%), whereas the number of incorrect responses was 12 (10%).

The results showed that students generally performed well in understanding informal idioms with a high rate of correct responses across all the four expressions (90%). The idiom *to have something in the bag* had the highest success rate as all students answered it correctly. *To let the cat out of the bag* was also found to be easy to interpret and only 2 participants failed in deciphering its meaning. Similarly, the idiom *to pull the wool over someone's eyes* was answered incorrectly by only 3 participants. Meanwhile, *to have a green thumb* had the lowest number of correct responses among the four idioms (23), showing that it was the most difficult idiom in this category.

2.3 Slang Idioms

Table 4: Number and percentage of correct and incorrect responses to slang idioms

Slang Idioms		Correct	Incorrect
1	To get sacked	29 (24.17%)	1 (0.83%)
2	What's cooking	29 (24.17%)	1 (0.83%)
3	To have a big mouth	30 (25%)	0 (0%)
4	Something is a chicken feed	29 (24.17%)	1 (0.83%)
Total		117 (97.51%)	3 (2.49%)

The table above outlines the participants' responses to the four slang idioms, indicating the number and percentage of correct and incorrect interpretations. Regarding the first

idiomatic expression *to get sacked*, there were 29 correct answers (24.17%) and 1 incorrect answer (0.83%). The same results were reported with regard to the interpretation of the idiom *what's cooking*. The idiom *to have a big mouth* received 30 correct responses (25%) and no incorrect ones. As in the first and the second expressions, the fourth idiom, which is *something is a chicken feed*, was answered correctly by 29 participants (24.17%) and only 1 student did not succeed to arrive to the correct interpretation. All in all, the total number of correct responses reported in this category was 117 (97.51%), while there were only 3 incorrect responses (2.49%).

The results above show a high level of comprehension among students when it comes to understanding slang idioms. Each of the three following idioms : *to get sacked*, *what's cooking* and *something is a chicken feed* was answered incorrectly by only 1 student. The idiom *to have a big mouth* was correctly answered by all 30 the subjects.

2.4 The Distribution of Correct and Incorrect Answers across the Three Categories of Idioms

Table 5: Students' performance accross Standard, Informal and Slang idioms

	Correct	Incorrect
Standard	94 (26.11%)	26 (7.22%)
Informal	108 (30%)	12 (3.33%)
Slang	117 (32.51%)	3 (0.83%)

Table 5 above shows the number and percentage of correct and incorrect across the three categories of idioms idioms. The number of correct answers in standard idioms was 94 accounting for 26.11% of the whole responses, while the number of incorrect answers was 26 (7.22%). Regarding informal idioms, they received 108 correct answers (30%), and 12

incorrect responses (3.33%). Finally, 117 correct answers were provided when interpreting slang idioms, making up 32.51% of the whole responses, and only 3 participants answered them incorrectly (0.83%).

Based on the number of incorrect answers in each category, slang idioms appeared to be the easiest type of idioms for EFL learners to understand as they received the lowest number of incorrect responses (only 3). This indicates that the participants rarely give incorrect responses when dealing with this type of idioms. This may be linked to their easy and familiar vocabulary. This type of idioms is used by students in everyday conversations and it is encountered in movies, books and songs. Informal idioms had a slightly higher number of incorrect responses (12), suggesting that they are more difficult than slang idioms. This type of idioms is used in conversations between friends rather than official settings. Regarding standard idioms, they were found to be the most difficult type of idioms for Kabyle EFL learners to understand as it received the highest number of incorrect responses (26). This is maybe due to the fact that this type of idioms is mostly used in official occasions.

3. Strategies used by Master One EFL Students to Comprehend English Idioms

The analysis of the data revealed that Master One EFL students employed different strategies to understand English idioms. A total of 319 instances of strategies were reported in the data. It should be mentioned that only the strategies that led to correct answers were taken into consideration during the analysis.

