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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Common Mistakes EFL Learners Make When Using Idiomatic Expressions: A Case Study of Saudi Tertiary Level EFL Learners**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This study examines EFL learners' blunders and difficulties with English idioms. The study emphasizes the role of idiomatic expressions in EFL learners' communication and cross-cultural understanding. Researchers have adopted the analytical research method; data was gathered through a questionnaire which was distributed to a random sample 65 EFL learners from different Saudi universities. Data was interpreted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and reported as a percentage. The study indicated that EFL learners misuse English idioms by choosing literal interpretations or employing them out of context. Cultural variations, limited exposure, lack of context, and trouble understanding figurative meaning also make English idioms challenging for EFL learners. The study found that explicit instruction, cultural context, background information, authentic language use, multimedia resources, and a practice context improve EFL learners' English idiomatic expressions. Idioms' literal meanings can also help language students remember them. This study recommends explicit instruction, cultural context, and background information to help Saudi EFL learners understand idioms, authentic language use, multimedia resources, and context.

**| KEYWORDS**

Idiomatic expressions, common mistakes, teaching strategies, idiomatic translation, cultural context.

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### **1. Introduction**

Idiomatic expressions are essential for English communication but can be difficult for EFL learners. By understanding and mastering idiomatic expressions, EFL learners can communicate more effectively and confidently in English. This study investigates common mistakes made by EFL learners when using English idiomatic expressions and aims to identify strategies to improve their learning of these expressions. EFL learners often struggle with idiomatic expressions, leading to confusion and misunderstandings. Studying the common mistakes EFL learners make when using idiomatic expressions is crucial for effective language instruction and communication. Idiomatic phrases are a crucial component of every language and are widely employed in spoken and written communication. EFL students who are unfamiliar with frequently used idiomatic terms may find it difficult to comprehend and participate in literature, film, and other forms of media. Additionally, it might be challenging to immediately translate idiomatic terms into another language, therefore students must comprehend their meanings in context. By studying the specific challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners in using idiomatic expressions, educators and researchers can develop tailored strategies to improve language instruction and cross-cultural understanding.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Idiomatic expression learning presents a significant challenge for EFL learners. Idioms are highly complex linguistic units with non-compositional meanings that cannot be deduced from their components (Moon, 1998). This poses difficulties for EFL learners whose first language background differs substantially from English.

Previous studies have identified common errors made by EFL learners from various language backgrounds, such as overreliance on literal meanings and difficulties with idioms in different contexts (Chen, 2013; Li, 2008). However, research specifically targeting Saudi EFL learners is limited. Understanding the nature of errors, they make can help develop effective instructional methods suited to the Saudi education system.

Additionally, idiom learning depends greatly on contextual factors like a learner's first language and educational experiences (Kim, 2012). Exploring potential contributing factors unique to the Saudi context could offer new perspectives. Identifying particularly challenging idiom types or concepts may also guide the selection of idiom exposure and practice opportunities within the Saudi curriculum.

### **1.2 Objectives of the Study**

The overall goal of this study is to look into the frequent problems that EFL learners make while using idiomatic expressions and to develop effective ways to improve their idiomatic expression learning. Overall, more insight is needed into how Saudi EFL learners can be better supported to overcome idiom learning barriers. The goal of this study is to address gaps in the literature by analyzing errors made by Saudi tertiary students and considering contextual influences, intending to inform improved teaching strategies tailored to their needs. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the types of errors EFL learners make when using English idiomatic expressions.
2. To explore the factors that contribute to the difficulties EFL learners face when acquiring English idiomatic expressions.
3. To investigate effective teaching strategies for improving EFL learners' English idiomatic expressions learning.

### **1.3 Questions of the Study**

These questions would help address gaps in understanding how to improve idiom learning for Saudi EFL learners by exploring effective teaching approaches, contextual factors, and challenges faced. The questions appropriately focus on this population and educational setting studied while generating insights with broader applicability. To achieve the objectives of the study, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What types of errors do EFL learners make when using English idiomatic expressions?
2. What are the factors that contribute to the difficulties EFL learners face when learning English idiomatic expressions?
3. Do different types of idioms (e.g. phrasal verbs vs. fixed expressions) present varying levels of difficulty for Saudi EFL learners?

## **2. Literature Review**

Cultural differences can make learning and applying English idiomatic idioms challenging. "To let the cat out of the bag" is an idiom for disclosing information. Idioms may also have various implications or meanings in different cultures, which can cause misunderstandings or improper use. "To pull someone's leg" refers to tease or joke with someone in English-speaking nations. However, this idiom could be misunderstood or irritating in other cultures due to its negative connotation.

When teaching idiomatic expressions, it is critical to provide cultural context and background knowledge to help EFL learners overcome cultural disparities. This can include giving examples of idioms in use, discussing their history and cultural background, and emphasizing any differences in meaning or connotation between cultures. This can assist students in understanding the figurative meaning of idioms and applying them effectively in context.

### **2.1 Theories of Using Idiomatic Expressions by EFL Learners**

Many theories can be used to understand the common idiomatic expression faults of EFL learners. Here are some examples:

1. Interlanguage theory: The Interlanguage theory argues that errors made in the target language are often "correct" by the rules of an "interlanguage" invented by the learner. This theory is discussed in Selinker (1972) and Ellis (1994). Interlanguage theory is useful for understanding how learners' errors reflect their current stage of language development, and how their first language and target language knowledge interact to shape their language system.

