

# The Impact of Pictorial Cues on Understanding Idioms Among Arab EFL Learners

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## Abstract

Idioms vary extensively in their difficulty, especially for foreign language learners. English Foreign Language (EFL) learners often find transparent idioms, such as *break someone's heart*, which means to make someone feel deep sadness, more straightforward. Whereas, they may find *kicking the bucket* 'to die' somehow opaque and challenging. The study investigates the extent to which Arabic speakers of English find contextual and pictorial cues embedded in social media platforms beneficial for understanding idioms and the methods they often use to comprehend idioms. Thirty female Arabic-speaking learners of English at a high school in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia participated in this study. The study used a three-version design to assess the participants' understanding of idioms through a multiple-choice interpretation task. The participants were divided into three groups and received the same amount ( $n = 24$ ) and type of idioms in three different methods: contextualization (i.e., participants were exposed to idioms in context), decontextualization (i.e., participants were exposed to idioms out of context) and the third group was exposed to pictorial-cued idioms. The findings revealed that visualisation was the most effective method for mastering idioms rather than contextualisation. On the other hand, decontextualisation was the least effective method. The study concludes with specific reference to some pedagogical implications.

**Keywords:** Arabic, bitmojis, (de)contextual-cued, English, idioms, pictorial-cued, social media

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, the power of social media platforms stands not through scripts, but through images which speak a thousand words. Pictorial forms of communication are trendy nowadays, as they help in promoting the language and grasping the meanings in a very colourful, arty and attractive way. Several phone applications (apps) use countless emojis, bitmojis and stickers which are considered fascinating methods to communicate feelings and opinions to other users without articulating too many words. Emojis and bitmojis, for instance, save a good deal of effort and time with simply a single click. Users of Snapchat, for instance, often use emojis and bitmojis while texting. Users habitually use them to cheer up the receiver or just because they find them much simpler and easier than putting their thoughts into boring texts. Today, if a user receives a message delivered with a plain text, s/he may think the sender is too formal, upset or annoyed particularly when it is an informal communication with a member of her/his family or a close friend. Some users find some pictorial forms of communication such as Snapchat bitmojis somehow straightforward, while others may find them puzzling, especially if they are new to the app and/or the target language and culture. For instance, when someone receives the Snapchat bitmoji 'so jelly', as shown in Figure 1, after a friend shared some Snapchat photos while s/he was enjoying a summer holiday on the beach, the receiver may find it difficult to understand especially if s/he is not familiar with the term and Snapchat depicts the expression literally by showing a representation of a jam jar. The intended meaning in this context is feeling jealous 'slang'.



Figure 1. Example of a Snapchat bitmoji that represents the English slang ‘so jelly’



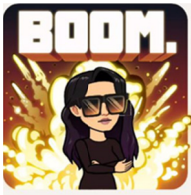
Non-literal language or figurative language is frequently used in online social networks which are considered an ample source of non-literal texts, extensively including sarcasm, irony, metaphor, simile, personification, etc. Non-literal language goes beyond the literal meaning of a single word that does not function in its typical sense. It is used to provide readers with an enhanced understanding of something or attain a more comprehensive and richer image. Some English Foreign Language (EFL) learners may find non-literal language challenging to understand and they often comprehend the text literally. Consider the idiom, *it was raining cats and dogs*, which is used to portray heavy rain in English. The reader may think that cats and dogs are literally falling from the sky as Figure 2 demonstrates if s/he is not familiar with this idiom. This difficulty may originate from the fact that this idiomatic expression corresponds to a different image in the learner’s first language (L1). For instance, Arabic speakers would say *تمطر كأفواه القرب* *tūmṭr kāfwāh ālqṛāb*, which literally means it is raining like the mouths of waterskins in Arabic.



Figure 2. Example of a Snapchat bitmoji that represents the English idiom ‘raining cats and dogs’

Social media platforms are more reliant on images to excite users and creatively deliver meanings. Snapchat, among other social platforms, is one of the up-to-date platforms that are highly rich in non-literal language. Table 1 presents some types of non-literal language embodied in Snapchat including idioms, similes, onomatopoeias, etc. Note in social media *Boom* also means ‘yes, done it’, ‘all sorted’. For example if someone said, “they’d achieved something”, a person can reply with “Boom” as in well done. Some forms are delivered via only images (e.g., *happy as a pig in mud*) and others through images together with scripts (e.g., *smell a rat*).

Table 1. Examples of Snapchat bitmojis that represent some figurative language in English

Type of non-literal language	Form	Meaning	Example	Pictorial cue (e.g., Bitmojis)
Idioms	<i>Smell a rat!</i>	to suspect deception	<i>She is in charge of the Arizona election. I <u>smell a rat</u>.</i>	
Similes	<i>Happy as a pig in mud.</i>	being extremely happy	<i>She was <u>happy as a pig in mud</u> when she got the job.</i>	
Onomatopoeias	<i>BOOM</i>	a sound that depicts an explosion	<i>Then we heard another <u>BOOM</u>.</i>	

The current study set out to investigate the use of such rich and vivid resources for mastering non-literal language among EFL learners. Keeping in mind that social media platforms are new, very little is currently known about them. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no single study has been carried out on social media platforms as convenient sources for delivering the hidden meaning of non-literal language. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which Arabic-speaking learners of English find pictorial cues embedded in social media platforms, such as Snapchat bitmojis, helpful tools for making idioms more comprehensible in comparison with (de)contextual cues available via other social media platforms, i.e. Twitter (X now) tweets.

### 1.1 Social Media Language

Social media language is used by a wide variety of users for different interactive functions, including expressing themselves, sharing interests, connecting with others, and expanding careers. The concept of social media language stands for the language used on virtual platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn*, *X* and *Snapchat* ... etc. Social media language refers to the unique text comprising vocabulary, composition, and style that has originated on modern social media platforms. It is described by its informality, slang usage, and briefness and is the means in which the meanings of texts are delivered to the users. Each channel has its own linguistic system that functions to deliver meanings in a unique method.

