

Understanding EFL Students' Processing of Idiomatic Expressions Out of Context: Insights Gained From Think-Alouds

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Abstract—The current study examines how EFL students confront the difficulty of comprehending English idioms without supportive context. It aims to study the online processing strategies Saudi EFL learners employ when giving the meaning of English idioms. The Idiom Recognition Test (IRT) and Think-aloud protocol were used to vary and measure the idiom's difficulty and to analyze the processing of the idiom immediately after visual perception. Twenty frequently used idioms representing formal and informal English were selected. They were of three types: English idioms, which have identical forms and meanings of Arabic equivalents; English idioms, which have similar forms and meanings of Arabic equivalents; and English idioms, which differ from Arabic idioms. Results showed that most of the participants had difficulty interpreting the English idioms. Moreover, participants most often drew on the literal meaning, using the compositional parts of the idiom. Referring to an L1 idiom was the second most successful strategy but the fourth most often employed out of the six strategies. The third most effective strategy was background knowledge, yet it was the least used overall. Consequently, the results support all the idiom processing models that emphasize the literal meaning over the figurative one.

Index Terms—idioms, idiom processing, strategies, idiom comprehension

I. INTRODUCTION

An idiom is a figurative expression whose meaning cannot always be derived from the meaning of the constituent elements. Because of the non-literal nature of the idiom, it would be difficult to acquire and comprehend it. The figurative meaning is unpredictable, and as Cooper (1999) states, idioms cause language learning problems for learners. English idioms are difficult for native speakers (Gibbs, 1994; Nippold, 1991), and they present problems to L2 learners (Cooper, 1998; Irujo, 1986).

In the field of EFL/ESL, some researchers (e.g., Liontas, 2002) who investigated the issue of L2 idiom processing suggested that EFL learners process idioms literally and then access the figurative interpretation. Others (e.g., Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Siyanova-Chanturia et al., 2011) claimed that L2 learners comprehend idioms by accessing the figurative meaning directly. The idea of reliance on the literal meaning is evident in the dual L2 idiom representation model, which was introduced by Abel (2003) to explain differences between native and nonnative speakers. It combines the lexical and conceptual levels and covers the requirements of the integration of L1 and L2 lexicon.

It is known that the literal and figurative meanings are different when processing idioms for native and nonnative speakers. L2 learners are familiar with the literal meaning of a lexical item before they come across the figurative meaning (Cieślicka, 2006). Therefore, it would be realistic to propose that there is a more salient status for the literal meaning than the figurative meaning. This led to the formulation of the L2 idiom comprehension model (the literal salient resonant model of L2 idioms) by Cieślicka (2004). The model assumes that the idiom constituents' literal meanings are more salient than figurative meanings in decomposable and nondecomposable idiomatic phrases. The reason behind this is that second language learners who receive formal L1 instruction encounter idioms after they become acquainted with the literal meanings of words in idioms, and these literal meanings are set up in their mental lexicons much more than the figurative meanings that were encountered recently. Results of Cieślicka's (2006) study show that "L2 results are much more compatible with general processing predictions of compositional models of idiom processing" (Cieślicka, 2006, p. 134).

Most of the Current research on the issue of idiom recognition by L2 learners has focused on two main issues. They are the effect of L1 on L2 idiom comprehension "L1 transfer" (Irujo, 1986; Arnaul & Savignon, 1997; Liontas, 2001), and strategies that learners use in L2 idiom comprehension (Bulut & Yazici, 2004; Chen, 2004; Hongshan, 2008; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013; Ranong, 2014; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Alhaysony, 2017; Orfan, 2020; Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021). Results of Irujo (1986), Arnaul and Savignon (1997), and Liontas (2001) studies showed that the easiest idioms to comprehend and produce are the ones that are identical in L1 and L2 while the different ones in L1 and L2 are the most difficult.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the studies that investigated the strategies used by EFL students used the Idiom Recognition Test and Think-aloud protocol to gather data. The majority found that guessing from the context was the most used strategy by EFL learners. Cooper (1999), Bulut and Yazici (2004), Chen (2004), Ranong (2014), Angarini and Hatmanto (2021), Ta'amneh (2021), Nadeem and Almowalad (2022) examined strategies used by second language learners while processing English idioms from different perspectives.

