Patterns of Persian EFL Learners' Comprehension of Idiomatic Expressions: Reading Strategies and Cross-cultural Mappings in Focus

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Abstract

This paper primarily focused on the description of the results of a study conducted with sixty Iranian adult EFL learners to investigate how the reading strategies and pragmatic elements are likely to govern and characterize the comprehension and interpretation process of English idioms with and without contextualized reading. It also intended to determine the role of cultural mappings and the extent to which Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of cultural idioms is affected by their L1 when they try to construct their own meanings. The researchers came up with some interesting inferences about such theme-based patterns of idiomatic expressions through descriptive statistics and analysis of the participants' metacognitive comments in four phases of the study.

Keywords: Idiom, Comprehension, Reading strategies, Context, Culture mapping

1. Introduction

Every language has phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally, most of which have historical, philosophical, sociocultural, or even political origins. Even if we know the meanings of all words in a phrase and understand the grammar completely, the meaning of the phrase may still be confusing. As an important part of the language and culture, idioms reflect the transformation in conceptualization of the universe and the relationship between human beings and the universe. This colorful aspect of languages is used to communicate our thoughts and feelings, to give life and richness to the language by taking the existing words, combining them in a new sense, and creating new meanings, just like a work of art (Lennon, 1998).

There are many factors involved in translating or reproducing an idiom or a fixed expression into another language such as the availability of a similar meaning available in the target language, significance of the specific lexical items constituting the idiom, appropriateness of using the idiomatic language in a given register, etc. The bigger the gap between L1 and L2, the more difficult the transfer of meaning will be. That is why L2 learners often render a metaphorical expression in the L2 by using an analogous counterpart of their L1 due to their lack of awareness of metaphorical concepts and lexical strategies.

When it comes to differences between the language and culture of native speakers of Persian and those of English speakers, there are certain attitudes, ideas, culturally prescribed rules of behavior and certain ways of social interaction that seem to be accepted by most English speakers that are generally observed differently by Persian speakers. Even if those students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) might show a high degree of verbal fluency in their discourse, they invariably seem to lack the conceptual appropriateness that typifies that of natives. They tend to speak or write with the formal structures of English but think in terms of their Persian conceptual

system. In fact, perceiving and producing English idioms are among the most difficult areas for Iranian English learners and those learners/translators resort to different strategies to bridge up the gap.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Having taught translation subjects, specifically the course, "The Application of Idioms and Metaphorical Expressions in Translation", for several years now, the researchers of the present study have experienced considerable difficulties in conveying figurative and cultural language concepts, especially the idiomatic expressions, to EFL learners. In the meantime, most reference materials on English idioms seem to be primarily intuition based, teacher-made and randomly selected. That is why they often include seldom-used idioms and incorrect descriptions of the meaning and use of some idioms, hence limiting their usefulness to non-native students. Also, despite the huge number of studies in different aspects of idioms, there have been a few studies of how cultural elements in idioms are dealt with. This area seems to have been the most neglected and underexplored aspect of EFL teaching particularly at Iranian language centers and universities.

This research, therefore, addressed this gap and employed a hybrid experimental research design (reading strategies plus introspections and retrospections questions) in an effort to understand more fully the psychological plausibility of the participants' reading behavior; that is, the nature of the mental processing involved in the comprehension and interpretation of texts containing idioms. The study specifically investigated the processing of different types of idioms as matching idioms (Lexical-Level or LL Idioms) between L1 and L2 (idioms with complete overlap, i.e. the same metaphorical mapping as in English and/or Persian is present and the same or at least similar lexical items are used); partially-matching idioms (Semi-lexical Level or SLL Idioms) between L1 and L2 (idioms with partial overlap, i.e. the same mapping occurs but this is expressed using different lexical items) and non-matching idioms (Post-lexical Level or PLL Idioms) between L1 and L2 (idioms which show a different domain mapping altogether), under two broad categories of general and American vs. British culture-bound idioms. Therefore, four research questions were proposed as follows:

Q1•Would context (or lack thereof) play any significant role in Iranian EFL learners' comprehension and interpretation of idioms?

Q2•What kind of reading strategies do they employ in searching for an idiomatic phrase?

Q3•What are some cultural or meaning constraints, if any at all, surrounding their comprehension and interpretation of English phrasal idioms when such idioms are contextualized?

Q4•What is the role of transfer (either positive or negative) in perceiving or producing those idioms and which idiom subtypes are faster and easier to understand?

1.2 Background of the Study

Idioms make up a large proportion of any discourse, and the comprehension and production of them are the main parts of the studies of idiomaticity in both first and the second language literature. A number of studies conducted in the 1990s (e.g.,Cronk and Schweigert 1992; Colombo 1993; Botelho da Silva and Cutler 1993; McGlone, Glucksberg, and Cacciari 1994) focused on idiom comprehension. Some scholars such as Cronk and Schweigert identified familiarity and literalness as measurable indications for the computation and representation of idiomatic meaning in the mental lexicon; others such as Botelho da Silva and Cutler studied the role of ill-formedness in idiom processing while the case of ambiguity and the relationship between context and different types of idioms was the main interest of others. (McGlone et al. 1994)

According to Cooper (1999) four theories try to explain how native English speakers comprehend idioms: the first called Idiom-list hypothesis (Bobrow & Bell, 1973) which states a native speaker who encounters an idiom first interprets it literally. If a literal meaning doesn't fit the context in which the expression is situated, then he searches for the idiom in question in a special mental idiom lexicon and then chooses the figurative meaning. In the second model called lexical representation hypothesis (Swinney & Cutler,1979), idioms are considered to be long words that are stored in the mental lexicon along with all other words and both the literal and the figurative meanings of the expressions are processed simultaneously, which results in a "horse race" in which the context determines the more fitting interpretation. Third model, the direct access hypothesis (Gibbs, 1980, 1984; Schweigert, 1986), is an extension of the lexical representation hypothesis, for it posits that a native speaker rarely considers the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression but instead retrieves the figurative meaning directly from the mental lexicon. The fourth idiom-processing model, composition model (Gibbs, 1994; Tabossi & Zardon,1995), supersedes the three models described above.

