



An exploration of Difficulties and Strategies Encountered by Yemeni EFL Undergraduates in understanding idiomatic expressions

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Abstract

Idiomatic expressions are an integral part of English proficiency, reflecting both linguistic and cultural competence. However, they present persistent challenges for non-native speakers due to their figurative nature, cultural specificity, and lack of direct equivalents in learners' first language. This study investigated the difficulties Yemeni undergraduate EFL learners face in understanding idiomatic expressions and explored the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. A structured questionnaire was administered to 30 level-four English major students at Sana'a University. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) and inferential analysis via SPSS to identify patterns and potential differences across gender and educational background. The findings revealed that learners' main obstacles stemmed from limited cultural knowledge, insufficient exposure to idioms in authentic contexts, and the arbitrariness of idiomatic meanings. To address these challenges, students reported using strategies such as guessing meaning from context, literal interpretation, consulting L1 equivalents, memorization, and visualization. No significant differences were observed based on gender, suggesting that, within this small group of Yemeni EFL undergraduates at Sana'a University, the reported difficulties and strategies were broadly shared. Given the limited sample size and single-institution context, these findings should be viewed as preliminary and cannot be generalized to all advanced EFL learners. The study highlights the pedagogical importance of systematic instruction in idioms, emphasizing contextualized practice, authentic materials, and interactive classroom activities. Incorporating these approaches can enhance learners' comprehension and production of idiomatic expressions and contribute to both linguistic proficiency and cultural competence. These findings offer practical insights for EFL educators seeking to improve idiomatic competence, which remains a key marker of advanced English mastery.

1. INTRODUCTION

Idiomatic expressions are often regarded as the colorful and expressive side of a language, adding nuance, cultural depth, and stylistic richness to communication (Bulut, 2004). Mastery of idioms is widely considered a hallmark of advanced language proficiency, as they frequently appear in spoken and written discourse and carry meanings beyond the literal interpretation of their words (Moon, 2006; Langlotz, 2006). Native speakers use idiomatic expressions spontaneously, often without conscious reflection on their figurative meanings (Boers, 2008).

For non-native speakers, however, idioms present significant challenges due to their figurative, culturally embedded, and often arbitrary nature.

For example, consider idioms such as hot under the collar, breathe fire, and let off steam, all of which denote anger. Their meanings derive from shared cultural and conceptual metaphors: anger is conceptualized as internal heat, which can cause physical reactions such as flushed faces or raised voices. While such imagery is intuitive to native speakers, learners unfamiliar with the metaphorical reasoning may misinterpret or fail to use these expressions accurately. Similarly, idioms like bite off more than you can chew or raining cats and dogs carry figurative meanings that cannot be deduced from the literal definitions of their individual words. Without explicit instruction or contextual support, non-native learners are prone to misunderstand these expressions, which can lead to breakdowns in comprehension and communication.

Arabic-speaking EFL learners, including those in Yemen, face additional challenges due to cross-linguistic differences. Many English idioms lack direct equivalents in Arabic, limiting learners' ability to rely on first-language (L1) transfer. Research shows that idioms with recognizable counterparts in the L1 are generally easier for learners to acquire, while idioms without analogues or with culturally specific references are significantly more difficult to master (McPartland, 2000; Pimenova, 2011). Furthermore, the arbitrary nature of idiomatic meanings and their non-literalness exacerbate these challenges, requiring learners to develop strategies that go beyond simple vocabulary memorization (Ali et al., 2023).

The significance of idiomatic competence extends beyond lexical knowledge; it reflects both linguistic and cultural proficiency. Learners who lack idiomatic competence may struggle with reading comprehension, listening, speaking, and writing, particularly in authentic contexts such as academic discussions, media content, or professional communication. Moreover, idiomatic expressions are often used in idiomatic or figurative language tasks in language proficiency exams, making their mastery essential for both academic success and real-life communication. Consequently, understanding how learners process idioms and the difficulties they encounter is critical for effective EFL pedagogy.

Previous studies in the Arab context highlight the persistent difficulties learners face with idioms. Alhaysony (2007) found that Saudi EFL learners often struggle with comprehension and production due to limited cultural knowledge and infrequent exposure to idiomatic language. Saleh and Zakaria (2013) reported that Libyan students relied heavily on guessing from context but still faced challenges with unfamiliar expressions. Jordanian and Yemeni studies similarly suggest that EFL learners' idiomatic competence is closely linked to exposure, contextual understanding, and strategy use (Alrishan & Smadi, 2015; Al-Kadi, 2015). Despite this research, there is still a need for focused studies on Yemeni undergraduates, as sociolinguistic and educational contexts may influence both the types of idioms learners encounter and the strategies they employ.

In addition to identifying difficulties, it is crucial to examine the strategies learners use to understand idioms. Research in second-language acquisition suggests that learners employ a combination of strategies, including guessing from context, consulting L1 equivalents, literal analysis, memorization, and visualization (Cooper, 1999; Zyzik, 2009). These strategies are often applied flexibly, depending on learners' prior knowledge, the complexity of the idiom,

and the communicative context. Understanding which strategies are most effective in specific contexts can inform curriculum design and classroom instruction, allowing educators to scaffold idiom learning better and improve students' communicative competence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition and Nature of Idioms

Idiomatic expressions are typically defined as fixed combinations of words whose meanings cannot be deduced directly from the literal meanings of their individual components (Moon, 2006; Langlotz, 2006). These expressions often embody conceptual metaphors, cultural images, and figurative meanings (Marlies, 1995). For example, spill the beans does not literally mean beans spilling, but rather it means to reveal a secret—a meaning that transcends the literal meaning of each word.

