IDIOM PROCESSING IN L2: THROUGH ROSE-COLORED GLASSES

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Abstract

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Research in the field of foreign/second language (L2) teaching has shown that L2 speakers, just like L1 speakers, apply some strategies while processing the idioms despite the lack of sufficient input in the classroom setting and the lack of language contact. In order to interpret the meaning of idioms, L2 speakers recall the strategies acquired during the first language acquisition. They rely on the literal meaning conveyed in the context and guess what it means. Even when the particular idiom has a perfect match in their mother tongue, they prefer moving from context, treating those similar idioms as false friends. The findings also showed that the type of idiom (formal, colloquial, or slang) does not affect the results.

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Introduction

Idioms, the colourful side of languages, are one of the symbols used while we are communicating our thoughts and feelings. They are used to give life and richness to the language by taking the existing words, combining them in a new sense, and creating new meanings, just like a work of art (Lennon, 1998). Unlike novel phrases, idioms are recalled as integral units. Most native speakers frequently use these units in their daily lives; consequently, idioms form a very important part of any natural language (Vanlancker-Sidtis, 2003; Wray & Perkins, 2000). According to a study that is conducted by Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson and Johnson, "approximately 6.7% of the sentences in third-to eighth-grade reading materials used idioms" (in Harris, 1999, p.142). Similarly, Pallio, Barlow, Fine, and Pollio (in Cooper, 1999), in order to figure out the rate of idiom use, worked on political debates, psychological texts, novels, and psychotherapy sessions and found that "most English speakers utter about 10 million novel metaphors per lifetime and 20 million idioms per lifetime. This works out to about 3000 novel metaphors per week and 7000 idioms per week" (pp. 233-234). While investigating how native speakers figure out the meaning of these restricted collocations (i.e. whether they call the literal meaning or the figurative meaning of the words in the "novel metaphors" or both), the following hypotheses have been tested:

H1: Idioms are first interpreted literally. If the literal meaning of an idiom does not fit the context in which the expression is situated, the native speaker searches for the idiom in a special mental idiom lexicon and then chooses the figurative meaning (Cooper, 1999).

H2: Idioms are long words housed in the mental lexicon along with other words, as "an

aspect of the lexical mountain"(Cornell,1999, p. 9). When a native speaker encounters an idiom, both its figurative meaning (of the entire idiom) and its lexical meaning (of each individual word) are activated at the same time (Matlock, 1998).

H3: The figurative meaning of idioms is quicker to comprehend than their literal meaning. Native speakers may have access only to figurative meanings of words or of particular word combinations that make up an idiom (Matlock, 1998). For example, if you say to a native speaker of English "hold your tongue" or "you are a lucky dog", s/he recognises these as figurative expressions that should not be interpreted literally even though they are expressions that may have literal meaning.

H4: Idioms are compositional. Meaning is not assigned to the entire idiom (e.g. green thumb) but to its individual words (e.g. green). The meanings of decomposable idioms such as "chicken feed" (an insignificant amount) are quicker to process than those of the non-compositional idioms in which the literal meaning provides no clue to depict the figurative meaning such as "suffer from burnout" (being exhausted).

We strongly believe that these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive but complementary. In fact, native speakers may be using all of these strategies while processing the meaning of idioms.

We claim that these are the general strategies developed during the acquisition of the mother tongue (hereafter L1), and idioms "constitute a significant part of human cognition" (Gibbs, et al., 1997, p. 141). The question is whether second/foreign language (hereafter L2) speakers make use the same ones while processing the L2 idioms though we are aware of the fact that there are many factors that influence the usage and comprehension of L2 idioms such as the lack of class input and familiarity with figurative language and the influence of L1, and so on (Wray, 1999). First of all, "many second-language materials either ignore idioms entirely or relegate them to the 'other expressions' section of vocabulary lists, without providing exercises or other aids to learning" (Irujo, 1986a, p. 237). That is to say, we rarely introduce our students L2 idioms despite the fact that mastery of these is difficult since idiomatic expressions contain such forms in which words are not often used with their usual meanings. Another factor that places a burden for L2 learners to decode the meanings of the idioms is that since there are not always one to one correspondences between L1 and L2, the idioms cannot be easily comprehended from the meaning of their parts. Therefore, there is a high possibility of communication breakdown (Irujo, 1986b). For example, a foreigner may comprehend the words in an American idiom such as "burn the candle at both ends" or "let the cat out of the bag". However, s/he may not understand that "burn the candle at both ends" means "to do too many things at the same time" or "let the cat out of the bag" means "to tell a secret".

