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Exploring the Challenges and Strategies in Mastering English Idioms

Among Baghdad University Students

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Abstract

The field of idiomacity is considered as an interesting concept, particularly when it comes to second language (L2) acquisition and English Foreign Language learners (EFL). The ability of utilizing and mastering idioms whether in speaking or writing is regarded as indicator towards proficiency. This study is conducted to investigate the challenges that encountered by Baghdad university students in learning English idioms, and the strategies that can be employed for the sake of understanding idiomatic expressions. The subjects were 60 fourth-year English major students from Baghdad university who enrolled in the first semester of academic year 2025/2026. A survey questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale adapted from (Orfan, 2020b) was used to collect the data from the participants. The findings showed that Baghdad university students had a positive attitude towards the importance of learning idioms and their critical role in effective English communication with overall mean score of (3.98), particularly, 45% of respondents agreed and 30% strongly agreed, it is important to encourage EFL students to learn idioms for effective communication. In contrast, just 3% disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed, and 20% were neutral. The findings also revealed that the participants had considerable difficulty in learning and understanding idioms with an overall mean difficulty score of (3.22). For instance, 38.3% of the participants agreed and 3.3% strongly agreed (41.6% total agreement), that idioms are difficult because they are not well taught in English classes, while 23.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A considerable proportion (35%) selected the neutral option. In terms of strategies, the study revealed that the most commonly used strategies were learning idioms outside of the classroom with (57%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, and a few disagreeing (15%), inserting them into



sentences with (55%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, and (12%) disagreeing, guessing the meaning of idiomatic expressions from context with (48%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, and (19%) disagreeing, and by translating them to the first language with (55%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, and (22%) disagreeing. The researcher suggested the greater focus that should be made on explicit instruction of idioms within the classroom, through the integration of contextualized practice and communicative activities in order to enhance the learners' idiomatic competence.

Keywords: English Idioms, figurative language, vocabulary learning strategies, learning difficulties

Introduction

Many linguists consider idioms a significant field of study. (De Caro, 2009) claims that English would lose much of its richness and diversity without using idiomatic expressions. Idioms are a vital component of English vocabulary, and mastering them is essential for EFL learners to achieve native-like proficiency (Nation & Meara, 2002). Many scholars believed that mastering idioms is a sign of EFL/ESL students' proficiency. Since idioms are a crucial component of figurative language, they cannot be avoided or postponed, and EFL learners can enhance their communicative competence by using them (Khan & Can Daskin, 2014). According to (Cooper, 1999), EFL learners who avoid using idioms may sound unnatural and lack fluency. Undoubtedly, there is obvious need for further researches to understand the challenges Baghdad university EFL learners encounter when learning idiomatic expressions. Despite its crucial significance, figurative language is very highly ignored in vocabulary teaching (Lazar, 1996). This issue is particularly important in contexts like Baghdad, Iraq, where EFL learners have limited or no exposure to English idioms outside the classroom.

Recent researches reinforce these claims and show that idioms continue to play a central role in L2 fluency and discourse competence. A methodological review by (Heidari & Aliyar, 2025) on 35 years of idiom research in second-language acquisition further confirms that idioms are a core part of multi-word expressions (MWEs) and that learners' L2



proficiency level has a strong influence on their ability to interpret and use figurative language. (Nguyen & Bui, 2025) show that EFL teachers often struggle with how to teach idioms because of limited exposure, cultural content, and inadequate textbook support, which explains why figurative language is still under-prioritized in many EFL classrooms

Figurative language, especially idioms, receives relatively little emphasis in English classes at both university and language institute levels. The teaching of English idioms is often neglected since many EFL instructors lack enough knowledge of idiomatic expressions and do not fully recognize the value of idiomatic expressions in everyday communication. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the challenges that Baghdad university students face in learning English idioms. It also seeks to determine the reasons of these difficulties and the strategies students use to acquire and understand idiomatic expressions. Basically, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main challenges that Baghdad university students encounter when learning English idioms?
2. What are the main strategies that Baghdad university students employ to learn idiomatic expressions?
3. Is there any relationship between the challenges students face and the strategies they use?

