

**Language Transfer and
Idiom Comprehension: A
case study of Algerian and
Saudi subjects**

Dr. Anissa Daoudi
University of Exeter
Exeter,
UK

Abstract

Despite the fact that idioms are common to all languages, their frequency remains for a good number of foreign-language learners a major obstruction. The present article exposes the results of a study conducted with 50 Arab (Saudi and Algerian) university students of Translation Studies, in order to investigate the degree to which idiom type affects the comprehension and the production levels. While it also looks into whether the context plays any role towards the decoding and encoding of an idiom, it investigates the influence of the mother tongue on idiom comprehension and production.

Subject Index Entries: *Context, Idiomaticity, Idiom types, Idiom decoding, Idiom encoding, Language transfer, Idiomatic strings, Figurative and literal interpretation, Target and source idioms, idiom decomposition, lexical ambiguity.*

ملخص

Introduction

An idiom is institutionalized linguistic expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts. For example, the meaning of the expression *kick the bucket* cannot be deduced from the literal meaning of *kick* and *bucket*. The same thing applies to all languages; in French, the meaning of *cassé sa pipe* (to die) cannot be interpreted from the literal meaning of *cassé*, (broken) and *pipe*, (pipe). Idiomatic expressions are found in all languages and they are

بالرغم من أن الاصطلاحات التعبيرية موجودة في جميع اللغات إلا أنها تبقى في نظر متعلمي اللغات الأجنبية عائقاً كبيراً. عادةً ما تتم ترجمة الاصطلاحات من اللغة الأصل إلى اللغة المستهدفة بطرق مختلفة. يتناول هذا المقال نتائج الدراسة التي شملت 50 طالباً جزائرياً وسعودياً من ميدان الترجمة بهدف الكشف عن مدى تأثير صيغة الاصطلاح التعبيري في مستويات الفهم والإنتاج. ومن جانب آخر تبحث الدراسة في تأثير اللغة الأم في فهم الاصطلاحات التعبيرية وكذا إنتاجها.

frequently used. The familiarity and the ability to use them properly in a particular context are among the distinguishing features of a native/native-like command of a language. Native speakers are often unaware of the nature of these idiomatic expressions as they process them spontaneously. It is only if one happens to be a non-native speaker of the language that the problem of comprehension and sometimes production may arise. Idioms are frequently used by native speakers as Searle (cited by Kassis: 1994) comments: “speak idiomatically unless there is some special reason not to”.

The use of such idiomatic expressions is seen in a wide range of fields such as journalism, media, literary, and scientific works (Glaser, 1998:132-142). Their creation is a reflection of new conceptions of the world and new methods of conveying ideas lively. Therefore, they are such a widespread phenomenon that they cannot be ignored in the study of language and communication. Although, there has been an increasing amount of research done on the role of phraseology in second language acquisition, there is still a lack of detailed description of learners’ phraseological performances as the basis of how phraseological competence develops (Howarth, 1998: 24). In addition, there is little mentioned about the role of language transfer in the learners’ comprehension of idioms. In order to understand the above-mentioned aspects, the following literature overview will highlight the different issues related to the field of phraseology in general and idioms in particular.

Review of the Literature

When reviewing the literature on idiomaticity, one has to distinguish between studies done on the first language (L_1) and others on the second language (L_2). One key observation is that research into L_1 idiom processing and comprehension has not been matched by an equal interest in second/foreign research. Among the research found in the first language are Cronk and Schweigert (1992) who analysed the process of comprehension and representation of idiomatic meaning in the mental lexicon, bearing in mind the factors of familiarity and literalness. Other studies have dealt with the effect of context on the literal and figurative interpretation (Colombo, 1993) and the relationship between context and the various types of idioms (Liontas, 1997, 2000 and 2001). Levorato and Cacciari (1992, 1995) who analysed children’s comprehension of idiomatic expressions through

the factor of familiarity and contextual information found that these two features contributed greatly to the comprehension and production of figurative language. Familiarity, idiom semantic transparency and idiom performance were proposed by Levorato and Cacciari (1992, 1995). From a teaching point of view, it was found that learners ought to be exposed to idioms and their different uses. Furthermore, learners should be encouraged not only to decode idioms, but to encode and make good use of them.

The present study is more concerned with research on idioms in second language learning/teaching and the importance context plays in the comprehension phase; this area did not attract as much research as in L₁. However, Irujo (1986) demonstrated that advanced students of English rely on knowledge of their native language to comprehend and produce L₂ idioms. She also found that identical idioms are the easiest to comprehend and produce. Similar idioms on the other hand, present learners with somewhat more difficulty. Idioms with no equivalent in L₁ are found to be the most difficult for learners to comprehend and produce, with almost no positive or negative transfer between the two languages. Kellerman (1978, 1979, and 1983) investigated the relationship between L₁ knowledge and interpretation of the figurative use of L₂ expressions. He considered 'transfer' of L₁ items into L₂ expressions to be an active learner strategy. Abdullah (1998) also found that Syrian learners of English as Foreign Language used L₁ to interpret and comprehend idioms. Similarly, he found that identical idioms were comprehended and translated with no difficulty, whereas idioms with no equivalents were proved to be the most difficult. Liontas (1997 and 2001), analysed the role of context in the way in which L₂ learners process, comprehend, and interpret idiomatic expressions. He found that context plays a vital role in the decoding and encoding of idioms.

For the purpose of this study I will go deeper into language transfer. The terminology related to language transfer is rather problematic. Therefore I will simply say that the concept itself is based on the assumption that previous learning affects the new one. This leads us to mention that some researchers who argue that the patterns and the forms of the native language are imposed on the second one (Gass, 1979). Others comment that transfer is not simply a consequence of habit formation (Odlin, 1989: 25). A distinction is made between contrastive analysis and behaviourism on the issue of

language transfer and native language influence. It is argued that much influence of the native language can be found helpful if the differences between the two languages are not great. This similarity between the first and second languages will produce a positive transfer. However, if the two languages are dissimilar, such as Arabic and English, when learners try to transfer identically the forms and patterns of the native language, negative transfer occurs (Irujo, 1986: 289).

Psycholinguistic, as a new discipline, appeared to deal with language acquisition not as a process of habit through repetition and reinforcement, but as the result of an innate device. Target language started to be viewed as a source that could develop learners' language acquisition. However, this did not stop researchers in the 1980's to prove that interference is an important factor (Steinbach, 1981; Irujo, 1986). Irujo (ibid) focused on the influence of transfer in the acquisition of idioms. She differentiated between idioms in terms of their similarity to first language equivalents. Her work did not only deal with the comprehension level, but the production one as well. Her findings, applied to English and Spanish, can be summarised as follows: on the comprehension, subjects were able to understand idioms in English even if they were slightly different from their Spanish counterparts. They were able to produce identical idioms more correctly than idioms of other types. In production, it was also found that negative transfer occurred when differences in idioms in the first and second language were great. Abdullah (1998) confirms her findings on the aspect of positive and negative transfer and adds that this could be applied even if the two languages are dissimilar as in the case of Arabic and English.

My starting point for the present study is to distinguish between the three phases that EFL learners go through when dealing with idioms: identification, comprehension and production. Identification is the phase that precedes the understanding of an idiom; it is what makes a learner decide about the idiomaticity of an expression. Then comes the comprehension phase, which is the processing of idioms, finally, the production phase, which is the encoding of idioms by EFL learners. For the purpose of this article, I will concentrate on the second phase, "comprehension" and will highlight the importance of language transfer from L1 and its relationship with context.