In an exploratory study, Cooper (1999) investigated the online processing strategies employed by second language learners when processing English idioms. Eighteen nonnative English speakers were given an IRT in which they had to provide orally the meanings of twenty idioms. Think-aloud protocols were used to gather data while participants took the IRT. Results showed that the comprehension strategies of idioms are categorized into two main categories: preparatory strategies and guessing strategies. Preparatory strategies included discussing and analyzing the idiom, requesting information about the idiom, and repeating or paraphrasing the idiom. Guessing strategies included guessing from the context, using the literal meaning, using background knowledge, and referring to an L1 idiom. Results showed that the most used strategy was guessing from the context (28%). The second most used one was discussing and analyzing the idiom (24%). The least used one was Referring to L1 (5%).

Replicating Cooper's study, Bulut and Yazici (2004) examined the underlying processes of nonnative English speakers concerning idiom perception. Eighteen Turkish teachers of English were given an IRT that included 18 English idioms. A think-aloud protocol was used to elicit participants' thoughts. Results showed that the most employed strategy was guessing from the context. Differences between the other strategies were not statistically significant.

To examine EFL idiom comprehension by Chinese learners in the process of reading, and to determine what strategies they adopt, Hongshan (2008) used think-aloud protocols that showed idiom comprehension was easier when the similarity between the English idioms and L1 translation was greater. Several strategies have been used, such as analyzing the idiom, literal translation, and using background knowledge. Hongshan found that L2 learners relied on their L1 to interpret English idioms with direct Chinese equivalents. Therefore, participants have not used L1-related strategies with idioms that have no Chinese equivalents.

Ranong (2014) investigated the strategies Thai-L1 speakers use to comprehend and process English idioms and the factors determining the strategies used. 60 undergraduate Thai students took an IRT to verbalize their thoughts about English idioms shown on a screen. Results of the think-aloud protocol showed that the most frequent strategies were guessing from context, repeating and paraphrasing, using keywords, and using literal meaning, while the least frequent strategies were asking for clarification, using background knowledge, and referring to learners' first language idioms. Ranong (2014) found that learners' proficiency level is related to the score of the correct answers. High-proficient learners had the highest correct answers and used contextual information and background knowledge strategies, while low-proficient learners had the lowest scores and depended on the literal meaning of words.

Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) investigated the most helpful and frequently used strategies Jordanian students use to understand idioms. 150 English language learners had a test developed to test their knowledge of idiom expressions and a questionnaire. They found that the most frequent strategy is using context (69%), which is the same result as Cooper's (1999) study. They also found other more frequent strategies, such as similar idioms from L1, literal translation of words, retelling and rephrasing, and figuring out the meaning of individual words. More strategies that were not mentioned in Cooper's study were using different media and reading different kinds of texts.

Alhaysony (2017) conducted a similar study, which employed a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to collect data. She investigated the strategies used by Saudi EFL students to facilitate understanding of idioms. Eighty-five students at Aljouf University participated in this study. Results of the questionnaire and the interview showed that subjects used a variety of idiom-learning strategies. They confirm the use of context as the most frequently used strategy. The most used strategies were guessing from context, predicting the meaning, and literal translation.

Angarini and Hatmanto (2021) conducted interviews to learn the strategies Indonesian students use to learn English idioms. They state that the first strategy students implement is the use of context. Subjects search the internet, use their first language, and ask others to understand English idioms.

In two similar studies, Ta'amneh (2021) and Nadeem and Almowalad (2022) used a questionnaire to discover the strategies employed by undergraduate Saudi students to learn English idioms. Results of Ta'amneh (2021) showed that the most frequently used strategies were predicting the meaning of the idioms, translating into Arabic, guessing the meaning from the context, using verbal and visual information, and using the dictionary. Nadeem and Almowalad (2022) found that the most used strategies were guessing the meaning from context, learning the idioms outside the classroom, and translating words to L1.

III. AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aforementioned studies discussed a crucial theoretical consideration of bilingual idiom research and what strategies EFL learners use to understand an idiom's meaning. The current study investigates how EFL learners, such as Saudi students, tackle the problem of comprehending English idioms. It differs from Alhaysony's (2017), Ta'amneh's

(2021), and Nadeem and Almowalad's (2022) studies in that it aims to study the online processing strategies used by Saudi EFL learners of English while giving the meaning of English idioms.

The Idiom Recognition Test is used to measure the idiom's difficulty. Think-aloud protocol, an online measure of comprehension, is used to analyze the processing of the idiom immediately after visual perception. The use of online methodology presupposes that the task is done under time pressure and that results reflect immediate cognitive processes involved in the task (Marinis, 2003). Unlike previous studies, idioms in the current study were presented with no supporting context. The reason behind this was to find out what other strategies EFL learners employ to comprehend English idioms and enrich our understanding of EFL idioms processing.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1- Using the Idiom Recognition Test (IRT), to what extent do idioms differ in difficulty level?
- 2- What strategies do Saudi students employ to apprehend idioms when they are presented out of context?

V. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

20 Saudi fourth-year undergraduate students at the Department of English, Umm Al-Qura University, participated in the study. They represent 44.4% of all fourth-year students. They were randomly chosen for the experiment. They are native speakers of Arabic and have been studying in the English department for four years.

B. Treatment

20 frequently used idioms were selected with reference to previous L2 idiom processing studies (e.g., Cooper, 1999; Bulut & Yazici, 2004; Al-Khwaldeh et al., 2016; Alhaysony, 2017), and some idiom dictionaries, such as Dictionary of American Idioms (Makki et al., 1995), Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, and Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (Siefring, 2004). Table 1 shows the selected 20 idioms: 10 represent formal English idioms, and the other 10 represent informal English. Similar to Irujo's (1986) materials, idioms of this study are of three types: English idioms that have identical form and meaning Arabic equivalents (i.e. A drop in the ocean, in Arabic نقطة في بحر), English idioms which have similar form and meaning Arabic equivalents (To get cold feet, in Arabic, تجمدت أطرافه), and English idioms which are different from Arabic idioms (to pass with flying colors). Each idiom was typed on a separate card and was shown to the participants in sequence.

TABLE 1
IDIOMS USED IN THE EXPERIMENT

Formal	Informal
To see eye to eye	To get into deep water
To roll up one's sleeves	To raise the dust
To tighten his belt	To have a green thumb
To burn the midnight oil	To let the cat out of the bag
To go round the houses	To be a pain in the neck
To reach for the stars	To get cold feet
A drop in the ocean	To be in the soup
To pass with flying colors	To catch some rays
To be the salt of the earth	To cost an arm and a leg
To rub salt into the wound	Off the top of your head

C. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Participants were tested individually so that their answers and thoughts would never affect the others' while processing the idioms. First, they were provided with The Idiom Recognition Test (IRT) and were instructed to read the idioms silently. Then, participants were asked to give the meanings of the idioms orally and to express their thoughts on how they recognized them through Think-aloud (TA). The same procedure was followed with each idiom. Think-aloud protocols have been audio-recorded for transcription, coding, and analysis.

With reference to earlier studies about L2 idiom comprehension (Cooper, 1999; Bulut & Yazici, 2004), two phases were used to analyze the data:

1st phase: The participants' definitions of idioms were scored on a scale of three points. One point was given to the wrong answer, two points to a partially correct answer, and three points to a completely correct answer.

2nd phase: Strategies used for idiom comprehension were analyzed and marked. They were divided into two main types:

Preparatory Strategies: strategies that are used to clarify knowledge about the idiom. They included requesting information about the idiom (RI), discussing and analyzing the idiom (DA), and repeating or paraphrasing the idiom (RP).

Guessing Strategies: Strategies that are used to lead to the interpretation of the English idiom include referring to a similar L1 idiom (L1), utilizing the literal meaning (LM), and relying on background knowledge (BK).