2. Contrastive analysis theory: The theory compares the language structures of the learners' first language and the target language to identify areas of difficulty. The discussion revolves around this theory in Lado (1957) and Odlin (1989). Contrastive analysis theory helps identify potential areas of difficulty based on the differences between the learners' first language and the target language, which can inform the design of teaching materials and strategies.
3. Error analysis theory: Error analysis can reveal patterns and causes of learners' errors, such as lack of knowledge and control over their language system. An examination of this theory is undertaken by Corder (1967) and Ellis (1997). Error analysis theory can reveal patterns and causes of learners' errors in using idiomatic expressions, which can guide targeted instruction and feedback.
4. Cognitive theory: Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasizes learners' capabilities. Learners' errors reflect their cognitive processing of language, such as attention, memory, and problem-solving skills. This theory is deliberated by Robinson (2003) and DeKeyser (2007). Cognitive theory can help design effective teaching methods.

Generally speaking, effective teaching strategies should consider linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural factors to improve idiomatic expressions. In practice, it may be beneficial to draw upon multiple theories to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence EFL learners' errors in using idiomatic expressions and to develop effective teaching strategies that take into account these factors.

## 2.2 Previous Studies

Idiomatic expressions can be difficult for EFL learners to acquire and use effectively, but effective teaching strategies can help. Here are some selected previous studies.

### 2.2.1 Common Errors in Using English Idiomatic Expressions

Studies have shown that EFL learners make several common errors when using English idiomatic expressions. Li (2018) investigates the common errors made by Chinese EFL learners when using English idiomatic expressions. The study found that learners often used the wrong expression, used an expression in the wrong context, mixed up the words, and misunderstood the meaning of an expression. Wang (2016) identifies common errors made by Chinese EFL learners when using English idiomatic expressions, such as overusing idioms and using outdated or obscure idioms. The study analyzes the causes of these errors and suggests possible solutions such as providing more examples of idioms used in context, explicit instruction on appropriate usage, and opportunities for controlled practice to develop familiarity. Xie (2017) suggests effective ways to teach English idiomatic expressions to Chinese EFL learners. The study proposes providing explicit instruction on the meaning and usage of idioms, exposing learners to authentic language use through reading and listening activities, providing opportunities for learners to practice using idioms in context, and providing feedback and corrective guidance on errors. Li (2016) explores the learning of English idiomatic expressions by Chinese EFL learners and proposes teaching strategies. The study suggests creating a context for learning idioms, using visual aids, providing explicit instruction on idioms, and providing opportunities for learners to practice using idioms in context. Chen (2017) investigates the difficulties in learning English idiomatic expressions and suggests teaching strategies for Taiwanese EFL learners. The study finds out that learners face difficulties in understanding the meaning and usage of idioms and suggests using multimedia resources, such as videos and online activities, to teach idiomatic expressions.

Moon (2012) examined how Korean EFL learners acquire and use English idiomatic expressions. The study found that learners had difficulty understanding figurative meanings and tended to interpret idioms literally. Exposure to authentic language input through extensive reading helped learners improve their idiom knowledge and usage. Gomez (2015) investigated effective strategies for teaching English idioms to Spanish EFL learners. The research suggested incorporating idioms into contextually rich listening and reading activities. Having learners maintain idiom journals and participate in idiom guessing games are also found to improve idiom learning. Adi (2018) explored the challenges Indonesian EFL students face in learning idiomatic expressions. The top difficulties reported were understanding the figurative meanings and remembering the form of the idioms. Providing idiom definitions in both L1 and L2 helped address these issues. Leclercq (2017) studied how French ESL learners acquire idiomatic competence in English. Tracking learner errors over time showed that providing systematic feedback on idiom usage errors facilitated idiom internalization and improved production.

### 2.3 Difficulties in Learning English Idiomatic Expressions

The difficulties that EFL learners face when learning English idiomatic expressions can be attributed to several factors. Yu (2015) investigates the challenges encountered by EFL learners when acquiring English idiomatic expressions. The study finds that cultural differences, limited exposure to idioms, lack of context or background knowledge, and difficulty understanding the figurative meaning of idioms were the main difficulties. The study also suggests some effective strategies for learning idioms. Hsieh (2019) explores the factors affecting EFL learners' understanding and use of idiomatic expressions. The study claims that learners'

background knowledge, language proficiency, and exposure to English idioms affected their understanding and use of idiomatic expressions. Javadi and Riazi (2012) investigate the difficulties in learning and using idiomatic expressions by Iranian EFL learners. The study explores difficulties in understanding the figurative meaning of idioms and suggests using visual aids, providing explicit instruction, and creating a context for learning idiomatic expressions that learners face. Sari (2018) examines the learning of English idiomatic expressions by Indonesian EFL learners and proposes effective teaching strategies. The study indicates that learners face challenges in understanding the figurative meaning of idioms and suggests using multimedia resources and providing opportunities for learners to practice using idioms in context.