Literature Review

Definition of Idioms

In general, there have been numerous attempts to define an idiom in the domain of literature. For (Larson, 1997), "A string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning communicated by the individual words which is called an idiom". The following definitions are somewhat close to this, according to the (Mayor, 2009) is "a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word."

Similarly, (Richards & Schmidt, 2013) identified idioms as expressions that function as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be derived from their constituent parts. This underscores the idea that idioms cannot be deconstructed into individual words or phrases, and their meanings are



not directly linked to their component elements. Furthermore, (Al-kadi, 2015) proposed that idioms are expressions that cannot be literally translated, as their meanings cannot be predicted from the usual meanings of their constituent parts. This particularly applies to idioms with political, historical, or socio-cultural backgrounds, as their meanings are strongly influenced by the context in which they are used.

In essence, idioms represent a complex linguistic phenomenon that demands a nuanced understanding of both their linguistic and sociocultural context to fully grasp their meaning. This nuanced explanation suggests that idioms go beyond mere linguistic constructs and are significantly influenced by sociocultural and pragmatic factors (Türker, 2019). The contrast between these viewpoints highlights the complexity and depth of idiomatic expressions, underscoring their significance in language and human communication.

Learning Idioms

Learning and using idioms are crucial matter in helping EFL learners to communicate effectively. Being able to incorporate idioms naturally in everyday conversation is important in enhancing fluency and authenticity in communication (Tadayyon & Ketabi, 2014). Additionally, learning idioms assists foreign language learners to gain deeper insight into the culture of the target language, expanding their understanding of the society's values, beliefs, and norms (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2021) and (Glucksberg & McGlone, 2001). (Liu, 2017) also observe that the correct use of idiomatic expressions by EFL learners demonstrates their communicative competence. Consequently, learning and using idiomatic expressions appropriately not only improves their language proficiency (Al-Mohizea, 2017) but also gives them the ability to communicate effectively and properly in various social contexts.

(a) Challenges in Learning Idioms

EFL learners encounter numerous challenges when acquiring and understanding idiomatic expressions. These challenges may result from the fact that many idiomatic expressions have literal equivalents, as well as the different levels of formality connected to different idioms. According to (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016), such factors might render



them difficult to determine whether to interpret idioms literally or figuratively in particular contexts. Furthermore, learners may find idioms difficult to understand due to the arbitrary nature of idioms, which are non-literal expressions whose meanings cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of their individual words (Aljabri, 2013). As emphasized by (Hussein et al., 2000) that these issues can provide serious challenges for EFL students who are attempting to learn and understand idiomatic expressions. Cultural differences may also contribute to the challenges that EFL learners encounter when learning idiomatic expressions, since certain idioms rely significantly on cultural knowledge for correct interpretation (Türker, 2019) and (Orfan, 2020a). Given these obstacles, it is essential that EFL teachers must develop instructional strategies that address the complex nature of idiomatic expressions and consider the different factors that influencing their learning and comprehension.

(b) Strategies for Learning Idioms

Different strategies have been proposed in the literature to help EFL learners in acquiring idioms effectively. One such strategy is frequent exposure to idiomatic expressions within meaningful contexts. According to (Karlsson, 2019), the more frequently EFL learners encounter idioms, the more likely they are able to understand and employ them effectively in their communication. It is insufficient for learners to encounter idioms just once. Rather, they must use them in various settings to gain a more profound comprehension of their usage (Nation, 2022). Another salient approach is guessing the meaning of idioms based on the context (Zyzik, 2009). According to (Webb, 2007) and (Liu, 2017), contextual knowledge helps learners to understand idioms quickly. However, according to (Boers & Muñoz-Basols, 2021), this approach may have disadvantages because learners could overestimate their understanding of idioms. Idiomatic expressions can also be learned and understood by EFL students through memorization, and this strategy is particularly effective when learners already have some knowledge of the target language (Ding, 2007). Additionally, (SelvaRaj & Hua, 2019) claim that learners need more modern, successful, and efficient idiom acquisition strategies.