Table 6: Strategies used by EFL learners to comprehend English idioms

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Guessing from the context	172	(53.92%)
Referring to L1 idiom	69	(21.63%)
Using background knowledge	62	(19.43%)
Using literal meaning	16	(5.02%)
Total	319	100%

Table 6 above shows that Master One English students used four strategies to understand English idioms: Guessing from the context was the most frequently used strategy, accounting for 53.92% of the total responses. This result is in line with previous research (Alhaysony, 2017 ; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016 ; Cooper, 1999 ; Kriengphan, 2017 ; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013), indicating that idioms are easily interpreted when they are associated with contextual clues. The second strategy was referring to L1 idiom, which represented 21.63% of all the strategies used. This result is in line with Al-Khawaldah et al. (2016), who they found that idioms which have equivalents in the students' mother tongue are easy to understand. Conversely, this finding is inconsistent with the findings of other researchers (Cooper, 1999 ; Kriengphan, 2017), who showed that referring to an L1 idiom was the least frequently used strategy. The third strategy involved using background knowledge, with a percentage of 19.43%. This result is consistent with that reported by Kriengphan (2017). Finally, using literal meaning was found to be the least frequently used strategy (5.02%). This result is inconsistent with Cooper (1999) and Kriengphan (2017) who found that using literal meaning was one of the most frequently used strategies. However, it is consistent with Al-Khawaldah et al. (2016) who stated that it is the least frequently used strategy.

3.1 Guessing the Meaning of the Idiom from the Context

Guessing the meaning of the idiom from the context was the most frequently used strategy. This strategy was used to interpret the meanings of all the idioms given to the participants. It involves analysing the surrounding words, phrases and situations in which the idiom is found to arrive to the intended meaning. The following examples are taken from the data :

In the first idiom *a little frog in a big pond*, one of the participants relied on the context to understand the expression, indicating that words such as sky, frog and pond helped him to decipher its meaning. Regarding the idiom *to get sacked*, one of the students answered as follows : "Since Molly was a bad worker absolutely she will be fired, the context of the sentence gave me a hint to understand the meaning of the idiom". Another participant stated that the idiom *suffering from burnout* means feeling tired or exhausted, and he arrived to this meaning by relying on the previous sentence or the context (Pam needed a vacation) which indicates that she needs to take a rest. Concerning the expression *to pull the wool over someone's eyes*, one of the respondents said that he used the context to arrive to the correct meaning which is to trick someone, he used the word broken as a clue to interpret the meaning of the idiom although he has never heard it. To explain the idiom *to have a green thumb*, another respondent said the following : "It means that Jennifer knows her way with plants and she is capable of taking care of them. Thanks to the context I arrived to this meaning".

3.2 Referring to an L1 Idiom

Another strategy identified in the data was the use of equivalents from the participants' first language to interpret English idioms. This was the second most frequently employed strategy among the participants. They relied on their knowledge of their L1 idioms to arrive to the meanings of unfamiliar English idioms. This strategy shows that linguistic transfer helps in

understanding idiomatic expressions. The following examples, taken from the participants' responses, illustrate the use of this strategy to interpret the meanings of the idioms :

Most of the participants explained the idiom *to have something in the bag* by relying on a Kabyle idiom which is *attan g ljib*. This idiom means to be certain of achieving something. The use of this strategy helped the respondents to arrive to the correct meaning of the idiomatic expression. It is effective when the English idiom has a similar equivalent in the participants' mother tongue. Regarding the idiom *to roll up one's sleeves*, which means to prepare yourself to start working hard, some students relied on a similar expression in Kabyle which is *ad icemmer fighaln-is* or *ad icemmer lekman-is*. This Kabyle idiom conveys the same idea as the English expression. Similarly, when interpreting the idiom *to have a big mouth*, which means to talk too much, participants made use of an idiomatic expression that exist in their L1 which is *aqmouch-is d ameqran*. This idiom has exactly the same meaning as the English one. The idiom *to tighten one's belt*, which means to spend less money due to financial trouble, was also interpreted through the use of an equivalent expression in Kabyle (*ad icneq tabagust* or *ad izeyyer tbghost*). This shows how students make links between their first language and the foreign language.