Above, I review chronologically the relevant theories and models related to idioms, the development of phraseology, in general, and

idioms, in particular. On evaluating these theories, one area that has not been explored sufficiently is the concept of “context”. Context is the most important factor in the process of identifying, comprehending and producing idioms. There is no single definition for context. The reason is the multi-faceted and complex nature of the various types that could fit in the definition of context. Context can be defined as a situation in which something happened in a setting of one sort or another; thus, it could be a social/cultural context that is known to a particular person or group/community; the language/linguistic context whereby a form of expression is produced, which could have a literal or a figurative interpretation. Both social and linguistic contexts could ultimately have an impact on the way an idiomatic expression is received by the hearer or reader.

Humans are quite successful at conveying ideas and thoughts to each other. This is due to many factors: the richness of language, the common understanding of the world and the world’s mechanism. Most of this mechanism is done implicitly, without any sort of formal declaration. In the case of language learning, in general, and idioms, in particular, there is an implicit agreement between the writer versus reader and speaker versus listener about certain conventions and norms. This contextual contract is the foundation to what we, as humans, make use of in our daily lives. Realizing the need for context is therefore a step forward towards using it effectively. A better understanding of the importance of context is needed.

The first reaction to the word “context” brings together words like location, identities of people and objects. A more precise definition is that context is location, identities of people around the user, the time of the day, the season, temperature, etc. This implies that context is linked to aspects like user’s emotional state, focus of attention and belief. Context can thus be the user’s physical, social, emotional or informational state. Context categorization feeds our development of context versus idiom processing. A categorization of context will help our understanding of the relationship between aspects in the language that we might take for granted, such as the relationship between words, which is the nucleus of the present research, i.e., idiom processing is about the relationship between words. Context so far is related to where you are, who you are dealing with and when, etc. There are certainly types of contexts that are more important than others. I propose to focus on the location, identity and activity, which

will help in forming a definition of what I refer to as social/cultural, linguistic and psychological contexts (see Figure 1 below).

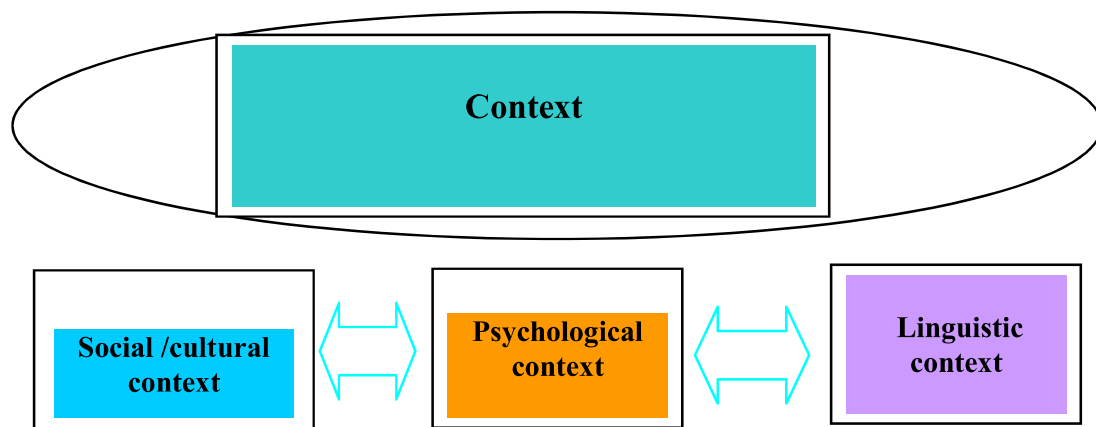


Figure 1: Types of contexts

The importance of social context had been recognized to the extent of claiming that language use is largely prescribed by the situation in which it is spoken (Giles and Coupland, 1991: 3). This is true in the case of idioms, especially when the latter's relationship between words is not a straightforward one and is determined by the situation in which the idiomatic expression has been used. An interesting distinction of contexts is made by Batstone (cited by Collentine and Freed, 2004: 155). Contexts are divided into communicative and learning contexts. While the former requires that the learner uses L₂ as a tool for exchanging information and participating in important social and interpersonal functions, the latter deals with the learners' input and output as directed and assisted by the teacher. As far as this study is concerned, the above distinction fits well with my differentiation between the two phases of learning idioms, namely the comprehension and the production stages. I relate the production phase directly to the communicative context, where a foreign language learner chooses to use idioms in his/her communication, either verbal or written. This involves the learners' risk taking in attempts to improve their linguistic skills. Here, the learner's initiative and risk taking vary from one learner to another. The learning context, on the other hand, is associated with both the understanding and the production phases. In a learning context, the learner has more or less

no option but to complete the task assigned. At this level, the learner's choice is not included. In other words, encoding idioms does not become a decision taken by the learner. Although L₂ classrooms are encouraged to create a communicative context where the learner uses the language as a tool, it is still not as effective as claimed. The following section is about idiom comprehension (the second phase) which relies significantly on language transfer. Context is very important to the comprehension phase.

The Study Hypotheses

As far as language transfer in relation to idiom comprehension is concerned the following hypotheses are set:

1. Identical idioms would be the easiest to comprehend and produce. They would show positive transfer.
2. Similar idioms are confusing and prove to cause negative transfer.
3. Different idioms would be the most difficult to comprehend and produce.
4. Context influences and affects comprehension of idiomatic strings.
5. Idiom production is very low. There is a high tendency towards "avoidance" as a learning strategy.

Subjects

The study is conducted with two different groups, namely, fourth year BA students studying English at the Department of Translation, King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and fourth year *Licence* students studying translation and interpreting at the Department de Traduction et Interpretariat, L'Université d'Alger, Algeria. The status of English in both Algeria and Saudi Arabia is foreign language, which implies that the use of this language is very limited. The Algerian *Licence* in translation (English-Arabic-French) takes four years. Algerian subjects are both male and female, whereas in Saudi Arabia, the subjects are all male. Arabic is usually the mother tongue in Algeria, though there are some students of Berber origin where the Tamazight is their mother tongue. French is officially the second language. However, from learners' language proficiency point of

view, it has native-like status. As for Saudi Arabia, the official and mother language is Arabic.

Materials and Procedures

To give a clear idea of the practical side of the methodological model of this study, three instruments have been chosen for gathering data: questionnaires, observation and interviews.

The first data collection instrument used was the questionnaire, which contained 50 statements. The latter, were grouped according to the stages believed to be the cycle adopted by learners when dealing with idioms namely: idiom identification, comprehension and production phases.

The second data collection used was classroom observation. Subjects were given various tests. For example, to test comprehension, a list of 40 idioms (mixture of identical, similar and different idioms) was given in the form of a multiple choice exercise (idioms out of context). Then, subjects were given idioms in context to see if it influences comprehension. Other exercises tested recall, subjects were asked to fill in the gaps with the appropriate idiomatic expression.

The third instrument for collecting data was group interview, where answers from the above mentioned instruments used were confirmed or disconfirmed. The interview was semi-structured and reformulated questions asked in the questionnaire and in the classroom tasks.