Social media language is hypertextual which enables users to route between a set of interrelated components. Hypermedia is a multifaceted dynamic mixture of hypertext and hypermedia. Hypertext covers text only and engaged materials only lead to the relevant materials whereas hyperlink may include irrelevant materials. Hyperlink entails text, aural, audio-visual, and images. So, hypertext comprises images and graphics which are connected to the key text through hyperlinks. Social media are typically multi-modal (i.e., they integrate several types of media language) and hyperlinked (i.e., they allow users to move simply from one component to another). Users' attention rarely settles for long by way of browsing, swiping, and clicking from one page, screen, or window to another. The majority of social media platforms integrate different patterns of language to deliver meaning including texts, music and sound, still and moving images ... etc. These patterns are repeatedly integrated, and users often switch between them. Users can read a certain text and then select a video or sound clip, a picture catches their attention, and they read the text following it. There are numerous forms of social media 'texts', although some of them may appear somewhat evanescent: Facebook posts, Instagram photos, Tweets, followers' comments on a Snapchat story or a YouTube video ... etc.

By running a content analysis of social media, forms of social media language include: verbal, non-verbal, textual, contextual, pictorial and aural. Social media platforms such as Pinterest and Tumblr are principally lacking verbal language, whereas other platforms such as Snapchat are becoming gradually governed by pictorial imagery. Social media language includes a wide range of pictorial devices, e.g., animated emoticons, memes and gifs. Social media language relies heavily on visual language with a system that largely uses images to deliver meaning. Owing to their unique patterns, these images can be inferred by a huge group of users. Examining how these various factors interact on various social media sites is a helpful method of merging them. Platforms may be contrasted in terms of the types of communication they enable and those they discourage or prohibit. Platforms contain built-in limits and possibilities: if we utilise them, we must follow the template they supply. X's original 140 then 280-character restriction is an apparent example of a constraint that indirectly supported certain types of communication while making others more difficult. In contrast, Snapchat is a semi-private space, which allows communicating with others. Users describe and picture themselves for an audience of 'friends', and to make their private life accessible to other 'followers'.

According to Bourina and Dunaeva (2019), implementing modern technologies results in a revolution in the patterns of understanding, which are associated with the pictorial understanding of image, representation, and colour. This complex vigorous and multidimensional environment supports comprehending foreign languages and cultures. Language and culture are perceived only by means of real-life communication when it has potential to communicate within an authentic specific-context. It would be advantageous to consider how these forms communicate meanings when users move across different platforms; i.e., what form of language would deliver meanings more appropriately? A more verbal, textual, contextual or a more pictorial platform? Hence, the current study attempts to determine the usefulness of integrating different elements embedded in social media platforms in delivering figurative meanings and they were compared in terms of the degrees of idioms transparency they make (im)possible in relation to meaning-making. Although one platform can have different forms of cues, this study focuses on only one cue for each platform. That is, to determine the power of contextual cues and pictorial cues provided by different social media platforms, only one form of cue embedded in each platform has been examined, i.e., only texts from X and pictures from Snapchat.

## 1.2 Idioms

Foreign language learners often encounter idioms in daily communication. Idioms are common across languages and cultures, yet they are complicated forms of non-literal expressions (Nippold, 1991). By definition, an idiom is a group of words that contains a meaning that cannot be comprehended based on the literal meaning of single words. An idiom is a phrase that even if someone understands the meaning of its words, s/he still does not understand the meaning of the whole expression. These words are not intended to be recognised literally. For instance, when someone says, "This cost me an arm and a leg," and she still got both her arms and legs, the reader may get puzzled and not realise that it means it costs a lot of money. Also, if someone says, "s/he has cold feet", this does not mean that her/his toes are truly cold. Rather, it means s/he is nervous about something. Also, "they've got bad blood" does not mean that their blood is unclean, yet it stands for having a bad relationship or ill/bitter feelings. Hence, idioms cannot be inferred simply by considering their individual words. Thus, comprehending idioms may be problematic for EFL learners.

### 1.2.1 Transparent and Opaque Idioms

Several factors play roles in idiom comprehension in foreign language contexts, including transparency, and context of use. Transparency also known as "literalness" means how straightforward it is to recognise an idiom based on the individual words it comprises. According to Cain et al. (2005), transparency stands for "the degree of agreement between the literal and figurative meanings of an idiom" (p. 67). Idioms may be sorted based on their level of transparency: 1) decomposable, 2) abnormally decomposable, and 3) no decomposable. Decomposable idioms are made of words that support their whole non-literal meaning, such as *biting a bullet*. The word *bite* signifies doing something and the *bullet* denotes something unpleasant that has been avoided to do. Abnormally decomposable idioms comprise words that are metaphorically related to the inclusive non-literal meaning of the idiomatic expression, such as *let the cat out of the bag*. The word *let* represents reveal and *the cat* figuratively indicates a secret. Whereas, no decomposable idioms comprise words that do not mirror their figurative meaning, such as *kick the bucket*. Empirical evidence suggests that learners are likely to react to the first two types of decomposable idioms quicker than the last ones.

Linguists usually refer to idioms as transparent idioms and opaque idioms. Others subdivided these two categories into semi-transparent idioms and semi-opaque idioms. Transparent idioms stand for idioms that have closely related meanings to literal ones. Thus, transparent idioms are often not challenging to recognise, since

their meanings may be effortlessly deduced from the meanings of their components, which have literal meanings but the mixture has a figurative meaning, e.g. *got a sweet tooth*, which means a craving for sweet food.