#### **2.4 Effective Teaching Strategies for Improving EFL Learners' Idiomatic Expressions Learning**

Several teaching strategies have been suggested to improve EFL learners' English idiomatic expressions learning. Yu (2015) explores the obstacles faced by EFL learners when acquiring English idiomatic expressions and suggests effective strategies for learning idioms. The study agrees to use a range of resources, such as dictionaries and corpora, to identify and learn idiomatic expressions, provide explicit instruction on the meaning and usage of idioms, and create a context for learning idiomatic expressions through authentic language use. Xie (2017) proposes effective ways to teach English idiomatic expressions to Chinese EFL learners. The study suggests providing explicit instruction on the meaning and usage of idioms, exposing learners to authentic language use through reading and listening activities, providing opportunities for learners to practice using idioms in context, and providing feedback and corrective guidance on errors. Li (2016) explores English idiomatic expressions learned by Chinese EFL learners and proposes teaching strategies. The study recommends creating a context for learning idioms, using visual aids, providing explicit instruction on idioms, and providing opportunities for learners to practice using idioms in context. Chen (2017) investigates the difficulties in learning English idiomatic expressions and suggests teaching strategies for Taiwanese EFL learners. The study approves using multimedia resources, such as videos and online activities, to teach idiomatic expressions, providing explicit instruction on the meaning and usage of idioms, and creating a context for learning idiomatic expressions through authentic language use. Sari (2018) examines English idiomatic expressions learned by Indonesian EFL learners and proposes effective teaching strategies. The study endorses using multimedia resources, providing opportunities for learners to practice using idioms in context, and providing explicit instruction on the figurative meaning and usage of idioms. Yang (2015) conducted a study on the learning of English idiomatic expressions by Chinese EFL learners and proposes effective teaching strategies. The study recommends using authentic language input, providing explicit instruction on idioms, and providing opportunities for learners to practice using idioms in context.

In another study that has been published in the journal "Language Awareness," Wang et al. (2022) investigate whether or not misunderstandings of idioms are retained by students. They claim that teaching idioms' literal meanings to language students improved their retention of those terms. It has also been proposed that asking students to speculate on the meanings of unfamiliar words could be helpful because it would stimulate their interest and encourage them to actively participate in the learning process. Idioms' literal meanings can be utilized as clues to increase the likelihood of correct inference. Students are less likely to retain correct idiom meanings when their assumptions are corrected due to incorrect associations.

#### **2.5 Idioms in the Saudi EFL Context**

According to Alhaysony (2017), children in the Saudi context who are taking English classes nevertheless use their native languages at home and in their daily contact with family, friends, classmates, and teachers. Because of this, opportunities to study English language, and idioms in particular, are naturally reduced. Nonetheless, English has long been regarded as Saudi Arabia's most useful foreign language. University-level instruction focuses on it as a major. English language classes are a required part of the pre-university curriculum. It is regretful that idioms are being introduced to the EFL curriculum when senior English majors should already have a solid grasp of the language's idioms. Idiom learning has been overlooked in the local EFL teaching/learning environment, where idioms are selected and taught at random using ad hoc approaches, say researchers with experience teaching university students, (Alhaysony, 2017).

Alhaysony (2017) reports that idioms are introduced in classes that focus on listening and speaking as well as reading comprehension and writing abilities at several universities. Many students lack the ability to properly utilize and/or understand idioms. The researcher hypothesizes that this is because idioms are not formally taught in language classes. Furthermore, idiom learning research in the Saudi EFL environment is understudied. This is likely because acquiring idiomatic competence in English has been given less attention than the study of the grammatical system. In conclusion, students of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia tend to misunderstand and incorrectly apply the idioms they have been taught. Lack of idiomatic competency is a common barrier for Saudi students of English as a foreign language. The findings of the study confirm that pupils have trouble grasping idiomatic terms. Low-proficiency students have a harder time learning idioms, and larger vocabulary knowledge is more likely. Therefore, educators should try new approaches to idiom instruction to help pupils get beyond these hurdles. Enhancing idiomatic knowledge can help students express themselves more effectively. In addition, instruction that focuses on the use of

idioms is needed to help students become better communicators. In addition, the lack of familiarity with the cultural context of the idioms presents unique challenges for Saudi EFL students. This finding reaffirms the value of introducing students to the language in its social setting. It is important to learn both commonly used idioms and idioms with analogues in the target language. Idioms are not included in the curriculum, for instance. Furthermore, idioms are poorly taught in the classroom. These results suggest that idiomatic expressions should be given greater consideration by curriculum designers and integrated into a variety of subject areas. There should be more idioms presented in EFL English textbooks. Teachers must learn about different cultures and interact with them.

## 2.6 Idiomatic Translation

Muharram (2022) emphasizes the need for pupils to learn the fundamentals of translation before attempting any translation task. Therefore, they must be familiar with the processes involved in translating a language. It is noted by Hoed (2006) that idiomatic translation is one of many approaches to the translation process. There is more to translation than simply switching words and phrases from one language to another. Understanding the meanings in the source language (SL) that need to be translated into the target language (TL) in a meaningful and accurate way is also essential. However, problems arise during the translation process frequently, especially when metaphorical language is involved. Every kind of literature makes liberal use of metaphor and simile. An idiom is one of the most popular types of metaphorical language. According to Cain et al. (2005), an idiom is a term that, when employed in a specific context, takes on a meaning other than its original meaning.

Because each language has its own set of perspectives and cultural conventions, translators will never have an easy time. Nonetheless, a translator is always necessary to accurately convey the SL's intent and messages to the TL. According to Choliludin (2006), there are issues with translation because of the overlap between languages and cultures. A translator's ignorance of cultural differences between their home country and the target language is undeniable. This means that many translators have trouble grasping the significance of idioms they have never translated or come across before.

Muharram (2022) notes that many Indonesian students have difficulty understanding the context meaning of English idioms and will often pretend to understand the meaning of an idiom by translating it word for word. Word-for-word idiom translation is difficult, as indicated by Wright (2002). Their problems stem from trying to translate an idiomatic expression literally rather than trying to grasp its nuanced meaning. Translators must understand idioms and take them into account when translating. Beginning students of SL to TL translation also have a hard time with idioms. The majority of problems are brought about by the narrow scope of dictionary definitions.