It is widely believed that parallels between idiomatic expressions in the learner's L1 (Turkish) and the L2 (English) will have a remarkable effect on the comprehension of idioms. This parallelism is named "interlingual factor" by Cornell (1999, p.6). Sometimes this will be a positive one. For instance, the Turkish idiom "kolları sıvamak" (sleeves roll up) and the English idiom "roll up sleeves" have the same meaning: to prepare to work hard, or "kemer sıkmak" (belt tighten) in Turkish and "tighten belt" in English have the same meaning: to live on less money than usual. Although the similarity between L1 and L2 enables the L2 learners to reach the figurative meaning of an idiom easily without going to the wrong paths, it may nevertheless lead them to the wrong paths. To illustrate, if you hear a sentence like the following one "he lost many friends because he was always looking out for ***number one***", it means "he made enemies because he constantly ***thought only of himself***". The idiom

"number one" in English may refer to one's own interest, one's private or selfish advantage. Yet, in Turkish, the idiom "bir numara" (one number) does not have such a meaning although "number one" and "bir numara" are totally the same idioms in terms of the words forming the idiom. This idiom has a meaning of "first rank or importance; first quality, best" in Turkish. In fact, we do not have so many idioms like these. At this point, as Cornell (1999, p.6) claims, "it would be an exaggeration to say that such 'false friend idioms' are many in number."

Irujo (1986a), in her experiment, asked the Spanish learners of English to recognise and give the meanings of three groups of English idioms. The idioms in the first group were identical to, the idioms in the second group were similar to, and the idioms in the last group were very different from Spanish idioms. The data obtained from this study showed that participants easily comprehended and produced the idioms that were identical to Spanish idioms. Similarly, Kellerman (1983) found a relationship between L1 knowledge and interpretation of the figurative use of L2. He first asked native speakers of Dutch to find 17 sentences containing the Dutch word *breken* (in English: break) and group them according to their similarities in meaning. Then, he wanted 81 Dutch students in the first and third years of university education to choose the sentences that they would translate with the English verb *break*. He concluded, "even though both verbs have a focal meaning (he *broke his leg*) and a set of peripheral meanings (*His fall was broken by a tree* or *His voice broke when he was 13*), a greater percentage of Dutch students (81%) accepted as translatable the English sentences" (p.238).

These findings lend credence to our main goal that L1 may have some effects on learners' processing of L2 idioms. Yet, it is not known exactly what kinds of comprehension strategies are used in L2 idiom processing. Therefore, this present study analyses the underlying processes of non-native teachers who were highly experienced and practised English speakers. We have formed three hypotheses:

H1: The participants will depend on the context rather than the literal meaning when they cannot find an identical match in their L1.

H2: The participants will comprehend the formal idioms better than informal or slang ones since these idioms appear in the textbooks but not the other ones.

H3: The idioms identical to Turkish ones will be comprehended more easily than those that are different from.

Methodology
Participants

A total of 18 Turkish teachers of English with the teaching experience of 7.1 years in English language teaching field and ranging in age from 24 to 47 years were tested. All had been trained in linguistics during their BA and/or MA years. They were teaching English to adults at the preparatory school of Cukurova University in Adana, Turkey. As we thought that the time spent in English speaking countries had an affect on their comprehension of the idioms, we asked them the duration of their stay in an English-speaking country. We found that with the exception of three participants (in Group 1), none had been to an English speaking country and spoke another foreign language aside from English.

The English language proficiency levels of the participants had been determined by the KPDS test they had taken previously. In Turkey, this standard language test is taken by the people working for the government such as teachers working at state schools, instructors working at state universities, engineers, doctors, lawyers, etc working for the government. These government officers must get A, B, or C from this test in order to get extra salary for

their foreign language proficiency. In the test, there are 100 questions (covering grammar, vocabulary, reading, dialogue completion, and translation), and the top score is 100.