Analysis

In order to follow the analysis of idiom comprehension, I shall highlight the types of idioms adopting Laufer's (1991: 589) terminology and Irujo's (1986a) idea of language transfer, as follows:

- a) *Cognate idioms*: idioms that have identical equivalents in the native language (in the form and function), e.g. *to play with fire* and its Arabic counterpart يلعب بالنار, meaning "to look for trouble".
- b) *False cognates*: idioms that share similar structure with some native equivalents, but are different in function from that of the native language, e.g. *to bite the dust*, meaning "to die" with يسف التراب which means "to be poor".
- c) *Idioms with pragmatic equivalents*: idioms that express similar idiomatic functions to that of the native language, but differ in their idiomatic form, for example, *to rub salt in the wound/ injury*,

meaning “to make a situation worse” and its counterpart in Arabic, يزيد الطين بلة, which also means “to aggravate a situation”.

d) *Idioms with no equivalents*: idioms that have no first language equivalents, neither in the form nor in the function, such as *to take a French leave*, i.e., “to leave one’s duties without asking permission” and in Arabic كل يغني على ليلاه meaning “everyone is seeking his/her interests”.

Like Irujo’s (1986a) hypothesis, this study is based on the assumption that identical idioms (similar in form and function) are more likely to show positive transfer and would be easier to comprehend and to produce correctly than idioms with no equivalents. Also, similar idioms (similar in form but different in function) would reveal evidence of negative transfer; while comprehension might almost be as high as identical idioms, at the production level (i.e. encoding phase) there would be greater chances of interference from the first language. The above classification takes into consideration translation equivalence and stresses the importance of pragmatic translation, for example, *to buy a pig in a poke*, i.e. “to buy something without inspecting it”, has a pragmatic translation that matches the Arabic يشتري السمك في البحر (lit. to buy fish in the sea). Unlike Irujo’s study based on a native and a foreign language, the present study deals with more than one native language: the Algerian subjects speak more than one native language, Arabic and Tamazight (Berber), in addition to French which is also a native-like language to some of the Algerian students.

Findings related to cognate idioms

The first type analysed was the “cognate idiom.” This section had four statements (Table1) according to the questionnaire, from which I selected Statement 19 for discussion, as it was the one that contained a significant difference in terms of scores; statements 20, 21 and 22, generated similar scores.

True cognates	
S19	I translate the idiom into my L ₁
S20	I check if there is a similar idiom in my L ₁
S21	I compare the idiom with its L ₁ counterpart
S22	True cognates are easy to comprehend

Table 1: Questionnaire statements about true cognates

From Statement 19 (Table 2) we notice that 36.7%, i.e. (11) of Algerian subjects said that they frequently “often” decoded identical idioms because they had their counterpart in the native language; 26.7% (8) thought they were “always” familiar with this type of idioms. On the other hand, 23.3% (7) said they “never” looked for identical idioms. With the Saudi group the picture was different, we had 26.7% (8 students out of 30) who seemed to be “often” clear about understanding identical idioms while again 26.7% (8) said they “never” transferred idioms from L₁. The similarity in scores among the Saudis who said they “often” translated idioms into L₁ and those who mentioned that they “never” did was interesting. The reason behind this could be a misunderstanding of the questionnaire statement. Moreover, 23.3% (7) Saudis mentioned that they “sometimes” looked for identical idioms while the same percentage among the same group said they “sometimes” did. When adding up the percentages of Saudis who “sometimes”, “often” and “always” translated idioms into L₁, we get 73.3%, i.e. 22 out of 30 Saudis positively agreed on relying on L₁ translations.

Statement 19: I translate the idiom into my L1							
	Never %	Sometime %	Often %	Always %	M	S.D	Sig. .L
Saudi	26.7	23.3	26.7	23.3	2.47	1.137	P=.496 (S)
Algerian	23.3	13.3	36.7	26.7	2.67	1.124	
Average	25	18.3	31.7	25	2.57	1.125	

Table 2: Cognate computation (Statement 19).

On the other hand, from Table 2, 11 (36.7%) Algerians mentioned that they “often” translated idioms into L₁. Also, 8 (26.7%) Algerians argued that they “always” did. The fact that 7 (23.3%) said they “never” imported from L₁ made the Algerian picture no different from the Saudi one. This might be due to the perception that “language transfer” is a negative process in language learning.

Looking at the distribution of scores, (Figure 2 Statement 19 above), the white (lightest) block highlights that more than one-third of the Algerian students were clear about comprehending idioms with the help of the native language. On the other hand, the Saudi scores, are all proportionally equal, which could be due to the fact that many students were unsure of the question about identical idioms put to them in the questionnaire.

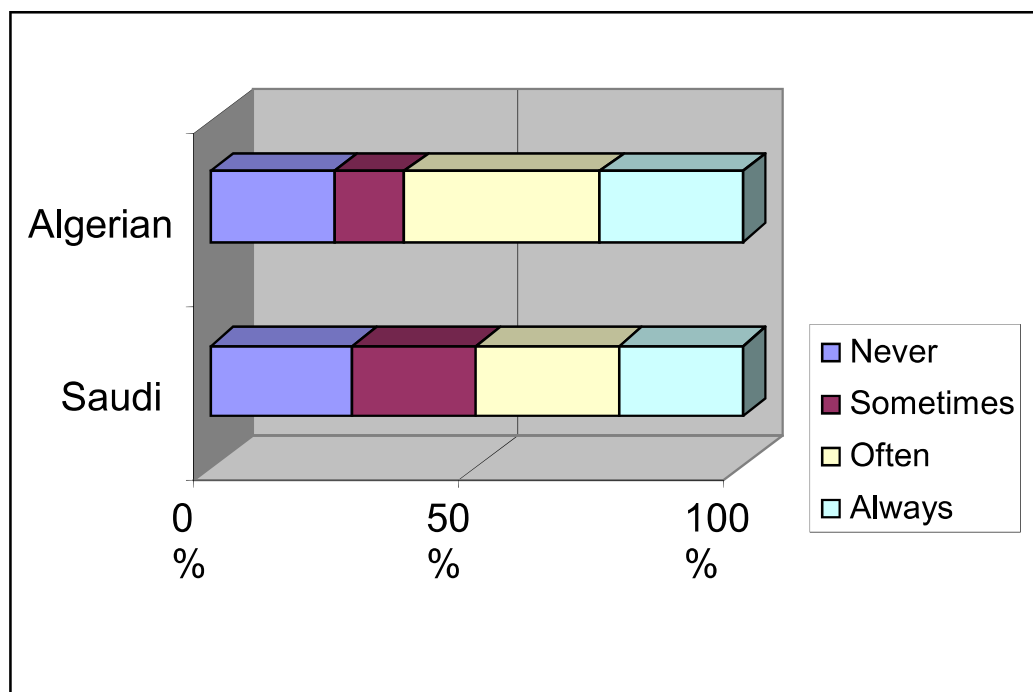


Figure 2: True cognate idioms processing (Statement 19)

In relation to cognate idioms from classroom observation, Algerian subjects recognised identical idioms which were similar in both form and meaning; *to shed crocodile's tears* يذرف دموع التماسيح; *no smoke without fire* لا دخان بلا نار; *give someone the green light* يعطي الضوء الأخضر إلى; *to fish in troubled water* يصطاد في الماء العكر and *to cast light on* يلقي الضوء على were found to be easy to comprehend. Interestingly, an expression such as *too many cooks spoil the broth*, which has an

equivalent in Arabic كثرة الطباخين تفسد الطبخة, was not found easier to comprehend by both groups. This might be explained as the unfamiliarity of the subjects with the word “broth”. The fact that these Arabic expressions have an equivalent in English indicates that these idiomatic expressions might originate from English and were translated into Arabic. Similarly, there are many idiomatic expressions in English that originate from Arabic, e.g. *the straw that broke the camel’s back*.