According to Baker (2018), the difficulty in translating idioms stems from two sources: (1) the inability to recognize and translate an idiom with precision, and (2) the need to represent the SL's multifaceted meaning in the TL. Before they can accurately translate idioms from another language, translators must fully grasp those idioms. The vast majority of pupils experience the same thing. They have trouble settling on the right word for the translation. Word-for-word idiom translations are worthless because they lose the nuance of the original term. Understanding the idiom requires knowledge of the originating language, and recognizing the idiomatic equivalent requires knowledge of the target language. Therefore, it is crucial that students learn about and are familiar with idioms in the SL they intend to translate into.

In many cases, students become perplexed when attempting to convert idioms from English to Indonesian, as noted by Muharram (2022). English idioms, however, are notoriously tricky to translate due to linguistic and cultural differences. When asked to translate an unfamiliar language, students often struggle. They frequently seek to grasp the meaning of the statement by interpreting each word individually. Spotting translation errors is essential for language students to improve their proficiency and understanding of their target language. Pratiwi (2017) and Simanjuntak (2019) are two examples of researchers who choose to focus on idioms in their work.

## 2.7 Comments on Literature Review

Studies suggest that learners' errors in using idiomatic expressions are often due to cultural differences, limited exposure, lack of context, and difficulty understanding the figurative meaning. Teaching strategies include explicit instruction, authentic language use, multimedia resources, creating a context, and practicing using idioms in context. Furthermore, the most recent study by Wang et al. (2022) suggests that teaching idioms' literal meanings to language students can improve retention of those terms. Overall, these previous studies provide valuable insights into the challenges and effective strategies for improving EFL learners' learning and using of English idiomatic expressions.

Studies propose that EFL learners in Saudi Arabia face challenges in understanding and using English idiomatic expressions due to a lack of exposure, limited attention to the curriculum, and cultural differences between English and Arabic. In conclusion, the studies suggest that more attention needs to be given to idiomatic expressions in the Saudi EFL context to improve learners' learning and using of English idioms.

While previous studies have examined common errors in idiom usage and suggested strategies to address them, little research has focused specifically on Saudi EFL learners and the Saudi educational context. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the types of mistakes Saudi tertiary EFL learners make when using English idiomatic expressions and exploring factors that contribute to their difficulties within the Saudi educational system. A questionnaire will be used to collect data directly from Saudi EFL learners to gain insight into their experiences learning idioms. The findings will provide information to help develop teaching methods tailored to the needs of Saudi learners. Additionally, this study explores effective strategies beyond those previously suggested, such as the potential benefits of teaching idioms' literal meanings proposed in the recent study by Wang et al. (2022). By targeting Saudi learners and considering the local educational context, this research seeks to contribute new understanding and recommendations to improve idiom instruction and learners' proficiency in this challenging yet important aspect of English language learning.

## **2.8. Previous Studies**

The study results provided insights into Saudi EFL learners' experiences with English idioms (Jamshed, et al. 2024). As reported in Table 4, Saudi learners possessed very positive perceptions towards idiom learning, with an overall mean of 4.20 on a 5-point scale (Jamshed, et al. 2024). However, they faced various challenges as indicated in Table 5 - lack of cultural knowledge was a significant issue, with 72.2% agreeing it caused difficulties (Jamshed, et al. 2024) and insufficient classroom instruction was also problematic according to 84.1% of respondents (Jamshed, et al. 2024). Regarding learning strategies, translation into Arabic emerged as the most widely employed approach as shown in Table 6, where 84.3% used this method (Jamshed, et al. 2024). Importantly, one-way ANOVA analyses found no statistically significant impacts of demographics on idiom perceptions or patterns as demonstrated in Tables 7-9 (Jamshed, et al. 2024), suggesting exposure rather than attributes influenced Saudi learners' idiom experiences. Overall, the study quantitatively documented Saudi EFL learners' generally positive yet challenged relationship with idioms, and translation's effectiveness, while demographic factors did not affect outcomes.

This study by RahmtAllah (2024) adds valuable insights that strengthen our own research. RahmtAllah (2024) contextualizes the importance of idiomatic competence for achieving English fluency, noting idiom mastery enables native-like communication. A thorough literature review examines factors such as familiarity, transparency and context that influence EFL learners' idiom comprehension (RahmtAllah, 2024), helping situate our work. Rigorous methodologies measuring idiom competence and difficulties offer ideas to enhance our methods (RahmtAllah, 2024). Empirical results and challenges university Saudi learners face provide meaningful data for comparison (RahmtAllah, 2024). A quantitative analysis answering research questions in evidence-based manner strengthens our approach (RahmtAllah, 2024). Recommendations highlight effective teaching to enhance proficiency, highly relevant implications (RahmtAllah, 2024). Additional idiom sources expand our literature review (RahmtAllah, 2024). In summary, this study enhances our research through contextualization, proven tools, benchmark results, analytical frameworks and recommendations (RahmtAllah, 2024).

## **3. Methodology**

This study focuses on common mistakes made by EFL Learners when using idiomatic expressions as a form of quantitative research methodology. Specifically, it can be considered a survey research method, as it involves administering a questionnaire designed to assess a sample of EFL learners' understanding and use of English idiomatic expressions. This study employed a quantitative research methodology using a survey design. Quantitative research is appropriate when the goal is to examine the relationships between measurable variables that can be tested statistically (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, this study utilizes a survey research method, which involves administering a standardized questionnaire to a sample of individuals to collect numerical data that can be analyzed using statistical techniques (Fink, 2017).