Giora's (1997) graded salience hypothesis is another hypothesis which came out of the discussion on idiom representation, processing, and comprehension, according to which, salient meanings of words or expressions are

processed initially (if their lexicalized meaning can be retrieved directly from the mental lexicon rather than from the context) before less salient meanings are activated. Giora believed that metaphor and literal interpretations do not involve equivalent processes. The salient meanings of familiar and novel instances of metaphors, idioms, and irony are always accessed, and always initially, regardless of context, even rich and supportive contexts; that is, metaphor, idiom, and irony interpretation involves processing the literal meaning (see also Giora, 1999; Giora & Fein, 1999). In the meantime, other studies (e.g., Arnold and Hornett 1990; Levorato and Cacciari 1992, 1995; Nippold and Rudzinski 1993; Titone 1994) have looked for relationships between idioms and amount of exposure and use, cognitive strategies and idiom comprehension/production, and age and awareness of semantic links and cognitive abilities. For instance, Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) like Arnold and Hornett (1990) and Levorato and Cacciari (1992, 1995), found that familiarity, idiom transparency, and idiom performance gradually improved as subjects' age increased. Similarly, Titone (1994), found familiarity, compositionality, predictability, and literality to be important dimensions in the processing of L1 idioms. It is unfortunate that this intensity of research into L1 idiom processing and comprehension has not been matched by an equal level of interest among SLA researchers. However, Irujo (1986) utilized recognition and production tests to demonstrate that advanced students of English rely on knowledge of their native Spanish in order to comprehend and produce L2 idioms. She further observed that learners find those idioms which are identical in both L1 and L2 the easiest to comprehend and produce. Idioms which are similar in L1 and L2 present learners with only somewhat more difficulty, although production tests reveal interference from Spanish. Those idioms which are completely different in L1 and L2, however, prove the most difficult for learners to comprehend and produce, with almost no positive or negative transfer between the two languages. Liontas (2001), attempting to obtain information about the ways in which L2 learners process, comprehend, and interpret idiomatic expressions both in and out of context, found that idiom comprehension performance in Modern Greek significantly improves if contextual information is present. One key finding that emerged from the Liontas (1997, 2001) studies is that knowledge and understanding of vocabulary is directly linked to idiom performance regardless of whether contextual support is provided to learners. Boers and Demecheleer (2001) also draws attention to the cultural aspects of teaching idioms. They claim that the possible impact of cross-cultural variation on learners' interpreting idioms invites language teachers to give extra attention to figurative expression in the target language that relate to metaphoric themes that are less salient in the native language. Furthermore, they believe that an approach to teaching idioms will benefit from a teacher's awareness of cross-cultural as well as cross-linguistics differences.

In fact, several researchers have suggested that L2 learners, unlike L1 learners, appear to have considerable difficulties comprehending and producing idioms accurately (Cooper, 1998; Irujo, 1986, 1993). Sadeghilar (1993) focused on the application of translation in the process of learning idioms and found that identical idioms in both English and Persian would show positive transfer since they are the easiest to be comprehended and produced correctly. Similar idioms would show negative transfer and their comprehension is as high as identical idioms, but their productions reflect interference from Persian. Different idioms would show neither positive transfer nor negative one. Their comprehension and production are lower than those of other two types. Sadeghi (1995) also suggested that lexico-semantic based approach in teaching English idioms would lead to much better performance and comprehension for the Iranian EFL learners.

Equally important to note here is that no empirical study to date has investigated per se the reading behavior of Persian L2 learners- a common practice in many L1 psycholinguistic studies on idiomaticity, detecting and understanding idioms embedded in natural texts.

Based on the findings of the above-mentioned studies and with regard to the research questions of the present study stated above, the following null-hypotheses were formulated to be tested in this research:

Ho1. Context doesn't play any significant role in Iranian EFL learners' comprehension and interpretation of idioms.

Ho2. Iranian EFL learners don't employ any specific reading strategies in searching for an idiomatic phrase.

Ho3. There are no cultural or meaning constraints surrounding learners' comprehension and interpretation of English idioms.

Ho4. Transfer (either positive or negative) doesn't have any role in perceiving or producing the idioms.

2. Methodology

In order to trace students' meaning-assigning processes within the framework of cognitive linguistics which suggests that language units reveal how the mind works, participants were asked to engage in some reading tasks ranging from detecting idiom to full-context interpretation (phases 2, 3, and 4). [Insert Table 1 here]

The participants were also asked to describe as thoughtfully as possible their affective state during task performance. Prior to conducting these experiments, native speakers of English were asked to rate frequently used phrasal idioms. In this study, the term "concept" was used as a mental structure representing the knowledge about the particular traits of reality gained as a result of the process of cognition to describe the pragmatic or semantic structure of idioms. Also for the purposes of this study, the term "context" was defined as a paragraph-length narrative text (five to ten sentences long) or a two-person dialogue (two to seven interactional exchanges) written with the natural tone of the target language in mind; idioms were therefore presented in contexts that clarify their actual meanings and uses in everyday speech.

2.1 Participants

The subjects of this study consisted of 60 Iranian EFL learners studying English at the Islamic Azad University, Takestan Branch, during summer 2009. They were selected from among 135 participants. The entire class ranged between 20 and 23 years of age.

2.2 Instruments and Materials

Two testing instruments were first developed and used by the researchers in this study. At first, the Michigan Test of English Language proficiency (MTELP) was administered to determine students' level of proficiency. Then a standardized test (including 60 multiple-choice items and a translation task) on idioms as the pre-test to determine the idiomatic knowledge of the participants was given to the participants who had been selected. Some Iranian students' common translation/interference problems with English idioms and their equivalents were deliberately included in the test to determine the possible effects that students' first language might create in their development of idiomatic knowledge or competence. Two experts in TEFL (Ph.D. colleagues) were also consulted for the accuracy and appropriateness of the translated texts.

Then according to the mean performance and the standard deviation of the tests, subjects were assigned into high, mid and low groups. The students were homogeneously sorted so that the initial study groups represented three groups of 20s in three levels. Those students whose scores fell one standard deviation below and above the mean were assigned as the mid group. Those subjects whose scores were two standard deviations below and above the mean were classified as the low and high groups respectively. To protect all students' anonymity throughout the study, researchers applied S initial (which stands for every Student) and a number given to every participant indicating his/her order in each group as Low: S1-S20, Mid: S21-S40, High: S41-60. Some pre-selected works of contemporary English literature and texts of daily conversations were chosen as the base material for this experiment.

2.3 Procedures

The researchers went through four phases to conduct the present study.

2.3.1 Phase 1

Phase1 included a selection of a wide corpus of English idiomatic expressions by the native speakers of Modern English which is believed to be frequently used in everyday communication. One thousand and one hundred English idiomatic phrases were taken from authentic texts and materials. Three hundred items of the total idioms were focused just on the recognition and frequency rate of American and British Culture-Bound idioms (150 items for each). In fact, the meaning which lies behind this kind of expressions is always strongly linked to the specific cultural context where the text originates or with the cultural context it aims to re-create.

Those idioms were submitted during two online sessions to 20 English native speakers (10 American and 10 British -five males and five females in each) who live and study in Washington and London respectively, with the request to perform a Familiarity and Frequency Rating. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 35 years, with 15 (75%) between the ages of 18 and 24 years. The average age for the entire language sample was 23.25 years. The majority of the participants (65%) classified the family in which they grew up as middle class. 25% of participants came from lower middle class families, and 10% from upper middle class families. 35% of the sample held sophomore standing at the university, with the remaining participants divided into 20% seniors and 10% juniors. Only 15% of participants held freshman standing and the remaining 20% held graduate standing.

They rated their familiarity with the idioms using a scale that ranged from 5 ("very frequently used") to 1 ("don't know the idiom") as follows:

5) I have heard this expression, and I know what it means.

4) I have heard this expression, and I have an idea of what it means.

3) I may have heard this expression, but I don't really know what it means.

2) I may have heard this expression, but I do not know what it means.

1) I have never heard this expression before.

The respondents were asked then to estimate the frequency use/rate of a given idiom in English language and culture by responding to the following statement:

I use this expression very often (5), often (4), sometimes (3), rarely (2), and never (1).