These cognates were then analysed by a diagram listing 20 idioms (bottom-top) with a score of 0 to 10 (horizontally). Results from an observation task on decoding idioms was given to both groups, showed that out of 20 idioms (see Table 3 below), 8 idioms (Nos 1, 3, 5 6 .etc) were ticked as true cognates by both groups. This meant that out of the 20 expressions, 8 expressions were scored by both groups (10 out of 10), meaning that these 8 expressions were correctly ticked by both groups as “understood expressions”. Also, Figure 3 below shows that there were other expressions which were as close, i.e., out of the 20 idiomatic expressions, 9 expressions were scored 9 out of 10. These expressions were different from one group to another; for example, while Algerian students scored 9 out of 10 for the idioms *to lay one’s cards on the table*, *day of resurrection* and *history repeats itself*, Saudi subjects ticked 9 out of 10 for the expressions *to stick one’s nose in everything* and *attack is the best defense*. The scores varied for different idioms, 3 idioms were highlighted and were scored 8 out of 10; 1 idiom, *to lay one’s cards on the table*, was given 9 out of 10 scores by Algerian subjects. In all this, it may be explained that Algerian subjects scored higher than Saudis and this could be related to the fact that these idioms exist in Arabic as well as in French. Another idiom which scored highly by the Algerian subjects 9 out of 10 was *day of resurrection* which Saudis found difficult.

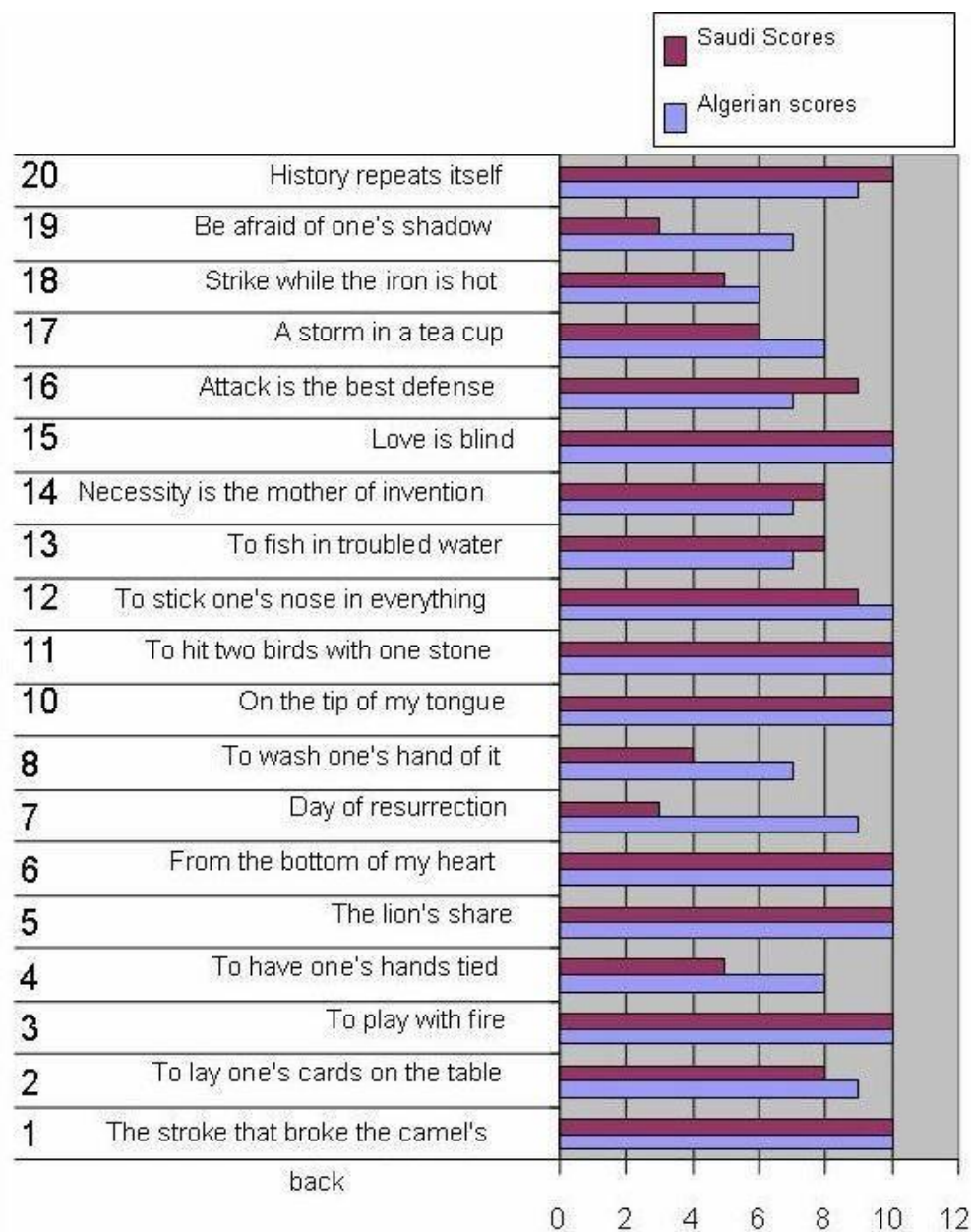


Figure 3: Scores related to true cognates (score 0-10/10)

Results from a translation exercise are presented in the form of a pie chart (Figure 4 below) showing the scores for identical idioms in nearly equal proportions. Idioms like *the straw that broke the camel's back* and *the lion's share* either scored 9 out 10 or 10 out 10. This confirms positively the hypothesis that identical idioms are easy to comprehend.

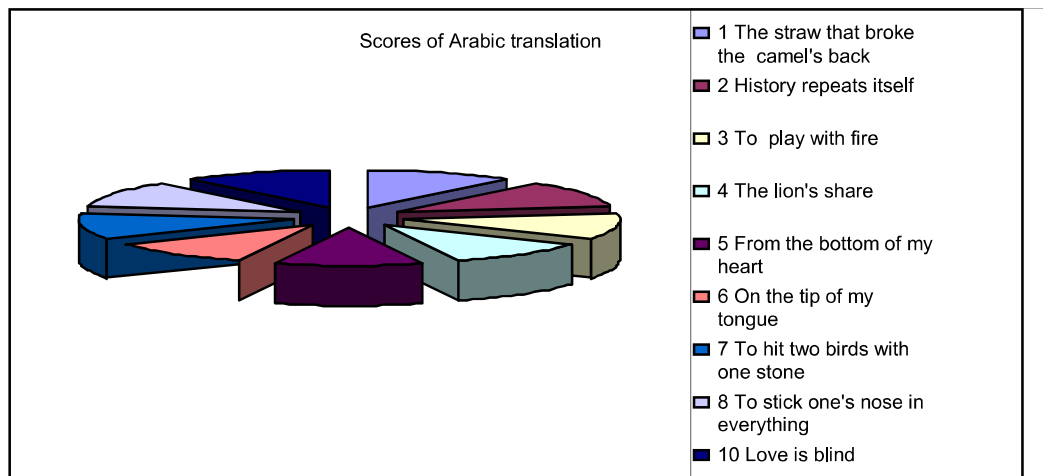


Figure 4: Identical idioms with the score between 9 out of 10 and 10 out of 10

From the group interview, the majority commented that they understood *play with fire*, because they relied on their native language. This expression exists in Arabic يلعب بالنار and also in French *jouer avec le feu*. They added that expressions like *the straw that broke the camel's back* القشة التي كسرت ظهر البعير is culture-specific to Arabic which means the concept itself is particular to Arab culture. Another expression, *to lay one's cards on the table*, is an English idiomatic expression with an equivalent in Arabic يكشف أوراقه على الطاولة was found easy to comprehend. Other idioms mentioned earlier have been imported into Arabic, from English such as *play a role*, *to shed/cast light on*, *to give the green light*...etc.