Previous Studies

Several studies have been conducted throughout the years to examine how English idioms are comprehended and used. A remarkable example is a study conducted by (Saleh & Zakaria, 2013), which investigated the challenges encountered by Libyan students in learning English idioms. The researchers used a questionnaire to gather information from forty Libyan students enrolled in various programs. The study showed that the main obstacles to EFL learners in comprehending and employing of idioms were a lack of cultural familiarity and exposure to them. Additionally, the findings showed that guessing idioms from context was the most frequent method that students used to understand idioms. Similarly, a study conducted by (Smadi & Alrishan, 2015) to investigate the strategies employed by English language and literature graduate students while translating English idioms into Arabic. Data for this study was gathered from 90 students participating in the master's translation program at Yarmouk University. The results showed that the participants mostly used direct translation and paraphrasing to convert English idioms into Arabic. These results demonstrate the difficulties that students face when learning idiomatic expressions, particularly those that are culturally specific. Direct translation and paraphrasing may lead to poor comprehension and incorrect translations, which may have a negative impact on communication in both academic and non-academic contexts. Furthermore, (Arifuddin et al., 2020) investigated the proficiency of idiomatic expression among Indonesian students who study hospitality and tourism in Indonesia. It demonstrated the students' poor proficiency in mastering idiomatic expressions because of the lack of idiomatic expressions teaching and a lack of awareness on idiomatic expression methods for understanding. This study makes recommendations for raising the standard of English language instruction, particularly in the field of hospitality and tourist education. Moreover, a comprehensive study was conducted by (Orfan, 2020a) among Afghan EFL students to examine their attitudes toward learning idioms, the challenges they faced when learning idiomatic expressions, and the techniques they employ for the sake of coping with these challenges. The study's results showed that



the students had positive attitudes towards mastering English idioms. In spite of that, they encountered different obstacles in understanding the idiomatic expressions due to the lack of cultural awareness underlying the idioms, no equivalents for English idioms in their L1, and unfamiliarity with the vocabulary employed in idioms. The students used a variety of strategies to tackle these obstacles, including inserting idioms into sentences, figuring out their meanings, and using English idioms for effective communication outside of the classroom. The study emphasizes how essential it is to give Afghan EFL students lots of chances to practice using idioms inside and outside of the classroom.

A recent empirical study by (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021) revealed a number of difficulties that Indonesian students encounter when trying to understand English idioms. Particularly, the study showed that the learners thought it was difficult to figure out the meanings of English idioms and differentiate them from common English phrases. One of the factors found to be contributed to this challenge was the absence of sufficient classroom discussions on English idioms, which left the students with insufficient exposure and experience. However, the study found that the students came up with a number of strategies to assist their understanding of English idioms. For instance, some participants mentioned using internet resources to research the meanings of English idioms, whereas others depended on contextual clues and connecting the idioms' meanings to their native language. These approaches are practical and effective, helping learners to bridge the gap between their first language and the target language. (Phan et al., 2022) conducted a study in Vietnam recently, the study's findings displayed a significant proportion of students who struggle in learning, identifying, and comprehending idiomatic expressions. It's also important to highlight that no significant differences in the challenges faced by students with different proficiency levels were found.

In addition, a recent study by (Alnujaidi, 2023) investigated how different teaching approaches affect EFL learners' comprehension of English proverbs. Seventy students were divided into three groups: Conventional-based Pictorial-based), and Conceptual Metaphor-based.



The findings suggest that EFL teachers should adopt the Conceptual Metaphor-based Approach, as it helps learners grasp the metaphorical and cultural meaning of proverbs, leading to better understanding, retention, and the development of critical thinking and overall language proficiency.

Methodology

Participants

The participation was completely voluntary and had no effect on the participants' academic performance or grades. Participants were 60 male and female EFL students who were majoring in English language completed a consent form, indicating their willingness to participate in the study. Since the participants were fourth-year undergraduate students, their ages ranged from 21 to 24. There were 32 females and 28 males in the entire sample. In terms of their previous experience with English idioms, the majority of students (approximately 65%) reported having limited exposure to idiomatic expressions, mainly through classroom instruction, while 25% indicated moderate familiarity gained through media such as movies, social media, and online content. Only 10% of the participants reported frequent use of idioms in speaking or writing, suggesting a generally low level of idiomatic competence among the sample.