Opaque idioms, on the other hand, are the most challenging form of idioms since the meaning of the idiom is not that of the entire literal meanings of its parts. Thus, it would be unreasonable to deduce the real meaning of the idiom from the meanings of its constituents, owing to the manifestation of forms with culture-specific indications (e.g., historical, cultural, or political), especially for EFL learners. For instance, EFL learners may wonder what *a white elephant* means, which is something not principally beneficial that habitually has an extremely high charge of maintenance. The origin of this idiom goes back to the kingdom of ancient Siam (Thailand nowadays) where the King used to grant a live white elephant to any disliked person. Although generous, giving a white elephant is tremendously high-priced and hard to conserve (or re-grant). A white elephant may consume more than 400 pounds of nourishment daily.

### 1.2.2 Idioms and Contextual Cues

Experimental evidence suggests that context has a significant effect on idiom comprehension. Drawing on an extensive range of sources, learners comprehend idioms more precisely when they appear in enlightening contexts than when they appear separately. Unambiguous context provides the essential semantic evidence to guess and infer idioms appropriately. EFL learners are likely to understand idioms literally when they are used out of context. According to Brown (2007), the contextual cues neighbouring a particular expression can facilitate comprehension of its figurative meaning, especially if the context is elaborately extended. On the other hand, idioms with context-absent or context-limited patterns are likely to be challenging to recognise among EFL learners, especially if they are not familiar with them. For instance, when someone says, “Hold your horses”, s/he does not mean to hold real horses, but s/he asks someone to stop and think carefully about her/his decision. The surrounding context offered in (1) illuminates the figurative meaning which makes it easier to be inferred rather than the idiom being delivered out of context.

(1) *Just hold your horses, Natali! Let's think about it for a moment.*

EFL Learners are more influenced by idiom familiarity in and out of context. Familiarity is usually described as how often an idiom is used in a community. Consider, for instance, the English idiom *piece of cake*, which means something effortlessly done, which seems more familiar. Whereas they may find taking *French leave*, which means being away from work without permission, less familiar. Several researchers drew our attention to the fact that familiar idioms are likely to be processed faster and more accurately than unfamiliar idioms which necessitates the existence of supporting context to clarify their intended meanings. That is, it would be beneficial for EFL learners to access rich and meaningful contexts to facilitate effortlessly recognising the intended meanings.

### 1.2.3 Idioms and Pictorial Cues

Offering appropriate and related pictorial cues that portray distinct scenarios result in idioms being more engaging and may promote an accurate understanding. Pictorial cues provided by Snapchat, for example, are somewhat unique. Snapchat allows users to access a wide range of pictorial cues including emojis, bitmojis and stickers that deliver a huge variety of meanings including idiomatic expressions. Such pictorial cues may increase the accuracy of recognising and understanding idioms if they are not literally represented. Consider the following example that is represented in Figure. 3.

(2) *The break is over! Let's go back to the grind.*



Figure 3. A Snapchat bitmoji represents the English idiom ‘back to the grind’

The idiom *back to the grind* means going back to work after a break. The provided pictorial cue is a Snapchat bitmoji which shows a miner working underground to take out coal and bring them up to the top. Miner work is considered one of the most dangerous and toughest jobs. The reader may not be familiar with the word “grind”, although the meaning is somewhat transparent. However, the portrayed facial expression “being bored or exhausted” with a coal mining pick axe may help in inferring the figurative meaning appropriately.

### 1.3 Challenges of Mastering Idioms Among EFL Learners

EFL learners may find mastering some elements of the target language somehow challenging. Although EFL learners may perform in a target-like manner for mastering the target language, they may still find English idioms challenging to use appropriately as Levorato (1993) asserted. Empirical evidence suggests that idioms are considered to be one of the standing areas which establish a considerable challenge (Adkins, 1972; Cooper, 1999; Nippold, 2003; Colin, 2006). Arabic learners of English, for instance, face considerable challenges for mastering English idioms (Hajjaj & Kharma, 1989; Awwad, 1990; Mahmoud, 2002; Aldoubi, 2003; Ghazala, 2004; Fallatah, 2009; Noor & Fallatah, 2010). There are several factors which make idioms challenging for EFL. These factors may include the unique nature of idioms, lack of cultural familiarity with idioms, the impact of the mother tongue on the target language development and insufficient exposure to idioms.

#### 1.3.1 Unique Nature of Idioms

It is worth noting that idioms have unique meanings which cannot be realised from their constituent parts. Levorato et al. (2004) pointed out that idiom understanding involves learners going beyond a straightforward word-by-word understanding scheme and combining non-literal meanings into contextual evidence. For instance, a *whale of a time* “exciting time” in English has nothing to do with being on a whale back in its literal sense. The majority of idioms also have non-literal equivalents, which makes them even trickier to master. Native speakers may not struggle to recognise the intended meanings of idioms, whereas EFL learners may encounter challenges in guessing the intended meaning throughout the course of the target language development if they do not receive sufficient exposure to the target forms (Irujo, 1986b; Hajjaj & Kharma, 1989).

#### 1.3.2 Lack of Cultural Familiarity with Idioms

Idioms largely vary across different languages. The English idiom *when pigs fly*, which means something impossible to happen, may have different alternatives across languages. For instance, it corresponds to *If cows perform hajj on horns* in Arabic, *when chicken have teeth* in French, *when fish climbs up a poplar tree* in Turkish, *when the crayfish will whistle on the top of the hill* in Russian, *when donkey's Eid* in Indonesian, *in cuckoo's summer* in Bulgarian, *unless the sun would rise from the West* in Chinese, *when there are two Thursdays in a week* in Danish and *when it snows in summer* in German, etc. More interestingly, the same language may have more than one equivalent for the same idiom, such as *in the season of the apricot* in Arabic and *When hell freezes over* in English, which both also mean something impossible to happen. This makes idioms a very complicated component for foreign language learners.

Lack of cultural familiarity with English idioms is considered a serious challenge for learners to recognise and use idioms efficiently (Awwad, 1990; Huang, 2001; Mahmoud, 2002; Homeidi, 2004; Colin, 2006; Noor & Fallatah, 2010). Awwad (1990) pointed out that cultural variations across languages pose a considerable challenge for learners. Hajjaj and Kharma (1989) found that Arab-speaking learners of English often face challenges for mastering idioms because a huge amount of the idioms are culturally definite and non-corresponding to their L1. For instance, for a marriage proposal in English, someone would say ‘he got down on his knees and popped the question!’, but an Arabic speaker would say “he asked her hand for marriage”.