Idioms also vary in their transparency, fixedness, and cultural specificity. Some idioms are transparent (their figurative meaning relates more clearly to their literal meaning), while others are opaque (metaphorically distant from their literal structure). Additionally, many idioms are culturally bound, drawing on specific historical or social backgrounds (Langlotz, 2006). Recent research emphasizes the cognitive dimension of idiom learning. For instance, Aydin (2024) conducted a comparative study using two visual instructional techniques—pictorial representation of literal meanings and pictorial representation of figurative meanings—across EFL and ESL learners. The study revealed that EFL learners benefited more from the literal-pictorial technique, particularly for transparent idioms, whereas ESL learners performed better when taught using figurative visualizations. This suggests that in contexts with limited natural exposure to the idiomatic language (like many EFL settings), literal imagery may provide stronger cognitive scaffolding.

2.2. Difficulties in Idiom Acquisition

EFL learners face multiple, interrelated challenges in acquiring idiomatic competence:

1. Non-literalness and Arbitrariness

Idioms are often arbitrary: their figurative meaning bears no logical link to the literal meanings of their words (Hussein et al., 2000; Boers, 2008). This arbitrariness makes them resistant to simple vocabulary-learning strategies, requiring learners to develop deeper semantic and conceptual understanding.

2. Cultural and Conceptual Gaps

Many idioms reflect cultural, historical, or social practices from the L2 community. Without familiarity with that culture, learners may misinterpret idioms or miss their intended nuances (Pimenova, 2011). In some cases, idioms may reference culturally specific events or values that are not easily translated across contexts.

3. Absence of L1 Equivalents

For many learners, especially those whose L1 differs greatly from English, direct equivalents for English idioms might not exist. This lack of equivalence complicates comprehension, forcing learners to rely on inferencing, memorization, or translation (McPartland, 2000; Al-Kadi, 2015). This issue has been documented in Yemeni EFL contexts: for example, Alwan Talib (2023) found that a large proportion of errors in translating English idioms into Arabic among Yemeni learners stem from inappropriate literal translation, indicating a gap in idiomatic competence.

4. Limited Exposure

Idioms are more frequent in spoken language, literature, media, and informal registers—contexts that EFL learners may not regularly access in academic settings. As Irujo (1986) and Nation (2001) argue, frequency and varied contextual exposure are critical to internalizing idiomatic expressions, but such exposure is often lacking in EFL curricula.

5. Syntactic Fixedness and Pragmatic Use

Idioms are often syntactically fixed (e.g., you cannot arbitrarily change their word order, tense, or structure). This rigidity can be a hurdle for learners whose L1 has more syntactic flexibility or who are used to transforming phrases.

6. Error Patterns in Translation

Empirical evidence from Yemeni learners shows a high rate of literal translation when dealing with idioms. Alwan Talib (2023) reported a 67.8% error rate in learners' translation of English idioms into Arabic, mostly due to literal renditions rather than idiomatic ones.

7. Weak Curricular Integration

In many educational contexts, idioms are not sufficiently integrated into regular language instruction. Textbooks may focus on grammar and vocabulary, relegating idioms to the margins, which limits learners' exposure and practice.

2.3. Strategies for Learning Idioms

To navigate these difficulties, learners use a variety of strategies. Research identifies several recurring strategies, some of which are more effective depending on learners' context and instructional support.

1. Contextual Guessing

Contextual guessing emerges as one of the most commonly used strategies. Cooper (1999) found that L2 learners frequently use contextual cues (surrounding text or situation) to infer idiomatic meaning. Zyzik (2009) also reported that guessing from context is frequently and successfully used by learners.

2. Literal Decomposition and Analysis

Learners sometimes break down idioms into their component words, analyze the literal meaning, and then map that understanding onto a metaphorical concept (Bulut & Yazici, 2004). This strategy can be especially useful for idioms with transparent metaphors.

3. L1 Equivalents and Translation

Consulting L1 equivalents remains a powerful strategy for many learners. When a learner's native language has a similar idiom, they can use that as a scaffold for learning the L2 idiom (Cooper, 1999; McPartland, 2000). However, as noted, this is not always possible, especially for culturally unique expressions.

4. Memorization and Repetition

Repeated encounter with idioms in various contexts is essential for retention. Nation (2001) and Krasner (1994) emphasize the role of exposure, recommending that idioms be presented in rich, varied contexts repeatedly to aid learning.

5. Dual Coding / Visualization

Visualization helps learners form mental images that tie literal and figurative meanings together. According to the Dual Coding Theory (Clark & Paivio, 1991), when information is presented both verbally and visually, it is more deeply encoded in memory. Empirical studies support this: Aydin (2024) showed that pictorial (literal) visuals were particularly helpful for EFL learners, whereas ESL learners benefited more from figurative visuals.

Similarly, Samburskiy (2020) found that using dual-coding techniques (mapping literal onto figurative meanings) significantly improved EFL learners' interpretation of unfamiliar idioms.