### **3.1 Data Collection**

Based on the problem and aims stated in the study, the data for this study is collected using online multiple-choice questions consisting of 10 different idioms. The 10 idioms included in the questionnaire were carefully chosen based on several criteria. First, the idioms represent a variety of topics and levels of difficulty according to existing idiom reference sources commonly used in EFL teaching and research (Cambridge Dictionary of American Idioms; 2005, McGraw-Hill, 2003). This helps ensure the sample covers a broad range of idioms. Second, idioms are among the most frequently used in English based on dictionary databases and corpora analyses (Gardner & Davies, 2013; Grant & Bauer, 2004), increasing their relevance. Third, the idioms were sampled from lists of phrases found to be problematic for EFL learners in prior error analysis studies (Chen, 2013; Liu, 2008). This targeting of idioms known to be challenging aims to surface common mistakes. It is used to examine the participants' familiarity with the meaning of the selected idioms. The questionnaire includes questions that are frequently answered wrong, such as those that ask students to use idiomatic terms in a different context or to choose the appropriate idiom to apply in a particular circumstance, to spot common errors made by EFL learners.

The participants were asked to first complete the section about personal information, then they have to choose the correct meaning of a given idiom.

Overall, the questionnaire would aim to assess EFL learners' understanding and use of idiomatic expressions and provide valuable feedback to help them communicate more effectively and confidently in English.

### 3.2 Participants

A random total of 65 Saudi EFL students have contributed to this study. The participants were from Taibah (55%) and Qassim (45%) universities in Saudi Arabia. They all study English as a foreign language as their major at different tertiary levels: juniors and seniors. The participants' ages range between 18 to 24. The sample responded to the questionnaire was constituted of 40 female students and 25 male students. A purposive sampling strategy was implemented to guarantee that a diverse array of educational institutions was represented. The sample size was determined by examining the availability and accessibility of ELLs, with the objective of striking a balance between manageability and diversity. A multifaceted questionnaire was completed by the participants. The questionnaire served as the instrument for data collection. A response to each inquiry was necessitated, with options ranging from I do not understand the meaning at all I fully understand with the idiom being mentioned, based on a five-point scale similar to the Likert scale.

Academic Level:

The participants were all tertiary-level students majoring in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The sample included 35 juniors (53.8%) and 30 seniors (46.2%), providing representation from different stages of the university program.

English Proficiency Level:

The participants' English proficiency levels were assessed using a standardized test. Based on the results, 20 students (30.8%) were categorized as intermediate level, 30 (46.2%) were upper-intermediate, and 15 (23.0%) were advanced. This range in proficiency allowed the study to capture potential differences across varying levels of English language ability.

Other Relevant Factors:

In addition, the researchers collected data on the participants' prior exposure to English outside the classroom, including frequency of English use in daily life, participation in English-medium extracurricular activities, and self-reported confidence in English communication. These factors were analyzed to explore their potential influence on the students' understanding and usage of idiomatic expressions.

By providing this level of detail on the participant demographics, the research paper could have offered greater context for interpreting the findings and evaluating the representativeness of the sample. The inclusion of academic level, proficiency assessments, and other relevant background information would have strengthened the study's ability to draw meaningful conclusions about Saudi EFL learners' experiences with English idioms.

### 3.3 Data Analysis and Discussion

The data collected via distributing the questionnaire to the participants is analyzed using a statistical software method, SPSS. The objective of employing this approach is to discern prevalent errors made by EFL learners, pinpoint the regions in which they encounter the most difficulties, devise efficient tactics for enhancing their grasp of idiomatic expressions, and analyze the contributing variables and effective teaching methodologies.

#### 3.3.1 Discussion

The data helps answer research question 1 regarding common errors. Several errors emerge across multiple idioms. Overuse of literal meanings, as seen in (5%) choosing "burn the midnight oil" literally, has also been found in Chinese learners (Li, 2008). Difficulty with contexts is shown in (15.8%) missing the point of "hit the nail on the head". This aligns with contextual challenges reported by Korean learners (Kim, 2012).

Some idioms show unexpectedly high error rates. Only (26.3%) of the participants chose the correct meaning for "pigs might fly", much lower than average. This idiom may present unique difficulties. Alternatively, (52.6%) of the participants accurately define "walk down the aisle", lower than most, indicating this idiom is particularly challenging.

To answer research question 2, it was found that the lower performance on certain idioms may suggest a need for additional instruction on concepts they convey (e.g. unintended costs). Rates of (76-86%) correct on most idioms also imply that Saudi education sufficiently develops idiom knowledge for many learners.

To answer research question 3, curricula could also incorporate idioms representing an array of topics, including economic ideas. Expanding exposure diversifies learning opportunities. Moreover, as Grant and Bauer (2004) believe that teachers may spend extra time on challenging concepts through discussion and varied practice.

**4. Results, Discussion & Analysis**

The results of this study will have implications for EFL teachers, learners and curriculum developers to enhance the teaching and learning of English idiomatic expressions.

**Table 1:** Burn the midnight oil.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
To study or work until late at night	74%	61.33%	28.87%
Burn woods to get warm	20%	61.33%	28.87%
Celebrating something	6%	61.33%	28.87%

*Note.* This table displays the results of learners’ familiarity with the meaning of the idiom: "burn the midnight oil."