In the context of social media, these cultural differences are manifest. To wish the best of luck to someone on Snapchat, a user would say *good luck! break a leg! knock 'em dead! blow them away! or fingers crossed!* Besides, Snapchat offers numerous pictorial symbols that represent ‘good luck’ across different cultures such as *a horseshoe* (i.e., American), *Hamsa hand* (e.g., Arabic), *four-leaf clover* (i.e., Irish), and *fortune cats* (e.g., Chinese) (See Figure 4.).





Figure 4. Some Snapchat bitmojis represent “good luck” across different cultures

For example, the expression *break a leg!* is frequently used in English to wish luck to those who will soon perform in front of a crowd. It is believed that this usage stems from the notion that wishing someone “good luck” will result in the exact opposite consequence. While keeping *your fingers crossed* means wishing that nothing will occur to cause misfortune. Good Luck with the luck charm horseshoe was known from the 10<sup>th</sup> century and is still used as a fortunate charm by some individuals to ward off bad luck and attract good fortune. The idiomatic expression *touch wood* (UK) / *knock on wood* (US) is used to evade bad fortune by revealing good fortune that someone experienced in the past or revealing future hopes. It is also commonly used in the Middle East (i.e. Egypt). Also, since roughly 300 B.C., the *hamsa* has been widely used as a protective symbol and a sign of good luck throughout the Middle East and North Africa. It is connected to the five pillars of Islam, one of God’s names in Hebrew, protection from the Evil Eye in Arabic, and Berber customs. It is worth mentioning that Arabic learners of English may find *touch wood* more comprehensible than other non-corresponding forms, such as *break a leg*. This may be attributed to the role of their L1 knowledge.

### 1.3.3 Impact of Mother Tongue on Foreign Language Development

The impact of the mother tongue on foreign language development plays a role in recognising idioms among EFL learners. If learners attempt to depend on their L1 to assist them to recognise and use idioms in the target language, they will be appropriately using them on very limited occasions only. Several scholars (Irujo, 1984, 1986a; Hussein et al., 2000; Huang, 2001; Aldoubi, 2003; Noor & Fallatah, 2010) argued that this approach may be beneficial in matching idioms in both languages, i.e. idioms with the same function and the same forms. For instance, the English idiom *a storm in teacup* identically matches زوبعة في فنجان *zūb ‘ī fī fnġān* in Arabic, which means a situation wherein a person is extremely upset about an unimportant thing. Also, *I’m all ears* in English corresponds to كُلي آذان صاغية *kulī aḡān ṣāġītī* ‘I’m all listening ears’ in Arabic.

On the other hand, there are some non-matching idioms between their L1 and the target language, i.e., idioms with the same function but different forms, such as *came empty-handed*, which means coming back without achieving what someone desired. It corresponds to عاد بخفي حنين *āda bḥufī ḥunīn* “came back with Huneen’s shoes”, which originated from a cultural-bound story in Arabic. This dissimilarity could result in unsuccessful communication if the learners do not notice the gap between their L1 and the target forms and make the necessary adjustments accordingly. Thus, a systematic account of (dis)similarities of idioms between the two languages is essential to facilitate recognising and producing the target forms appropriately, diminish the L1 negative interference and enhance positive transfer as possible.

### 1.3.4 Insufficient Exposure to Idioms

Idioms are commonly evaded in the language directed to EFL learners to accelerate communication. Thus, native speakers of English or instructors frequently tend to use simple and clear language while communicating with EFL learners (Mahmoud, 2002; Bulut, 2004; Noor & Fallatah, 2010). The majority of EFL materials either lack idiomatic expressions completely or approach them in a brief and non-efficient method. Several EFL instructors describe idiomatic expressions concisely when they appear in the provided materials or without delivering

adequate and suitable aids and cues to prompt mastering them appropriately. Furthermore, several EFL instructors are not familiar with idioms, their meanings, origins or/and usage (Aldoubi, 2003; Liu, 2003; Andreou & Galantomos, 2007; Noor & Fallatah, 2010).

The informality of most of these idioms may also play a role in receiving less attention. Most teachers and syllabus designers focus on formal rather than informal forms. For example, *being nuts about something*, which means being extremely fond of something, is considered an informal expression and such idioms do not receive enough attention in classroom contexts. However, idioms are commonly used in real-life contexts such as in songs, books, newspapers, magazines, films, television and radio shows and nowadays in social media platforms. Nevertheless, television and radio shows and films do not allow communication which is extremely essential for mastering any linguistic component. Input that lacks interaction is not adequate for language development as Long (1981) pointed out. Therefore, EFL learners' exposure to idiomatic expressions in non-communicative conditions lacks the opportunity to access adequate feedback, which is very fundamental for foreign language development.

## 2. Previous Studies on Mastering Idioms in Foreign Language Contexts

A large and growing body of literature has examined idioms. The growing body of literature on idioms suggests that the majority of studies (Cacciari, 1993; Gibbs, 1993; Glucksberg, 1993) theoretically focus on the linguistic features of idiomatic expression. A large volume of research in the field adopted Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis or Corder's (1976) Error Analysis approaches. Several scholars carried out studies on second/foreign language learners in Arabic-English context (Hajjaj & Kharma, 1989; Awwad, 1990; Mola, 1993; Alharthy, 1997; Huang, 2001; Mahmoud, 2002; Aldoubi, 2003; Eltahir, 2003; Fallatah, 2009; Noor & Fallatah, 2010; Khalil, 2016; Alhaysony, 2017).

