

Investigating EFL Students' Problems in Translating English idioms into Arabic .Third-year students at Tamanghasset University as a case study.

BENACHERINE Hamza^{1*}, TOUMI Karima²

1.University of Tamanghasset. Algeria, hamza.benacherine@gmail.com

2. University of Tamanghasset. Algeria, 78tkarima@gmail.com

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Abstract

Idiomatic expressions constitute an important part of everyday English as they appear all the time in both written and spoken forms with figurative and literal meanings. Figuring out the right meaning is what makes the task harder for EFL students. The present study is an analytical-descriptive study aiming at exploring the challenges of translating idioms from English into Arabic by EFL students at the department of English at the University of Tamanghasset. Twenty participants were handed a test that comprises a text with idiomatic expressions to be translated into Arabic. The findings revealed conclusively that students developed a liking for translation, although they still encounter linguistic and cultural difficulties that may prevent them from rendering a correct translation.

Keywords: Translation; idioms; procedures; language variations.

INTRODUCTION

Translation of idiomatic expressions may be a challenge for students and a concern for their instructors. Students are not aware of the difficulties they face, consequently, they may fall prey to literal or nonsense translations when extracting due to a lack of deep knowledge about translation procedures that might help them. Some studies have noticed the difficulties students experience when attempting to translate idioms into other languages, especially Arabic. The present study is based on an analytical exploratory methodology that will shed the light, through a translation test, on the different challenges students of English at Tamanghasset University face when dealing with the translation of idioms into Arabic.

* Corresponding author.

1. Literature Review

Research projects such as the ones listed below are among those that were conducted. It was discovered via these studies that university students have difficulties translating expressions into Arabic; poor transfer plays a significant part in the translation of idioms along with insufficient abilities and understanding of various usage of idiomaticity.

Littlemore (2003) explored the impact of cultural variations on the understanding of metaphors when they were translated. During a brief course at a British institution, he wanted to find out how Bangladeshi students perceived metaphors employed by their teachers. Interpretation of a variety of metaphors provided in context and identification of the value judgments made via these metaphors in these specific circumstances were the tasks assigned to students. Questionnaires developed by Hofstede (1980) were given to the Bangladeshi students and their British professors in order to discover areas of differences between their (working) cultures. Results revealed that the types of misinterpretations that students made of (the evaluative content of) the metaphors varied according to their respective cultural backgrounds.

Abdel-Fattah and Zughouli (2003) sought to determine the degree to which university English language students can correctly employ and express the meaning of English collocations. Students of English at the graduate and undergraduate levels were given a two-form translation test consisting of 16 Arabic collocations. The first test assigned comprised an English translation in a multiple-choice style, while the second required the participant to complete a free translation job. The results indicated that Arab learners of English at all levels had difficulty interpreting English collocations, which are essentially culturally-specific phrases.

Al-Dahesh (2008) investigated the difficulties encountered by Arab professional translators and Arab translation students while translating idiomatic English phrasal verbs into Arabic. he made several suggestions for professional translators, lexicographers, and educators. Translation tests were carried out to identify the sorts of errors that may occur and the potential dangers in the translation process. The findings of the research demonstrated that dealing with the phenomena of idiomatic English phrasal verbs might present several

difficulties. The inability to create functional-pragmatic counterparts for such verbs is the most significant component of these difficulties. Literal translation, mistranslation, not respecting Arabic language rules, a shift of register, incorrect delivery of speech acts, use of paraphrasing, and use of Arabic colloquial and regional dialects, were the primary reasons for the failure to deliver the appropriate functional pragmatic equivalents of the idiomatic English phrasal verbs listed in the translatability study.

Badawi (2008) evaluated the capacity of Saudi EFL prospective instructors to translate cultural expressions and to identify the most frequently used tactics. 43 EFL potential instructors, ranging in age from 21 to 23 years, took part in the study. The sample was restricted to fourth-year English language majors who were expected to be well-versed in the English language as well as translation methods. The tools he employed were a culture-based translation exam as well as a questionnaire on translation approach awareness. The results of the research indicated that instructors' performance was very bad, as shown by their scores on the culture-based translation exam; their knowledge of translation strategy was extremely limited, and the manner of translation used was literal.