This rank-ordered procedure yielded for each idiom an average "subjective frequency" or "familiarity" rating obtained from all participants. The ratings provided a number of details about the frequency of an idiom in the English language and culture, which were then used as the basis for the following three experiments. Only those 48 idioms (i.e., sixteen percent of 300 culture-bound idioms and almost 4.36 % of the total base material) and 85 idioms (i.e., almost eleven percent of 800 idioms and about 7.73% of the total base material) that obtained a "very frequently used" rating of 5 were included for use in the subsequent analysis. To make the job easier, the former was called "cultural idioms" and the latter as "general idioms" respectively. [Insert Tables 2& 3here]

Although the remaining eight hundred items had also some cultural elements, there was no significant difference of American or British English intended therein and the philosophy behind those questions was simply to rate the (non culture-bound) idioms used by all native speakers. That is because some idioms can be understood without the common cultural background, experience, reference or specific knowledge. Those idioms are widespread in other English varieties and even other languages and thus can be interpreted and understood more easily with the process of translation.

2.3.2 Phase 2

Phase2 called Idiom Detection Task or IDT, investigated how L2 learners identify and understand idioms in authentic texts of literature and what contextual reading cues and communication principles they used in searching for an idiomatic phrase.

Six paragraphs and two dialogs plus twenty multiple choice questions containing 45 idiomatic expressions and 20 culture-bound (10 American and 10 British) idioms, chosen at random from the list of 85 idioms and 48 culture-bound idioms rated '5' would constitute the material of this experiment and were printed on a 6-page booklet with appropriate space for participants to provide an answer. The length of the materials varied from five to eight sentences in length and from two to three interactional/dialog exchanges to ensure randomization of the material tested in a 70-minute session. Each participant was presented with a practice trial containing 5 items not used in the actual experiment, followed by the experimental items. Participants reported feeling comfortable with the identification procedure after this much practice. Following the practice session, each participant was instructed to answer the questions and underline within the body of the text the words or entire sentence that constituted the idiomatic expression in each text. Once the participants reached a decision, they were requested to explain why they thought the underlined words were an idiomatic phrase. [Insert Table 4 here]

2.3.3 Phase 3

Phase3 tested the assumption that for second language learners' analysis of an idiomatic expression, when presented without a supporting context, is an obligatory, automatic process. If an idiomatic expression is recognized at an early point because of the one-to-one translation match of single lexemes between the Persian and English idiom, as the proposed Idiom-matching Hypothesis predicts, further analysis of the L2 idiomatic phrase would be, in Idiom-matching Hypothesis principle, no longer necessary in order to understand the metaphoric meaning of the phrase. Conversely, a non-matching phrasal idiom could be understood, if at all, only after a full linguistic analysis, i.e., a combined phonological, syntactic, and semantic analysis. If L1 idiomatic phrases were stored in memory as multiword lexical units, then the analysis of the phrasal idioms should not be necessary for comprehending the idiom.

Forty entries of general idioms plus ten culture-bound idiomatic expressions (5 American and 5 British in each) constituted the 50 phrasal idioms as the material of the present Zero Context Task (ZCT) phase. The researchers randomly selected ten phrasal idioms with their word-for-word counterparts in Persian and forty non-matching phrasal idioms from the remaining idioms rated '5' for this phase. The same original group of sixty students at the same university took part in this phase. All phrasal idioms were presented in their zero context (i.e., without supporting context) followed by three lines in which participants were asked to first define the meaning of each idioms before providing their equivalent Persian idioms. The 2-point scale as (1) correctly defined and (2) incorrectly defined were used for the evaluation of the idiomatic definitions given. [Insert Table 5 here]

2.3.4 Phase 4

Phase4, also called FCT dealing with understanding general and cultural idioms in full context, was focused on whether context would affect positively the way learners of English understand idiomatic expression when such idioms were presented with the context that supports their interpretation. It is hypothesized that when the context constrains the idiomatic meaning, a non-matching idiomatic expression is understood considerably better than when it is isolated from its surrounding context, but is still more difficult to interpret than a matching expression even in the presence of context with text cues supporting the idiomatic meaning.

Fifty phrasal idioms including 40 general idioms (10 matching, 30 non-matching phrasal idioms as indexed by the results of Phase 3 above) and 10 culture-bound idioms would constitute the material of the (FCT) phase. Each item containing the idiomatic expression was made up of either short paragraphs three to six sentences in length or short dialogs consisting of one to three interactional exchanges. Seven paragraphs and three dialogs containing the idioms reported in Phase3 were then randomly selected. The order of presentation of the experimental items was again varied to ensure randomization of material. Phase 4 used the same participants and phrasal idioms as in Phase 3 and was conducted immediately following the conclusion of Phase3. However, whereas in Phase 3 phrasal idioms were presented without supporting context, in Phase 4 all phrasal idioms were given in their full context, followed by three lines in which participants were asked to define a new meaning of each of the 40 phrasal idioms. Again, the new definitions offered were evaluated on a 2-point scale as (1) correctly defined or (2) incorrectly defined. The data was summarized in related tables and graphically in Figures. [Insert Table 6 here]

3. Results

3.1 Phase1

The participants' selections were evaluated first on the basis of their correctness, which reached the total average of fifty four percent for general idioms (Low: 46.66, Mid: 55.55, High: 60) and about eight percent for the culture-bound idioms (Low: 4.25, Mid: 8.5, High: 10). The retrospective protocols were then classified on the basis of the recurring thematic units present in the responses of the participants, resulting in a number of conceptual categories created and then re-translated into English by the researchers (and tested for reliability and validity considerations by another native-speaker rater) while sorting the responses into units of information. Once their retrospective protocols were operationally defined, these units were analyzed, pooled, classified into general categories and given one single representative label and quantified in percentage terms of each category against all responses in a descending order. [Insert Table 7 here]

3.2 Phase 2

The number of idioms detected correctly ranged from a low of 13 to a high of 40 in general idioms and 1 and 7 for the cultural idioms respectively. The group average of all idioms detected was 24 out of 45 idioms (Low: 21, Mid: 25, High: 27) or about fifty three percent of all idiomatic items. Individually their performance ranged from a low of 29 percent to a high of 89 percent for the general and 5 to 35 for the cultural idioms. The second point worth noting based on the data is that while there is variability among learners of English in detecting idioms in authentic texts of English literature, the majority of them employed predominately the literal meaning of the idiom (19.1, 21.5 & 22 percent), their translation skills from L2 to L1 and vice versa (17.20, 16 & 17 percent), the syntactic and semantic arrangement of the lexical unit (14.5, 14 & 9 percent), their prior knowledge of the functions of idioms in context (11.15, 11 & 8 percent), and, finally, the context surrounding the phrasal idiom (4,7 & 7 percent) as their main guide in reaching a decision. Of greatest interest in the present context is the observation that these five reading strategies alone account for 66 percent of all reader activity (Low: 65.95, Mid: 69.5 & High: 63) than all other remaining strategies listed. Also, lack of a familiarity with vocabulary was a major obstacle in the accomplishment of the IDT. The fact that almost half of phrasal idioms were identified successfully (24 out of 45) suggests that learners of English are capable of using many kinds of reading strategies: forward inferencing; schema accommodation, assimilation, and adaptation; process of elimination; and contextual lexical, grammatical, and syntactic cues to name but the most important ones, in order to describe strategies such as improbability, literal translation, word arrangement and placement in text, context, and fantastic/metaphorical images. [Insert Figure1 here]