Furthermore, some scholars examined the role of context in idioms comprehension (Ortony et al., 1978; Nippold & Martin, 1989; Bulut, 2004; Noor & Fallatah, 2010; Xie, 2017). Nippold and Martin (1998) examined idiom interpretation in isolation versus context among 475 teenagers. The results showed that idioms in context were more accurate than idioms out of context, and that correctness for both gradually increased across the target age range. Idioms in isolation caused more No Response, Literal, and Unrelated non-target-like categories than idioms in context. On the other hand, several studies examined the role of pictures for mastering idioms in foreign-language contexts (Fotovatnia & Khaki, 2012; Abbasi et al., 2015; Vaez-Dalili et al., 2017; Altakhaineh & Shahzad, 2020). Altakhaineh and Shahzad (2020) examined the efficiency of utilising images vs. online dictionaries in tutoring English figurative forms to Arabic-speaking EFL learners ( $n = 50$ ). The researcher used a pre- and post-test design to assess the subjects' understanding of figurative forms pre-treatment and post-treatment. The subjects were allocated into two treatment groups: Group A ( $n = 25$ ), was subjected to the figurative forms using images delivered by an overhead projector, whereas Group B ( $n = 25$ ) was subjected to the figurative forms using an online dictionary and activities. Later, both groups were requested to offer interpretations of the target forms in a comprehension task. The findings showed that although both groups showed improvements on the post-test, however, Group A significantly outperformed Group B owing to the picture method used in the treatment.

Furthermore, several studies (e.g., Cronk & Schweigert, 1992; Cronk et al., 1993; Vaez-Dalili et al., 2017) examined the effects of contextualisation and visualisation on the comprehension of transparent and opaque idioms. Vaez-Dalili et al. (2017) examined the role of (de)contextualisation and image cues for mastering transparent and opaque idioms ( $n = 40$ ) among Iranian intermediate EFL learners ( $n = 90$ ), which were allocated into 3 different groups: contextualised (i.e., idioms in contexts), decontextualised (i.e. idioms in isolation) and image-cued learners. The findings suggested that mastering transparent idioms was far superior to opaque idioms across the three groups. Furthermore, using images was the most successful technique, followed by contextualisation, and lastly, decontextualisation was the least successful technique.

## 3. Statement of the Problem

This study sheds some light on the effects of contextual and pictorial cues, accessed via authentic resources, i.e. social media platforms, on mastering idioms among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. According to the best of the author's knowledge, despite the large and growing body of literature that had investigated mastering idioms and had tackled the challenging areas, the majority of the studies had examined idiom comprehension in artificial contexts. That is, they examined the usefulness of presenting idioms in the classroom with the use of different teaching methods. This study, however, examined the challenging area of understanding English idioms regarding the existence of contextual and pictorial cues in natural contexts, i.e., social media platforms. This paper could be considered to be among the first research carried out in this new context examining how



transparent and opaque idioms are understood by EFL learners. This paper provides some novel insights into the realm of mastering the non-literal language embedded in social media in foreign language development context.

#### 4. The Experimental Study

##### 4.1 Research Objectives

The study investigates the extent to which Arabic speakers of English find contextual and pictorial cues embedded in social media platforms helpful tools for mastering idioms. That is, whether authentic context and pictorial cues available via X and Snapchat help in making the target meanings more transparent and hence more comprehensible. The purpose of the present study was to examine the receptive knowledge of Arabic-speaking learners of English in Saudi Arabia with respect to idioms in/out of certain contexts and with/without pictorial cues, e.g., in daily conversations via social media platforms (e.g., X and Snapchat). To determine whether the available content of social media may help in appropriately delivering the intended meaning and may be beneficial for EFL classroom-based context.

##### 4.2 Research Questions

The current study is guided by the following questions:

**RQ1:** Do Arabic-speaking learners of English find pictorial cues embedded in social media platforms helpful in appropriately recognising the meaning of idioms rather than (de)contextual cues?



**RQ2:** What are the strategies Arabic-speaking learners of English use to comprehend the meanings of idioms embedded in social media platforms?

##### 4.3 Research Methodology

To address the questions raised, a random selection of thirty female high school students in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia were recruited for this study. The participants' age range was from 17 to 18 ( $M = 17.6$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ). The participants are originally from different Arab countries including Saudi Arabia ( $n = 10$ ), Yemen ( $n = 2$ ), Palestine ( $n = 4$ ), Syria ( $n = 3$ ), Egypt ( $n = 5$ ), and Sudan ( $n = 6$ ). The homogeneity of the participants was determined based on their performance on the Oxford Quick *Placement Test* (OQPT), devised by Oxford University Press and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (Syndicate, 2001). Nevertheless, their proficiency levels range from elementary ( $n = 20$ ) to lower intermediate ( $n = 8$ ) and only two of them were intermediate. This distribution does not allow making any solid comparison related to their proficiency levels. The study assesses the participants' receptive knowledge of idioms. The comprehension test required participants to offer interpretations of the target idioms (See Appendix A). The participants were divided into three groups: contextualised (i.e., exposed to idioms in context), decontextualised (i.e., exposed to idioms out of context) and visualised group (i.e., exposed to idioms with pictorial cues). Each group received the same amount ( $n = 24$ ) and type of idioms (transparent ( $n = 12$ ) vs. opaque ( $n = 12$ )) in different methods. The first part was designed to collect demographic information related to the participants' background (e.g., age, language spoken at home, and amount of exposure to the target language). Then the interpretation task was administered to assess the participants' comprehension of the relevant idioms. The third part includes an open-ended question to determine the method the learners often use while conferring English idioms.

A total of 24 items were randomly selected from the Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (2009). The researcher administered 3 versions of the test; only one version for each group. The idioms were displayed one by one on a large screen using an overhead projector for all the participants of the same group, not individually. Participants were initially asked to watch the screen and choose the appropriate interpretation among four-option items on a sheet of paper for the appearing English idiom (See Appendix A). Each version included identical idioms and the items in the three versions are randomly ordered with some distractors added to all of them. Version A includes idioms out of context and without pictorial cues. Version B with idioms delivered in written contexts. Version C with idioms delivered with the use of visualised cues (i.e., Snapchat bitmojis) for the same items of version A and B as they are represented in Snapchat, as shown in Table 2. Participants were not allowed to use a dictionary or to consult online resources. Afterwards, the participants were asked a post-task question related to how they often infer the meanings of idioms embedded in social media platforms to find out the most common inferring method (See Appendix A).