3.3 Using Background Knowledge

Some of the participants relied on what their existing knowledge to interpret the meaning of English idioms. The use of their background knowledge allowed them to understand familiar expressions. As the examples below show, this strategy was employed by the participants to comprehend English idioms :

One of the participants utilized the background knowledge when interpreting the idiom *suffering from burnout*, explaining that it means feeling tired or exhausted. When processing the idiom *to have a big mouth*, another respondent relied on his background knowledge to infer

its figurative meaning. When dealing with the expression *to have a green thumb*, one respondent stated: "I am familiar with this expression, I heard it in a movie and looked for its meaning, so the strategy I relied on was using background knowledge". Regarding the idiom *to get sacked*, which means to be fired, a student mentioned that he already knew the expression. As for the idiom *something is chicken feed*, one of the students explained that it refers to something cheap or of little value, adding that, for rich people spending a large amount of money -even thousands of dollars- seems like nothing.

3.4 Using Literal Meaning

Using literal meaning involves interpreting an idiom based on the direct meanings of its individual words. This strategy was the least employed strategy when processing English idioms. This may be due to the fact that most idioms have figurative meaning ; thus, relying on the literal meaning can lead to misunderstandings. The following examples are extracted from the data :

Rgarding the idiom *to get sacked*, one of the participants relied on the literal meaning of the words to arrive at the correct meaning (to be fired). In interpreting the idiom *to be suffering from burnout*, meaning being exhausted, one student employed the literal meaning strategy. Concerning the idiom *to be a little frog in a big pond*, the literal meaning again served as a key to infer its meaning. It conveys the idea of feeling small or little in comparison to the big world in which we live.

4. Strategies Employed by Kabyle EFL Learners, by Idiom

Table 7: Strategies Employed by Kabyle EFL Learners, by Idiom and their frequency

Idiom	Guesssing from the context	Using literal meaning	Using background knowledge	Referring to L1 idiom
To be a little frog in a big pond	8 (2.51%)	2 (0.63%)	2 (0.63%)	1 (0.31%)
To be suffering from burnout	17 (5.33%)	2 (0.63%)	6 (1.88%)	0 (0%)
To tighten one's belt	12 (3.76%)	0 (0%)	3 (0.94%)	11 (3.45%)
To roll up one's sleeves	10 (3.13%)	0 (0%)	3 (0.94%)	17 (5.33%)
To pull the wool over someone's eyes	22 (6.90%)	2 (0.63%)	3 (0.94%)	0 (0%)
To have something in the bag	6 (1.88%)	0 (0%)	5 (1.57%)	19 (5.96%)
To have a green thumb	18 (5.64%)	1 (0.31%)	2 (0.63%)	2 (0.63%)
To let the cat out of the bag	19 (5.96%)	1 (0.31%)	7 (2.19%)	1 (0.31%)
To get sacked	20 (6.27%)	5 (1.57%)	4 (1.25%)	0 (0%)
What's cooking	14 (4.39%)	1 (0.31%)	13 (4.08%)	1 (0.31%)
To have a big mouth	5 (1.57%)	0 (0%)	10 (3.13%)	15 (4.70%)
Something is a chicken feed	21 (6.58%)	2 (0.63%)	4 (1.25%)	2 (0.63%)
Total	172 (53.92%)	16 (5.02%)	62 (19.43%)	69 (21.63%)

The table above presents data about the different strategies used by the participants to comprehend each of the 12 English idioms.

Different strategies were employed to comprehend English idioms. For the first idiomatic expression *to be a little frog in a big pond*, 8 participants (2.51%) relied mostly on guessing the meaning of the idiom from the context making it the most frequently used strategy when trying to understand this idiom. Using literal meaning and background knowledge strategies were in the second place. Each one of them was used twice (0.63%). Only one participant (0.31%) used an idiom from his mother tongue to interpret the meaning of this expression.

Regarding the idiom *to be suffering from burnout*, 17 of the participants (5.33%) guessed the correct meaning of this idiom from context, literal meaning and background knowledge were used by 2 (0.63%) and 1 (0.31%) participants, respectively. This shows that the majority of the students are not familiar with this idiom. However, no participant used the referring to an L1 idiom strategy, suggesting that this idiom has no equivalent in the students' mother tongue.

Concerning the idiom *to tighten one's belt*, only two strategies were employed to interpret it which are : guessing from the context (12 participants, making up 3.76% of the whole answers), and referring to an L1 idiom (11 participants, 3.45%). This supports the claim that context helps students to understand idioms. This also shows students dependence on their L1 to gain a better understanding of the various aspects of the foreign language.