3.3 Phase 3

Of the 40 general idioms here examined, 25 idioms (62.5 percent) on average (Low: 29, Mid: 24 & High: 22) were incorrectly defined. The number of phrasal idioms incorrectly defined ranged from a low of 17(42.5 percent) to a high of 35 (87.5 percent), whereas those that were correctly defined ranged from a low of 5 (12.5 percent) to a high of 25 (62.5 percent), resulting in an overall success rate of 37 percent (Low: 27, Mid: 40 & High: 45). The ZCT

data therefore clearly suggest that idiom performance may be dependent on idiom subtype; that is, on the conceptual-semantic image distance (i.e., the degree of opacity) between Persian and English idioms. In addition, it further underscores the claim that idiom type affects the speed and ease of idiom comprehension and interpretation. But what these results most strongly indicate, however, is that the understanding of all idiom types, particularly PLL idioms, is significantly hampered by lack of context. One can realize at first look that the learner variability and the difference of correct definitions versus incorrect definitions is a negative one (Low:-46, Mid:-20& High:-10). However, upon closer scrutiny within the two idiom phrasal types—matching idioms and non-matching idioms—it emerges that matching idioms were correctly defined more than four times as often for Low, about three times for Mid, and about four times for High; while nearly all of the matching idioms were correctly defined (74.16 percent), out of the 10 non- matching idioms only 21.66 percent were found to be correct. Also, the number of phrasal idioms correctly defined in each idiom type ranged from a low of 3 to a high of 10 and 1 and 15 respectively. These findings suggest that non-matching phrasal idioms are processed much difficult than matching phrasal idioms.

3.4 Phase 4

Of the 40 phrasal idioms examined in context, only 18 idioms or 46 percent on average (Low:57.5, Mid: 42.5, High:38) were incorrectly defined or 21 percent difference in decrease of error interpretation from the previous ZCT. The number of phrasal idioms incorrectly defined ranged from a low of 9 (22.5 percent) to a high of 32 (80 percent), whereas those that were correctly defined ranged from a low of 8 (20 percent) to a high of 31 (77.5 percent), resulting in an overall success rate of 54 percent or 22 out of 40 phrasal idioms (Low: 42.5, Mid: 57.5, High: 62). Individually, participants' performance ranged from a low of 20 percent to a high of 77.5 percent. Upon closer inspection of the FCT idiom type, it emerges again that the participants correctly defined more matching idioms (90 percent or 9 out of 10 idioms-Low: 83.5, Mid: 91.5, High: 95.5) than non-matching idioms (42 percent or 13 out of 30 idioms- Low: 29, Mid: 45, High: 51), a result which is consistent with the *Idiom-matching Hypothesis* posited at the outset of this study. Without exception, all participants showed considerable progress from the previous ZCT experiment in the comprehension and interpretation of English phrasal idioms. The increase in idiom performance (i.e., comprehension gain), when compared to the gain achieved in the ZCT, led to an overall increase in group performance of 17 percent for the general idioms 29 percent for culture-bound idioms. This increase was more pronounced with the non-matching idioms (20 percent) than with the matching idioms (16 percent) given the fact that the participants had already achieved a high level of success with such idioms in the ZCT. Regarding the success rate of those correctly defined cultural idioms in phase 4, it was also observed that there was 29 percent increase than phase 3. [Insert Table 8 here]

4. Discussion

Based on the results of the study mentioned above, the data provided convincing evidence that lack of context exerts a strong negative effect upon the accuracy of idiom interpretation by L2 learners. SLL and PLL idioms do have stronger impact than LL idioms. Indeed, performance increased by 17 and 29 percent in the context condition for the general idioms and the culture-bound idioms respectively (i.e., from 37 in phase 3 to 54 percent in phase 4 for the general idioms and from 12 in phase 3 to 41 percent in phase 4 for the culture-bound idioms). Moreover, it was shown that idiom interpretation is seriously distorted if there is a lack of context for both matching and non-matching idioms. While idiom interpretation was considerably higher for highly matching idioms (i.e., identical idioms in L1 and L2), 90.16 percent, non-matching idioms (i.e., completely different idioms in L1 and L2) caused learners considerable difficulty. Performance in these idioms only reached 41.66 percent, clearly suggesting that lack of context impacts idiom understanding. However, with the introduction of context, even the non-matching idioms saw an increase of 20 percent in performance accuracy. [Insert Figure 2 here]

The results of phase 2, coupled with the many valuable insights gained from the participants' retrospective accounts and post-task evaluations, provided ample evidence that L2 learners do compute literal and idiomatic meanings separately, yielding two alternative interpretations. Only after the literal interpretation has been considered and rejected, the "idiomatic" sense becomes available. Beyond that, the insightful answers participants offered in this experiment show the many challenges learners of English encounter when attempting to capture the meaning of a phrasal idiom as well as their affective state of learning during the process of idiom identification and understanding. Also, their retrospective protocols revealed that, in fact, they are much more sophisticated linguistically and strategically than surmised by the instructors.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicate that context plays an important role in the construction of idiomatic meaning and Identical and Different idioms in both context and non-context treatments, compared with those of similar idioms, enjoy the

main effects in this regard. Also, different strategies are employed by language learners; while lack of tacit knowledge of idioms is a major cause for their failure in comprehending the idiomatic meanings. At the same time, the degree of opacity between target and domain idioms influences the speed and ease of idiom understanding and treating idiomatic expressions just as sets of separate haphazard lexical items, independent of human conceptual and cultural system would lead to negative transfer. In fact, all statistical evidence nullifies our Null Hypotheses for alternative hypotheses; therefore, the researchers can safely conclude that the null hypotheses are false.

In light of the findings of phase 2, one final general question of interest concerns whether the same pattern of idiom strategizing is also observed in participants from a variety of second languages before it can be concluded definitively that there is a universal modus operandi in identifying and understanding phrasal idioms.

Furthermore, since culture-bound expressions are unique to any language, they require an adequate cultural awareness of both source and target languages (e.g. American/British English and Persian in our study), and they cannot be understood just from the meaning of their individual words. At the same time, in most cases, High level participants performed proportionally better than Mid and Low levels and they all showed better results with American (than British) culture-bound idioms.