A cursory examination of this idiomatic translation research reveals that students have difficulties attempting to translate terms from English into the Arabic language. Idioms are culturally specific terms that cannot be translated in their literal sense, which causes several difficulties. For this reason, the purpose of this research is to investigate the difficulties that students would have while translating English expressions into Arabic.

2. Definition of translation

A number of scholars have identified translation from different perspectives. Nida viewed it as “the production in the target language of the closest natural equivalent to the message of the source language, first to meaning and then to style” (qtd. in Horgulin and Bernard (1977:30). While Peter Newmark (1998:5) argues that translation “is rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text”.

Learners can take advantage of the ideas and insights that another language offers to understand the figurative meaning of its idioms and other expressions of various kinds.

3. Definition of idioms

Idioms, as an essential part of everyday English, comprise a broad range of scenarios that are appropriate for the usage of these phrases, from informal discussions with friends to more official business meetings and written correspondences. When words are used together in a way that deviates from their meanings, it is called an idiom (The Longman Pocket Dictionary: 2001). In the same way, Carter (1987) defines idioms as ‘‘peculiar combinations with constrained forms and meanings that cannot be derived from the literal meanings of the words which make them up’’. This means that learning and using an idiom are done all at once. As a rule, its meaning is metaphorical and cannot be dissected into its essential parts.

3.1 Features of Idioms

A/ Metaphoricity

Metaphor or figurativeness is one of the most often stated characteristics of idioms by researchers. Scholars generally agree that metaphoricity is a necessary component of idiom (Cronk et al.1993). According to Moon (2008), metaphoricity and ambiguity are inextricably linked, and the ambiguity problem cannot be solved by recipients and users of idioms without a larger context.

B/ Fixedness

Idioms also have a certain degree of stability. A huge number of fixed terms, such as idioms, are utilized in a variety of ways. This lexical variant is not widespread, according to Palma &Titone, (2020), who stated that users are unable to substitute the terms. Users' inventiveness indicates that lexical variety does occur in certain contexts. However, idioms are tightly tied to their fixedness and lexical status.

C/ Level of formality

Idioms, according to Webelhuth (2018), are ‘‘, on one hand, usually connected with somewhat informal or colloquial registers and with popular speech and oral culture’’ and are utilized in spoken language rather than written language. On the other hand, formal

idioms exist, as noted by Ding (2019), which shows the formality of the relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

D/ Idiom Variation

The variation here can be envisioned as the use of different conventional versions of the same multi-word expressions that achieve the same interpretation of the expression in question. Prentice et al (2021). The variation can be achieved through lexical or syntactic avenues, with a majority of multi-word expressions facilitating some form of lexical or structural variation

E/ Compositeness

The quality of having the status of a composite number is referred to as its compositeness. Idioms are almost often assumed to be figures of speech in linguistics, even though this assumption goes against the compositionality principle. Compositionality is highlighted as the central concept for the study of idioms since this is the case in the majority of descriptions of idioms. Makkai (1972, p.8) stated that an idiom is made up of “more than one minimal free form or a word”. According to this guiding concept, the meaning of a whole should be put together using the meanings of the individual components that comprise the whole. If it may be put another way, if one understands the meanings of each of the components that go into making up the whole, then they ought to be in a position to comprehend the entire.

3.2 Problems of idioms translation

Idioms are difficult to translate because of their language-specific character. When considering translation approaches, idioms must first be recognized, comprehended, and evaluated. When translating a text, the translator must be able to identify the idioms that appear in it. A translator's ability to discern between the literal and true meanings of a term is critical in idiom translation. As a result, mastery of the original language is required to correctly recognize and use idioms.

A/ Linguistic differences

Besides being competent in the source language, a translator must also be able to deal effortlessly with the target language. Using natural target language idioms is critical, according to Larson (1984),

since doing so assures that the translator can generate fluid and dynamic target language writing while also preserving the source text's stylistic qualities. The final challenge is to come up with a translation that conveys the same meaning in the target language.

B/ Cultural differences:

It is widely known that culture and translation are among the most determining and influential variables in human communication. It is generally believed that culture influences the translational discourse in a number of ways. This is why the translation's primary goal is to ensure that the source and target language are culturally equivalent to avoid misunderstandings between them.