6. Etymological / Historical Explanation

Understanding the origin or history of an idiom can deepen a learner's conceptual grasp. Haghshenas & Hashemian (2016), for instance, recommend exploring literal origins as a way to build mental imagery and make idioms more memorable.

7. Multimodal Instruction

More recent pedagogical research emphasizes combining modes (lexical, etymological, visual, contextual) to teach idioms. Alnujaidi (2025) compared different approaches—lexical, etymological, and multimodal—and found that the multimodal approach significantly outperformed the others in developing idiomatic competence.

8. Techniques in Teaching Idioms

Teaching techniques also matter. Nakhchivan (2024) outlines effective methods such as using contextualized learning, corpus-based approaches, and visual aids to teach idioms, supporting the idea that idioms must be taught with attention to both language and culture.

2.4.Cultural Awareness, Attitudes, and Pedagogical Implications

Idioms carry more than linguistic meaning; they convey cultural values, beliefs, and shared conceptual metaphors. Thus, idiom learning is closely tied to cultural competence.

Cultural Awareness: Bara (2025) studied Algerian EFL teachers and students and found that both groups believe idioms are crucial for promoting cross-cultural understanding. However, they also identified challenges: teachers reported a lack of authentic materials, while students wanted more cultural context behind idioms.

Learner Attitudes and Motivation: In Jordan, Alfaqara (2021) surveyed 214 EFL students and found that although they held very positive attitudes toward idioms, they nonetheless encountered barriers—such as lack of L1 equivalents and rare idioms—and most commonly used strategies like memorization and dictionary use.

Cross-Cultural Translation: Ymeri & Vula (2023) investigated how EFL students translate English idioms into Albanian. Their study showed students preferred paraphrasing and cultural equivalents over literal translation, revealing how learners navigate idiomatic meaning in culturally meaningful ways.

2.5.Empirical Studies in the Arab / Middle Eastern Context

Some studies have specifically looked at idiom processing in the Arab world, which is especially relevant for your Yemeni context:

Iraqi EFL Learners: Hassan (2021) examined idiom comprehension and usage among Iraqi university students. The study found that students had weak idiom familiarity and struggled particularly with the figurative meaning, attributing errors to insufficient curricular coverage and lack of exposure.

Yemeni Learners: As mentioned, Alwan Talib (2023) conducted an error-analysis study on idiom translation among Yemeni EFL learners and found high rates of literal translation errors, suggesting a gap in idiomatic competence and contextual understanding.

Additionally, EFL learners' idiomatic competence has been linked to their speaking skills: a thesis from Ecuador (Heredia Gallegos, 2022) showed that idiomatic expressions significantly contribute to communicative fluency and cultural understanding in speaking practice.

2.6.Research Gaps and Rationale for the Current Study

Based on the literature, the following gaps emerge—especially relevant to Yemeni EFL undergraduates:

1. **Specific Research in Yemeni Context:** While there is research on translation errors (Alwan Talib, 2023), fewer studies examine how Yemeni learners interpret idioms (comprehension) and which strategies they actively use to process them.
2. **Instructional Approaches:** Despite evidence that multimodal instruction is effective (Alnujaidi, 2025), there's limited research on how such approaches perform in Arab EFL classrooms, considering cultural norms and resource constraints.

3. Idioms and Cultural Competence: Research like Bara (2025) underlines the role of idioms in cultivating cultural awareness, but few studies explore how Yemeni students perceive idioms' cultural functions and how this perception affects their learning.

4. Effectiveness of Strategies: Many studies rely on self-reported strategy use. There is a need for mixed-method or experimental research in the Yemeni context to test which strategies actually lead to better comprehension, retention, and production of idiomatic expressions.

2.7. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in several theoretical perspectives:

Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1991): Suggests learners benefit when idioms are represented both visually and verbally, which can enhance memory and comprehension.

Cross-linguistic Transfer: Examines how L1 influences L2 idiom processing, especially in translation, strategy use, and comprehension (McPartland, 2000; Cooper, 1999).

Language Learning Strategies Framework (Oxford, 1990): Emphasizes that learners actively deploy cognitive, memory, and metacognitive strategies (like guessing, visualization, or analysis) to make learning more effective. As already noted, extensive studies have been conducted to examine the difficulties and strategies of EFL learners encounter in acquiring idiomatic expressions. However, the body of research about leaners' difficulties and strategies English idioms is still in need to be examined and studied carefully.

2.8. Research Questions

The present study focuses specifically on Yemeni EFL undergraduates at Sana'a University, aiming to answer two main research questions:

1. What difficulties do Yemeni EFL learners face in understanding and using English idiomatic expressions?
2. What strategies do they employ to facilitate comprehension and accurate usage of idioms?
- 3- Are there statistically significant differences in the responses of EFL students based on their gender ?
4. Are there statistically significant differences in the responses of EFL students based on their educational background ?

By investigating these questions, the study seeks to provide practical insights for EFL educators in Yemen and similar contexts. The findings will highlight key challenges learners face, illuminate effective strategies for idiom acquisition, and suggest pedagogical approaches to enhance both linguistic and cultural competence. Ultimately, the study aims to bridge the gap between learners' exposure to idiomatic language and their ability to comprehend and produce it effectively, contributing to improved language learning outcomes and advanced proficiency.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This study employed a descriptive and analytical research design using a quantitative approach supplemented by qualitative insights. The design was chosen to systematically investigate the difficulties Yemeni EFL undergraduates face in understanding idiomatic expressions and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. Quantitative methods allow for measuring the prevalence and frequency of difficulties and strategies, while qualitative insights provide explanatory depth regarding learners' experiences.