Table 2. An example of a test item used in the experiment: Piece of cake!

Idiom	Meaning	Versions		
		A	B	C
		Decontextualised	Contextualised (from X)	Visualised (from Snapchat)
<i>Piece of cake!</i>	<i>Extremely easy!</i>	<i>Piece of cake!</i>	e.g., hoping that my final exam is a piece of cake 	 Description: a Snapchat bitmoji that depicts a giant strawberry piece of cake with a lady eating satisfyingly.

The researcher attempted to measure the frequency of the target idioms using the British National Corpus (BNC). However, BNC typically shows all contexts in which the form might appear even if it stands for literal meaning and nonliteral meaning. For instance, the English idiom *on the fence* may mean someone who is sitting literally on a fence or the target figurative meaning “being neutral”. Taking into consideration that the BNC enquiry brings all contexts with all meanings (both literal and nonliteral), the researcher excluded frequency and included transparency only. The design included only transparent and opaque idioms. The design aims to determine whether transparent and opaque idioms could be recognised in/out of contexts and with/without pictorial cues. Simply, the incorporated transparent idioms mean the literal and nonliteral meanings are closely related. Opaque idioms mean the literal and nonliteral meanings are not related. Examples of the transparent and opaque idioms from this study are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Examples of transparent and opaque idioms

Variable		Example	Meaning
Transparency	Transparent	<i>on the fence</i>	being unable to decide
	Opaque	<i>kick the bucket</i>	to die

To ensure the validity of the test items, the researcher consulted faculty members’ intuitions ( $n = 3$ ) who have extensive experience in teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia. They are native speakers of Arabic who are highly fluent in English and currently work as members of the English Department at Taif University. They were selected to judge whether the test items are transparent or opaque. And to make sure that the test items include simple, short, and familiar vocabulary appropriate to the participants’ level of proficiency. Ethical considerations were taken into account. All participants signed informed consent forms before the study onset. The study was piloted ( $n = 5$ ) to assess the design and, according to it, necessary modifications were made.

## 5. Results

One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare the effect of three different techniques on the learners’ performance across the three groups and to test the difference in understanding score between the groups.

Table 4. Results of the one-way ANOVA comparing the effect of three different techniques

Groups	N	M	SD	F	Sig.
A Decontextualised	10	4.50	0.707	147.181	<b>0.000</b>
B Contextualised	10	18.40	4.168		
C Visualised	10	23.50	1.354		

The results of the ANOVA showed a significant difference between the groups ( $F = 147.181$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) as shown in Table 4. The mean scores for the groups were as follows: idioms out of context ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.707$ ), idioms in context ( $M = 18.40$ ,  $SD = 4.168$ ), and idioms with pictures ( $M = 23.50$ ,  $SD = 1.354$ ). Figure 5 demonstrated that the visualised group outperformed the contextualised group. Whereas, the decontextualised group was the weakest group. These results suggest that providing contextual and pictorial cues can significantly improve the understanding of idioms among Arabic-speaking learners of English. The findings have implications for language teachers and course designers who seek to enhance the effectiveness of language learning materials and pedagogy, particularly in the domain of idiomatic expressions.

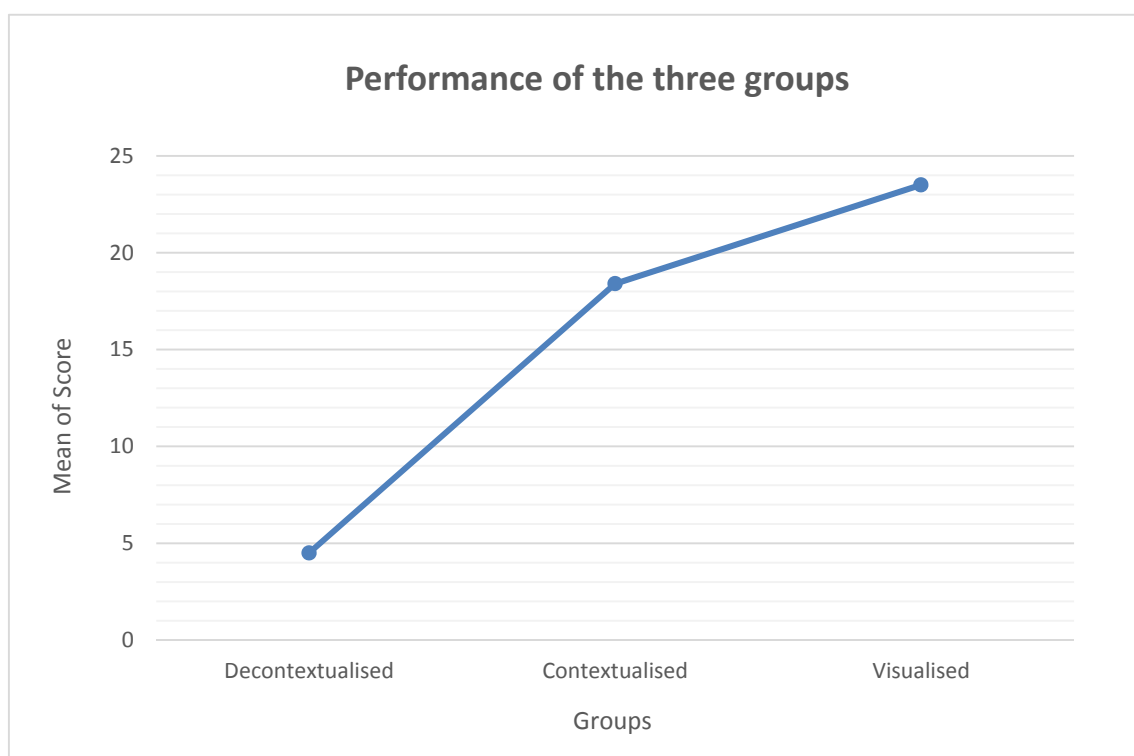


Figure 5. Results of the effect of the three different techniques used across the three experimental groups