VI. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

TABLE 2
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

Idiom	M	SD
1. To roll up one's sleeves	2.20	1.005
2. To get into deep water	1.85	0.812
3. To see eye to eye	1.05	0.223
4. To have a green thumb	1.45	0.604
5. To burn the midnight oil	1.40	0.753
6. To let the cat out of the bag	1.55	0.825
7. A drop in the ocean	2.50	0.888
8. To catch some rays	1.35	0.670
9. To reach for the stars	2.60	0.680
10. To raise the dust	1.35	0.587
11. To go round the houses	1.60	0.753
12. To be in the soup	1.85	0.933
13. To be the salt of the earth	1.35	0.587
14. To cost an arm and a leg	1.65	0.875
15. To pass with flying colors	1.15	0.366
16. To be a pain in the neck	2.00	0.973
17. To tighten his belt	2.30	0.864
18. To get cold feet	1.20	0.523
19. To rub salt into the wound	2.25	0.966
20. Off the top of your head	1.35	0.670
Means of item means	1.7	

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the idioms used based on the definitions given by subjects. The mean score of all idioms was 1.7. The average score ranged between 1.05 *To see eye to eye* to 2.60 *To reach for the stars*. The most difficult idioms for interpretation were *To see eye to eye*, *To pass with flying colors*, and *To get cold feet*. The average score on these idioms was 1.05, 1.15, and 1.20, respectively. The easiest ones to interpret were *To reach for the stars*, *A drop in the ocean*, and *To tighten his belt*. The average score on these idioms was 2.60, 2.50, and 2.30, respectively.

One idiom causing problems for participants was *To see eye to eye*. TA protocols revealed that participants translated the words into Arabic and tried to match them with any Arabic idiom or metaphor. They found it impossible to guess the correct interpretation because it does not have an Arabic equivalent. On the other hand, participants found *To Reach for the Stars* and *A Drop in the Ocean* the easiest, although they had never heard of them before. They indicated they knew them since there were very similar Arabic equivalents.

TABLE 3
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL IDIOMS BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL

Formal Idioms	M	SD	Informal Idioms	M	SD
To reach for the stars	2.60	0.680	To be a pain in the neck	2.00	0.973
A drop in the ocean	2.50	0.888	To be in the soup	1.85	0.933
To tighten his belt	2.30	0.864	To get into deep water	1.85	0.812
To rub salt into the wound	2.25	0.966	To cost an arm and a leg	1.65	0.875
To roll up one's sleeves	2.20	1.005	To let the cat out of the bag	1.55	0.825
To go round the houses	1.60	0.753	To have a green thumb	1.45	0.604
To burn the midnight oil	1.40	0.753	Off the top of your head	1.35	0.670
To be the salt of the earth	1.35	0.587	To raise the dust	1.35	0.587
To pass with flying colors	1.15	0.366	To catch some rays	1.35	0.670
To see eye to eye	1.05	0.223	To get cold feet	1.20	0.523
Mean of Formal means	1.84	0.708	Mean of Informal means	1.56	0.747

Table 3 illustrates that only 10% of the means for informal idioms scored as high as 2 (a partially correct answer), while 50% of the means for formal idioms gained 2, and some were close to 3 (for an entirely correct answer). These higher means of partially correct responses on the formal idioms could be related to the idiom being closer to an idiom in the L1.

Of the formal idioms that had a mean score of 2 and above, Table 3 also shows the three highest mean scoring definitions: *To reach for the stars* (2.60), *A drop in the ocean* (2.50), and *To tighten his belt* (2.30), had a most used strategy of referring to the L1 (refer to Table 4, Strategies leading to the correct answers). Whereas the lower two of the

formal idioms drew on the literal meaning: *To rub salt into the wound* (2.25) used both L1 and LM, while *To roll up one's sleeves* (2.20), and the informal idiom, *To be a pain in the neck* (2.0), drew primarily on the LM.