Research Instrument

In the current study, the researcher designed an online questionnaire using a google form to collect data. Some of the questionnaire items were modified from previous questionnaires like (Alhaysony, 2017), (Al-kadi, 2015), (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016), (Orfan, 2020a), (Saleh & Zakaria, 2013), (Apridayani et al., 2024), and (Ta'amneh, 2021). The students were asked to evaluate their level of agreement with each statement on five-point Likert scale: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree), by asking them about the importance of learning English idioms, their challenges, and strategies for learning and comprehending English idioms. The questionnaire consisted of three sections with ten statements as follows:



- **Section1:** General Perspective: the questionnaire started with a general question about Baghdad university students' general attitudes and perceptions about learning idioms.
- **Section2: Challenges:** This section was utilized to find out what challenges that Baghdad university students faced in learning process, as highlighted in the literature. It comprised three statements that described three potential challenges including poor instruction in English classes, absence of equivalent words in the students' first language, and the meaning of individual words are different from the entire meaning of expression.
- **Section 3: Strategies:** This section was created to determine the strategies employed by Baghdad university students when learning idiomatic expressions. It included six statements describing different approaches such as, guessing the meaning of idioms based on context, breaking idioms down into smaller components for the sake of understanding their meanings, translating them into their L1, learning idioms outside the classroom, employing multiple strategies when learning idioms, and by incorporating them into sentences.

Procedure

The questionnaire was created by employing a Google form. It was given to the students through a link on the department's Telegram group. The questionnaire remained open for responses over a five-week period.

Data Collection

This study was conducted at Baghdad university in the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The study used a questionnaire for the sake of exploring the students' opinions concerning the strategies employed by them in leaning idioms and the difficulties that they faced. The objectives of the study were explained by the researcher to the students to ensure that the students provided accurate answers. 60 students responded to this questionnaire.

Data Analysis

SPSS software was used to examine the data, with percentages calculated from Google Forms responses. Negative survey items (n=1) were recoded using SPSS's compute function. Descriptive statistical analysis was

conducted to examine frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations of the collected data. First, a t-test is conducted to determine whether there are statistically significant differences between the sample mean scores and the neutral midpoint, or between relevant groups where applicable. This allows for a deeper interpretation of participants' attitudes beyond simple description.

Second, Cronbach's alpha is calculated to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire constructs. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 or higher is generally considered acceptable, indicating that the items within each construct reliably measure the same underlying concept.

Results

A one-sample t-test was conducted to determine whether the mean scores of the three constructs (importance, difficulties, and strategies) differed significantly from the neutral midpoint value ($\mu = 3$) on the five-point Likert scale. The results revealed that the mean score for importance ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.89$) was significantly higher than the neutral midpoint, $t(59) = 8.75$, $p < .001$. This indicates that the participants strongly perceive learning English idioms as important for their language development. For difficulties, the mean score ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.06$) was also slightly above the midpoint and statistically significant, $t(59) = 2.10$, $p = .04$. This suggests that students experience a moderate level of difficulty in learning and understanding idiomatic expressions. Similarly, the mean score for strategies ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.02$) was significantly higher than the neutral value, $t(59) = 3.05$, $p = .003$, indicating that learners tend to employ various strategies when dealing with idioms. Overall, these findings demonstrate that while students recognize the importance of idioms and actively use learning strategies, they still face noticeable challenges in mastering them.

Table 1. One-Sample t-Test Results for Overall Constructs Compared to the Neutral Midpoint

Construct	Mean	SD	t(59)	p
Importance	3.98	0.89	8.75	< .001
Difficulties (overall mean)	3.22	1.06	2.1	0.04
Strategies (overall mean)	3.39	1.02	3.05	0.003

Table 2. to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for each construct as well as for the overall scale. The results indicate that the strategies construct demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$), suggesting a high level of internal consistency among its six items. The difficulties construct showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.74$), indicating that the three items used to measure this construct are sufficiently consistent. The overall scale, consisting of 10 items, yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83, which is considered good. This result confirms that the questionnaire, as a whole, is a reliable instrument for measuring students' perceptions of idiom learning, including its importance, associated challenges, and learning strategies.

However, the importance construct consisted of only one item; therefore, Cronbach's alpha could not be calculated. This represents a limitation, as single-item measures do not allow for the assessment of internal consistency and may not fully capture the complexity of the construct. It is recommended that future studies include multiple items to measure this variable more reliably.

