

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND IN UNDERSTANDING IDIOMS

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Abstract: Idioms are an essential component of natural language use and play a crucial role in achieving communicative competence in a foreign language. However, idioms are often culturally bound, which makes their comprehension particularly challenging for language learners from different cultural backgrounds. This study investigates the role of cultural background in understanding English idioms among learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Using a mixed-methods approach, the research examines how cultural knowledge influences idiom interpretation, comprehension accuracy, and pragmatic use. The findings reveal that learners with greater exposure to the target culture demonstrate significantly higher levels of idiomatic understanding. The study highlights the importance of integrating cultural instruction into idiom teaching and offers pedagogical implications for EFL classrooms.

Keywords: idioms, cultural background, EFL learners, idiomatic competence, intercultural communication

Introduction

Idioms constitute a significant and dynamic part of any natural language. They are frequently used in everyday communication, media discourse, and literary texts, allowing speakers to express ideas in a vivid, concise, and culturally meaningful way. An idiom is generally defined as a fixed or semi-fixed expression whose overall meaning cannot be fully inferred from the literal meanings of its individual components. For example, expressions such as “*spill the beans*” or “*break the ice*” carry meanings that go beyond their literal interpretation. Idioms are culturally embedded expressions that reflect shared experiences and values of a speech community (Boers, 2000; Wray, 2002).

For learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), idioms represent one of the most challenging aspects of language acquisition. Despite having sufficient grammatical knowledge and vocabulary, learners often struggle to understand idiomatic expressions, especially when these expressions are deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, or social experiences of native speakers. This difficulty suggests that idiom comprehension is not merely a linguistic process but also a cultural one. Cultural background plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals interpret language. Each culture develops its own metaphors, symbols, and shared experiences, which are often encoded in idiomatic expressions. When learners encounter idioms originating from an unfamiliar cultural context, they may misinterpret or fail to understand them altogether. Idiomatic competence is considered an integral part of communicative competence in advanced language use (Canale & Swain, 1980; Littlemore & Low, 2006). Consequently, the lack of cultural knowledge can hinder effective communication and lead to pragmatic misunderstandings. The present study aims to explore the role of cultural background in understanding English idioms. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does cultural background influence EFL learners’ comprehension of English idioms?
2. What types of idioms are most affected by cultural differences?

3. What pedagogical strategies can enhance idiom comprehension through cultural instruction?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the growing body of research on idiomatic competence and intercultural communication in foreign language learning.

Literature Review

Idiomatic competence is widely recognized as a key component of communicative competence. Scholars argue that the ability to understand and appropriately use idiomatic expressions distinguishes advanced language users from intermediate learners. Language learning inevitably involves cultural learning, as language is shaped by social practices and cultural conceptualizations (Kramsch, 1998). Idioms are not only linguistic units but also carriers of cultural meaning, reflecting a community's worldview, traditions, and values. Previous studies have shown that learners often avoid using idioms due to uncertainty about their meanings and usage contexts. This avoidance can result in speech that is grammatically correct but pragmatically unnatural. As a result, developing idiomatic competence is essential for achieving fluency and native-like proficiency. Learners with greater exposure to the target culture tend to demonstrate higher accuracy in idiom comprehension (Irujo, 1986; Liontas, 2015).

The relationship between language and culture has long been a central topic in applied linguistics. Language is not simply a system of grammar and vocabulary; it is a cultural artifact shaped by social practices and collective experiences. Cultural background influences how speakers conceptualize reality, organize knowledge, and express meaning. In foreign language education, cultural knowledge is often divided into two categories: "big C" culture, which includes history, literature, and institutions, and "small c" culture, which refers to everyday practices, beliefs, and communication styles. Idioms are closely related to small c culture, as they often emerge from daily life, traditions, and shared metaphors.

Many idioms are culture-specific and cannot be directly translated into other languages without losing their meaning. For example, English idioms related to sports, such as "throw in the towel" or "hit below the belt," may be difficult for learners from cultures where these sports are not widely practiced. Similarly, idioms based on historical events, folklore, or religious references may pose comprehension challenges for learners unfamiliar with these contexts. Research has demonstrated that learners tend to understand idioms better when similar expressions exist in their native language. When cultural knowledge is lacking, learners often rely on literal interpretations, which leads to misunderstanding of idiomatic meaning (Cooper, 1999). Conversely, idioms with no cultural equivalents often lead to literal interpretation errors. These findings underscore the importance of cultural familiarity in idiom comprehension. Research suggests that idioms should be taught in meaningful cultural contexts rather than as isolated lexical items (Boers et al., 2008).

Methodology

Research Design. This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of cultural background in idiom comprehension. The quantitative component focuses on measuring learners' comprehension accuracy, while the qualitative component explores learners' interpretations and perceptions.

Participants. The participants consisted of 60 EFL learners at the intermediate and upper-intermediate levels. They were divided into two groups based on their cultural exposure to English-speaking environments. Group A included learners with limited exposure to English culture, while Group B consisted of learners who had extensive exposure through media, study abroad programs, or interaction with native speakers.

Instruments Data were collected using three main instruments:

1. An idiom comprehension test consisting of 30 English idioms with multiple-choice and open-ended questions.
2. A background questionnaire designed to assess participants' cultural exposure and learning experiences.
3. Semi-structured interviews conducted with a subset of participants to gain deeper insights into their interpretive strategies.

Data Analysis . Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative analysis to identify differences between the two groups. Qualitative data from interviews were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns related to cultural knowledge and idiom interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Findings. The results of the idiom comprehension test revealed a significant difference between the two groups. Learners in Group B, who had greater exposure to English culture, achieved higher scores overall. They demonstrated better understanding of idioms related to daily life, social interaction, and cultural metaphors. In contrast, Group A learners showed lower comprehension levels, particularly for idioms with strong cultural references. These learners frequently relied on literal interpretation or guessed meanings based on individual words, which often led to incorrect answers.

Qualitative Findings. Interview data provided further insights into how cultural background influences idiom comprehension. Learners with cultural exposure reported using contextual clues, prior knowledge, and cultural associations to infer idiomatic meanings. They also expressed greater confidence in interpreting figurative language.

On the other hand, learners with limited cultural exposure described idioms as confusing and unpredictable. Many participants emphasized that understanding the cultural story behind an idiom helped them remember and use it correctly. This finding highlights the role of cultural narratives in language learning.

Discussion

The findings support the view that idiom comprehension is deeply intertwined with cultural knowledge. Cultural background acts as a cognitive framework that enables learners to make sense of figurative language. Without this framework, idioms appear arbitrary and difficult to decode. These results align with previous research suggesting that idioms should not be taught in isolation. Instead, they should be presented within meaningful cultural and contextual frameworks. Integrating cultural explanations, authentic materials, and comparative analysis can significantly enhance learners' idiomatic competence.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study has demonstrated that cultural background plays a vital role in understanding English idioms. Learners with greater exposure to the target culture show higher levels of idiomatic comprehension and confidence in interpretation. The results indicate that idiom learning is not solely a linguistic task but also an intercultural process. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest several implications for EFL instruction. Teachers should incorporate cultural information when teaching idioms, using authentic texts, visual aids, and real-life examples. Comparative analysis between learners' native language idioms and English idioms can also help bridge cultural gaps. Furthermore, encouraging learners to explore the cultural origins of idioms can promote deeper understanding and long-term retention. In conclusion, effective idiom instruction requires an integrated approach that combines language

and culture. By acknowledging the role of cultural background, educators can help learners develop not only idiomatic competence but also intercultural communicative competence, which is essential in today's globalized world.

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