TABLE 4
FREQUENCY OF STRATEGIES EMPLOYED

Idiom	Strategy						
	Repeating or paraphrasing idiom	Discussing and analyzing idiom	Requesting information	Using literal meaning	Using background knowledge	Referring to L1 idioms	Total of strategies used for each idiom
1. To roll up one's sleeves	7	7	14 (30%)	12 (25%)	3	4	47
2. To get into deep water	5	12	0	25	7	0	49
3. To see eye to eye	12	20	0	12	3	2	49
4. To have a green thumb	12	12	12	8	5	0	49
5. To burn the midnight oil	17	12	5	12	0	2	48
6. To let the cat out of the bag	7	12	0	30 (61%)	0	0	49
7. A drop in the ocean	1	2	3	8	7 (10%)	46 (69%)	67
8. To catch some rays	12	12	17	8	0	0	49
9. To reach for the stars	1	2	0	7	15 (35%)	18 (42%)	43
10. To raise the dust	12	3	3	19	8	4	49
11. To go round the houses	5	12	0	21	5	6	49
12. To be in the soup	7	7	3	20	13	0	50
13. To be the salt of the earth	12	10	0	23	4	0	49
14. To cost an arm and a leg	20	5	7	18	0	0	50
15. To pass with flying colors	32 (67%)	7	0	9	0	0	48
<u>16. To be a pain in the neck</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>22 (48%)</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>46</u>
17. To tighten his belt	1	5	20	3	5	14	48
18. To get cold feet	17	15	0	10	2	3	47
19. To rub salt into the wound	10	3	14	4	5	10	46
20. Off the top of your head	12	15	0	16	5	0	48
Total	204	180	105	287	91	113	980
% of all uses	20.8	18.4	10.7	29.3	9.3	11.5	

- Total strategy uses on all items = 980
- Formal idioms with a result 2 or higher on the IRT (bold)
- Informal idioms with a result of 2 or higher on the IRT (underlined)

TABLE 5
STRATEGIES BY FREQUENCY OF USE

Strategies	N	Total	Mean	Std. Deviation	% of all uses
1 Using literal meaning	20	287	14.35	7.541	29.3
2 Repeating or paraphrasing idiom	20	204	10.20	7.571	20.8
3 Discussing and analyzing idiom	20	180	9	4.952	18.4
4 Referring to L1 idioms	20	113	5.65	10.757	11.5
5 Requesting information	20	105	5.25	6.584	10.7
6 Using background knowledge	20	91	4.55	4.110	9.3

Tables 4 and Table 5 show a rank ordering of strategies employed by participants in descending order. They illustrate that the most frequently employed and predominant strategy was (using the literal meaning). It has been used 287 times with a mean of (14.35) and a percentage of (29.3%). It was followed by (repeating or paraphrasing the idiom) which was used 204 times with a mean of (10.20) and a percentage of (20.8 %). Discussing and analyzing the idiom was used 180 times with a mean of (9) and a percentage of (18.4 %). They were followed by referring to an L1 idiom (11.5 %), requesting information (10.7 %), and using background knowledge (9.3 %). Literary meanings and repeating or paraphrasing idioms were employed more frequently than others. They represent about 50% of the strategies employed by learners

TABLE 6
STRATEGIES LEADING TO THE CORRECT ANSWERS

Idiom	Participant																			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1. To roll up one's sleeve	LM	LM		LM	LM	L1	LM	LM		LM	BK		LM	LM						L1
2. To get into deep water		LM			LM					LM	LM									BK
3. To see eye to eye																				
4. To have a green thumb	BK																			
5. To burn the midnight oil	L1					LM									LM					
6. To let the cat out of the bag					LM				LM	LM			LM							
7. A drop in the ocean	L1	L1	L1	BK	L1	L1			L1	L1	BK	L1		L1	BK			L1		L1
8. To catch some rays					LM			LM												LM
9. To reach for the stars	L1	L1		L1	LM	L1	L1	L1	L1	BK		BK		BK	L1	BK	L1			LM
10. To raise the dust										L1										
11. To go round the houses							BK						LM					L1		
12. To be in the soup		LM							BK		LM		LM				BK		LM	BK
13. To be the salt of the earth																	BK			
14. To cost an arm and a leg				LM							LM			LM						LM
15. To pass with flying colors																				
16. To be a pain in the neck		LM			L1	LM		LM	LM		BK	LM	BK							LM
17. To tighten his belt	L1	L1	L1		BK		L1	LM		L1		L1		LM	LM					BK
18. To get cold feet	BK																			
19. To rub salt into the wound	LM	L1		L1	L1	LM		BK				LM	L1	LM	BK	LM		L1		
20. Off the top of your head														LM	LM					