3.3 Strategies used in translating idioms

A/ Newmark's strategies

According to Newmark (1988), the translator must ensure that their translation is both comprehensible and natural, written in everyday language with the appropriate syntax, idioms, and vocabulary. The idioms, styles, and registers are all part of a person's natural language use. Newmark (1988) explains the difference between translating idioms and translating idiomatic expressions. Idiomatically correct interpretation "reproduces the original message, but tends to misinterpret the subtleties of colloquialisms and other idioms that are not included in the original text "In 1988, (Newmark,) There are two forms of translation: semantic and communicative translation, according to Newmark (1988). Semantic translation is to capture the meaning of a word or phrase as accurately as possible, considering the semantic and syntactic structures of the target language. The second form of translation, known as communicative translation, aims to generate an impression on its audience that is as near to the original audience.

B/ Vinay and Darbelnet's strategies

Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) identify two broad translation strategies: direct and oblique translation, which relates to the difference between literal and free translation. It may be feasible to translate a message from one language to another using Vinay and Darbelnet's procedures in some cases.

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Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) proposed seven methods or procedures; they are borrowing, calque, literal, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation.

- **Equivalence:** John Catford produced another definition of equivalence “[...] the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL). (Catford, 1965, p. 20)
- **Borrowing:** Borrowing is where words or expressions are taken directly from the source text and carried over into the target language. This technique is often used when there is no target language equivalent, such as food or clothing.
- **Calques:** It is a straight translation of the source text into grammatically and idiomatically appropriate destination text. Certain stylistic effects cannot be achieved when dealing with structural and metalinguistic variations between languages without disrupting lexis or syntactic order in the target language.
- **Literal Translation:** A literal translation is a metaphrase, achieving a text in the target language which is as correct as it is idiomatic. According to Vinay and Darbelnet, a literal translation can only be applied with languages extremely close in cultural terms. It is acceptable only if the translated text retains the same syntax, the same meaning, and the same style as the original text.
- **Transposition:** Transposition is a change that can be justified, even whether it is literal or transposed, by a shift in perspective. It involves moving from one grammatical category to another without changing the meaning of the text. This translation technique introduces a change in grammatical structure.
- **Modulation:** Modulation is about a shift in the form of the text by introducing a semantic change or perspective.
- **Adaptation:** also called cultural equivalent, is a cultural element that substitutes the original text with one that is

better suited to the culture of the target language. This results in a more familiar and comprehensive text.

C/ Ghazala's Strategies:

- **Free Translation:** For genres including literature, politics, journalism, and culture, Hasan Ghazala's free translation of the pro TL is suited because it does not demand translation of particular details, but rather focuses on expressing the overall message (**Ghazala 2008, p.16**).
- **Literal Translation:** When it comes to translation in Arab countries, (**Ghazala, 2008, p.7**) argues that literal translation is used not only by inexperienced translators but also by professional translators.

D/ Baker's Strategies:

The Idiom-Translating Strategies of Baker for the purpose of accurately rendering idioms, Baker (**1992, p. 72-78**) recommended the following approaches:

- **Translation by a more specific term:** In this approach, an idiom in the target language (TL) is used that has lexical and semantic equivalents to the source language's idiom.
- **Translation by cultural substitution:** Using an idiom that has a similar meaning but differs in form is also acceptable. The target language may have an idiom or fixed expression with a similar meaning to the source language, but with distinct lexical elements.
- **Translation by a loan word:** this is the most prevalent method of translating idioms when a match cannot be discovered in the TL or when it appears unsuitable to employ idiomatic language in the TT due to stylistic differences between the source and target languages' preferences. The exclusion of translations like single words, and idioms may be deleted entirely from the TT in the same way. Perhaps it's because it doesn't have a direct equivalent in the TL, due to the difficulty of conveying the meaning in another way, or for stylistic reasons.

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Hence, from the theoretical point of view, this study should be able to reveal some light on the reasons why students face challenges with idioms. This can be accomplished by pointing out the reasons behind the mistakes conferred by the subjects, as well as the translation methods adopted.

4. Methodology

The research procedures and methods adopted in this research were selected especially to achieve the research objectives.

The goal of the practical section is to look at the challenges students confront when translating idioms. It also tries to discover learners' different mechanisms of idioms translation from English into Arabic, particularly when there is no direct equivalence in the target language.