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Table 1. Sample Exercises of Some English Idioms

Choose the best definitions for the underlined expressions:		

Choose the best definitions for the underlined expressions:
1- The one you bought from the man you called <u>the big cheese</u>?
a) the man with big ears   b) the man with the important job
c) the man with the yellow teeth   d) the man with the big smile
2- The car is rubbish and I went round to his garage <u>like a bull in a china shop</u> in the show room.
a) shouting at him   b) knocking everything over   c) running up to him   d) hitting everybody

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate idioms:
3-Ah, here you are! ....! I have been waiting an hour.
a) Time after time   b) about time too   c) all in good time   d) in the nick of time

4-She was very affected in her accent and manner. Most people thought she was very ....
a) Wine and dine   b) moan and groan   c) la-di-da   d) meals-on-wheels

Match each idiom on the left with its definition on the right:

1-	Tie up loose ends	understand and deal with something
2-	Give something a shot	try something
3-	Get to grips with something	just in case
4-	Make do	finish off final little tasks
5-	To be one the safe side	uncover the truth
6-	Get to the bottom of something	manage with something of worse quality

Culture-bound idioms

1-	The silly season	the feeling that a situation is bad and not to improve
2-	Doom and gloom	old-fashioned or run-down bar or other place
3-	Take the Bull by the horns	a loss of courage or nerve
4-	Spit and sawdust	take decisive and direct action
5-	Cold feet	a talent for gardening
6-	Green thumb	period of time in the summer when there is not much (political) news, so the newspapers have articles about events that aren't important

Underline within the body of the following letter the words or entire sentence that constitute the idiomatic expression:

Dear Jack,

Hope all goes well with you. Unfortunately, everyone here is out of sorts. Will is down in dumps because he doesn't like his math teacher this year. I've told him that it's not the end of the world and that he'd better just grin and bear it, but I think he likes being a misery guts and so he complains about her every night. Pat, is also suffering from sour grapes because I got the role in the school play she wanted. This puts a damper on every meal, so I 'm really looking forward to staying with you at the week end.
Love,
Karen

First define the following idioms and then provide their equivalent Persian idioms: (Answers provided)

Button one's lips		
	معادل فارسی زیپ **دهان خود** را کشیدن /إمعنی تحت اللفظی : دکمه‌های لب خود را بستن	**SLL**
Get something off one's chest		
	معنی تحت اللفظی : چیزی را از سینه خود خارج کردن / معادل فارسی: **دل خود** را **خالی کردن**	**SLL**
Get up on the wrong side of the bed		
	معنی تحت اللفظی : از سمت نادرست تخت برخاستن / معادل فارسی: از **دنده چپ برخاستن**	**SLL**
Give someone the cold shoulder		
	معنی تحت اللفظی : به کسی شانه سرد دادن! / معادل فارسی: **با کسی سرد برخورد کردن**	**PLL**
Stand on one's own two feet		
	معنی تحت اللفظی : روی دو پای خود ایستادن / معادل فارسی: **روی پای خود ایستادن**	**LL**
Open a can of worms		
	معنی تحت اللفظی : یک قوطی پر از کرم را باز کردن/ معادل فارسی: **آتش در لانه زنبور کردن**	**PLL**
Scrape the bottom of the barrel		
	معنی تحت اللفظی : ته بشکه را تمیز کردن/ معادل فارسی: **کفگیر به ته دیگ رسیده**	**SLL**
Two heads are better than one		
	معنی تحت اللفظی : دو تا کله بهتر از یکی است / معادل فارسی: **یک دست صدا ندارد**	**SLL**
A bad vessel is seldom broken		
	معنی تحت اللفظی : یک ظرف بد به ندرت می‌شکند/ معادل فارسی: **بادمجان بم آفت ندارد**	**PLL**
White lie		
	معنی تحت اللفظی : دروغ سفید/ معادل فارسی: **دروغ مصلحت آمیز**	**PLL**

Table 2. Frequently Used Idioms (Out of 800)

NO	IDIOM	TYPE	N0	IDIOM	TYPE	NO	IDIOM	TYPE
1	feel/be under the weather	PLL	30	against all the odds	SLL	59	a grey area	SLL
2	look like death warmed up	PLL	31	take someone for granted	SLL	60	a black hole	LL
3	recharge one's batteries	LL	32	a foregone conclusion	LL	61	start the ball rolling	SLL
4	feel off-color	SLL	33	see sth coming (a mile off)	LL	62	The ball is in your court	LL
5	on the road to recovery	SLL	34	be touch-and-go	SLL	63	be on the ball	PLL
6	be on the mend	SLL	35	no prizes for guessing sth	PLL	64	break a leg!	PLL
7	be as fit as a fiddle	PLL	36	the cards are stacked against sb	LL	65	play ball	LL
8	be as right as rain	PLL	37	chancing your arm	PLL	66	a level playing field	PLL
9	be out of sort	SLL	38	be in the lap of the gods	PLL	67	be in line for sth	LL
10	be down in the dumps	SLL	39	to be bull-headed	SLL	68	have put two feet in one shoe	PLL
11	it's not the end of the world	LL	40	at a considerable price	LL	69	along the lines of	LL
12	grin and bear it	LL	41	put paid to	PLL	70	step out of line	SLL
13	a misery guts	SLL	42	pay the price for	LL	71	line of work	LL
14	sour grapes	SLL	43	at the bottom of the (career) ladder	SLL	72	along/on the right lines	LL
15	put a damper on	PLL	44	dead-end job	SLL	73	to stir up a hornet's nest	SLL
16	burn the midnight oil	LL	45	run-of-the-mill	PLL	74	be at each other's throats	SLL
17	give it a shot/whirl	SLL	46	tighten one's belt	LL	75	make a clean breast of	PLL
18	get to grips with	SLL	47	let sleeping dogs lie	SLL	76	breath down sb's neck	PLL
19	to be on the safe side	SLL	48	get/give sb the sack	PLL	77	be a real pain in the neck	PLL
20	get to the bottom of	LL	49	step into sb's shoes	LL	78	get it off one's chest	LL
21	be all sweetness and light	PLL	50	rushed off one's feet	PLL	79	ram sth down sb's throat	PLL
22	get/grate on sb's nerves	LL	51	have one's work cut out	SLL	80	give sb the cold shoulder	PLL
23	give sb a hard time	LL	52	play with fire	LL	81	new blood	LL
24	poke fun at	SLL	53	spread like wildfire	SLL	82	a high-flyer	LL
25	add insult into injury	SLL	54	in the heat of the moment	SLL	83	to be up to creek without a paddle	PLL
26	cast aspersions on	PLL	55	there's no smoke without fire	LL	84	make a name for oneself	LL
27	out-and-out	PLL	56	add fuel to the flames/fire	LL	85	on one's way up	SLL
28	be asking for trouble	LL	57	white-collar worker	PLL			
29	on the off-chance	SLL	58	in black and white	SLL			

Table 3. American vs. British Culture-bound Idioms (Out of 300)