       The participants in this study were divided into two groups basing on their grades in this test:

       Group 1: Level A (grades ranging from 90 to 100 KPDS score); (f=6)

       Group 2: Level B (80-90 KPDS score); (f=12)

These groups can be placed as advanced and low-advanced proficiency levels.

Materials and Procedure

       We first prepared the idiom recognition test (IRT), involving 20 frequently used idioms selected from Cooper (1999) and various on-line sites on the Internet (see the appendix). These idioms were then categorized according to their different levels of discourse. Following Cooper's classification, we grouped eight of these idioms as the representatives of Standard English, other eight as informal or colloquial, and the other four as slang expressions (see Table 1). Finally, we typed each idiom on a separate note card and then created a context so that the participants would decipher the meanings of the selected idioms.

       After forming the sample by taking the KPDS grades of the teachers into consideration, we administered the IRT to the participants. Firstly, the participants were asked to read the idioms written on the card silently. They were not asked to read loudly in order to eliminate the prosodic cues (pausing, length, pitch, etc.) of English since our aim was to verbalize their thoughts as they deduced the meanings of the idioms through think-aloud (TA) procedure:

Stimulus situation: The researcher had to roll up his sleeves to get the proposal on time. What does *to roll up his sleeve* mean?

Participant: "Since I am a master student, I am used to this situation. I am writing the proposal of my master thesis, and I have to hand in it on time, so I have to work a lot. I think it means start studying in order to get the proposal on time; but I am not sure. I have only guesses [guessed] the meaning by considering my experience."

Table 1.
Idioms on IRT by level of Discourse

Standard English (more formal)	Informal or Colloquial (conversational)	Slang
• To see eye to eye • To tighten his belt • To roll up one's sleeves • To see things through rose-colored glasses • To stir up a hornet's nest • To burn the midnight oil • To pull someone's leg • To make a mountain out of a molehill	• To rob the cradle • To be up the creek without a paddle • To get off the ground • To break a leg • To be under the weather • By the skin of my teeth • To let sleeping dogs lie • To be all ears	• What's cooking? • To be chicken feed • To be bad-mouth • To be bull-headed

 TA protocols were used in this study so as to get evidence related to comprehension processes of idioms after participants took the IRT. Olson, Duffy and Mack (1984) point out the focus of TA task as follows:

> The focus of TA task should be to get students to report the content of their immediate awareness rather than to report explanations of their behaviour. Further, subjects should be asked to report explanations of their behaviour. Further, subjects should be asked to report what they are thinking right now, not what they remember thinking some time ago.... TA data should not be taken as direct reflections of thought process but rather as data that are correlated with underlying thought process (p. 241).

Through TA data, it is possible to see what is on the subject's mind during the task. In conducting the IRT and collecting the TA data, the procedure suggested by Olson et al. (1984) was followed. Each session was carried out in the researcher's private office and was recorded on a tape recorder.

Results and discussion

After transcribing the cassettes, we grouped the idiom comprehension strategies by following Cooper's (1999) model: Preparatory and guessing stages (see Table 2):

a)   The Preparatory Stage: The participants clarify and consolidate knowledge about the expression (RP-- repeating or paraphrasing the idiom). Then, they gain more time before uttering a guess, perhaps to rehearse an answer, and to sift through the new linguistic information (DA -- discussing and analysing the idiom). Finally, they gather additional information in order to make a better-informed guess about the idiom's meaning (RI-- requesting information about the idiom)

b)   The Guessing Stage: The participants are guessing from the context (GC), using the literal meaning (LM) and the background information (BK), referring to an L1 idiom (L1), using particular word (PW).

In this study, we focused on only the guessing stage due to the place limitation. Our first hypothesis was that the participants would make use of the context first. If the context does not help, they will apply other strategies such as background knowledge, literal meaning, or L1. The obtained data seem to support our hypothesis.

As displayed in Table 2, the number of the total guesses was 360; out of this number, 83 guesses were incorrect. Among the rest (f= 277), guessing from the context (GC) was statistically significant (X^2 =16.30 > 15.08; df = 5; p: 01). This was the mostly used technique when compared to others. For the others, we do not observe significant variations among the choices of the participants. Both literal meaning (LM) and background knowledge (BK) were used at equal frequencies (f= 54).