4.1 Sample:

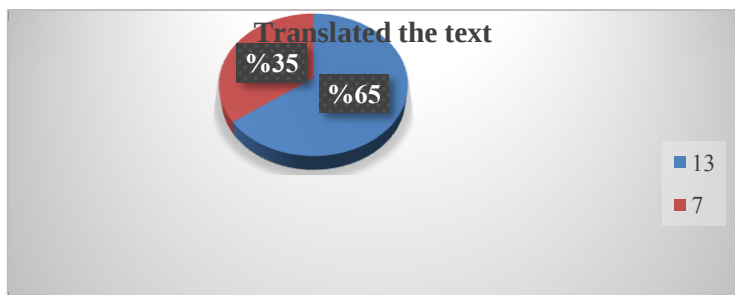
The sample selected for this research involves the students from the department of English at Tamanghasset University – Algeria. In precise, several rationales have been figured out to specifically select this particular group of learners as participants. First, they must be pursuing towards the end of their program course, and second, they must be native speakers of the Arabic language. Therefore, a total of twenty students were selected as the participants of the study. Moreover, as all the participants were in their third year, these students had been expected to have a good command of the English language and do not have any substantial linguistic problems when translating from Arabic to English. For those reasons, the final-year students had been selected as the most appropriate participants for this research.

4.2 Test Procedures

As the aim of this research is to determine the problems and challenges faced by students in translating idioms from Arabic to English, the test is taken from Thought Co: a leading reference website that is specialized in expert-created educational information. The test is about a brief story on what it takes to be successful in a small company and was chosen by the researcher as it focuses on the usage of idioms in context. Twenty third-year Students are supposed to figure out sixteen idiomatic expressions and translate it into Arabic.

Table.1 percentage of students who translated the text

16	Translated the text	Yes	13	65%
		No	7	35%
		Total	20	100%



As depicted from the data, thirteen individuals managed to translate the text or at least part of it. Seven of them however didn't translate it at all. This resulted in a score of 65% for those who translated the text and 35%

For those who didn't. Therefore, the analysis can be considered valid since more than half of the participants managed to translate the text hence the reliability of the study.

4.3 Translation of idiomatic expressions of the test:

Although the majority of the participants claimed that they translated idioms using equivalence, many of them opted for literal translation techniques. Seven participants translated the full text, while the remaining six merely translated a part of it leaving blank spaces when in short of translation strategies. In the following table a sample translation of the idioms is detailed:

Idiom	Meaning/equivalent in Arabic	Students using Equivalence	Students using Literal translation	Other procedures	Total
he fits the bill	الشيء أو الشخص المناسب تماماً لغرض معين	6	4	2	12

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to start from scratch	يبدأ من الصفر	09	02	02	13
put his nose to the grindstone	أن تعمل بكد وثبات	03	07	02	12
to take the bull by the horns	يمسك بزمام الأمور	04	05	04	13
at the drop of a hat	يفعل شيئاً فوراً دون تخطيط مُسبق	04	07	01	12
to know something inside out	ماهر في/ يَعرف كل شيء عن شيء	04	04	05	13
pie in the sky	أصغاث أحلام	00	07	04	11
early birds	الواصل مبكراً/ شخص يستغل الموقف في وقت مبكر	02	07	04	13
sink or swim	إما أن تنجح أو تفشل	03	08	02	13
to play things by ear	الارتجال في موقف ما	01	07	/	8
have one's ears to the ground	ينتبه جيداً لما يدور حوله	01	04	01	6
full steam ahead	انطلق بهمة/بسرعة	01	02	03	6
drove hard bargains	يَصِلُ إلى اتِّفاق بعد مُفاوضات شاقَّة	06	02	01	9
by leaps and bounds	بسرعة فائقة/ في لمح البصر	05	02	04	11

stumbling blocks	حَجَرُ عَثْرَةٍ / عائق	08	01	01	10
got the jump on	حَقَّقَ القَفْزَةَ / يَرْكَبُ / الموجة	03	03	01	6

Table 2. Sample translation of idiomatic expressions in the text.