TABLE 7
FREQUENCY OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Strategies	Total	% of all uses
1 Using literal meaning	52	46.5%
2 Referring to an L1 idiom	38	33.9%
3 Using background knowledge	22	19.6%
Total	112	100%

Table 6 and Table 7 show participants' strategies to interpret the idioms successfully and the frequency of effective strategies, respectively. Of the 400 items (20 idioms x 20 participants), 112 (representing 28%) were interpreted and comprehended correctly. This low number indicates the difficulty participants had in processing English idioms. The strategies that led to correct interpretations were: using the literal meaning (52 answers, 46.5%), referring to an L1 idiom (38 answers, 33.9%), and using background knowledge (22 answers, 19.6%). The following table shows whether the differences between the strategies used by subjects are statistically significant.

TABLE 8
LSD MULTIPLE COMPARISONS MATRIX

		Using literal meaning	Repeating or paraphrasing idiom	Discussing and analyzing idiom	Referring to L1 idioms	Requesting information	Using background knowledge
Using literal meaning	Mean Difference (I-J)	0	4.15	5.35 [*]	8.70 [*]	9.10 [*]	9.80 [*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.073	.021	.000	.000	.000
Repeating or paraphrasing idiom	Mean Difference (I-J)		0	1.20	4.55 [*]	4.95 [*]	5.65 [*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.601	.049	.033	.015
Discussing and analyzing idiom	Mean Difference (I-J)			0	3.35	3.75	4.45
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.146	.104	.054
Referring to L1 idioms	Mean Difference (I-J)				0	.40	1.10
	Sig. (2-tailed)					.862	.632
Requesting information	Mean Difference (I-J)					0	.70
	Sig. (2-tailed)						.760
Using background knowledge	Mean Difference (I-J)						0

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level. ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), N=20

Table 8 shows that the difference between the two most frequently employed strategies (using literal meaning and repeating or paraphrasing the idiom) is not statistically significant. This is due to the slight difference between their means (14.35 vs. 10.2). There are statistically significant differences between using literal meaning and discussing and analyzing idioms, referring to L1 idioms, requesting information, and using background knowledge.

The difference between repeating or paraphrasing idioms and discussing and analyzing idioms is not statistically significant ($p = 0.60$), but the differences between repeating or paraphrasing idioms and referring to L1 idioms, requesting information, and using background knowledge are statistically significant ($p=0.049$, $p=0.033$, $p = 0.015$, respectively). Here are no significant differences between the least frequently employed strategies.

VII. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the online idiom comprehension processes employed by Saudi EFL learners. The first research question examined to what extent idioms varied in difficulty as they were measured by (IRT). The means from

the list of formal idioms suggest they were produced with greater accuracy, but there is a slight variance between the overall formal and informal mean.

The mean of the formal and informal idioms (1.7) indicates that learners' interpretations were not even partially correct. These low results revealed that most participants had difficulty interpreting the English idioms. Apart from a few, most English idioms caused problems for Saudi EFL learners. This result is consistent with (Cieślicka, 2006; Wu, 2003). This is because English idioms are not presented early on to EFL learners. Hence, the literal meanings of an idiom's constituents are more salient when compared to the figurative meanings. Furthermore, a lack of context prevented them from using a heuristic approach (Cieślicka, 2006). The strategies of using literal meanings and referring to similar L1 idioms may have also resulted in negative transfer (Iroju, 1986) and context guessing (Arnaud & Sauvignon, 1997).