Findings related to False Cognate idioms

The second type analysed was the “false cognates”. Idioms that have similar equivalents in the source language in form only but not in meaning; for example, *to pay through the nose*, means in English “to pay dearly” whereas, the Arabic equivalent يدفع رغم أنفه means “to pay by force” (lit. to pay despite his nose). This implies that the two idioms, though they agree in form, they import a completely different meaning. The questionnaire contained 3 statements for this section (see Table3 below), from which I selected statement 24 (S24) and statement 25 (S25) for discussion, as the former revealed a difference in the t. test between the two groups and the latter showed no difference at all.

False Cognates	
S23	Idiom that is similar in form and context is easier to understand
S24	False cognates are misleading
S25	Idiom that is different in form only is more difficult to comprehend

Table 3: Questionnaire statements about false cognates

If we look at S24, Saudi and Algerian subjects were asked whether or not this type was misleading, 16 Saudi students (53.3%) and 12 Algerians (40%) found that they “sometimes” regarded similar idioms as problematic (Table 4 below). By comparing 9 Saudis (30%) and 10 Algerians (33.3%) who said that they “often” recognised such idioms as being different in form only, the t. test, however, revealed that the difference was significant. Algerian subjects had more chances of finding similar idioms in French and Tamazight (Berber). This can sometimes have disadvantages as the risk of language interference from the source language might be higher. The Saudi group had no other language to compare with; hence, only 2 students (6.7%) said that they could not find the idiom *to pay through the nose* in Arabic.

Further to my analysis, table 4 below shows (53.3%) 16 Saudis subjects scored stated that they occasionally, i.e., “sometimes” found false cognates misleading, whereas 12 Algerians (40%) claimed they “sometimes” did. Although they both agree on this, the difference between the two groups was significant as indicated in the t. test ($P=.436$ (S)), the idea was the same that false idioms can sometimes be misleading but definitely not all the time (see Table 4 below). The sum of the Saudis who “sometimes”, “often” and “always” found these idioms misleading came to a total of 93%, i.e., 28 out of 30. This indicated the number of subjects who positively agreed to Statement 24. Similarly, the number of Algerians who “sometimes”, “often” and “always” found these idioms misleading reached a total of 80%, i.e., 24. This left 2 Saudis (6.7%) and 6 Algerians (20%) who “never” did.

Statement 24: False cognates are misleading							
	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %	M	S.D	Sig. .L
Saudi	6.7	53.3	30	10	2.43	.744	P=.4 36 (S)
Algerian	20	40	33.3	6.7	2.27	.868	
Average	13.3	46.7	31.7	8.3	2.35	.820	

Table 4: Processing of false cognates (Statement 24)

I noticed from observation that not in all cases were idioms interpreted wrongly. For example, the English idiom *out of the frying pan into the fire* (i.e. from bad situation to worse) was interpreted as يقوم من نقرة ليقع في حديرة (lit. he rises from one hole to fall into another) as having the same meaning. The reason for this was related to the concept of “fire” which represents “danger”, semantically transparent to Algerian subjects. Here, we notice that although the two idioms were different in form and similar in meaning, subjects were not confused and clearly were aware of the similarity in meaning between the two idioms. Also, *keep your shirt on* (i.e. be patient) was immediately related to the Arabic one which has the same meaning طَوَّلْ بالك. Furthermore, *to give free rein to one's imagination* was interpreted rightly as يطلق العنان لخياله (meaning to give absolute freedom to one's imagination). The same thing with the English idiom *birds of a feather flock together*, which was translated correctly as الطيور على أشكالها تقع (lit. birds of the same type fall). The subjects knew that these idioms had the same meaning but they differed in form. Such idioms were categorised in this study as “idioms with pragmatic translations”.

Statement S25 (see Table -below) showed that 25 (41.7%) from the whole sample (60 subjects) “sometimes” found idioms different in form only difficult to understand. While 2 Algerians (6.7%) thought that they “always” found this type of idioms difficult, 4 Saudis (13.3%) “always” did. Furthermore, 10 (30%) Saudis “often” felt that idioms that are different in form only were more difficult to decode. Likewise, 11 (36.6%) Algerians “always” did. These results reveal that both groups positively agree that idioms that are different in form only required more thinking and are difficult to comprehend.

Statement 25: Idiom that is different in form only is more difficult to comprehend							
	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %	M	S.D	Sig. .L
Saudi	13.3	43.3	30	13.3	2.43	.898	P=.65 8 (NS)
Algerian	16.7	40	36.7	6.7	2.33	.844	
Whole Sample	15	41.7	33.3	10	2.38	.865	

Table 5: Idiom different in form only is difficult to comprehend (Statement 25)

Figure 5 below show the same information about S25 information in a bar chart with different colours.

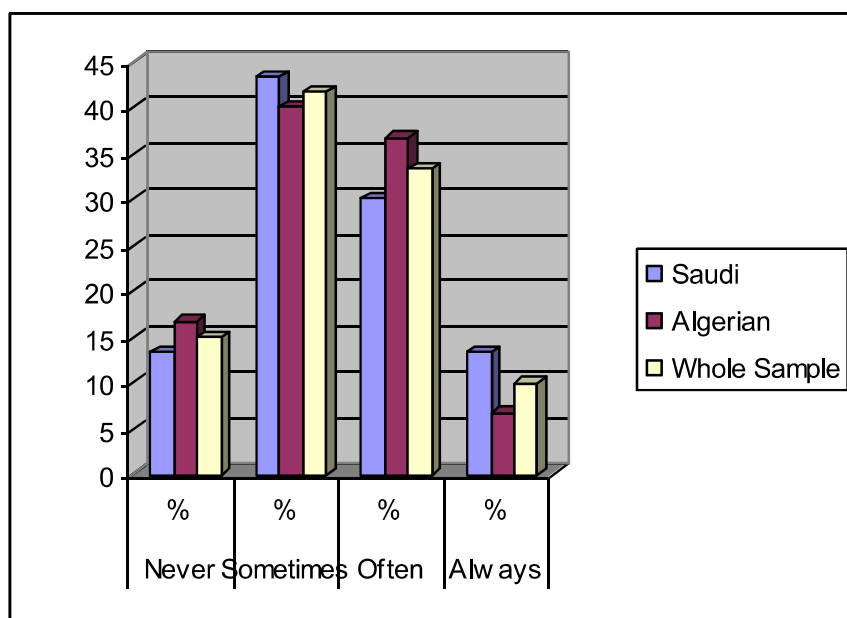


Figure 5: False cognates (Statement 25)

From classroom observation, it was apparent from students' performances that Algerian subjects were not as confident as when they were dealing with the true cognates. During the collective interview, Algerian subjects were invited to discuss their answers by comparing each other's work. For the idiom to *have the hands tied*, they thought of the equivalent Arabic idiom *يربط الحنة على يديه* (lit. to wrap henna on one's hands) which in this case was the false one, since the English idiom means to be immobilised, while the Arabic counterpart refers to being lazy. Here, subjects assumed wrongly that

the two idioms are similar both in form and meaning. This was probably due to the fact that the two idioms had the word “hand”, which by definition was a false cognate. The students then started to discuss other idioms that contain the word “hands”; they came up with idioms such as, *to have one’s hands full*, i.e. “to be very busy”, *to wash one’s hand of*, i.e. “to abandon something”, and *from hand to mouth* “to live tightly”. The last one has an equivalent in Arabic يعيش على الكفاف but, in contrast to the other two; this idiom belongs to a different type, i.e. idioms with pragmatic equivalent, which shall be discussed in the next section. In addition, other idioms of the same category that were discussed were of a different type, that is, idioms with no equivalence; again I shall discuss them in a later section.