4.4 Data analysis

- **(Idiom 1) : He fits the bill:** 6 students out of 13 managed to find the equivalent of the idiom. Four students used literal techniques like يناسب القاتورة تماما which means they provided out-of-context translation, while two of them didn't translate it at all.

- **(idiom 2): to start from scratch:** the majority of students; 91% of them succeeded in identifying the exact equivalent of this idiom من بدا من الصفر , two students paraphrased it into يطمح للبدء من لاشيء. While two other students who didn't get its meaning simply rendered it as follows: بدا من سكراتش .

- **(idiom 3): his nose to the grindstone:** most of the students failed to use the suitable translation technique. They translated it literally into ليعمل except for three students who translate it as ليس خائفا من إذلال نفسه . بكد و ثبات . while two students rendered an out-of-context translation such as:

- **(idiom 4): to take the bull by the horns:** four students managed to translate it into يمسك بزمام الأمور , 38% of them opted for the literal translation : قرر ان يمسك الثور من قرنيه. while four of them provided irrelevant translations such as قرر ان ينتزع الصدارة.

- **(idiom 5): to know something inside out:** 30,76% of students used equivalence to reach the meaning of the idiom as in يعرف كل يعرف كل شيء من الداخل , or صغيرة و كبيرة . a Literal translation for the same idiom was used by 30,76% of them as in يعرف كل شيء من الداخل , while 38,46 % used no specific techniques and were totally out of context such as داخل وخارج الوطن

-**(idiom 6): at the drop of a hat:** four students who could somehow infer the meaning of the idiom and translated it as في طرفة ترك . seven of them gave irrelevant translations as in عين / في لمح البصر

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عمله المحمي عند سقوط قبعته , while one student didn't use any techniques and rendered it into غادر عمله الأمن من الباب الواسع .one last student didn't provide a translation at all.

- **(idiom 7): pie in the sky:** no one could understand this idiom as the students were maybe unfamiliar with such idiomatic expression. Seven of them 53,87 % used literal strategy as in تفاحة في السماء . فطيرة يرتقي في and 30, 76% preferred other strategies as in يرتقي في السماء which do not border on the appropriate meaning.

- **(idiom 8):early birds:** 15,38 % of the students succeeded in guessing the metaphorical meaning of the phrase as عرفوا كيف مبكرا . يستغلون الفرصة . Seven among them failed to grasp the meaning and translated it word by word. While 53, 84% answered كانوا طيوراً مبكرة . The remaining student's translations were out of context as in. كانوا كالطيور المغردة

- **(idiom 9): sink or swim:** translation procedures of 23.07 % percent of the 13 students were adequate; they translated the English phrase into its Arabic equivalent with the same meaning but in a different form: كانوا جاهزون للربح أو الخسارة , while eight students representing 61,55% paraphrased it into على استعداد للقتال أو للنجاح, مستعدون للمجازفة . The rest of the participants used modulation, transposition as in غير مستعدون للسباحة أو الغرق, مبالى بالخسارة , which was a wrong choice.

- **(idiom 10): to play things by ear:** only one of the students used an appropriate paraphrased translation with a similar meaning : كانوا يمتعون بالارتجالية و يتصرفون وفق الظروف . 53,88% were unfamiliar with the idiom and translated it word-for-word as in يلعبون الأشياء بأذانهم ,while five students didn't translate it at all.

- **(idiom 11): have one's ears to the ground:** only one student understood the metaphorical meaning behind this idiom and used كان ملماً بخفايا السوق ومتقن لما يدور حوله , 30,78% of them translated it literally as in ييقون اذانهم على الأرض ,while one student rendered it by : ضربو : بآذانهم على الأرض ,which was irrelevant.

- **(idiom 12): full steam ahead :** only one student managed to use the appropriate strategy in واصلو باصرار و عزيمة (two students) used a literal translation as in تحركو بسرعة كالتيار , while the remaining students used different strategies as in تحركو بكامل قوتهم الى الامام .

- **(Idiom 13): drove hard bargains:** 46, 15% among the participants translated it using equivalence such as اقامو صفقات مربحة. Two students used word-for-word translation such as ساقو طريقا صعبة, as they were unfamiliar with the given idiom. One student used واجهو الويلات while three students didn't translate it at all.