NO	British Culture-bound IDIOMS	TYPE	NO	American Culture-bound IDIOMS	TYPE
1	As queer as nine bob note	PLL	1	Take a breather	PLL
2	Tie the knot	PLL	2	Lose one's shirt	SLL
3	Talk the hind legs off a donkey	PLL	3	Against all odds	SLL
4	The best (greatest) thing since sliced bread	PLL	4	Touch all the bases	PLL
5	Burning the candle at both ends	PLL	5	Cook the accounts	PLL
6	Eyes are bigger than one's belly	SLL	6	Showing a talent for	SLL
7	Squeeze someone till the pips squeak	PLL	7	Take the Bull by the horns	LL
8	Win the wooden spoon	PLL	8	Like a three-ring circus	PLL
9	Play cat and mouse with	SLL	9	Fly in the ointment	PLL
10	I 'm all right, Jack.	PLL	10	Strike while the iron is hot	SLL
11	Sell the family silver	SLL	11	Blessing in disguise	SLL
12	The gnomes of Zurich	PLL	12	Look over somebody's shoulders	SLL
13	Live the life Riley	PLL	13	Born with a silver spoon in one's mouth	PLL
14	The corridors of power	SLL	14	Put the cart before the horse	SLL
15	Spit and sawdust	PLL	15	Fall between two stools	PLL
16	The jewel in the crown	SLL	16	Not one's cup of tea	PLL
17	Break the mould	LL	17	In one's salad days	PLL
18	Doom and gloom	PLL	18	Get the show on the road	PLL
19	Dear old Blighty	PLL	19	Throw caution to the wind	PLL
20	The ghost in the machine	PLL	20	Paint the town red	PLL
21	Everything but the kitchen sink	PLL	21	Put someone in the picture	SLL
22	(All) Lombard Street to a China orange	PLL	22	Have an ax to grind (with someone)	PLL
23	Big girl's blouse	PLL	23	At sixes and sevens	LL
24	Bob is your uncle	PLL	24	Skate on thin ice	SLL

Table 4. General vs. Cultural* Idioms-IDT Data (Low, Mid, High)

THEMATIC UNIT	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20	Group
Idioms identified (n)	21	14	15	22	13	13	19	23	19	24	19	22	26	20	28	23	26	26	19	24	21
Success rate (%)	47	31	33	49	29	29	42	51	42	53	42	49	58	44	62	51	58	58	42	53	46.66
Cultural Idioms identified (n)	1 Am					1 Am		4 (3Am & 1 Br)			2 Am	2 Am			4 Am		1 Am	1 Am		1 Am	0.85
Success rate (%)	5					5		20			10	10			20		5	5		5	4.25

THEMATIC UNIT	S21	S22	S23	S24	S25	S26	S27	S28	S29	S30	S31	S32	S33	S34	S35	S36	S37	S38	S39	S40	Group
Idioms identified (n)	23	18	17	19	19	21	15	21	33	30	19	27	26	32	31	30	33	22	30	35	25
Success rate (%)	51	40	38	42	42	47	33	47	73	67	42	60	58	71	69	67	73	49	67	78	55.5
Cultural Idioms identified (n)	1 Am	1 Am	2 Am	2 Am	6 (4Am & 2Br)		3 Am		4 Am	1 Am	3 Am			5 Am		1 Am	1 Am			4 Am	1.7
Success rate (%)	5	5	10	10	30		15		20	5	15			25		5	5			20	8.5

THEMATIC UNIT	S41	S42	S43	S44	S45	S46	S47	S48	S49	S50	S51	S52	S53	S54	S55	S56	S57	S58	S59	S60	Group
Idioms identified (n)	30	28	19	24	23	31	28	29	31	22	35	17	33	29	24	31	20	40	22	24	27
Success rate (%)	67	62	42	53	51	69	62	64	69	49	78	38	73	64	53	69	44	89	49	53	60
Cultural Idioms identified (n)	2 Am	1 Am	5 (3Am & 2 Br)	1 Am	7 (6Am & 1 Br)	1 Am	4 Am	1 Am	1 Am		4 Am	2 Am	1 Am	3 (2Am & 1 Br)	1 Am		1 Am	3 Am	1 Am	1 Am	2
Success rate (%)	10	5	25	5	35	5	20	5	5		20	10	5	15	5		5	15	5	5	10

*** Am and Br Stand for American and British English/Idioms**

Table 5. General vs. Cultural Idioms- ZCT (Low, Mid, High)

Idiom Type	S 1	S 2	S 3	S 4	S 5	S 6	S 7	S 8	S 9	S 10	S 11	S 12	S 13	S 14	S 15	S 16	S 17	S 18	S 19	S 20	Group
Correctly defined	(12) 30	(6) 15	(7) 17.5	(11) 27.5	(5) 12.5	(6) 15	(10) 25	(12) 30	(10) 25	(13) 32.5	(10) 25	(11) 27.5	(14) 35	(10) 25	(15) 37.5	(12) 30	(14) 35	(15) 37.5	(10) 25	(12) 30	(11) 27
Success rate %	30	15	17.5	27.5	12.5	15	25	30	25	32.5	25	27.5	35	25	37.5	30	35	37.5	25	30	27
Cultural idioms Correctly defined	(1) 10	(0) 0	(2) 20	(0) 0	(0) 0	(1) 10	(0) 0	(0) 0	(3) 30	(2) 20	(1) 10	(1) 10	(0) 0	(2) 20	(0) 0	(0) 0	(3) 30	(1) 10	(0) 0	(1) 10	(0.9) 9
Success rate%	10	0	20	0	0	10	0	0	30	20	10	10	0	20	0	0	30	10	0	10	9

Idiom Type	S 21	S 22	S 23	S 24	S 25	S 26	S 27	S 28	S 29	S 30	S 31	S 32	S 33	S 34	S 35	S 36	S 37	S 38	S 39	S 40	Group
Correctly defined	(17) 42.5	(11) 27.5	(11) 27.5	(15) 37.5	(13) 32.5	(13) 32.5	(14) 35	(12) 30	(18) 45	(19) 47.5	(16) 40	(14) 35	(13) 32.5	(20) 50	(18) 45	(21) 52.5	(19) 47.5	(14) 35	(18) 45	(23) 57.5	(16) 40
Success rate %	42.5	27.5	27.5	37.5	32.5	32.5	35	30	45	47.5	40	35	32.5	50	45	52.5	47.5	35	45	57.5	40
Cultural idioms correctly defined	(1) 10	(0) 0	(4) 40	(0) 0	(2) 20	(1) 10	(1) 10	(0) 0	(2) 20	(1) 10	(2) 20	(1) 10	(1) 10	(3) 30	(0) 0	(0) 0	(1) 10	(0) 0	(1) 10	(4) 40	(1.25) 12.5
Success rate %	10	0	40	0	20	10	10	0	20	10	20	10	10	30	0	0	10	0	10	40	12.5

Idiom Type	S 41	S 42	S 43	S 44	S 45	S 46	S 47	S 48	S 49	S 50	S 51	S 52	S 53	S 54	S 55	S 56	S 57	S 58	S 59	S 60	Group
Correctly defined	(21) 52.5	(18) 45	(13) 32.5	(16) 40	(17) 42.5	(22) 55	(17) 42.5	(19) 47.5	(21) 52.5	(15) 37.5	(25) 62.5	(11) 27.5	(21) 52.5	(20) 50	(16) 40	(19) 47.5	(15) 37.5	(25) 62.5	(15) 37.5	(15) 37.5	(18) 45
Success rate %	52.5	45	32.5	40	42.5	55	42.5	47.5	52.5	37.5	62.5	27.5	52.5	50	40	47.5	37.5	62.5	37.5	37.5	45
Cultural idioms Correctly defined	(3) 30	(1) 10	(4) 40	(1) 10	(4) 40	(2) 20	(2) 20	(0) 0	(1) 10	(3) 30	(1) 10	(0) 0	(0) 0	(1) 10	(2) 20	(1) 10	(0) 0	(1) 10	(0) 0	(3) 30	(1.5) 15
Success rate %	30	10	40	10	40	20	20	0	10	30	10	0	0	10	20	10	0	10	0	30	15