Table 2.
Comprehending the L2 idioms

STAGES: Preparatory	EXAMPLE
RP: Repeating or paraphrasing the idiom without giving an interpretation	"*Let sleeping dogs lie ...* yes don't disturb the dogs while they are sleeping..."
DA: Discussing and analysing the idiom or its context without guessing at the meaning	"*Burn the midnight oil ...* well, he has a test tomorrow and he is not ready and midnight oil reminds me the old times when there was no electricity, so people would use oil ..."
RI: Requesting information about the idiom or context	"What does 'procrastinate' mean?
Guessing (total: 360 guesses) (correct = 277; incorrect = 83)	
GC: Guessing the meaning of the idiom from the context (f= 115)	" *To be bull-headed ...* I haven't seen this idiom before, so I don't know its meaning; but, the second sentence [why can't you admit that others' opinion are just as good as yours?] helps me to get the meaning. Since he doesn't admit others' opinion, he must be stubborn and insists on his ideas.
LM: Using the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning (f= 54)	"*To stir up a hornet's nest ...* I don't know the meaning of hornet, but I think it is a kind bird or maybe bee. When I see this idiom, I think of a person who is stirring up a nest, he is causing trouble. Uh ... Nest symbolises peace and this person destroys the peace by stirring up, so I think it means making others angry.
BK: Using background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom (f= 54)	"*Break a leg! ...* Oh, I know this idiom. It is widely used by actors and actresses in theatres. They say 'good luck' in this way to each other before the play starts.
L1: Referring to an idiom in the L1 to understand the L2 idiom (f= 43)	"*To tighten his belt ...* In Turkish we have a sentence that has almost the same meaning. *Kemer Sıkmak.* Especially the politicians use this idiom a lot these days because of the economic problems we have."
PW: Knowing a particular word. (f = 11)	"To be up to creek without a paddle." Oh! I know what paddle means so without paddle gives an idea that you are in trouble.

The second hypothesis of the study aimed at investigating whether the idiom type (standard, conversational or slang) influenced their comprehension. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the distribution of the overall guesses and the strategies each participant chose. After comparing the frequencies in Table 3, we do not see any relationship between these two variables. In order to see whether there is a relationship between the idiom type and participants' guesses, we also compared the correct and the incorrect guesses with the idiom types. The obtained chi-square results yielded no statistically significant differences.

Table 3
The distribution of the overall guesses

Idiom type	f	f
	guesses for GC	total incorrect guesses
Formal	32 (out of 114 correct guesses)	30 (out of 144) (20.83 %)
Informal	43 (out of 109 correct guesses)	35 (out of 144) (24.30 %)
Slang	29 (out of 55 correct guesses)	17 (out of 72) (23.61 %)

So our hypothesis (formal idioms will be comprehended more frequently than the informal or slang ones) was rejected. In order to find out which idiom(s) is/are the most incorrectly guessed ones within these categories, we rechecked the data and found that these were Idiom 10 (formal; "to see eye to eye"; f = 11), Idiom 12 (conversational; "to be up the creek without a paddle"; f= 10), and Idiom 4 (slang; "to bad-mouth"; f=6). This finding has led us to investigate the question to what extend the theoretical models of L1 comprehension of idioms apply to the comprehension of idioms by these participants. We have observed that while our participants encounter an unknown idiom, their thought processes in recognising an idiom are slower and more deliberate than those of the native speakers, no matter how proficient they are in the target language.

The use of TA methodology in this study has enabled us to follow non-native speakers' thought processes in arriving at an interpretation of the given expression. We have observed that when non-native speakers encounter an unknown idiomatic expression, they experiment and evaluate possible answers through trial and error as if they were solving a comprehension problem. This is called "heuristic method", in which "learners are encouraged to learn, discover, understand, or solve problems on their own by experimenting, by evaluating possible answers or solutions, or through trial and error" (Cooper, 1999, p. 255). Our participants applied this method in solving the linguistic problem of deducing the meaning of the given idioms.