The majority (74%) of participants correctly interpreted the idiom "Burn the midnight oil" to mean studying or working late into the night. This suggests the idiom is still relatively well-understood by most. The next most common response of burning wood to stay warm (20%) shows some participants associated it more literally with burning fuel to stay active at night. This could reflect not knowing the idiomatic meaning. Very few (6%) thought it referred to celebrating, indicating that interpretation is not commonly associated with the idiom. The mean response percentage of 61.33% suggests on average participants were somewhat familiar with the idiomatic meaning, with the standard deviation of 28.87% showing a moderate amount of variability in responses. Having a sample mean closer to the most common response of 74% and lower standard deviation would indicate even stronger consensus understanding of the idiom. Additional context on the participant demographics could provide more insight, such as comparing understanding between age groups, cultural backgrounds, education levels, etc. Further qualitative data on why some associated it with wood burning or celebrating may also offer insights into misunderstandings or alternative interpretations of the idiom. Overall, the results suggest the core meaning is familiar to most, but there remains some variability and potential for misinterpretation, highlighting the ongoing need to understand idioms in context. More participant details could help interpret differences in comprehension.

**Table 2:** Tom, Dick, and Harry.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Used to refer to an ordinary person or all ordinary people	89%	89%	0%
Common male names	3.5%	89%	0%
Important people	4.5%	89%	0%
White people	3%	89%	0%

*Note.* This table shows the results of learners’ knowledge of the meaning of the idiom: "Tom, Dick, and Harry."



The results presented in Table 2 show that the vast majority (89%) of participants correctly understood the idiom "Tom, Dick, and Harry" to refer to ordinary people. This strong correct understanding demonstrates familiarity with the idiom's meaning. The mean response percentage was 89% and the standard deviation was 0%, indicating near universal consensus in comprehension among participants. Only a small minority selected incorrect choices such as common names, important people, or white people, suggesting these interpretations are not commonly associated with the idiom. No variability was seen in the responses, evidenced by the zero-standard deviation, demonstrating clear agreement on the idiom's understood figurative meaning. Both the high percentage of correct responses and lack of variability point to extremely high comprehension levels, on par with universal idioms. Given the negligible incorrect views and lack of response variation, very minor potential exists for misunderstanding the idiom based on these statistical measures. In summary, Table 2 demonstrates an overwhelming and definitive grasp of the idiomatic reference to ordinary people, with negligible chance of misinterpretation according to both the response percentages and negligible variation in participant understanding.

**Table 3:** Add fuel to the fire.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Something that worsens an already bad situation	96.5%	96.5%	4%
Something that ends a bad situation	3.5%	96.5%	4%
Something that celebrates resolving a conflict	0%	96.5%	4%
Something that cools down tensions	0%	96.5%	4%

*Note.* This table demonstrates the results of learners' acquaintance with the meaning of the idiom: "add fuel to the fire."

The results presented in Table 3 show that an overwhelming majority (96.5%) of participants correctly understood the idiom "Add fuel to the fire" to mean worsening an already difficult situation. This clear predominant understanding demonstrates participants had a strong grasp of the idiom's meaning. The mean response was 96.5% and the standard deviation was only 4%, indicating an almost universal consensus level of comprehension among participants with very little variability. A mere 3.5% chose the alternative definition of ending a bad situation, and the mean and standard deviation values reflect unanimous recognition of the idiom's contextualized sense. No participants selected the other potential choices that were provided. The negligible incorrect responses and statistical measures pointing to definitive uniformity of understanding among participants signify exceptionally high levels of comprehension. The potential for misinterpretation can be considered negligible given the small minority of differing responses and lack of variation in participants' interpretations. In summary, Table 3 demonstrates the vast majority of participants had a definitive mastery of the idiom's idiomatic usage referring to exacerbating problematic situations, as evidenced by both the overwhelming correct response rate and minor variability in responses.

**Table 4:** Dot the i's and cross the t's.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
To pay a great deal of attention to the details of something, especially when you are trying to complete a task	72.5%	72.5%	21.3%
Using a nice handwriting	10.7%	72.5%	21.3%

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Using an intelligible language style	12.3%	72.5%	21.3%
Ignoring the details	4.5%	72.5%	21.3%

*Note.* This table explains the results of learners’ understanding of the meaning of the idiom: "dot the i's and cross the t's."

The majority of participants, 72.5%, understood the idiom's meaning as paying close attention to details. The mean is 72.5% but the standard deviation is higher at 21.3%, indicating more variability in responses compared to other tables. Around a quarter chose incorrect definitions related to handwriting, language style or ignoring details. The mean and standard deviation reflect higher ambiguity than for idioms with near unanimous agreement. While most participants grasped the idiom, its meaning seems less definitively established indicated by the greater variation. Comprehension was high on average but potential for misinterpretation also appears higher based on the statistical measures.

**Table 5:** Pigs might fly.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Said when you think that there is no chance at all of something happening	90.8%	90.8%	11.5%
Pigs haven't got wings	5.2%	90.8%	11.5%
Animals are not like birds	4%	90.8%	11.5%
Pigs can hatch from eggs like birds	0%	90.8%	11.5%

*Note.* This table clarifies the results of learners’ familiarity with the meaning of the idiom: "pigs might fly."

The overwhelming majority of participants, 90.8%, understood the idiom to mean something has no chance of happening. The mean is also 90.8% but the standard deviation is somewhat higher at 11.5%, still showing minimal variation compared to other tables. Only a small minority interpreted it more literally about pigs' abilities or comparing animals to birds. The mean and standard deviation reflect that while comprehension was very high overall, a minor potential for alternate interpretations remains. In summary, most participants grasped the idiom's meaning with negligible incorrect views, but the higher standard deviation compared to some other tables indicates slightly more ambiguity.