- **(idiom 14): by leaps and bounds** five students making up 38,46 % used equivalent procedure to translate the idiom such as كان عملهم يتطور بوتيرة سريعة, while two other students preferred to use the literal translation as in على قدم وساق. four students didn't get the meaning and translated it as ينمو ببطء شدي.

- **(idiom 15): stumbling blocks:** The majority of the respondents used an equivalent idiom in their mother tongue such as حجرة عثرة, only one student used paraphrasings like صعوبات, عوائق, and one student used equivalence such as in مشاكل. While three students didn't provide any translation.

- **(idiom 16): got the jump on :** three students 23, 07% managed to translate the idiom using paraphrasing such as in استهل الريادة, the same percentage was for those using حقق الفقرة, while seven students didn't provide any translation.

4.5 Discussion:

It was clearly difficult for the majority of the participants to correctly and meaningfully translate these idioms as there were only a few instances in which the participants demonstrated high levels of inter-language understanding which resulted in finding the right equivalent or arriving at the adequate paraphrasing of the expression, especially for the most prevalent and often used idiomatic expressions. Besides, a number of participants provided literal translations as an emergency strategy even if this could undermine the whole rendering.

It was also noticed that challenges were greatly related to a lack of translation procedures like that of Vinay and Darbelnet when dealing with idioms that have no equivalents or have partial equivalents in the target language. Moreover, Terminology is another hurdle that had participants struggling to find the right corresponding term in the target language. In addition to problems that are linguistic in nature, a mere interpretation of the test results indicates that there might be a variety of factors contributing to these challenges such as a limited understanding of the cultural aspects of the target language as students lack reading skills in both languages. Language directionality is another factor that could have an impact on their understanding of idiomatic expressions as their mother tongue -Arabic- may interfere in the process of thinking, understanding, and translating idioms

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between English and Arabic, which in turn results in a literal and erroneous translation. In addition to the difficulties associated with understanding and translating idiomatic expressions, it is of paramount importance for instructors to raise their students' awareness of the importance of idioms use which is considered to be an important aspect of the English language as it comes up every day in both forms; written and spoken. Furthermore, instructors must also use a variety of translation teaching approaches and encourage their students to make use of these approaches and strategies to deal with the figurative side of these expressions. In sum, idioms need to be taught along with other modules and courses such as literature and civilization.

Conclusion

Idiomatic expressions are admittedly a difficult aspect of the English learning process as they carry a mysterious and metaphorical meaning which may allow for instances of myriad misunderstandings among the participants. Misunderstandings are bound to happen, especially when the participants are not well versed in the linguistic as well as the cultural aspects of both languages; the source and the target language.

The test the participants took offered deeper insights into their translation strategies as a whole and, more specifically, the extent to which they are able to deal with the translation of English idiomatic expressions. Moreover, Strategies, procedures, and tactics of translation appeared to be less used by the participants as they stuck to literal and out-of-context translations as emergency strategies to deal with these idioms.

Students of translation need, therefore, to develop an understanding of the cultural and linguistic aspects of both languages, and apply the translation procedures accordingly. They also need to work on polishing the artistic side in translation by reading extensively in both languages. In doing so, students will be able to successfully deal with a wide variety of idioms, proverbs, and expressions of different kinds and patterns, and therefore become good translators.

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Appendix 1: The test

Read the following text carefully then translate it into Arabic:

Young and free

I've got a young friend, he's only 25, but he fits the bill perfectly. He's single and he's hungry. He's willing to start from scratch and, best of all, he isn't afraid of putting his nose to the grindstone for those 80 hour weeks. He decided to take the bull by the horns by going starting up his own business. He found a software developer who knew the internet inside out. This young man was also very ambitious. He left his safe job at the drop of a hat. They were both reaching for pie in the sky, and they were ready.

They also were lucky. They founded a startup and got into the whole social networking business in 2002. In other words, they were early birds and they were willing to sink or swim. Probably the most important ingredient in their success was that they were willing to play things by ear. They kept their ears to the ground, moved full steam ahead and drove hard bargains. Soon, their business was growing by leaps and bounds. Of course, they had some stumbling blocks along the way. Who doesn't? Still, they got the jump on the competition and by the year 2008, they were multi-millionaires. This sort of success for the young and free now has copycats around the world.