Table 6. General vs. Cultural Idioms-FCT (Low, Mid, High)

Idiom Type	S 1	S 2	S 3	S 4	S 5	S 6	S 7	S 8	S 9	S 10	S 11	S 12	S 13	S 14	S 15	S 16	S 17	S 18	S 19	S 20	Group
Correctly defined	(15) 37.5	(13) 32.5	(10) 25	(19) 47.5	(8) 20	(11) 27.5	(15) 37.5	(17) 42.5	(20) 50	(19) 47.5	(19) 47.5	(15) 37.5	(23) 57.5	(17) 42.5	(25) 62.5	(17) 42.5	(22) 55	(21) 52.5	(18) 45	(17) 42.5	(17) 42.5
Success rate %	37.5	32.5	25	47.5	20	27.5	37.5	42.5	50	47.5	47.5	37.5	57.5	42.5	62.5	42.5	55	52.5	45	42.5	42.5
Cultural idioms correctly defined	(2) 20	(1) 10	(3) 30	(1) 10	(1) 10	(2) 20	(1) 10	(4) 40	(5) 50	(3) 30	(3) 30	(2) 20	(2) 20	(3) 30	(2) 20	(1) 10	(4) 40	(5) 50	(3) 30	(4) 40	(2.6) 26
Success rate %	20	10	30	10	10	20	10	40	50	30	30	20	20	30	20	10	40	50	30	40	26

Idiom Type	S 21	S 22	S 23	S 24	S 25	S 26	S 27	S 28	S 29	S 30	S 31	S 32	S 33	S 34	S 35	S 36	S 37	S 38	S 39	S 40	Group
Correctly defined	(25) 62.5	(19) 47.5	(20) 50	(22) 55	(17) 42.5	(19) 47.5	(22) 55	(20) 50	(26) 65	(28) 70	(25) 62.5	(20) 50	(20) 50	(28) 70	(27) 67.5	(23) 57.5	(24) 60	(21) 52.5	(23) 57.5	(28) 70	(23) 57.5
Success rate %	62.5	47.5	50	55	42.5	47.5	55	50	65	70	62.5	50	50	70	67.5	57.5	60	52.5	57.5	70	57.5
Cultural idioms correctly Defined	(3) 30	(3) 30	(5) 50	(2) 20	(4) 40	(2) 20	(4) 40	(1) 10	(5) 50	(4) 40	(3) 30	(2) 20	(6) 60	(5) 50	(1) 10	(2) 20	(3) 30	(4) 40	(2) 20	(7) 70	(3.4) 34
Success rate %	30	30	50	20	40	20	40	10	50	40	30	20	60	50	10	20	30	40	20	70	34

Idiom Type	S 41	S 42	S 43	S 44	S 45	S 46	S 47	S 48	S 49	S 50	S 51	S 52	S 53	S 54	S 55	S 56	S 57	S 58	S 59	S 60	Group
Correctly defined	(28) 70	(25) 62.5	(21) 52.5	(25) 62.5	(22) 55	(29) 72.5	(24) 60	(27) 67.5	(27) 67.5	(22) 55	(30) 75	(18) 45	(28) 70	(29) 72.5	(26) 65	(23) 57.5	(22) 55	(31) 77.5	(19) 47.5	(21) 52.5	(25) 62
Success rate %	70	62.5	52.5	62.5	55	72.5	60	67.5	67.5	55	75	45	70	72.5	65	57.5	55	77.5	47.5	52.5	62
Correctly defined	(8) 80	(6) 60	(8) 80	(6) 60	(9) 90	(7) 70	(6) 60	(5) 50	(8) 80	(9) 90	(4) 40	(3) 30	(5) 50	(7) 70	(5) 50	(6) 60	(5) 50	(6) 60	(4) 40	(7) 70	(6.2) 62
Success rate %	80	60	80	60	90	70	60	50	80	90	40	30	50	70	50	60	50	60	40	70	62

Table 7. Sample Idioms, Representative Strategies Used and Metacognitive Comments in the IDT

STRATEGIES

-Translation(from L2 to L1 and vice versa)

-Literal meaning does not make sense

-Context (or lack thereof)

-Graphophonics /Word arrangement (the syntactic and semantic arrangement of the lexical unit)

-Unable to figure out (I have no idea/I don't know)

-Image too wild and strange

-Sounds/seems/Looks like

-Vocabulary or metaphorical knowledge (or lack thereof)

-Guessing(I am inventing my own meaning)

-Description and /or personalizing situation

-Cultural information

-Uncategorized/ Miscellaneous

(repeating or paraphrasing the idiom without giving an interpretation, elimination process, the texts' surface codes, giving different feedbacks such as being frustrated or confused, or other strategies, etc)

English Phrasal idiom	Meaning	Persian Meaning/ Equivalent idiom	
feel/be under the weather	Not very well	احساس کسالت کردن	PLL
be as fit as a fiddle	Perfectly well	ساز کوک (مثل ویولن)- به معنی فردی که از سلامت جسمانی عالی برخوردار است	PLL
it's not the end of the world	What has happened won't cause any serious problems	دنیا که به آخر نرسیده!	LL
grin and bear it	Accept a situation you don't like because you can't change it	سوختن و ساختن، تحمل کردن تا سر حد امکان	LL
to be on the safe side	To protect oneself even though it might not be necessary	برای رعایت احتیاط، محافظه کارانه عمل کردن	SLL
get to the bottom of	Try to discover the truth about something	به کنه مطلب پی بردن	LL
get/grate on sb's nerves	Irritating/annoying someone	کسی را عصبانی کردن، رو اعصاب کسی راه رفتن	SLL

Table 8. Summary of ZCT and FCT Data

ZCT	General Idioms-Low	General Idioms-Mid	General Idioms-High	Cultural Idioms-Low	Cultural Idioms-Mid	Cultural Idioms-High
LL	13	20	25	6	8.5	8
SL	8	11	14	2	2	4
PLL	6	9	6	1	2	3
Group Total	27	40	45	9	12.5	15