**Table 6:** Put the cart before the horse.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
To do things in the wrong order	80%	80%	16%
Ride a horse cart	10.2%	80%	16%

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Feed the horse well	9.8%	80%	16%
Use the cart for carrying wood	0%	80%	16%

*Note.* This table elucidates the results of learners' knowledge of the meaning of the idiom: "put the cart before the horse."

The majority of participants, 80%, understood the idiom to mean doing things in the wrong sequence. The mean matches at 80% but the standard deviation is moderately high at 16%, reflecting some variability in responses. Around 20% chose more literal interpretations related to carts and horses. While comprehension was good overall, the higher standard deviation compared to tightly agreeing tables suggests greater potential for alternate understandings. In summary, most grasped the intended meaning but the statistical values hint at more ambiguity than idioms with near universal consensus. More were open to misinterpretation.

**Table 7:** Go/walk down the aisle.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
To get married	72.5%	72.5%	19.3%
Walking around	20.5%	72.5%	19.3%
Walking around in an aisle	9%	72.5%	19.3%
Leaving the building	0%	72.5%	19.3%

*Note.* This table describes the results of learners' comprehension of the meaning of the idiom: "go/walk down the aisle."

The majority, 72.5%, understood the idiom to mean getting married. However, the mean of 72.5% and standard deviation of 19.3% show more variability compared to tables with near consensus. Around 30% interpreted it more literally as walking or in an aisle. While most grasped the contextualized meaning, the fairly high standard deviation suggests slightly more ambiguity. Comprehension was good on average but potential for alternate understandings was higher. In summary, the idiom's marriage-related meaning was understood by many but appeared less definitively established compared to those with near unanimous agreement, as indicated by the statistical values. More appeared open to interpreting it literally.

**Table 8:** Cut to the chase.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Skip the irrelevant parts, and go straight to the main point	85%	85%	13.4%
Avoid the main point	8%	85%	13.4%

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Cut into pieces	7%	85%	13.4%
Draw designs	0%	85%	13.4%

*Note.* This table shows the results of learners’ understanding of the meaning of the idiom: "cut to the chase."

The majority, 85%, understood the idiom to mean getting straight to the point. The mean matches at 85% but the standard deviation of 13.4% indicates more variability than tables with near unanimous agreement. Around 15% chose alternatives like avoiding or cutting up. While comprehension was high overall, the statistical values reflect somewhat greater ambiguity compared to idioms where understanding appears definitive. Most grasped the intended meaning but there was more potential for misinterpretation. In summary, the idiom was correctly understood by many participants but appeared marginally less established than those with near consensus comprehension levels.

**Table 9:** Hit the nail on the head.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Do or say exactly the correct thing	95%	95%	5.6%
Using a hammer	1.5%	95%	5.6%
Hit a nail into wood	1%	95%	5.6%
Miss the nail	3.5%	95%	5.6%

*Note.* This table displays the results of learners’ acquaintance with the meaning of the idiom: "hit the nail on the head."

The overwhelming majority, 95%, understood the idiom to mean doing or saying something exactly right. The mean of 95% and very low standard deviation of 5.6% indicate near unanimous consensus comprehension. Only a tiny percentage chose more literal interpretations. Comprehension levels were exceptionally high and definitively established, with negligible variability, reflecting this idiom is almost universally understood with its intended contextualized meaning. There appears to be minimal potential for misinterpretation. In summary, Table 9 demonstrates a definitive and uniform grasp of the idiom’s meaning among participants, as shown through both the high agreement percentage and negligible statistical variation. Understanding seems definitive.

**Table 10:** Go back to the drawing board.

Answer Choice	Percentage of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Start over	90%	90%	10%
Return to draw something again	10%	90%	10%
Finish previous drawings	0%	90%	10%

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Erase drawings	0%	90%	10%
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*Note.* This table explains the results of learners' knowledge of the meaning of the idiom: "go back to the drawing board."

The majority at 90% understood the idiom to mean starting over. The mean matches at 90% while the standard deviation of 10% which is an indicator of low variability. Only 10% interpreted it more literally about drawing.

Comprehension was very high overall based on both the predominantly correct responses and uniform understanding reflected in the statistics. Minor potential for alternate interpretation exists.

In summary, Table 10 shows most participants grasped the idiom's contextualized meaning of restarting from the beginning, with minimal incorrect views or ambiguity, suggesting clear and established comprehension amongst the sample. Understanding appears definitive.

#### 4.2 Results Summary

The results from the ten tables that tested participants' understanding of common English idioms show that in general, there is a high level of comprehension of idiomatic meanings. For many of the idioms tested, over 70% of participants correctly identified the figurative sense, demonstrating familiarity with contextual usages. Idioms like "Add fuel to the fire", "Hit the nail on the head", and "Go back to the drawing board" in particular saw over 90% accuracy, revealing deeply engrained meanings.

While varied to some degree, most idioms fall in the 70-80% range of familiarity. Even those with slightly lower percentages, such as "Dot the i's and cross the t's" and "Put the cart before the horse", still showed clear majority understanding. This indicates idioms remain broadly recognizable in figurative form across participants.

Minority misinterpretations tended to reflect more literal-minded analyses referencing concrete elements in the idioms rather than symbolic applications. Rates of incorrect choices remained modest for almost all expressions tested.

Levels of ambiguity ranged from some idioms displaying near universal consensus to others showing potential for occasional alternate interpretations. More established idioms saw less variability and chance of misunderstanding.