In the group interview, the Algerian students discussed false cognate idioms such as *mutton dressed as a lamb*, i.e., “someone wearing inappropriate clothes to appear younger”, which was mistaken for the Arabic idiom ذئب في ثياب حمل, i.e. “showing something that is not sincere, hypocritical”. What caused the confusion is the word “lamb”, students were looking for idioms in Arabic that contained similar words i.e. “lamb” (حمل). None of the students thought of the identical idiom in English *a wolf in sheep’s clothing*.

Another English idiom *ostrich policy*, i.e. “to hide when you are in danger” was mistaken again for the Arabic one السياسة تغلب القباحة, i.e., “niceness is harder than nastiness”. The word “policy” in English and Arabic looked identical however its meaning in this context is different. Furthermore, the English idiom *to bite the dust*, i.e. “to die” was mistaken for the Arabic one يسف التراب, i.e. “to live poorly”. The two idioms were similar in form but different in meaning.

Findings related to Idioms with pragmatic Equivalents

The third analysis focused on idioms with pragmatic equivalents in the native language, i.e. similar in meaning to the target idiom, but different in form. The questionnaire (Table 6) included 4 statements (S26, S27, S28 and S29). I analysed S27 separately from S26 and S29 because while the former contained a t. test with a significant difference between the two groups, the latter (S26 and S29) revealed no difference between them.

S26	Idiom with pragmatic translation is difficult to comprehend
S27	Idiom different in form only needs careful thinking
S28	Idiom different in meaning needs careful thinking
S29	Idiom similar in function and different in form is more difficult to understand

Table 6: Questionnaire statements concerning idioms with pragmatic equivalents

From statement S27, (see Table 7 and Figure 6 below), we note that out of the 30 Saudi subjects, 12 (40%) “often” thought that an idiom different in form needed careful thinking; as for the Algerian group, 10 out of the 30 subjects (35.7%) “always” did. Furthermore, 8 Algerians (28.6%) “often” and 8 others (28.6%) from the same group “sometimes” thought that this type of idioms required careful thinking. From the whole sample (60), 4 only (6.9%) thought they “never” took this type of idiom as one that needed further thinking.

Statement 27: Idiom different in form needs careful thinking							
	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %	M	S.D	Sig. .L
Saudi	6.7	30	40	23.3	2.8	.887	P=.60 2 (NS)
Algerian	7.1	28.6	28.6	35.7	2.9 3	.979	
Whole Sample	6.9	29.3	34.5	29.3	2.8 6	.926	

Table 7: Idiom different in form need careful thinking
(Statement 27)

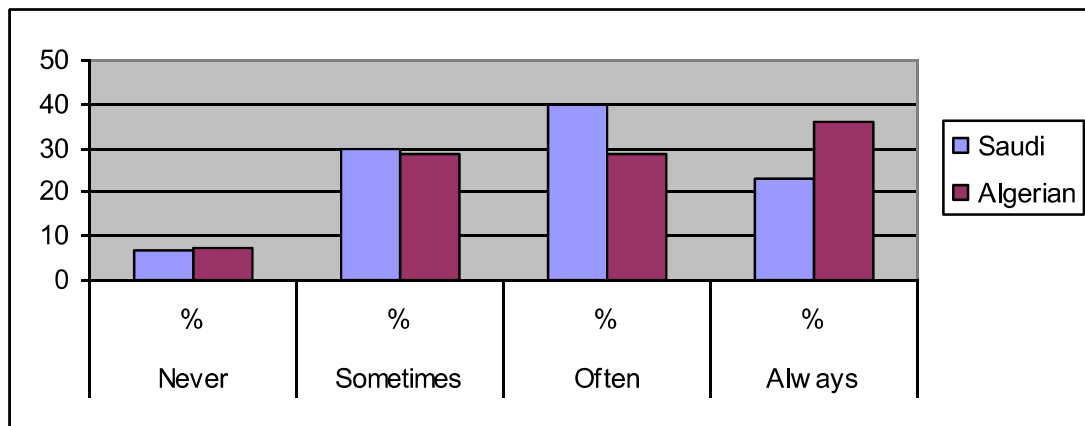


Figure 6: Idiom different in form need careful thinking (Statement 27)

With regard to S26 and S29, Table 8 points out that among the Saudi group, 14 (48.3%) “sometimes” found this type of idiom difficult. This score agrees with what Algerian subjects said at the group interview (see below). Similarly, among the Algerian subjects 16 out of 30 (53.3%) felt that they “sometimes” found idioms with pragmatic translations difficult to understand. What was worth highlighting was the score by the Algerian subjects; none said that this type of idiom was difficult. The same statement had been confirmed at the interview. They were clear that these idioms were not difficult but they rather needed careful thinking. If we compare the Saudi scores, we note that the number of students who said that they “always” found these idioms difficult 6 (20.7%) similar to those who said that they “often” did.

Statement 26: Idiom with pragmatic translation is difficult to comprehend							
Statement 29: Idiom similar in function and different in form is more difficult to understand							
	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %	M	S.D	Sig. .L
Saudi	10.3	48.3	20.7	20.7	2.52	.949	P=.079 (S)
Algerian	16.7	53.3	30	0	2.13	.681	
Average	13.6	50.8	25.4	10.2	2.32	.840	

Table 8: Idioms similar in function and different in forms (Statements 26 and 29)

Observation revealed that the majority of Algerian subjects understood the meaning of the idioms given. For example, it was not a problem for them to understand *it never rains but it pours*, which, has an equivalent in French, though they are different in form, *un mal ne vient jamais seul* (lit. disaster never comes singly). For, *can't make heads or tails of something*, Algerian subjects thought of its translation لا يعرف رأسه من رجليه (lit. someone who does not know his head from his feet) and also related it to another Arabic idiom which shares the same idea, لا يعرف الغث من السمين (lit. he cannot differentiate between the skinny and the fat). Subjects had no difficulty working around these idioms. Moreover, *between the devil and the deep blue sea* was rightly translated بين المطرقة و السندان (lit. between the hammer and the anvil). The latter was given more than one Arabic idiom that is similar in meaning and different in form, as بين شقي الرحي (lit. between the two blocks of the grinding stone) and كالمستجير من الرمضاء بالنار (lit. like someone who seeks fire to avoid blazing heat). Algerian subjects also referred to the French translation of the same idiom *entre le marteau et l'enclume*. Language transfer in these cases did not come from Arabic only, but from French as well. The latter made the understanding of some idioms easier and gave the subjects richer lexicon. *To do a U turn* was not difficult for Algerian subjects, as they called on their metaphoric knowledge and associated the shape of the letter U with the action. Also, their knowledge of French helped in the understanding of the idiom.