Bonferroni Post Hoc Test for multiple comparisons was used to determine exactly which groups differ from each other. Table 5 shows that all mean differences between the groups are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), as indicated by the asterisk (\*) in the Sig. column. The test showed that the mean value of task score was significantly different between group A,  $M = -14$ ,  $SD = 1.15$  and group B,  $M = 14$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ , ( $p = 0.000$ , 95% C.I. = [-16.82, -10.8]). There was also significantly different between group A,  $M = -19$ ,  $SD = 1.14$  and group C,  $M = -19$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ , ( $p = 0.000$ , 95% C.I. = [-21.93, -16.07]). There was also significantly different between group B,  $M = -5.1$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ , ( $p = 0.000$ , 95% C.I. = [16.07, 8.03]) and group C,  $M = 5.1$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ , ( $p = 0.000$ , 95% C.I. = [-8.02, -2.17]). Specifically, the decontextualised group had significantly lower mean scores than the contextualised and visualised groups, and the visualised group had significantly higher mean scores than the other two groups.

Table 5. Results of the Bonferroni post-hoc multiple comparisons across the three groups.

<b>Bonferroni</b>						
(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
A Decontextualised	B	-13.900*	1.146	.000	-16.826	-10.974
	C	-19.000*	1.146	.000	-21.926	-16.074
B Contextualised	A	13.900*	1.146	.000	10.974	16.826
	C	-5.100*	1.146	.000	-8.026	-2.174
C Visualised	A	19.000*	1.146	.000	16.074	21.926
	B	5.100*	1.146	.000	2.174	8.026

\*, The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Furthermore, the transparent idioms had a mean score of 8.63 and a standard deviation of 3.306, while the opaque idioms had a mean score of 6.83 and a standard deviation of 5.292. The t-value was 1.580 and the significance level was 0.121. This suggests that there was no significant difference in understanding scores across the groups at the 0.05 level of significance as Table 6 demonstrated.

Table 6. Results of the t-test of learners' performance across the three groups on transparent and opaque idioms

Idioms	M	SD	t	Sig.
Transparent	8.63	3.306	1.580	0.121
Opaque	6.83	5.292		

## 6. Discussion

Turning now to the experimental evidence on the power of the cues accessible by means of social media in delivering figurative language, this study was designed to address the following questions:

*Q1: Do Arabic-speaking learners of English find pictorial cues embedded in social media platforms helpful in appropriately recognising the meaning of idioms rather than (de)contextual cues?*

Concerning the first research question, the most obvious finding from the analysis is that the participants' performance significantly varied across the three versions: non-context, context, and pictorial-cued. The findings suggest that the participants who relied upon visual cues had achieved higher accuracy in guessing the appropriate meanings of the idioms. Others who relied upon context to guess the idiomatic meanings were less accurate. Whereas, the decontextualised group struggled to infer the meaning since no cues were provided neither contextual nor pictorial. That is, there were differences in the individuals' performance on the idiom interpretation test. Group A face challenges in understanding idioms out of context and in the absence of any visual cues. The findings suggest that the participants could recognise idioms in context more than those out of context. This suggests that context plays a fundamental role in facilitating the process of inferring many English idioms even though most of these idioms were unfamiliar to them. They found idioms in visualised cues such as *back to the grind* more effortless to master than when they occur in only written contexts or out of context. Consistent with the literature, findings of this research lend support to the conclusions of Vaez-Dalili et al. (2017) who suggested that using images was the most successful technique, followed by contextualisation, and lastly, decontextualisation was the least successful technique.

However, the single most striking observation to emerge from the data was that there was no significant difference in inferring transparent and opaque idioms across the three groups. That is, mastering transparent idioms was not far superior to opaque idiom. This can be justified by the fact that some opaque idioms were frequently used and familiar to them. Nevertheless, the results suggested that high-transparent idioms were slightly more straightforward to recognise than low-transparent idioms although the difference is not significant. The participants found more transparent idioms such as *a piece of cake* unproblematic to infer than less opaque idioms such as *the elephant in the room*. Furthermore, the participants found highly familiar and corresponding idioms to their L1 such as, *strike while the iron is hot*, effortless to master rather than non-corresponding idioms such as, *go Dutch*. It is worth noting that participants across the three groups found some culture-specific idioms somehow challenging even with the availability of the contextual and the pictorial cues. Therefore, many aspects of the languages, such as culture, history, and environment, should be taken into account when introducing idioms to EFL learners.

*RQ2: What methods do Arabic-speaking learners of English often use to comprehend the meanings of idioms embedded in social media platforms?*

With respect to the second question, the participants have reported that they often tend to use a wide range of techniques to comprehend idioms including guessing, L1 knowledge, and literal translation, looking for unfamiliar expressions in the dictionary, consulting online resources, among others. They also asserted that the most frequently used method was predicting the meaning of expressions from the given context, based on available verbal and/or visual materials (if any). The participants claimed that the idioms that lack meaningful contexts and were challenging to identify, led to an inappropriate understanding.

However, the participants asserted that some of the visual cues implemented in Snapchat were misleading and depicted the meaning literally which result in unfruitful understanding of idioms, such as a bitmoji depicts a lady in a laboratory for *have chemistry*, a lady holding a cast for *break a leg*, a lady on the back of a whale for *having a whale of a time* ... etc. This leads them to infer the meanings literally. Although some of them noticed this trait and avoided any literal interpretations and realised that there are some hidden meanings.