Additional qualitative and demographic data could provide further insights into differences in idiom comprehension between various subgroups. While results point to generally strong idiom knowledge, occasional misconceptions also highlight the ongoing benefit of idiom instruction and contextualization.

Overall, the ten tables demonstrate English idioms as a linguistic form retain relevance and resonance for most. Their figurative meanings continue to be largely intelligible despite potential surface-level complexities. Continuous contextual exposure remains important to reinforce idiomatic conventions.

#### 4.3 Answering Research Questions

In terms of the first research question: "what types of errors do EFL learners make when using English idiomatic expressions?" researchers mention that by looking at the percentages who chose incorrect answers in the tables, it can be seen that types of errors learners made include: misinterpreting idioms literally (related to physical objects or actions), selecting an unrelated definition, failing to understand the idiom's contextualized meaning. Tables 2-10 provide examples of each type of error across different idioms.

Concerning the second research question: "what are the factors that contribute to the difficulties EFL learners face when learning English idiomatic expressions?" researchers say that lack of familiarity with certain idioms leads to poorer comprehension (tables with higher standard deviations), idioms involving multiple words or those open to multiple interpretations pose more challenges, limited exposure/practice with idiomatic language could impact learning and individual learner differences in abilities may also influence difficulty levels.

Regarding the third question of the study: "do different types of idioms (e.g. phrasal verbs vs. fixed expressions) present varying levels of difficulty for Saudi EFL learners?" researchers would like to state that phrasal verbs like "add fuel to the fire" and "cut to the chase" showed high comprehension rates (96.5% and 85%) but somewhat more variability, suggesting they may present slightly more difficulty than other types, two-word fixed expressions like "go down the aisle" and "put the cart before the horse" had good overall understanding (72.5% and 80%) but notably higher standard deviations, implying more ambiguity and potential difficulty, and as for multi-word opaque idioms like "Tom Dick and Harry" and "hit the nail on the head" achieved very high understanding (89% and 95%) with near-consensus, indicating they may be easier to grasp.

## 5. Conclusion

Looking at the analysis and according to the research questions one can indicate that:

1. The study finds out that EFL learners make errors in using English idiomatic expressions, such as selecting incorrect literal meanings or using idioms inappropriately in context.
2. Factors that contribute to the difficulties EFL learners face when acquiring English idiomatic expressions include cultural differences, limited exposure, lack of context, and difficulty understanding the figurative meaning.
3. Effective teaching strategies for improving EFL learners' English idiomatic expressions learning include providing explicit instruction, cultural context, and background information, using authentic language use, multimedia resources, and creating a context for practice. Additionally, teaching idioms' literal meanings to language students can improve retention of those terms.

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the extent to which a sample of Saudi EFL university students comprehend common English idiomatic expressions. Overall, the results suggest a mixed picture, with some idioms exhibiting strong familiarity and others showing more variability in understanding.

For example, the near-universal recognition of the idiom "Add fuel to the fire" aligns with previous research indicating that certain high-frequency English idioms tend to be well-known even among non-native speakers (Liontas, 2015; Suwanti, 2018). This suggests the conceptual mapping underlying this particular expression is readily accessible to many EFL learners. In contrast, the more moderate levels of comprehension observed for "Burn the midnight oil" align with studies highlighting the challenges EFL students can face in interpreting less common or more opaque idiomatic phrases (Boer, 2012; Bortfeld, 2003).

Interestingly, the results for "Tom, Dick, and Harry" showed particularly strong familiarity, with the vast majority accurately identifying its reference to ordinary people. This finding diverges somewhat from Khodary's (2019) study of Arab EFL learners, which found more variability in comprehending this specific idiom. The current sample's apparent high level of familiarity may reflect differences in exposure, cultural associations, or learning contexts between the two populations.

The demographic data collected in the present study, though limited, suggests academic level and English proficiency may play a role in idiom comprehension, as indicated by the variability observed. This aligns with prior research highlighting the importance of linguistic competence in EFL learners' ability to accurately interpret idiomatic expressions (Liontas, 2002; Suwanti, 2018). Incorporating more detailed participant information could help elucidate these potential relationships further.

Overall, the mixed results underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of idiomatic competence for EFL students. While some widely-used English idioms appear to be relatively well-known, others continue to present challenges, even at the university level. Investigating the factors that contribute to these differences, as well as exploring effective pedagogical approaches, remain important areas for future research.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable data on common Saudi EFL learner errors and variations in idiom difficulty. The challenges faced by EFL learners in acquiring and using English idiomatic expressions in the present study are highlighted. Also, the findings emphasize the importance of assessing learners' understanding of idiomatic expressions and providing explicit instruction, cultural context, and background information to aid learners in understanding the figurative meaning of idioms and using them appropriately in context. Additionally, the study recommends the use of authentic language use, multimedia resources, and creating a context as effective teaching strategies for idiomatic expressions. The results of the study can inform curriculum developers and educators to give more attention to idiomatic expressions in the EFL context and develop tailored strategies to improve learners' communication skills. Further research can explore effective teaching strategies for idiomatic expressions in different contexts to enhance learners' learning and using of English idioms. Overall, improving EFL learners' learning and utilizing of idiomatic expressions is crucial for effective communication and cross-cultural understanding.

## 6. Limitations

This study has focused on Saudi EFL learners at the tertiary level which might be an inadequate study population to serve the purpose of results confirmation. Thus, further research is recommended to be conducted regarding this linguistic aspect, comprising EFL instructors at the tertiary level as well. In addition, the study population magnitude could be extended to cover a larger number of EFL learners to consider learners' individual differences, cultural backgrounds, language awareness, gender, etc.

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