From group interview, subjects commented that *to add insult to injury* is similar to the Tamazight idiomatic expression *thaawint ilabhar*, (lit. to add water to the sea). The two idioms are similar in form; however, their meanings are different as the Tamazight means “to add something where there is plenty of it”, whereas the English one means “to aggravate a situation”. One subject corrected: “no, the idiom *to add insult to injury* is similar to the Tamazight idiom. (*irnou el zeeth ithmes*, lit. to add oil to fire)”. The latter is closer in meaning, but not in form, to the English idiom.

Again, subjects were debating whether or not *a storm in a tea cup*, i.e., “exaggeration of a small problem” is similar to the Algerian Arabic idiom المندبة كبيرة و الميت فأر (lit. the funeral is big and the dead is a mouse). Here, subjects did not mention the equivalent of this idiom in Arabic which is زوبعة في فنجان (lit. a storm in a cup). Subjects were clear that this type of idiom can be translated into similar idioms in

Arabic in function only. They started giving examples that were not included in the exercises given to them, where an idiom in English could be translated with its Arabic counterpart that shares the same meaning but not the same form such as *diamonds cut diamonds* which can be translated into لا يفلّ الحديد إلا الحديد (lit. only metal that cuts metal). The two idioms were similar in function but different in form. This meant that subjects were aware that idioms can not always be translated into identical idioms in the native language only, but can be translated into idioms in the native language with pragmatic translation. Other idioms from the same category were listed such as *half a loaf is better than no bread* and its counterpart in Arabic الرمد خير من العمى (lit. conjunctivitis is better than being blind), *cut one's coat according to one's cloth* which also has a pragmatic translation in Arabic مد رجلك على قدر لحافك (lit. stretch your legs according to your cover), *don't count your chickens before they are hatched* and the Arabic idiom لا تقل فول حتى يصير في المكيول (lit. don't say broad beans until they are in the weighing bag) and *when in Rome, do as Romans do* which has an idiom that is similar in function دارهم ما دمت في دارهم و أرضهم ما دمت في أرضهم (lit. go along with them as long as you are in their home and please them as long as you are in their land). The above examples given showed that students made a difference between identical idioms and idioms with pragmatic translation. They thought that this category of idioms (idioms with pragmatic translation) was not as straightforward as the identical idioms.

To sum up, one can say that not all idioms with pragmatic translations were found difficult by the subjects and that in many cases subjects found the translations easy. What helped Algerian students over Saudi ones was their mastering of more than one language, as was the case with some subjects whose first language was not Arabic only, but French and with some French and Tamazight (Berber) too. With some still French was a first language. Both groups felt that idioms with pragmatic translations were not as straightforward as identical idioms. The following section analyses the computation of idioms with no equivalents as far as comprehension is concerned.

Findings related to Idioms with no equivalents

The fourth and last type analysed was idioms with no equivalents in the source language neither in form nor in meaning; for example, *ship shape and Bristol fashion*, i.e. “to be very neat” and رجع بخفي حنين, i.e. “to be unsuccessful”. This section contained 8 statements (see Table 9). I selected Statement S30 and S36 for discussion to represent this section as they had similar scores.

Idioms with no equivalents	
S30	Idiom different in meaning needs careful thinking
S31	Idioms with no equivalents are difficult to understand
S32	Idioms with no equivalents are easy to understand
S33	Culture-specific idioms are essential to EFL learners
S34	Culture-specific idioms are difficult to decode
S35	Idioms that are specific to one culture are difficult to decode
S36	I know enough about the target culture
S37	I am exposed to the target culture

Table 9: Questionnaire statements on idioms with no equivalents

We note from statements, S30 and S36, 10 Algerians (35.7 %,) agreed that these idioms were the most difficult ones and that it was “always” difficult to guess their meanings (Table10 below). Similarly, 12 Saudis (40%) “often” found idioms with no equivalent to be the most difficult to decode. Their argument was based on the fact that they were not exposed to the target language and its culture. Also, they did not understand them because they do not exist in the native language. Furthermore, 9 (30%) Saudis and 8 (28.6%) Algerians thought they “sometimes” knew enough about the target culture, leaving out a relatively small number of subjects from both groups 4 (6.9%) who “never” did.

Statement 30: Idiom different in meaning needs careful thinking							
Statement 36: I know enough about the target culture							
	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %	M	S.D	Sig. .L
Saudi	6.7	30	40	23.3	2.8	.887	P=.6 02 (NS)
Algerian	7.1	28.6	28.6	35.7	2.93	.979	
Average	6.9	29.3	34.5	29.3	2.86	.926	

Table 10: Idioms with no equivalents (Statements S30 and S36)

The hypothesis of the study suggested that subjects would find these idioms difficult; especially since L₁ and L₂ are very different. After exhausting the various types of idioms as seen above, subjects were left with a list of the expressions that were not ticked as known to them. The first exercise was in a multiple choice form whereas the second one was a translation exercise. Table 11 below provides a list of this type of idioms with the scores of both groups (0 to 30) in the multiple choice test, and translation from Arabic into English and vice versa. This order of giving the subjects a multiple-choice exercise and then a translation was done on purpose in order to reduce the chances of guessing; the student could tick an answer in a multiple-choice exercise without being very sure of its correctness. However, in a translation exercise, the student was at a production level, where s/he had to find the meaning of the idiom to be able to translate it and at the same time to keep the coherence of the text as a whole.

Idioms with no equivalents	Multiple-Choice Test Saudi	Multiple-Choice Test Algerian	Translation into Arabic Saudi	Translation into Arabic Algerian
Till kingdom come	6	5	4	6
To carry coal to Newcastle	6	9	4	5
To kick the bucket	0	0	0	0
Come hell or high water	3	2	1	3
To go Dutch with someone	8	25	8	24
To spill the beans	10	23	7	23
To cook one's goose	9	9	8	6
To paint the town red	2	4	2	2
Ship shape and Bristol fashion	0	0	0	0
To skate on a thin ice	25	27	25	27
Give someone a kick	15	23	10	20
To rain cats and dogs	18	15	14	15
To face the music	0	2	0	2
To give someone the cold shoulder	14	12	12	12
Blow one's own trumpet	5	12	3	10
A drop in the bucket	12	14	5	9
To pass the buck	10	12	4	12
Let bygones be bygones	2	4	2	3
Out of the blue	0	1	0	0

Table 11: Processing of idioms with no equivalents

Idioms such as, *ship shape and Bristol fashion*, *to face the music* and *out of the blue* were clearly unheard of by both groups (see column one and column two, Table 11 above). Note their scores. This showed that both groups were not exposed to these idioms at all and due to the degree of opaqueness of the idioms, the subjects could not figure out the meanings of the idioms. However, when given in context, both groups managed to guess the meaning of *out of the blue*, but they neither understood *ship shape* nor *Bristol fashion* nor *to face the music*. Note again their scores. To give a clearer picture of these scores I produced the results in Table 12.