The study's framework aligns with prior research on idiom acquisition (Cooper, 1999; Al-Kadi, 2015; Alnujaidi, 2025) and builds on dual coding and language learning strategies theories to analyze learner behavior.

3.2. Participants

The study population consisted of 30 Yemeni EFL undergraduates enrolled in level-four English major courses at Sana'a University, Faculty of Languages. Using purposive sampling, 30 students (10 males and 20 females) were selected to participate, based on the following criteria:

1. Enrolled in level-four English courses, ensuring an advanced understanding of English.
2. Willingness to participate voluntarily.
3. Adequate proficiency in English, as verified by cumulative grade point average and instructor assessment.

The participants' age ranged between 19 and 23 years, and all were native Arabic speakers with prior exposure to English in academic contexts, which is consistent with the requirements of EFL research (Al-Kadi, 2015; Alfaqara, 2021).

3.3. Limitations

Although the study was carefully designed, several limitations should be noted:

1. Sample Size: The study involved only 30 participants from a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.
2. Self-Reported Data: Reliance on questionnaires introduces potential bias, as students may over- or under-report their difficulties or strategy use.
3. Context-Specific Findings: Results may be influenced by the particular curriculum and instructional methods at Sana'a University, and may not fully reflect the experiences of EFL learners in other Yemeni universities.

3.4. Justification

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust framework for identifying key difficulties and strategies related to idiomatic competence. Combining descriptive, inferential, and qualitative analyses allows for a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences, aligns with similar studies in the region (Al-Kadi, 2015; Alhaysony, 2007; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013), and offers actionable insights for improving idiom instruction in EFL contexts.

3.5. Instruments

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed specifically for this study. The questionnaire was designed based on prior research (Alhaysony, 2007; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013; Cooper, 1999) and consisted of three main sections:

1. Demographic Information: Questions about gender, age, academic level, and prior exposure to English.
2. Difficulties in Understanding Idioms: A set of 13 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = Strongly Agree) measuring difficulties such as non-literalness, cultural gaps, lack of L1 equivalents, and exposure frequency.
3. Strategies for Learning Idioms: A set of 15 items rated on the same 4-point Likert scale assessing the use of strategies, including contextual guessing, literal analysis, L1 equivalents, memorization, visualization, and multimodal approaches.

The questionnaire was validated by three experienced EFL instructors for clarity, relevance, and content validity. A pilot study with five students was conducted to ensure reliability, with a resulting Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency.

3.6. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure followed these steps:

1. Ethical Approval: Permission was obtained from the Department of English, Sana'a University, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality.
2. Distribution of Questionnaires: Questionnaires were administered in classroom settings during regular course hours to ensure a high response rate.
3. Instructions: Clear instructions were provided verbally and in written form, emphasizing honest and accurate responses.
4. Collection and Screening: Completed questionnaires were collected immediately and checked for completeness. Missing or inconsistent responses were excluded from the final analysis.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed to protect participants:

Informed Consent: Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written consent. **Confidentiality:** Personal identifiers were removed, and responses were coded numerically to ensure anonymity.

Voluntary Participation: Students were assured that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data Security: All data were stored securely and will be used exclusively for academic purposes.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. The following procedures were applied:

1. Descriptive Statistics: Means, standard deviations, and frequencies were for each item to assess common difficulties and strategies.

calculated 2. Inferential Statistics: Independent-sample t-tests were used to examine potential differences in difficulties and strategies based on gender and also to explore differences across other demographic variables, such as prior exposure to English .

3. Degree of Agreement: The degree of agreement for each item was determined using the mean score :

(1.00–1.74): Strongly disagree

(1.75–2.49) :Disagree

(2.50–3.24) : Agree

(3.25–4.00) : Strongly agree

4. Qualitative Analysis: Open-ended responses were analyzed thematically to provide insight into specific difficulties or strategies mentioned by students beyond the questionnaire items.

4.1.Sources of difficulties in learning idioms

To answer the first research question "what are the difficulties EFL Yemeni University students encounter in understanding English idioms?",

Table (1) Sources of difficulties in learning idioms

No	Statement	Agree F %	Disagree F %	M	Std. D.	Degree of agreement
1.	I feel confident using English idioms	13 37.1	11 31.4	2.53	.819	agree
2.	Authentic texts should accompany idiom study.	19 54.3	10 28.6	2.60	.563	agree
3.	Idioms are difficult to understand due to lack of experience.	17 48.6	5 14.3	3.10	.662	Strongly agree
4.	Idioms are easy to use.	12 34.3	11 1.42	2.47	.860	agree
5.	Idioms are difficult to understand due to lack of cultural background	19 54.3	5 14.3	2.83	.747	agree
6.	Idioms are difficult because they are not taught well in class	10 28.6	6 17.1	2.47	1.106	disagree
7.	Idioms are difficult because the cultural courses I attended were insufficient	9 25.7	8 22.9	2.67	1.061	agree
8.	Idioms are difficult because they are not included in my course syllabus	15 42.9	9 25.7	2.90	.712	agree
9.	Idioms are difficult because many words are unfamiliar	17 48.6	8 22.9	2.90	.662	agree
10.	Idioms are difficult because they have no equivalent in my first language.	16 45.7	6 17.1	2.67	.884	agree