The second research question examined other strategies Saudi students employ to comprehend English idioms. The results showed they most often drew on the literal meaning, thus using the compositional parts of the idiom. However, using the literal meaning only sometimes offered success in comprehending the idiom. This could reflect context guessing and, or negative transfer. Referring to an L1 idiom was the second most successful strategy but the fourth most often employed out of the six strategies. This strategy was also the most used accurate strategy in correlation to the highest mean scores. The third most effective strategy was background knowledge, yet it was the least used overall. These strategies were more frequently used in similar studies, such as those of Al-Kawaldeh et al. (2016) and Alhaysoni (2017).

The present study confirms that Saudi EFL learners quickly comprehended and interpreted English idioms with similar Arabic equivalents. English idioms without Arabic equivalents were the most difficult. This result was expected and confirms earlier studies that examined idiom similarity in L1 and L2, such as Iroju (1986), Liontas (2001), and Honshan (2008). Saudi EFL learners relied on their L1 to interpret the L2 idiom. Without the supporting context of a similar idiom between L1 and L2, the accuracy of literal interpretations was less successful.

This study's absence of an intended supportive context helped provide crucial information on other online processing strategies Saudi EFL learners employ when comprehending and interpreting English idioms. This study shows how learners relied on the literal meanings of the idiom's constituents. Those meanings have a high priming effect caused by the absence of the context. The figurative meaning, on the other hand, requires the presence of the context to be activated. This observation is in line with the findings of Colombo (1993), Cooper (1999), and Wu (2003), Bulut and Yazici (2004). It also shows that relying on L1 is the least used strategy according to Cooper (1999) and Bulut and Yazici (2004) studies.

The results of this study should be interpreted with or against models of idiom comprehension. It is very clear that the results showed a variety of strategies employed by the participants. The three non-compositional models are too limited to account for these strategies since the idiom-list and the lexical representation hypotheses' ideas reflect the strategy of using background knowledge (Cooper, 1999). The third model, the direct access model, downgrades the literal meanings. Thus, the L1 models of idiom comprehension are incapable of accounting for all the strategies employed by the learners. The results are compatible with some of the compositional models. The results support all the models that emphasize the literal meaning over the figurative one. EFL learners, including this study's subjects, lack metaphorical competence in L2 and, therefore, rely on the literal meaning and their L1 conceptual system (Kecskés, 2000). While the Phrase-Induced Polysemy Model (Glucksberg, 1993) extends beyond the idiom's constituents from either literal or figurative to polysemous, the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 2002) draws on direct access to the salient meaning, outside figurative or literal constituents, doing so through familiarity and frequency. The relevance of either of these positions accounts only for the L1. The L2 learner, with less exposure to the L2 language, is less able to assign a polysemous extension to an idiom's constituents. Likewise, their exposure to an L2 idiom is less frequent and, therefore, unfamiliar. This purports to be why the Saudi students in this study may have assigned literal meanings to the individual constituents of the idiom.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Idioms are an essential part of language. Therefore, comprehending and using them is crucial for foreign language learners. The present study sheds light on idiom processing by EFL students in the absence of supported context, an issue that has yet to receive much attention. The present study aimed to investigate how idioms' difficulty levels varied as they were measured by the Idiom Recognition Test (IRT). The intention was to also examine what strategies Saudi students employed to comprehend English idioms. The present study partially attempted to replicate Cooper's (1999) research.

The findings revealed that most of the participants had difficulty interpreting English idioms. They showed that participants drew on the literal meaning most often, which only sometimes leads to success in comprehending the idiom. The second most used successful strategy was referring to an L1 idiom. The third most effective strategy was background knowledge, yet it was the least used overall.

The results also showed that English idioms without Arabic equivalents were the most difficult. Saudi EFL learners appeared to rely on their L1 to interpret the English idioms. Consequently, the results supported all the idiom processing

models that emphasize the literal meaning over the figurative one. EFL learners, including the subjects of this study, rely on the literal meaning and their L1 conceptual system because they need metaphorical competence in L2.

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