Table 4.

The distribution of Correct Answers, by Participant and Idiom

IDIOM	PARTICIPANT																	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. to be bull-headed	GC		GC		GC	LM	GC		BK		GC	BK	GC	GC		LM	GC	GC
2. to make a mountain out of a molehill	GC	LM	BK	L1	GC	L1	BK	BK	BK	L1	GC	BK	LM	LM	L1	GC	L1	GC
3. to see through rose-colored glasses	LM	L1	LM	GC	L1	L1	L1	L1	L1	BK	L1	BK	L1	GC	L1	GC	L1	BK
4. to bad-mouth	GC	LM	GC	PW				LM	LM			GC		LM	GC	LM	GC	PW
5. to pull someone's leg	GC	GC		GC		BK	BK	BK	BK	GC		BK		BK		BK	BK	BK
6. Break a leg!	L1	L1	GC	GC			BK		BK	GC		L1	GC	BK	GC		BK	BK
7. to stir up a hornet's nest	LM		PW			LM	LM		LM	GC		LM	GC	LM	LM	GC	LM	
8. what's cooking?	GC	GC	GC	PW			BK		GC		GC	GC	BK	GC	GC	GC	GC	BK
9. to get off the ground	LM			LM	GC	GC	PW	LM	LM						PW		PW	BK
10. to see eye to eye		GC			GC	GC			BK		GC		GC			GC		
11. Something is chicken feed	LM	GC	GC	LM	LM	LM	L1	L1	BK	LM	GC	LM	GC	GC			LM	LM
12. to be up the creek without a paddle			PW	PW	PW		GC					LM	LM	LM			LM	
13. to roll up his sleeves			LM			L1	L1	L1	BK	GC		BK	BK	LM	L1	BK	L1	L1
14. to rub the cradle		GC	GC		GC					GC			GC	GC	GC	LM		LM
15. to let sleeping dogs lie	GC	GC	BK	GC	GC	GC	GC	LM	LM	GC	GC	GC	GC	BK	GC	GC	BK	BK
16. to be under the weather	L1	GC	GC	GC	GC	GC	BK	L1	GC	GC	GC	GC	L1	L1	GC	BK	GC	GC
17. to tighten his belt	L1	L1	L1	GC	L1	GC	LM	L1	L1	BK	LM	BK	BK		L1	BK	L1	L1
18. by the skin of my teeth	GC		GC	GC		GC	GC		BK	GC	GC	BK	GC	GC		GC	GC	BK
19. to burn the midnight oil	GC		GC	GC	LM	GC	GC		LM	GC	GC	GC	LM	LM	LM	GC	LM	GC
20. to be all ears	L1	L1	BK	LM	BK	GC	GC	L1	BK	BK	GC	LM	LM	GC	L1	BK	GC	BK

NOTE: Each code in the table represents a strategy that led the participant to a correct response to an idiom on the IRT. **GC**= guessing from the context, **LM**= using the literal meaning of the idiom, **BK**= using background knowledge, **L1**= referring to an L1 idiom, **PW**= using a particular word of the idiom. Blank cells represent incorrect answers.

Our last hypothesis was about L1 transfer. We tested this through Idioms 3, 13, and 17, which can be translated into Turkish word for word. Idioms 3 and 17 were the most correctly comprehended ones and nine out eighteen participants depended on their L1 while processing these idioms. Surprisingly, as for Idiom 13, five out of eighteen participants could not correctly guess the meaning, and only six out of thirteen depended on their L1. This result brings the question of chance factor into our minds. However, when we look at the TA protocol data, we saw that some participants treated these idioms as "false friends or faux amis" (Edmondson, 1999, p.109). They knew from their teaching experiences that some elements in L2 seem to match with their L1 but they may not be the same. One of the participants in the TA data claimed that "this idiom looks like the Turkish one but it might not be. No! No! There is a trick. I have seen such words. Let me re read it." By reading again, this participant reflects her reliance on context rather than the similarity between English and Turkish in this case.