11.	Idioms should be presented in a manner that mirrors real-life language use.	17	48.6	4	11.4	3.17	.648	Strongly agree
12.	Idioms are difficult because I only learn them in textbooks	7	20.0	18	51.4	2.90	.803	agree

The quantitative results in Table 1 highlight several significant challenges faced by the participants. For the statement “Idioms are difficult to understand due to lack of cultural background,” nineteen students (54.3%) agreed, while five students (14.3%) disagreed, indicating that limited cultural knowledge is a prominent obstacle. For the statement “Idioms are difficult to understand due to lack of experience,” seventeen students (48.6%) agreed and five students (14.3%) disagreed, suggesting that insufficient real-life exposure to idioms also contributes to learners’ difficulties. Multiple statements address teaching and course content: “Idioms are difficult because they are not taught well in class” received agreement from ten students (28.6%), with six students (17.1%) disagreeing and the rest neutral, and a mean of 2.47 (“agree”). “Idioms are difficult because they are not included in my course syllabus” saw agreement from fifteen students (42.9%), with nine students (25.7%) disagreeing, and a mean of 2.90 (“agree”). These findings suggest that students perceive current teaching practices and curriculum design as insufficient, limiting opportunities to learn idioms through structured lessons and materials. Lexical and language transfer barriers were also reported: “Idioms are difficult because many words are unfamiliar” received agreement from seventeen students (48.6%), with eight students (22.9%) neutral, and a mean of 2.90 (“agree”). “Idioms are difficult because they have no equivalent in my first language” received agreement from sixteen students (45.7%), with six students (17.1%) disagreeing, and a mean of 2.67 (“agree”). The lack of direct translation or meaning in their L1 makes it harder for students to internalize idiomatic meanings. Only nine students (25.7%) agreed that “Idioms are difficult because the cultural courses I attended were insufficient,” with eight students (22.9%) neutral, and a mean of 2.67 (“agree”). This suggests diverse opinions on whether formal cultural education significantly impacts idiom mastery. Overall, the table illustrates that the greatest challenges for students include cultural gaps (54.3% agree, mean = 2.83), insufficient direct experience with idioms, a lack of teaching and syllabus coverage (28.6–42.9% agree, means = 2.47–2.90), lexical unfamiliarity (48.6% agree, mean = 2.90), and problems with language transfer (45.7% agree, mean = 2.67). The majority of mean scores fall into the “agree” range, solidifying these as real and pressing difficulties within the learner group. These findings underscore the importance of integrating explicit idiom instruction, including cultural context and authentic communicative practice, into language teaching. Addressing vocabulary challenges and providing opportunities to connect idioms to students’ backgrounds can further reduce these barriers and enhance idiomatic proficiency.

4.2. Widely Used Strategies in Idiom Learning

To answer the second research question " what strategies are widely used by EFL students to learn idioms?", descriptive statistics were calculated.

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of 15 items aimed to seek the participants' responses about the frequent use of strategies for learning and understanding idioms. The mean rating of frequency of strategies was calculated to determine which strategies were most widely used by students to learn idioms. They were ranked from the most frequently to the least frequently used strategies.

Table 2 Widely Used Strategies in Idiom Learning

	Strategy	Never F %	Rarely F %	Sometime s F %	Frequently F %	Std . D	Me an	Degree of usage
1.	I learn idioms by using them in sentences.	7 20.0	2 5.7	17 48.6	4 11.4	.803	2.90	Sometimes
2.	I can predict the meaning of idioms.	3 8.6	2 5.7	16 45.7	9 25.7	1.00	2.60	sometimes
3.	I learn idioms by communicating in English outside the classroom.	4 11.4	8 22.9	13 37.1	5 14.3	.890	3.03	Frequently
4.	I learn idioms through memorization.	11 36.7	7 20.0	6 17.1	6 17.1	.928	2.63	sometimes
5.	I learn idioms by reviewing them regularly	5 14.3	1 2.9	13 37.1	11 31.4	1.16	2.23	rarely
6.	I use multiple approaches, such as context clues, and memorization, to understand idioms	4 1.4	7 20.0	15 42.9	4 11.4	1.04	3.06	frequently
7.	I learn idioms through group discussion.	6 17.1	9 25.7	14 40.0	1 2.9	.937	2.13	Rarely
8.	I predict the meaning of idioms.	4 11.4	7 20.0	15 42.9	4 11.4	.794	2.30	Rarely
9.	I use descriptive definitions in English to learn idioms (meaning in L2).	1 2.9	13 37.1	12 34.3	4 11.4	.889	2.63	Sometimes
10.	When facing a difficult idiom, I ignore it.	2 5.7	2 5.7	14 40.0	14 40.0	.868	2.93	Sometimes
11.	I learn idioms through flashcards.	16 5.7	6 17.1	7 20.0	1 2.9	.844	1.66	never
12.	I translate idioms literally into my first language (L1) to understand them	12 34.3	3 8.6	10 28.6	5 14.3	1.04	2.86	Sometimes
13.	I learn an idiom better when video-graphic information supports its use.	3 8.6	9 5.7	7 20.0	11 31.4	1.17	2.26	Rarely
14.	I enjoy using idioms in conversation.	2 5.7	2 5.7	14 40.0	14 40.0	.868	2.93	Rarely

The analysis of student responses presented in Table 2 highlights the strategies that learners most frequently employ when learning English idioms. Among the strategies examined, students show a clear preference for approaches that involve active use and contextualized learning. For instance, “I use multiple approaches, such as context clues and memorization” received a mean score of 3.06, with 42.9% of students reporting “sometimes” and 11.4%

reporting “frequently,” classifying the overall degree of usage as frequently. This indicates that learners value combining different techniques to understand idioms rather than relying on a single method.