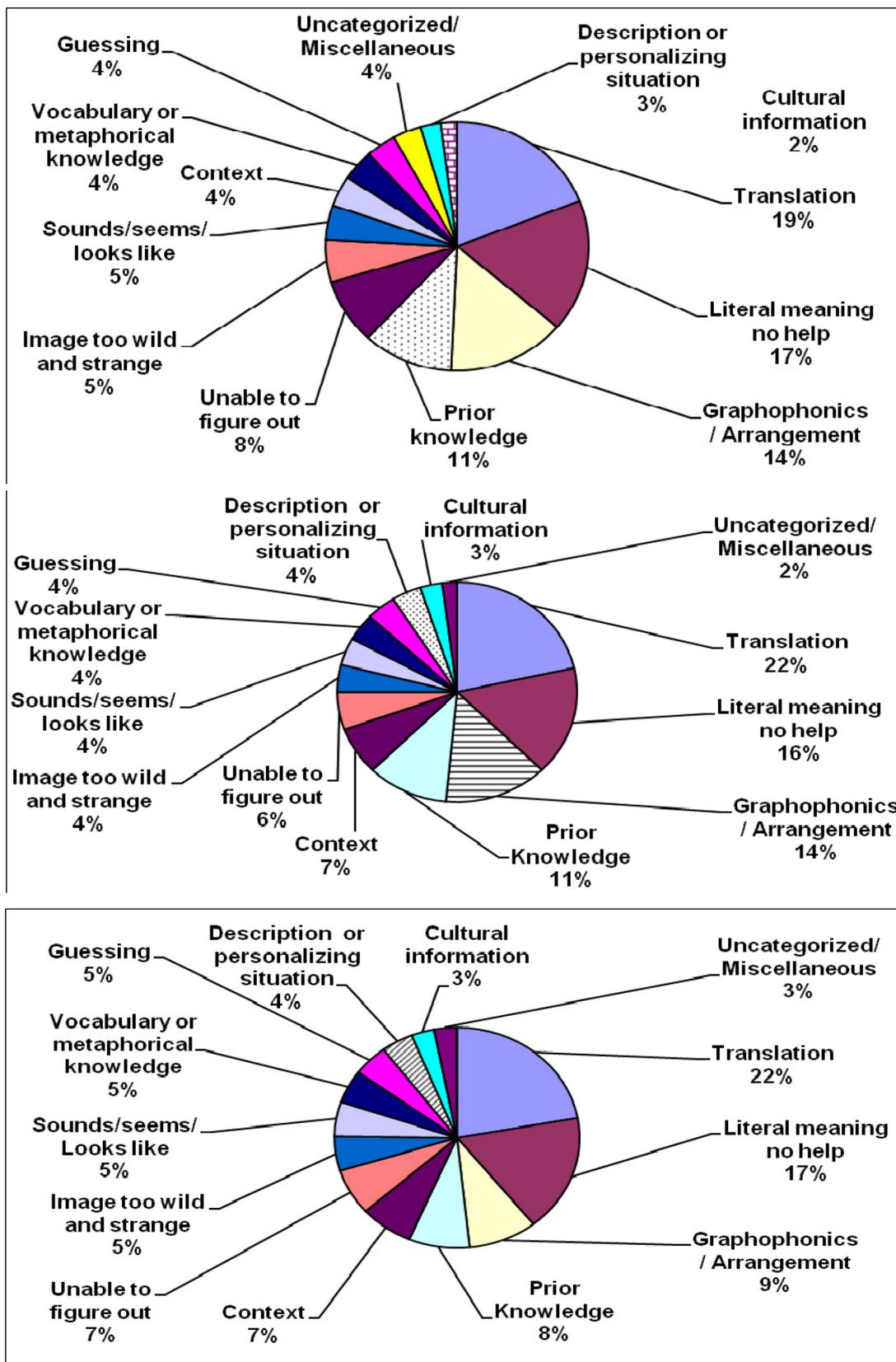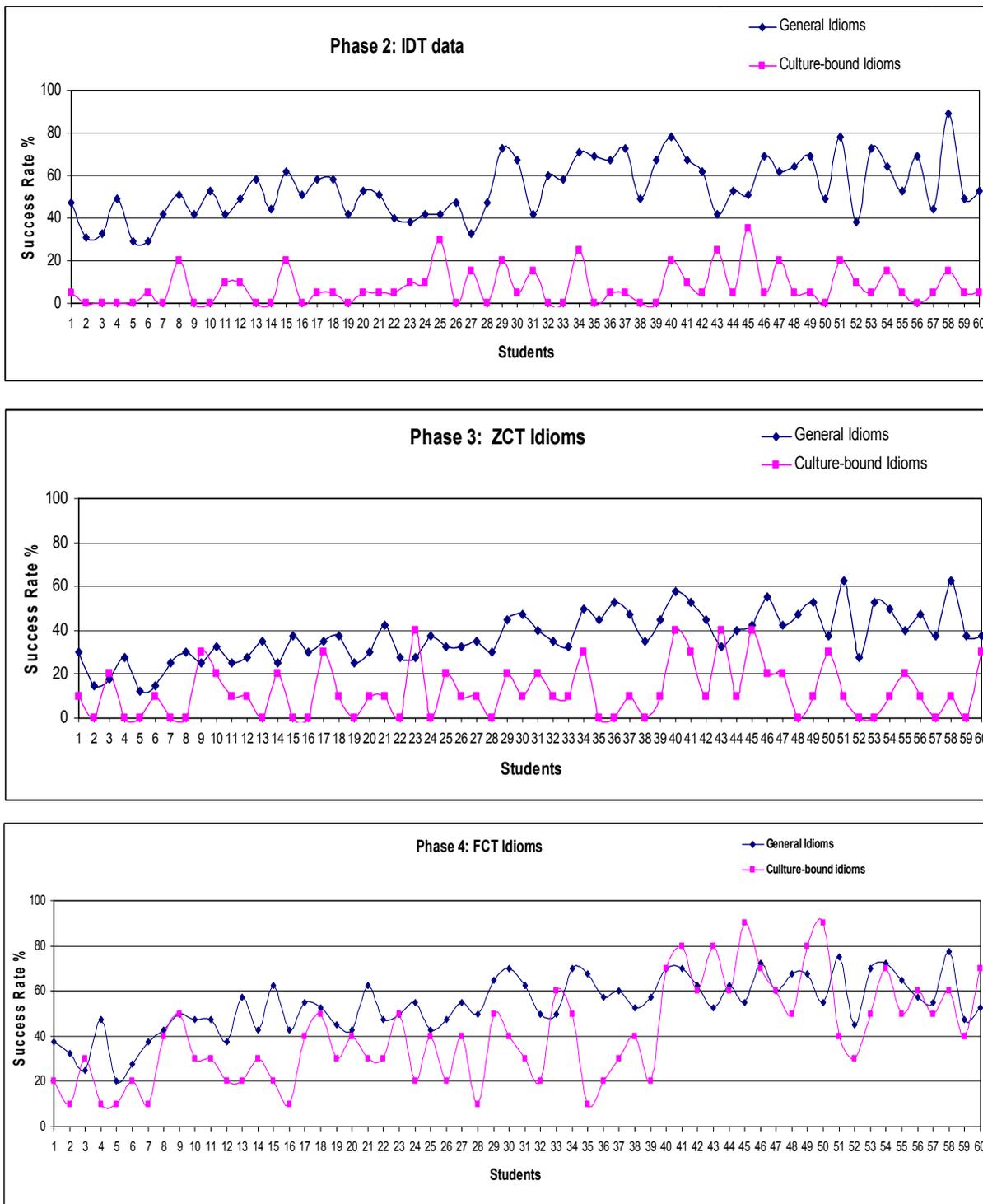| FCT	General Idioms-Low	General Idioms-Mid	General Idioms-High	Cultural Idioms-Low	Cultural Idioms-Mid	Cultural Idioms-High
LL	28	30	35	14	16	32
SL	8	15.5	16	8	10	19
PLL	6.5	12	11	4	8	11
Group Total	42.5	57.5	62	26	34	62

Figure 1. Summary of IDT Strategies

Figure 2. Success Rate of Phases 2, 3 & 4