Expressions scoring from 0-10	Expressions scoring from 10-20	Expressions scoring from 20-30
Come hell or high water	To give someone a kick	To Skate on thin ice
Till kingdom come	To paint the town red	
To carry coal to Newcastle	Let bygones be bygones	
To go Dutch with someone	Blow one's own trumpet	
To cook one's goose	A drop in a bucket	
Let bygones be bygones	To spill the beans	
Out of the blue	To rain cats and dogs	
Ship shape and Bristol fashion		

Table 12: Scores of both groups in idioms with no equivalents

Idioms like *out of the blue* (column one) were ones that both groups struggled with, scoring 0 to 10 in the multiple-choice and translation exercises; only one Algerian correctly ticked the meaning of the idiom in the multiple choice. However, the same expression scored (0) in the translation exercise among Algerians, which explained that the subject was just guessing the meaning of the idiom. Although Table 12 included the idiom *to go Dutch with someone* (column one) with those with the lowest scores (0-10), it was certainly one that scored highly among Algerians and not Saudis. [Note that Table 12 included scores

of both groups]. It was explained later by Algerians that they have heard it before, implying that the salience of the expression helps a lot in its decoding. *Let bygones be bygones*, was another expression that students from both groups did not find easy (see Table 7.11 for scores). The Algerian subjects when told of its meaning, immediately thought of the Saudi and Algerian colloquial idiomatic expression *ألي فات مات* (lit. what is gone is dead). Here, the idiom has a pragmatic equivalent in the source dialectal repertoire. Furthermore, *a drop in a bucket* was also associated by both groups with the Arabic expression *قطرة في محيط* (lit. a drop in an ocean). As for *to blow one's own trumpet* (column two, scores 10-20), 10 Algerians translated it correctly into Arabic, concentrating on the verb "to blow", which meant metaphorically in Algerian dialect "to exaggerate". As for their Saudi counterparts, only 3 did. Note that the scores for the idiom *to blow one's own trumpet* scored very low among both groups in the multiple-choice exercise. The only expression that gained the highest score by both groups was *to skate on thin ice* (column three, scores between 20-30).

At the group interview, Algerian subjects were trying to guess the meaning of *ship shape and Bristol fashion*, after being told that Bristol is a name of a city in England; they thought of an Algerian colloquial idiom *أشعث يا رأسي حتى يأتيك الزيت من مقرة* (lit, my hair shall remain dry until oil is brought from Magra). This idiom was used if something is taking longer time than it should do. Magra is a name of a small town in Algeria. The meeting point between the two idioms was the names of the places. Algerian subjects commented that they did not know idioms with no equivalents because they were not exposed to the target culture. This highlights the importance of learners' exposure to the various types of the target language, i.e. "contexts". Algerian subjects listed few Arabic idioms that are specific to the Arab culture such, *حلب الدهر أشطره* (meaning, to be unsuccessful), *رجع بخفي حنين* (meaning, someone who has acquired experiences from life), *جعل الليل اثمدا* (to use the night as kohl). Note *اثمدا* is a stone used as kohl. This Arabic idiom has a pragmatic translation into English, which is *to burn midnight oil*, but subjects did not mention it. The idioms that achieved scores that varied between 10 and 30 for both groups were *to skate on thin ice*, *to give someone a kick* and *to rain cats and dogs* (see Table 12 above). From the interview, Algerian subjects said that *to skate on thin ice* was a transparent idiom because the word "thin"

gives the indication of something dangerous. As for *to rain cats and dogs*, Algerian subjects confirmed at the group interview that they knew this idiom because it is a widespread one. Again this implied that the salience of an idiom played a crucial role in its decoding.

At the same interview, Algerian subjects were using various strategies to decode the idioms with no equivalents. They started by taking parts of the idiom and explaining them literally. For example, *blow your own trumpet*, some students took the word “blow” and explained it as “explode” and then they moved on to the word “own” and thought of “one self”. They concluded that the interpretation has to do with “someone harming himself/herself”. This highlights the lack students’ exposure to the target language and culture.

The importance of culture was highlighted by Abu-Ssayedeh (2004: 117). He stresses the link between the idiom and the culture in which they are found. He refers to the British at the point when they had the strongest navy in the world, from which derived a large number of idioms related to the sea, for example, *sail close to the wind*, *between the devil and the deep blue sea* and so on. He adds more idioms that are related to hunting, army, sports, gambling and many other spheres, which according to him contributed to the creation of the British idiom. Therefore knowing the target culture facilitates the recognition and comprehension of the idiom. An idiom like *to bring coal to Newcastle* mentioned above, is also cited by Baker (1992: 304) who emphasises that this particular idiom is culturally specific. No one would understand the significance of the idiomatic string without knowing that Newcastle is a city that was in the past famous for coal and nobody would need to carry coal from any other place as there is plenty of it there. As mentioned earlier, Algerian subjects came up with idioms that have the same meaning like جلب الماء إلى حارة السقائين (meaning, bring water where there is plenty of it) and another one related to olives which is known to be the product of the Berber, يجلب/يبيع الزيت للقبائل (lit. to bring olives to the Berbers). This is only known to the learner, if s/he is familiar with the Algerian culture and knows that Berbers grow olive trees.

In the group interview, many expressions that belong to the Arab culture only were mentioned and one of the subjects explained how sometimes the same expression was expressed differently according to the environment. An example was the Arabic expression أتلج صدري (lit. to cool/freeze my chest). Here, in order to express happiness and

satisfaction this Arabic idiom is used as the coolness is much appreciated in a hot climate like the Arab world. The equivalent used in English was *to warm my heart*, where warmth was viewed positively due to the coldness of the British weather. Conventions differ across cultures, so the straightforward images on one culture are not self-evident in another. A metaphorical concept in one culture does not necessarily call up the same conventional scenes in another. Consequently, this confirms my initial idea of “social” and “cultural” contexts that a learner should be exposed to while learning a foreign language. Furthermore, it approves my multifaceted definition of “context”, which in a real situation gives words their credibility and makes them meaningful and this is a fact in any natural language setting. This reinforces the idea that a language is not a system of conventional signs in a syntactical perspective, but a system of knowledge and of rules which determines its use in various communicative contexts.

Conclusion

This article portrays the result of a study conducted with Saudi and Algerian university students of Translation Studies. The study aims to investigate the degree to which idiom type affects the comprehension level among second/foreign language learners. Additionally, it looked at whether or not context plays any role towards the decoding of idioms and investigated the influence of the mother tongue on idiom comprehension.

The study concludes with the following major findings:

- 1 Unlike studies that claim that language interference has negative implications and is done by learners' tendencies to import from the mother tongue, this study proves that language transfer is positive and can lead to successful learning outcome if channeled properly.
2. As far as idiom types are concerned, both Algerian and Saudi subjects felt very confident in translating identical idioms and that the rate of positive translation was high because these idioms had their identical counterparts in the native language. This was a case of positive transfer.
3. The second type of idioms “false idioms” was found to cause some problems to both Algerian and Saudi subjects. They sometimes chose the wrong interpretation because they

assumed that the interpretation of the target idiom would be the same as the native one, which was sometimes an example of negative transfer.

4. Positive transfer could also be the result of the idiom's familiarity. In other words, subjects might translate an idiom correctly because they have heard it before.
5. Cultural idioms were found to be the most difficult to translate. This meant that idioms with no equivalents were found to be problematic, as subjects were not exposed enough to the target culture.
6. The more languages a student mastered, the more mental idiomatic lexicon s/he possessed, which helped in the decoding of idioms. This was explained in the case of the Algerians whose first languages were both Arabic and/or Tamazight (Berber) and in some cases Arabic and French as native-like; in comparison with the Saudi subjects whose first language was Arabic only.

Eliciting the role of language transfer in the decoding and encoding of idioms is not to claim that this is the only factor that helped idiom comprehension. There were certainly other factors such as idiom analysability that might have an influence on the learners' strategies in dealing with idioms.

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