As for the expression *to roll up one's sleeves*, 17 students used an equivalent idiom in their native language to arrive to its meaning. This strategy was the most frequently used one and accounted for 5.33% of the whole responses. Guessing from the context and using background knowledge were the second and third most frequently used strategies accounting for 3.13% and 0.94%, respectively. Using literal meaning strategy, however, was not used to comprehend this idiom and this can be related the figurative nature of this expression.

When it comes to the idiom *to pull wool over someone's eyes*, the most frequently used strategy was guessing from the context (6.90%), followed by using background knowledge and literal meaning, making up 2.50% and 1.88% of the whole responses, respectively. Referring to an L1 idiom strategy was not used by the participants.

When attempting to interpret the idiom *to have something in the bag*, referring to an L1 idiom was the most commonly used strategy. It was used by 19 students (5.96%). This shows that this idiom has an equivalent in Kabyle which facilitated its comprehension. Guessing from the context and using background knowledge ranked second and third, accounting for 1.88% and 1.57% of the whole responses, respectively. Using literal meaning strategy was not used to comprehend this expression.

With regard to the idiom *to have a green thumb*, 18 students (5.64%) interpreted it correctly based on the contextual clues, indicating that this idiom was not known by the students. They used the context in which the expression appeared to arrive to its meaning. Referring to an L1 idiom and using background knowledge were used twice. Each one of them made up 0.63% of the whole answers. Using literal meaning was found to be the least frequently used strategy, as it was used by only 1 student (0.31%).

When trying to understand the idiom *to let the cat out of the bag*, guessing from the context appeared again to be the most frequently used strategy (5.96%), followed by using background knowledge which was employed by 7 participants (2.19%). Referring to an L1 idiom and using literal meaning were used by only one participant. Each one of them accounted for (0.31%), indicating that this idiom has no equivalent in the students' mother tongue and it cannot be understood by looking up at the meaning of individual words.

Similarly, when trying to decipher the meaning of the expression *to get sacked*, the participants showed a strong reliance on contextual clues. This strategy was used by 20 students

(6.27%). Using literal meaning strategy comes in the second position. It was used by 5 participants, accounting for 1.57% of the whole answers. Using background knowledge was in the third position. It was used by 4 students (1.25%). Referring to an L1 idiom was not used at all.

Concerning the expression *what's cooking*, guessing from the context and using background knowledge were the most dominant strategies, as they were used by 14 (4.39%) and 13 participants (4.08%), respectively. This reveals that some of the students already know the idiom. Literal meaning and L1 strategies were the least frequently used strategies.

When interpreting the idiom *to have a big mouth*, 15 students referred to an L1 idiom (4.70%), making it the most frequently used strategy to understand this idiom, followed by the use of background knowledge (10 participants, 3.13%). To interpret the previous idioms, guessing from the context was nearly the most commonly used strategy, however, in processing this idiom, it appeared in the third position. It was employed by only 5 participants, making up 1.57% of the whole responses. The interpretation of this idiom did not mark any use of literal meaning, indicating that the words that make up this idiom do not reflect its intended meaning.

Finally, the expression *something is chicken feed* was interpreted by 21 participants using context (6.58%) while the use of background knowledge appeared in the second position with a percentage of 1.25%. Each of the strategies referring to an L1 idiom and using literal meaning were employed by only 2 students (0.63%).

5. Strategies Employed by Kabyle EFL Learners, by Category

Table 8: Strategies used by EFL learners to interpret idioms across the three categories

	Guessing from the context	Using the literal meaning	Using the background knowledge	Referring to an L1 idiom
Standard	47 (14.73%)	4 (1.25%)	14 (4.39%)	29 (9.09%)
Informal	65 (20.38%)	4 (1.25%)	17 (5.33%)	22 (6.90%)
Slang	60 (18.81%)	8 (2.51%)	31 (9.72%)	18 (5.64%)

The table above shows the use of idiom comprehension strategies across the three categories (Standard, Informal and Slang).