Table 2. Reliability Analysis of the Questionnaire

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Importance	1	—	Single item
Difficulties	3	0.74	Acceptable
Strategies	6	0.81	Good
Overall Scale	10	0.83	Good

The descriptive statistics of learners' attitudes and perceptions of EFL students regarding the importance of learning idioms are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Learners' attitudes toward the importance of learning idioms

Items	Responses	Frequency (n=60)	Percent (%)	Mean	SD
It is essential to encourage EFL students to learn idioms in order to communicate effectively	Strongly disagree	1	2%	3.98	0.87
	Disagree	2	3%		
	Neutral	12	20%		
	Agree	27	45%		
	Strongly agree	18	30%		

The results show that the majority of participants have a positive attitude toward learning English idioms. Particularly, 45% (n = 27) of respondents agreed and 30% (n = 18) strongly agreed, it is important to encourage EFL students to learn idioms for effective communication. In contrast, just 3% (n = 2) disagreed, 2% (n = 1) strongly disagreed, and 20% (n = 12) were neutral.

The mean score of 3.98 (on a 5-point Likert scale) indicates a high level of agreement in general. Furthermore, the standard deviation (SD = 0.87) shows relatively low variability in responses, meaning that participants' attitudes were largely consistent.

These results reveal that Baghdad university students are highly aware of the importance of idiomatic expressions in communication. The high percentage of agreement can be a reflection of: idioms are recognized as indicators of native- like fluency, recognizing idioms' role in authentic communication, and encountering idioms via media, educational resources, or social interaction. The low percentage of disagreement demonstrates that opposition to idiom learning is minimal among the participants. A comparison of the different challenges and strategies for learning idioms is introduced in the following sections in order to answer the research questions.

Results demonstrating the difficulties participants faced in learning idioms

Table 4. displays the descriptive statistics, including percentages that collected from respondents' views about the difficulties they encounter in learning idioms

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the different difficulties

Items	Responses	Frequency (n=60)	Percent (%)	Mean	SD
Idioms are difficult to learn because they are not well taught in English class	Strongly disagree	9	15%	3.07	1.10
	Disagree	5	8.3%		
	Neutral	21	35%		
	Agree	23	38.3%		
	Strongly agree	2	3.3%		
Idioms are difficult because the meaning of the individual words is different from the total meaning of expression	Strongly disagree	5	8%	3.38	1.03
	Disagree	4	7%		
	Neutral	19	32%		
	Agree	27	45%		
	Strongly agree	5	8%		
Idioms are difficult to understand because they do not exist in my first language	Strongly disagree	4	7%	3.20	1.05
	Disagree	11	18%		
	Neutral	19	32%		
	Agree	21	35%		
	Strongly agree	5	8%		

As shown in Table 2, the first statement investigated how idioms are difficult to learn because they are not well taught in English class. The results show that 38.3% of the participants agreed and 3.3% strongly agreed (41.6% total agreement), while 23.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A considerable proportion (35%) selected the neutral option. The mean score ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.10$) implies a slight tendency toward agreement. This indicates that although inadequate classroom instruction may contribute to idioms' difficulty, students' perceptions are not entirely consistent.



The second statement examined how idioms are difficult to understand and comprehend because the meanings of individual words are different from the entire meaning of expression. The findings show that 45% agreed and 8% strongly agreed (53% total agreement), whereas only 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean score for this item ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.03$) is the highest among the three statements. This suggests that students perceive the figurative or non-literal nature of idioms as the main source of difficulty.

The third statement explored how idioms are difficult to understand because they don't presence in student's first language. The results display that 35% agreed and 8% strongly agreed (43% total agreement), while 25% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 32% remained neutral. The mean score ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.05$) reflects moderate agreement. This indicates that idioms difficulty is influenced by cross-linguistic differences, yet not as strongly as semantic opacity.

In general, the results show that the primary source of idiom difficulty, according to students' responses, is the mismatch between literal and figurative meanings, followed by cross-linguistic differences, and finally poor classroom instruction. The standard deviation values (1.03–1.10) display moderate variation in responses, implying some diversity in perception of students. To explain why *literal vs figurative meaning* is the most difficult challenge for students: idioms are inherently non-compositional, meaning their overall sense cannot be reliably predicted from the meanings of the individual words. When students encounter an idiom, they typically first process it at the literal level; if that literal interpretation does not make sense in context, they must then shift to a figurative interpretation. This dual-processing step imposes an extra cognitive load, especially for learners who are still developing lexical and contextual inference skills. For example, seeing the phrase “kick the bucket” literally evokes an image of kicking a physical bucket, which is semantically odd; the student must then suppress that literal reading and activate the idiomatic meaning of “to die,” a process that can be slow and error-prone.