Another commonly used strategy is learning idioms by communicating in English outside the classroom, which earned a mean of 3.03 and a “frequently” usage classification. Specifically, 37.1% of participants reported using this strategy “sometimes” and 14.3% “frequently,” reflecting a strong inclination toward real-life application of idioms in authentic communicative settings.

Strategies that involve using idioms in sentences ($M = 2.90$, “sometimes”) and translating idioms literally into L1 ($M = 2.86$, “sometimes”) are also moderately used. These findings suggest that learners often rely on sentence-level practice and occasional first-language support to comprehend idiomatic expressions. Similarly, learners tend to predict idiom meanings ($M = 2.60$, “sometimes”) and memorize idioms ($M = 2.63$, “sometimes”) as supplementary strategies, indicating a mixed approach that balances active usage with memory-based learning.

In contrast, strategies such as learning idioms through flashcards ($M = 1.66$, “never”), group discussions ($M = 2.13$, “rarely”), and reviewing idioms regularly ($M = 2.23$, “rarely”) are the least frequently employed. These lower scores imply that students may prefer more interactive, context-driven methods over rote memorization or formal peer discussions.

Collectively, the data indicate that Yemeni EFL students favor contextualized, integrative, and communicative strategies for idiom learning, aligning with best practices in second language acquisition that emphasize exposure, usage, and flexibility (Irujo, 1986; Pimenova, 2011). Specifically, the strategies most widely used include:

Employing multiple approaches (context clues + memorization)

Learning idioms through real-life communication outside the classroom

Practicing idioms by using them in sentences.

These preferences highlight the importance of active, meaningful engagement with idioms and suggest that curriculum designers and instructors should prioritize strategies that promote authentic usage, contextual understanding, and varied practice opportunities.

Gender Differences in Understanding Idiomatic Expressions

This study investigated whether there were statistically significant differences in EFL students understanding of idiomatic expressions based on gender. To address this research question, an

independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of male and female students.

The following table summarizes the descriptive statistics and results of the independent-samples t-test comparing male and female students' comprehension of idiomatic expressions

Table 3 Comparison of Idiom Comprehension by Gender

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Mean Differences
Male	10	3.40	0.699	1.736	28	0.095	0.45
female	20	2.95	0.605				

Descriptive statistics for both groups are presented in Table 1. Male students (n = 10) had a mean score of 3.40 with a standard deviation of 0.699, whereas female students (n = 20) had a mean score of 2.95 with a standard deviation of 0.605

Although male students had a slightly higher mean score ($M = 3.40$) compared to female students ($M = 2.95$), the difference was not statistically significant, $t(28) = 1.736$, $p = 0.095$

Although the difference was not statistically significant, the slightly higher mean score for male students may reflect minor variability in idiom comprehension among individuals. This indicates that EFL students' difficulties or strengths in understanding idiomatic expressions are likely influenced more by individual differences, prior exposure, and learning strategies rather than by gender alone. Teachers and curriculum designers may consider incorporating diverse teaching approaches, such as contextualized practice and idiom-focused activities, to support all students in developing idiomatic competence effectively.

Overall, these findings suggest that gender is not a determining factor in EFL students' idiomatic comprehension, and instructional interventions should focus on strategies that benefit learners of all genders equally.