In the first category, which comprises standard idioms, strategies such as guessing from the context and using the literal meaning were used 47 times (14.73%) and 4 times (1.25%), respectively. The use of background knowledge was reported in 14 instances (4.39%). As for the strategy of referring to an L1 idiom, participants employed it in 29 responses (9.09%).

In the second category, which includes informal idioms, respondents employed the following strategies: guessing from the context (65 times, 20.38%), using the literal meaning (4 times, 1.25%), using background knowledge (17 times, 5.33%), and referring to an L1 idiom (22 times, 6.90%).

In the last category, which comprises slang idioms, the subjects employed the four strategies. The first, guessing from the context, was used in 60 answers (18.81%). The second one was the use of literal meaning which was employed 8 times (2.51%). With regard to the

use background knowledge strategy, it occurred in 31 instances (9.72%). Referring to an L1 idiom was used 18 times (5.54%).

As it can be seen from the table above, the four strategies were used for all types of idioms with varying frequencies.

With regard to standard idioms, guessing from the context was the most frequently used strategy, indicating that the learners relied mostly on contextual clues and the surrounding words to understand unfamiliar idioms. To interpret the idiom, *to tighten one's belt*, one of the respondents relied on the preceding sentence (After getting laid off from the pen factory). He explained that the context helped him to decipher the intended meaning of the idiom, stating that George has to save his money since he is in a bad financial situation. The second most frequently used strategy was referring to an L1 idiom, which suggests that learners tend to rely on the similarities between their mother tongue and the foreign language to interpret unfamiliar expressions. The following is an example taken from the data : one of the participants said : "the researcher had *to roll up his sleeves* to get the proposal in on time, this expression means that he has to work harder, I think there is a similar expression in my native language. In Kabyle, we say *ad icemmer fighallen-is*". Using background knowledge ranked third in terms of the frequency of use. This shows that the subjects have little knowledge about standard idioms and this is may be due to the fact that students do not encounter them in the course of their daily conversations. Using literal meaning was the least frequently used strategy, indicating that this type of idioms is rarely understood based on the meaning of individual words.

Concerning informal idioms, guessing from the context was again the most frequently used strategy. This shows the importance of context in idiom comprehension especially when words do not reflect the intended meaning. For instance, to guess the meaning of the idiom *to*

have green thumb, a student reported that in that context, the color of plants was green but a green thumb did not mean to have a green finger so from relating the words to each other, he was able to understand that green thumb means that Jennifer was acquainted or she knew how to do her job. The second most frequently used strategy was the use of background knowledge, indicating that the participants have good knowledge about informal idioms contrary to standard ones. This is maybe because the respondents are exposed to this type of idioms. The following example is extracted from the data : regarding the idiom *to let the cat out the bag*, one, of the respondents stated : "I already know this expression, I heard it somewhere in a movie or I don't remember". Referring to an L1 idiom ranked third. This could be related to the fact that informal idioms are somewhat culture-specific. They are used within specific speech communities and they may contain words that imply inappropriate meaning when translated to another language (Aoumer and Douib, 2014). Literal meaning was the least frequently used strategy to understand informal idioms, suggesting that learners often expect informal idioms to carry figurative meanings rather than literal ones.

As for slang idioms, learners again have shown great reliance on the context to interpret the meaning of this type of idioms. Even when the idiom is familiar, they still try to figure out its meaning by relating it to the surrounding words. In the expression *to get sacked*, despite the fact that the meaning of the idiom is clear without relating it to the surrounding context, one of the participants relied on the previous sentence (Molly was a bad worker) to arrive to the following meaning : get fired. The second most frequently used strategy was using background knowledge. This is maybe because slang idioms are frequently encountered. One of the respondents said the following when interpreting the idiom *something is chicken feed* : "I have already heard that all things that are described as chicken feed are downlooked or cheap". The third one was referring to an L1 idiom. The least frequently used strategy when dealing with slang idioms was using the literal meaning, however, its percentage was higher compared to its

use in the comprehension of idioms that belong to the two previous categories, this suggested that slang idioms may be more literal than both standard and informal idioms. The idiom *to get sacked* was literally interpreted by one of the participants by explaining that the verb *to get sacked* means to be fired, so the meaning of the idiom can be understood by looking at its individual words.