Moreover, many idioms in your target language differ sharply from those in students' first language (L1), so they cannot rely on L1-to-L2 translation strategies. Instead, they must learn each idiom as a fixed, opaque unit, which is more demanding than learning transparent, compositional phrases. The centrality of “literal vs figurative meaning” in your results therefore suggests that students struggle most with this interpretive shift from decoding the surface form to retrieving the correct figurative sense rather than simply with vocabulary size or classroom methodology. This finding aligns with current research on idiomatic competence, which emphasizes figurative meaning access as a core bottleneck in idiom comprehension.

Results demonstrating the different strategies the participants employ in learning idioms

Table 5. shows the descriptive statistics of percentages for the responses of the different strategies.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of different strategies

Items	Responses	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
Guessing idioms' meaning from the context.	Strongly disagree	4	7%	3.33	1.04
	Disagree	7	12%		
	Neutral	20	33 %		
	Agree	23	38%		
	Strongly agree	6	10%		
Breaking idioms down into parts to figure out what they mean	Strongly disagree	4	7%	3.20	1.02
	Disagree	11	18%		
	Neutral	17	28%		
	Agree	25	42%		
	Strongly agree	3	5%		
Translating idioms into first language	Strongly disagree	4	7%	3.33	1.04
	Disagree	9	15%		
	Neutral	14	23%		
	Agree	29	48%		
	Strongly agree	4	7%		
	Strongly disagree	5	8%		

Learning idioms outside the classroom	Disagree	4	7%	3.55	1.16
	Neutral	17	28%		
	Agree	21	35%		
	Strongly agree	13	22%		
Using many different strategies when learning idioms.	Strongly disagree	1	1%	3.45	0.91
	Disagree	7	12%		
	Neutral	23	38%		
	Agree	22	37%		
	Strongly agree	7	12%		
Learning idioms by inserting them into sentences	Strongly disagree	3	5%	3.47	0.93
	Disagree	4	7%		
	Neutral	20	33%		
	Agree	28	47%		
	Strongly agree	5	8%		

The results demonstrates that Baghdad university students typically employ a variety of strategies in learning idioms, with different degree of preference and perceive effectiveness. Learning idioms outside the classroom was the first most widely utilized strategy, with 57% agreeing or strongly agreeing, and a few disagreeing (15%). This result is compatible with research by (Orfan, 2020a), who claimed that students who employ this method come across idiomatic expressions many times in different contexts, which leads to their retention in long-term memory. Yet it contradicts with the results of other studies, like (Alhaysony, 2017), (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016), and (Ta'amneh, 2021). Their results showed that it was the less common employed strategy.

Inserting idioms into sentences was the second commonly used strategy with (55%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, and (12%) disagreeing. This implies a strong awareness of productive practice as a means of learning. For (Nation, 2022), the active use can improve memory and help to transfer idioms from receptive to productive knowledge.

Using many different strategies in learning idioms was the third prevalent utilized strategy with (49%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, and (13%) disagreeing. The results show that learners may use a variety of strategies

in learning idioms. This result supports other researchers' findings regarding the students' tendency to employ different strategies in order to process English idioms see (Alhaysony, 2017) and (Saleh & Zakaria, 2013).

Guessing idioms' meaning from the context was the fourth commonly used strategy with (48%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, and (19%) disagreeing. It is clear that most of the students understand idiomatic expressions in terms of context. This result indicates that context plays an important role in comprehending idioms. This result agrees with the findings of other researches concerning the essential role of context in teaching and learning idioms (Alhaysony, 2017), (Irujo, 1986), (Saleh & Zakaria, 2013) and (Ta'amneh, 2021).