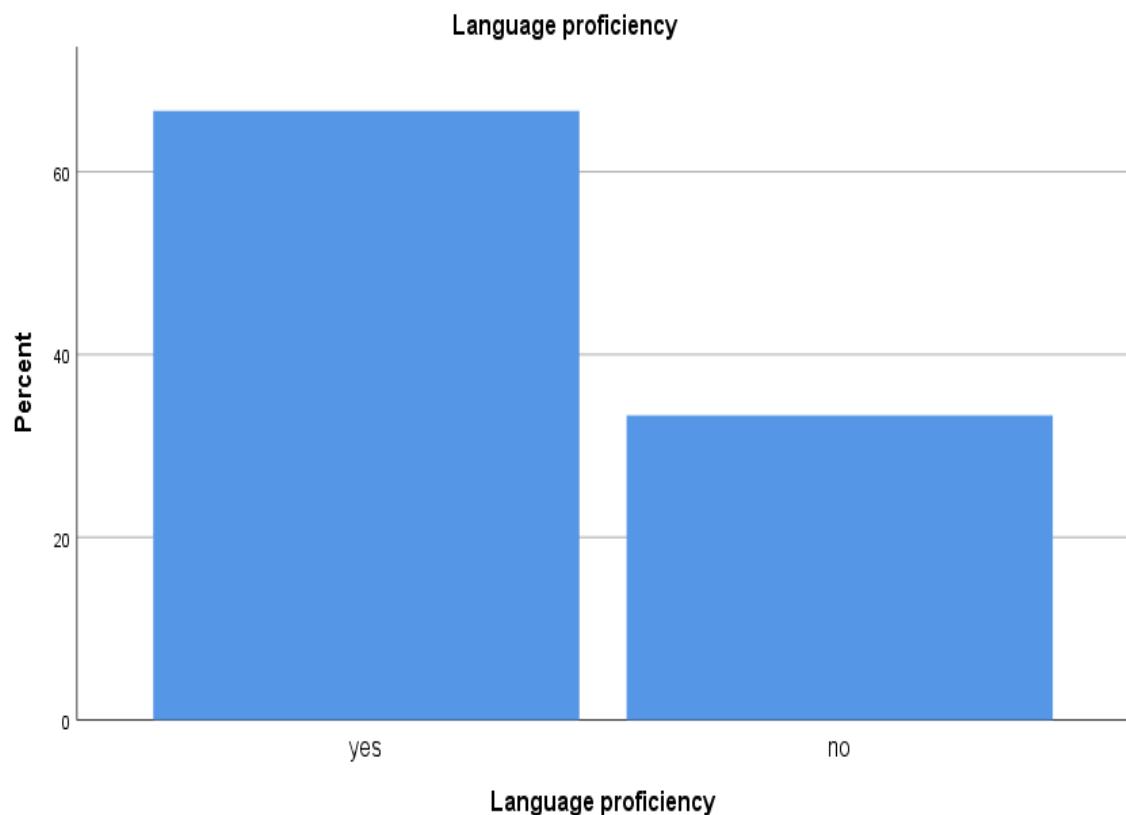
Also previous studies (e.g., Alhaysony, 2007; Al-Kadi, 2015) generally reported that gender does not significantly affect idiom comprehension, the present study shows that gender differences can exist in specific contexts, such as among Yemeni EFL undergraduates.

In conclusion, while idiomatic knowledge is influenced primarily by factors such as cultural familiarity, frequency of exposure, and learning strategies (Irujo, 1986; Pimenova, 2011), the current study demonstrates that gender does not have a measurable effect on students' ability to understand and process idioms.

4.3. Participants' Language Proficiency and Background

To answer to the fourth research question "are there statistically significant differences in the responses of EFL students based on their educational background ?" Descriptive statistics as

well as independent sample t-test were calculated. The percentage of those who had extra courses was 57.1 and those who had not was 28.6, see the figure 1 below



To examine whether students' educational background has an impact on their understanding of English idiomatic expressions, one samples t-test was conducted, table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of Idiom Comprehension by educational background

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	St.D
Language proficiency	15.232	29	.000	1.333	.479

The results revealed a t-value of 15.232 with a significance level of $p = .000$ and a standard deviation of 0.479. The significance level, being less than 0.05, indicates that the difference between groups is statistically significant.

These findings suggest that students coming from different educational backgrounds demonstrate noticeably different levels of ability in comprehending and interpreting idiomatic expressions in English. Specifically, students who have received a more intensive or high-quality English language education tend to perform better in processing idioms. This aligns with the idea that exposure to varied English language input, particularly in reading, speaking, and cultural content, enhances learners' understanding of figurative language, as idioms often carry cultural and contextual meanings that are not directly inferable from individual words.

Despite the standard deviation being the same across groups, the t-test confirms that educational background plays a meaningful role in idiom comprehension. This highlights the importance of considering prior learning experiences when designing instruction for EFL learners, particularly for advanced students who are expected to master idiomatic competence.

4.4.Implications for Teaching

1. Teachers should assess students' educational backgrounds to identify learners who may need additional support in understanding idiomatic expressions.
2. Instructional strategies such as contextualized examples, visual imagery, and repeated exposure to idioms can help bridge gaps in learners' prior educational experiences.
3. Curriculum developers may consider integrating idiomatic expressions more systematically across different educational levels to ensure all learners receive sufficient exposure.

In summary, the study found no significant influence of educational background on students' ability to understand and use English idioms, indicating that the difficulties and strategies reported in this cohort were broadly shared across different levels of prior experience. The participants included 30 undergraduate EFL students at Sana'a University, of whom 62.9% were advanced-level students and 37.1% were intermediate-level students. The one-sample t-test confirmed that the overall language proficiency of participants was statistically significant ($t = 19.653$, $df = 34$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the majority were sufficiently advanced to engage with idiomatic expressions in English. This aligns with Al-Kadi (2015), who also found that, in similar contexts, higher proficiency is generally associated with better idiom comprehension, but did not find significant differences across educational backgrounds within the cohort.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the Yemeni EFL students in this study face significant challenges in learning idiomatic expressions, primarily due to cultural gaps, lack of equivalents in Arabic, and insufficient instructional support. These difficulties appear consistent with patterns reported in previous research across various EFL contexts (Alhaysony, 2017; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013). The students in this sample reported employing a range of strategies to address these challenges, with contextual use, prediction, and L1 translation emerging as the most frequently used and perceived as effective. The findings from this limited cohort suggest a need for more systematic and explicit idiom instruction that integrates authentic texts, multimedia resources, and opportunities for contextualized practice (Nation, 2001; Kennedy, 2008). Furthermore, the absence of statistically significant gender- or educational-background effects in this study suggests that, within this small group of Yemeni EFL learners, idiom-learning difficulties and strategies are broadly shared across subgroups. This pattern underlines the importance of integrating idioms into the curriculum and providing learners with consistent exposure in similar instructional settings. In conclusion, the results of this study support the view that idiomatic competence is a critical component of EFL proficiency, at least for learners in comparable contexts. Effective instruction for such learners may benefit from combining explicit teaching, contextualized practice, multimedia support, and strategy training to help them comprehend and use idioms more naturally.