Chapter Five

Conclusions

This chapter presents a summary of the main findings of this study. It also provides some pedagogical implications for teachers and syllabus designers. Finally, this chapter concludes with some suggestions for future research.

1. Summary of the Results

This study explored the different strategies used by Master One Kabyle EFL learners at the University of Bejaia to comprehend English idioms. In addition, it examined the challenges they face when trying to understand these expressions. This study also aimed at identifying the type of English idioms that is most difficult to understand.

1.1 Difficulties Faced by Master 1 EFL Learners in Understanding English Idioms

A number of difficulties were identified by EFL learners when trying to understand English idioms. The lack of cultural background was the most common difficulty faced by Kabyle EFL learners when trying to comprehend idioms (80% agreed with this statement). This highlights how idioms are deeply linked to culture. The second major difficulty which stands as a barrier for Kabyle EFL learners was the figurative nature of idioms (the percentage of agreement with the statement was 73.34%). This confirms that idioms cannot be understood by analysing their constituent words. The lack of exposure and the absence of contextual clues appeared in the third position with a percentage of 66.67%. This shows that unfamiliarity with English idioms stems from the fact that students live in a non-native speaking country ; therefore they are not sufficiently exposed to idiomatic expressions. In addition, the absence of context makes idioms difficult for Kabyle EFL learners to understand. The low-frequency or unfamiliar words found in English idioms were reported to be the fifth most common difficulty faced by Kabyle EFL

learners in understanding English idioms (53.33% agreed with this statement). Finally, the difficulty that received the lowest percentage of agreement was that idioms are not included in the syllabi (43.33%), indicating that some students regard idioms as an important aspect of language that should be given more emphasis in schools and universities.

1.2 Types of Idioms that are Difficult to Understand

The findings of this study indicated that slang idioms were the easiest type of idioms for Kabyle EFL learners to comprehend. This type of idioms received the lowest percentage of incorrect answers (0.83%). Informal idioms also showed a high level of comprehension among Kabyle EFL learners as the percentage of incorrect answers was only 3.33%. In contrast, standard idioms were identified as the most difficult type of idioms for Kabyle EFL learners to understand, with a percentage of 7.22% of incorrect answers. This indicates that EFL learners are better equipped to interpret slang and informal idioms and this is mainly because of their exposure to these types of idioms via social media and TV. Conversely, the difficulty in comprehending standard idioms is linked to lack of exposure as they are used in formal contexts.

1.3 Strategies Used by Master 1 EFL students to Understand English idioms

The data collected from the participants revealed that 30 Master One EFL students employed 4 strategies to comprehend 12 English idioms which were categorized based on their level of formality (Standard, Informal and Slang). 319 instances of strategies were used by the subjects to arrive to the meanings of idioms. Guessing from the context was the most dominant strategy (53.92%), indicating that more than half of the learners relied on contextual clues to interpret the English idiomatic expressions. The second most frequently used strategy was referring to an L1 idiom, accounting for 21.63% of the whole responses. This shows that when students struggle in understanding unfamiliar idioms in the foreign language, they use their

mother tongue as a reference. With a percentage of 19.43%, using background knowledge appeared in the third position. This implies that prior experiences and general knowledge helps students in processing English idioms. Finally, the least frequently used strategy was using the literal meaning of the idiom (5.02%), likely due to the figurative meanings of idioms.

2. Pedagogical Implications

This piece of research offers valuable insights for curriculum development, particularly for Algerian syllabus designers who may consider incorporating idioms more systematically into their programs. The findings of this study also highlight the need to adopt effective teaching strategies to address the difficulties faced by EFL students when dealing with idioms. By integrating idioms thoughtfully into the syllabus and employing targeted instructional approaches, educators can enhance learners' comprehension and practical use of these expressions, ultimately improving their overall English proficiency.

3. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could benefit from expanding the selection of idioms beyond the 12 used in the present study. A more extensive and varied set of idioms would allow researchers to explore learners' comprehension and usage across a broader spectrum of figurative language. Additionally, adopting a pre-test / post-test experimental design with both control and experimental group may provide more concrete evidence of instructional effectiveness on idiom comprehension. Another worthwhile direction is to examine how learners' proficiency levels impact their ability to comprehend and use idioms. Investigating why certain idioms remain resistant to comprehension despite exposure and strategy use could offer valuable insights into the cognitive and cultural barriers that are involved.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Dear participant,

We are conducting a study on the strategies and difficulties faced by Algerian Kabyle EFL learners in understanding English idioms. Please complete the questionnaire below truthfully. We would like to assure you that all your answers will be kept confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

An idiom is "any group of words whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meaning of their individual words" (Healy, 1968, p.71). For example, the idiomatic expression "*to kick the bucket*" does not mean to literally kick the bucket ; it means *to die*.

Section 1: Personal Information

Gender : ☐ Male ☐ Female	Age :
Year of study :	Speciality :

Section 2: The Students' Difficulties in Understanding English Idioms

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Please tick one box for each statement)

Difficulties in Understanding English Idioms		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Idioms are difficult to understand because they often contain low-frequency or unfamiliar words.					
2	Idioms are difficult to understand because their meaning cannot always be deduced from the meanings of the individual words.					
3	Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background.					
4	Idioms are difficult without context clues.					

5	Idioms are difficult because of the lack of exposure to them.					
6	Idioms are difficult because they are not included in the syllabi.					

Appendix B

Idiom Recognition Test

Read the sentences below and give the meanings of the underlined idioms with explanations of how you arrived to those meanings. Please don't try to plan out what you say. Just act as if you are alone in the room speaking to yourself. Your answers will be recorded.

1. Looking up at the sky can make you feel like a little frog in a big pond.
2. Pam needed a vacation because she was suffering from burnout.
3. After getting laid off from the pen factory, George had to tighten his belt.
4. The researcher had to roll up his sleeves to get the proposal in on time.
5. The salesman sold Mrs. Smith a broken dishwasher. He pulled the wool over her eyes.
6. After coming back from her interview, Stacey knew she had the job in the bag.
7. People say that Jennifer can keep any plant alive with her green thumb.
8. By mistake, Kay let the cat out of the bag when she revealed the surprise.
9. We decided that Molly was a bad worker and that she would have to get sacked.
10. After dinner, John would go over to the mall to see what's cooking.
11. Because Betsy cannot keep a secret, other people call her a big mouth.
12. To some people, a thousand dollars is chicken feed.

Résumé

Cette étude vise à examiner les difficultés rencontrées par les apprenants kabyles d'anglais comme langue étrangère ainsi que les stratégies qu'ils emploient pour comprendre les expressions idiomatiques anglaises. Les participants dans l'étude étaient 30 étudiants de master 1 en anglais à l'université de Béjaïa, en Algérie. Les participants ont été sélectionnés selon une technique d'échantillonnage de commodité. Un questionnaire et un test de reconnaissance des expressions idiomatiques ont été utilisés comme instruments pour collecter les données. Les résultats de l'étude ont montré que les apprenants kabyles d'anglais comme langue étrangère rencontraient plusieurs difficultés dans la compréhension des idiomes anglais, notamment le manque de connaissance culturelle, la nature non littérale des expressions idiomatiques, l'absence d'indices contextuels, une exposition limitée aux expressions idiomatiques et un vocabulaire inconnu. Par ailleurs, les résultats ont montré que les expressions idiomatiques standards étaient les plus difficiles à comprendre pour les apprenants kabyles, suivis par les expressions idiomatiques informels, tandis que les expressions d'argot étaient les plus faciles à comprendre. Les résultats ont également révélé que les apprenants kabyles utilisaient quatre stratégies pour interpréter les expressions idiomatiques anglaises, à savoir: deviner à partir du contexte, se référer à un idiome en langue maternelle, utiliser les connaissances préalables et utiliser le sens littéral de l'expression idiomatique. Cette étude est significative car elle offre des pistes précieuses pour améliorer l'enseignement des expressions idiomatiques et renforcer la compréhension et l'apprentissage de celles-ci par les apprenants.

Mots clés : Les apprenants Kabyles Algérien d'anglais, Difficultés de compréhension des expressions idiomatiques, stratégies de compréhension des expressions idiomatiques.