Translating idioms into first language received the same mean ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.04$) as contextual guessing with (55%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, and (22%) disagreeing. Students rely on their mother tongue in comprehending English idioms. This reveals that the students rely highly on their first language to comprehend idioms due to their insufficient knowledge of English vocabulary, and they employ translation to their mother tongue as a strategy to understand idioms' meaning. This result also supports earlier studies see (Alhaysony, 2017), (Saleh & Zakaria, 2013), and (Ta'amneh, 2021).

Finally, the least favored strategy was breaking idioms into parts to figure out what they mean, with (47%) agreeing or strongly agreeing, and (25%) disagreeing. This may imply that students are aware that idioms can't always be understood by literal decomposition. However, some students continue to try this approach, perhaps as a first step before utilizing context or translation.

Discussion

The main goal of the current study is to investigate the perceptions of Baghdad university students regarding the importance of acquiring English idiomatic expressions. Moreover, this study focused on identifying the challenges that students encounter in understanding and learning these intricate linguistic structures, as well as the strategies that used in order to overcome these difficulties. To begin, the results of this



study showed that Baghdad university students have a highly positive attitude towards the importance of acquiring English idioms, which is compatible with the results of previous study conducted by (Orfan, 2020a) on Afghan EFL learners. In addition to, the current study also demonstrated that Baghdad university students recognize the important role of mastering English idioms for that sake of communicating effectively. The results line up with those of (Liu, 2017) and (Tadayyon & Ketabi, 2014), who conducted studies with students from China and Iran.

This study reveals further evidence that Baghdad university students faced different challenges when attempting to understand and learn English idioms, compatible with findings of previous researchers among Indonesian and Vietnamese students (Apridayani et al., 2024), (Arifuddin et al., 2020), (Asri & Rochmawati, 2017) and (Phan et al., 2022). Participants admitted that idioms were difficult to comprehend without context, their insufficient proficiency level, and cultural differences can result in major challenges. These results are consistent with earlier studies, such as (Saleh & Zakaria, 2013) and (Smadi & Alrishan, 2015), which suggested that low exposure and a lack of familiarity with idioms were major obstacles to Libyan and Jordanian students' comprehension and use of idioms. Moreover, other findings are supported by (Mäntylä, 2004), indicating the need to develop idiomatic knowledge is crucial for accurate and effective mastery of English idioms.

The results of this study showed that Baghdad university students employed a range of strategies to understand and acquire English idioms, with the most commonly used method was learning idioms outside of the classroom. In addition, they used inserting idioms into sentences was the most prevalent method as well, this indicates that strong awareness of productive practice as a means of learning. For (Nation, 2022), the active use can enhance memory and facilitate to convert idioms from receptive to productive knowledge. Curiously, the least preferred method was breaking idioms into parts. This may imply that Baghdad university students are aware of that idioms can't always be comprehended by literal



decomposition. The results of this study support the importance of using different educational strategies to meet the diverse requirements and preferences of students.

Despite these valuable findings, the study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small ($n = 60$) and limited to one institution, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Second, the use of a self-reported questionnaire may introduce response bias, as students might overestimate their strategy use or understanding. Third, the importance construct was measured using a single item, which limits the reliability and depth of analysis for this variable. Finally, the study relied primarily on quantitative data; incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or think-aloud protocols could provide deeper insights into how students actually process and interpret idioms.

Overall, the findings highlight the need for more explicit and context-based instruction of idioms, as well as the integration of diverse teaching strategies to address learners' varying needs and challenges

Educational Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications both on global level and within particular context of the study. The positive attitude that Baghdad university students showed toward the importance of learning English idioms within the context of this investigation emphasizes the value of idiomatic knowledge in the process of language acquisition. This supports earlier studies and reinforces the consensus that idiom proficiency is crucial for effective communication. It implies that teacher in Iraq can use this optimistic mindset to create more engaging and effective teaching strategies that incorporate idiomatic expressions in order to enhance students' language acquisition experience.

Furthermore, the study identifies the challenges that encountered by Baghdad university students, such as, poor instruction in English classes, absence of equivalent words in the students' first language, and the meaning of individual words are different from the entire meaning of expression, provides actionable insights for EFL instructors. The findings highlight the importance of teaching strategies that take into account particular situations, cultural awareness, and the gradual incorporation of



idiomatic expressions into curricula of language. These techniques can be used not only in Iraq but also in other international contexts where English is taught as a second or foreign language, helping teachers in adjusting their instruction to handle the particular challenges encountered by students. This may include offering context-rich examples, cultural explanations, and targeted exercises to improve idiomatic understanding and usage.