Conclusion

Our findings are in line with those of Cooper (1999) in the sense that L2 learners do not use a single strategy while encountering an unknown idiomatic expression; instead, they utilise a variety of strategies. They seem to apply a heuristic model. Even when there is a match between L1 and L2, they encounter meaning first, treating the similar idioms as false friends. While an idiom is activated, both figurative and lexical meanings are encountered at the same time; however, when the lexical presentation is not available in non-native speakers, figurative meaning cannot be recalled. Moreover, the type of the idiom (formal, conversational, or slang) does not affect the comprehension of the idiom. While processing the idiom, they seem to make use of the contextual clues more often than any other clues. In this study, we only investigated the perception of the native speakers. For further research, experimental studies can be conducted through reading classes to aid the L2 speaker to produce the idioms.

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<u>**Appendix A**</u>

Idiom Recognition Test (IRT)
1. "Don't be so bull headed. Why can't you admit that others' opinions are just as good as yours?"
    What does "*to be bull-headed*?" mean?
    [Answer: stubborn, inflexible]
2. "Calm down. There's really nothing to worry about. You're making a mountain out of a
    molehill". What does "*to make a mountain out of a molehill*?" mean?
    [Answer: to exaggerate a small problem]
3. "Depressed people should look at the world through rose-colored glasses." What does "*through
    rose-colored glasses"* mean?
    [Answer: as good and pleasant]
4. A: "I don't believe what Bob said. Why is he bad-mouthing?"
    B: "He's probably jealous of your success."
    What does "*bad-mouth"* mean?
    [Answer: say unkind, unflattering, embarrassing (and probably untrue) things about someone]
5. A: "Wow! Carl has done some really amazing things!"
    B: "Don't believe everything he tells you. He was probably pulling your leg."
    What does "*to pull someone's leg"* mean?
    [Answer: to tease someone by trying to make her/him believe something that's exaggerated or
    untrue]
6. "I understood you have a job interview tomorrow. Break a leg!" What does "*break a leg*" mean?
    [Answer: Good luck!]
7. "Mentioning the abortion issue just stirred up a hornet's nest." What does "*to stir up a hornet's
    neat*," mean?
    [Answer: to make many people angry]
8. "After dinner, John would go over to the mall to see what's cooking." What does "*What's
    cooking?*" mean?
    [Answer: What's happening?]
9. "Many small businesses can be successful once they get off the ground". What does "*get off the
    ground"* mean?
    [Answer: get good starts]
10. "Mother wants to buy a new house in the country. Father sees eye to eye with her." What does
    "*to see eye to eye*?" mean?
    [Answer: to agree with someone about something]
11. "To some people, a thousand dollars is chicken feed." What does "*chicken feed"* mean?
    [Answer: an insignificant amount of money]
12. "If you procrastinate, you will find yourself up the creek without a paddle." What does "*up the
    creek without a paddle*" mean?
    [Answer: in serious trouble]
13. "The researcher had to roll up his sleeves to get the proposal in on time. "What does "*to roll up
    his sleeve*" mean?
    [Answer: to prepare to work hard]
14. "Robert knew that he was robbing the cradle by dating a sixteen-year-old girl." What does
    "*robbing the cradle" mean*?
    [Answer: being romantically interested in someone who is too young]

15. "I know that what Julie said made you angry, but let sleeping dogs lie. If you say or do anything, you'll only make things worse." What does "*let sleeping dogs lie*" mean?
[Answer: Don't cause problems by doing something when it isn't necessary]

16. "Ted was feeling under the weather yesterday, so he decided not to go to work." What does "*under the weather*" mean?
[Answer: feel bad, unwell, ill, and sick]

17. "After getting laid off from the pen factory, George had to tighten his belt. "What does "*tighten his belt*" mean?
[Answer: live on less money than usual]

18. "I'll have to start earlier the next time. This time I only finished by the skin of my teeth." What does "*by the skin of my teeth*" mean?
[Answer: barely succeed in doing something]

19. "I'm not ready for the test tomorrow. I guess I'll have to burn the midnight oil." What does "*to burn the midnight oil*" mean?
[Answer: to study/work all night or until very late at night]

20. A: "I just got an e-mail message from our old friend Sally."
 B: "Tell me what she said. I am all ears."
What does "*to be all ears*" mean?
[Answer: to be eager to hear what someone has to say]