5.1. Summary of the Study

This study explored the difficulties that a group of Yemeni EFL undergraduates face in understanding English idiomatic expressions and the strategies they employ to facilitate comprehension. Idioms, as an important component of advanced English proficiency, can present persistent challenges for non-native speakers because of their non-literal meanings, cultural specificity, and lack of equivalents in learners' first language. Understanding and using idioms effectively is particularly important for developing both linguistic and cultural competence, yet many EFL learners encounter barriers that hinder fluent and accurate communication. The study involved 30 level-four English major students from Sana'a University. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of three sections: demographic information, difficulties in understanding idioms, and strategies for learning idioms. The instrument was validated by EFL experts and piloted to ensure reliability. Quantitative analyses, including descriptive statistics and inferential testing, were conducted using SPSS, and open-ended responses provided additional qualitative insights. The results revealed that, in this sample, learners faced multiple challenges in idiom comprehension: Non-literalness: Idioms could not be interpreted literally, making comprehension difficult for learners who rely on word-for-word translation. Cultural gaps: Idioms rooted in English culture, history, or literature were challenging to understand without relevant cultural background knowledge. Lack of L1 equivalents: Learners struggled with idioms that had no Arabic equivalents, highlighting the role of cross-linguistic differences in idiom acquisition. Limited exposure: Idioms were rarely included in textbooks or classroom instruction, limiting students' opportunities to encounter them in authentic contexts. Low frequency of idioms in input: Less frequent idioms were harder to comprehend, suggesting that repeated exposure is important for learning. These findings align with prior research in regional

and international contexts, while remaining specific to the present cohort, and they indicate that idiomatic comprehension challenges can be both widespread and multifaceted. Participants reported using several strategies to overcome these challenges: Contextual guessing: The most commonly used strategy, enabling learners to infer meanings from surrounding text or situational context. Literal analysis: Decomposing idioms into their constituent words to attempt figurative interpretation, although this was less reliable for more arbitrary idioms. Consulting L1 equivalents: Helpful for idioms with direct Arabic parallels, but less effective for culturally bound idioms. Memorization: Repetition and rote learning were widely used, especially for high-frequency idioms. Visualization and etymology: Applied to a moderate extent, suggesting potential for deeper engagement if systematically incorporated into teaching. No significant gender differences were observed in this study, indicating that, within this small group of advanced Yemeni EFL learners, reported difficulties and strategies were broadly similar across male and female students.

5.2. Implications

The findings from this limited sample have several implications for EFL pedagogy, curriculum design, and future research in similar contexts: Pedagogical design: Teachers should consider providing more explicit, systematic instruction on idioms, including figurative meanings, cultural background, usage, and situational context, particularly for learners with similar profiles. Exposure and frequency: Incorporating idioms into reading, listening, and speaking activities can increase familiarity and may enhance retention; repeated exposure in varied, authentic contexts seems especially helpful. Use of strategies: Learners can be trained to apply strategies such as contextual guessing, visualization, etymology, and mnemonic techniques more effectively in order to improve idiomatic competence. Curriculum development: Textbooks and course materials could include idioms of varying frequency, formality, and cultural relevance, allowing students in comparable programs to encounter them across multiple contexts. Integration of cultural knowledge: Cultural instruction accompanying idioms may help learners understand references, historical origins, and pragmatic usage, thereby reducing culture-related comprehension gaps. Teacher training: EFL teachers, particularly in Yemeni and similar contexts, should be made aware of learners' idiom-related difficulties and strategy preferences and be supported in providing guidance on effective idiom-learning techniques. You can use this as your revised version, or compare each sentence with your original to see how general claims were turned into specific, cautious ones. The key changes are: adding phrases like "in this sample," "within this small group," "in similar contexts," and avoiding words like "universal," "widespread" without qualification.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Yemeni EFL undergraduates at Sana'a University face considerable challenges in understanding and using English idiomatic expressions due to linguistic, cultural, and instructional factors. The study demonstrates that learners employ adaptive strategies to cope with these challenges, but there is a need for systematic teaching approaches that integrate idioms into meaningful contexts, emphasize cultural understanding, and encourage strategy development. The findings confirm that idiomatic competence is not merely a matter of vocabulary knowledge but involves cognitive, cultural, and metacognitive skills. Therefore, enhancing idiom instruction can significantly improve learners' overall language proficiency,

communicative competence, and cultural awareness within this specific context. This study provides practical guidance for EFL educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in Yemen and similar contexts, emphasizing the importance of idioms in achieving advanced English proficiency. However, given the limited sample size ($N = 30$) and the single-institution setting, the findings should be viewed as preliminary and cannot be generalized to all Yemeni or advanced EFL learners. Future research should explore larger, more diverse samples, incorporate longitudinal designs, and examine the effectiveness of specific teaching interventions for idioms, including digital tools, multimedia, and interactive classroom activities. Such studies would help build a more robust evidence base for idiom instruction in EFL contexts.

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