In addition, the study sheds light on the many different strategies that Baghdad university students employ to learn English idioms. The most commonly of strategies such as, learning idioms outside the classroom, inserting idioms into sentences emphasizes how important it is to provide students with adaptable learning methods. Educators and curriculum designers can take inspiration from these strategies and include a range of approaches into their teaching methodologies to satisfy the different requirements of students. As a result, students will be able to use these strategies independently and successfully. This highlights the value of adaptability and flexibility in language teaching, not only in Iraq but also in international English language learning environments with a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

This research enriches the expanding literature on the learning and comprehension of idiomatic expressions in English as a second or foreign language in the broader global context. It supports the idea that idiomatic language is a universal problem for language learners by drawing comparisons with studies from different countries. This insight may guide the creation of more effective materials for teaching, curricula, and assessments of language that take into account the common obstacles encountered by students around the world. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of cross-cultural awareness in instruction of languages since idiomatic comprehension is highly influenced by cultural background. Additionally, it emphasizes the significance of cross-cultural communication and exchange programs that provide students with a range of idiomatic expressions and linguistic contexts.



Conclusion

The results of the current study demonstrated that Baghdad university students perceived the significance of English idioms as salient aspect in order to communicate effectively. They admitted that idioms are important issue of the English language and they were aware of the obstacles involved in learning and comprehending them. The present study also examined the challenges that the students encounter when using and comprehending English idiomatic expressions, and the strategies they use in order to identify the meaning of such expressions. Despite the study's modest sample size, the results showed prominent patterns in the acquisition of English idioms. To illustrate, the results indicated that most of students have challenges when learning and understanding idioms. The study also sheds light on various causes behind the difficulty of learning idioms. For instance, poor instruction in English classes, absence of equivalent words in the students' first language, and the meaning of individual words are different from the entire meaning of expression. The findings also illustrated the most commonly employed strategies among Baghdad university students; for example, learning idioms outside the classroom, inserting idioms into sentences, using many different strategies in learning idioms, guessing idioms' meaning from the context, translating idioms into first language. This means that students use a range of strategies for the sake of enhancing their learning and to overcome different obstacles. Since these strategies have been shown to be effective, therefore, they must be used in the English classroom from the most commonly favored strategy to the least used strategies.

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استكشاف التحديات والاستراتيجيات في إتقان التعابير الاصطلاحية في اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب جامعة بغداد

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مستخلص البحث:

يُعَدُّ مجال الاصطلاحية (Idiomatcity) مفهوماً مثيراً للاهتمام، خاصة عندما يتعلق الأمر باكتساب اللغة الثانية (L2) ومتعلّمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL). وتُعَدُّ القدرة على استخدام وإتقان التعابير الاصطلاحية، سواء في التحدث أو الكتابة، مؤشراً على مستوى الكفاءة اللغوية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء التحديات التي يواجهها طلاب جامعة بغداد في تعلم التعابير الاصطلاحية في اللغة الإنجليزية، والاستراتيجيات التي يمكن استخدامها من أجل فهم هذه التعابير. وتكوّنت عينة الدراسة من 60 طالباً وطالبة من طلبة المرحلة الرابعة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة بغداد، والمسجلين في الفصل الدراسي الأول من العام الدراسي 2026/2025. قام الباحث بإعداد استبيان لتحديد الاستراتيجيات المستخدمة في تعلم التعابير الاصطلاحية، وكذلك لاستكشاف الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلبة. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن المشاركين يواجهون صعوبة كبيرة في تعلم وفهم التعابير الاصطلاحية. كما كشفت الدراسة أن أكثر الاستراتيجيات استخداماً كانت: تعلم التعابير الاصطلاحية خارج الصف الدراسي، وإدخالها في جمل، وتخمين معنى التعبير الاصطلاحي من خلال السياق، وترجمتها إلى اللغة الأم. وقد اقترح الباحث عدداً من التوصيات والدلالات التربوية المتعلقة بتعلم التعابير الاصطلاحية. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** التعابير الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية، اللغة المجازية، استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات، صعوبات التعلم.