## **7. Limitations, Implications and Avenues for Future Research**

Taken together, these results provide important insights into the context of foreign language learning and teaching despite the small sample size. This involves the call to integrate into the contemporary program the models of language learning in electronic devices environment, where language learning is perceived as a process of linking materials. Language learning in a hypertextual setting is perceived as a process of joining materials, when learners have capacity to recognise the links between diverse contexts and can cope with the challenge of multilingualism. Language learning in social media is grounded on the principles of mastering context complication, in relation to authentic materials. In hypertextually, learners have a chance to shape their own constructions from the target culture, and outline their learning objectives. Using social media platforms, with its hypertextually, teachers can personalise the learning progression, making it pictorial and stimulating, which permits learners to accommodate the target language innovatively. It is an opportunity to generate a link between texts, contexts and users within authentic resources. Learners can create their own hypertext, they can organise materials the way they understand it, using diverse resources as a method to incorporate text with audio-visuals. Social media language makes it potential to create in learners' novel, language-specific, meaning-making, means as Bourina and Dunaeva (2019) also recommended.

Integrating hypermedia materials for teaching a foreign language entails that this material has to be continually treated by several schemes of memory. This suggests that if a text additionally comprises several pictorial materials at the short-term recall phase, memorisation will take place. This makes it potential to provide a wide range of learning styles and advance the learner's own cognitive style. Instructors must consider the learners' styles including visualised learners. Visual learners typically prefer images and videos, whilst verbal learners prefer verbal materials. This multidimensional environment delivers entirely novel opportunities for accessing authentic materials related to the target language, culture, history, etc. It mirrors the interested area in a multidimensional manner.

Knowledge of the meaning of a large assortment of idiomatic expressions and the capability to put them in a proper context are among the distinctive features of English native speakers. EFL learners who attempt to misuse or avoid idiomatic expressions will always look non-native as Laufer (2000) asserted. EFL learners who desire to attain high levels of proficiency must master more about idiomatic expressions and overcome their challenges, communicate with English native speakers and access rich and authentic resources of idioms. Mastering idioms must be the key objective of any program that seeks to accomplish higher EFL communicative proficiency. It is significant for textbook designers and instructors to present idioms despite their degree of formality in a communicative method and explicitly show how, when and where to use them appropriately in a native-like manner. Therefore, it is desirable for textbook designers and EFL instructors to closely pay close attention to idioms and to present them in diverse contexts to support learners in overcoming this difficulty efficiently and achieving a high level of English proficiency. Idioms must be introduced systematically and competently. Learners must be offered further precise and convenient accounts of the meanings, origins, and usage of idioms together with proper practise to facilitate recognising and producing them successfully. A relevant and rich context with stimulating activities and helpful pictorial cues plays a role for better comprehension, greater fluency and higher accuracy.

Figurative language must be introduced primarily in early stages of foreign language development and it should not be introduced separately. For instance, idioms must be introduced daily and linked to every vocabulary lesson, such as vocabulary related to body parts, colours, plants, and animals. Instructors must make it clear that

these literal meanings might deliver metaphorical meanings in certain contexts and provide sufficient explanations using mind mapping and exercises. They can present the new word in different meaningful contexts and show the intended meaning for each, such as the word *rat* can occur as *a lab rat*, *smell a rat*, *rat race*, *rat on someone*, and *to look like a drowned rat*. Instructors can also use Pictionary games in the classroom to teach the target forms.

Considerably more work will need to be done to determine how different cues can be merged and look at how they would collaborate on different social media platforms to better deliver the intended meanings and how communicative competence can be enhanced using this multidimensional technology.

## 8. Conclusion

The findings of the current study revealed that visualisation was the more effective method for mastering idioms than contextualisation. On the other hand, decontextualisation was the least effective method. That is, the findings suggest that most of the participants are likely to recognise idioms in visualised contexts more than idioms out of context. The participants found Snapchat bitmojis considerably helpful in interpreting a number of meanings of the idioms although some of them are still misleading. The findings also support the conclusion that context plays a significant role in activating the process of successfully recognising English idioms. Furthermore, one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that some high-transparent idioms were slightly more straightforward to recognise than low-transparent idioms although the difference was not significant. The findings of this study have several significant implications for future practise associated with understanding how idioms must be presented to EFL learners in multidimensional ways.

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## Ethical Approval

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Taif University, Saudi Arabia (Application code: 42-356). The author considered all the ethical procedures for including human participants. All participants agreed to voluntarily participate in the study and signed consent forms.

## Competing interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this research.

## Authors' contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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## Availability of data and materials

The data is available upon request by contacting the author.

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## Appendix A

### Section 1: Biographical information

- 1) How old are you? .....
- 2) What is your nationality? .....
- 3) Do your parents speak the same language? .....
- 4) Which other language/s do you speak? If any, how do you learn them? Mention them in order.  
.....
- 5) Have you attended English classes outside school? If yes, for how long?  
.....
- 6) When did you start learning English? How old were you?  
.....
- 7) Have you spent time in an English-speaking country? (Where? /For how long? /What for?)  
.....

### Section 2: Multiple Choice Interpretation Task

Choose the best answer that interprets the provided context. You are not allowed to use a dictionary:

A: Example of Version A (n = 24) : Decontextualised

1. off the charts.

- |                                |                            |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| a. show extremely a high level | b. reached a normal level  |
| c. show a standard range       | d. reached a typical level |

B: Example of Version B (n = 24): Contextualised

1. This man's sarcasm is always off the charts.

- |                                |                            |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| a. show extremely a high level | b. reached a normal level  |
| c. show a standard range       | d. reached a typical level |

C: Example of Version C (n = 24): Visualised

1. This man's sarcasm is always off the charts.

- |                                |                            |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| a. show extremely a high level | b. reached a normal level  |
| c. show a standard range       | d. reached a typical level |



Note: A full version of the multiple-choice interpretation task (included 72 items) is available upon request.

### Section 3: Open-ended question

1. What methods do you often use to understand the meanings of idioms embedded in social media platforms?

.....

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.....

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