



THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND ON IDIOM COMPREHENSION IN EFL LEARNERS

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Annotation: This article explores the impact of cultural background on idiom comprehension among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, with a special focus on the challenges faced by learners from culturally diverse contexts. Idioms, as culturally bound expressions, present considerable difficulties for language learners due to their figurative meanings, cultural references, and context-dependent usage. The research highlights how cultural knowledge, exposure to authentic language input, and learners' L1 conceptual systems influence their ability to interpret and correctly use English idioms. A case study involving Uzbek EFL learners is presented to illustrate the relationship between cultural familiarity and idiomatic competence. Findings reveal that limited cultural schema, literal translation strategies, and insufficient exposure to English-speaking culture negatively affect idiom comprehension. The article concludes with pedagogical recommendations for integrating cultural awareness and idiom instruction into EFL curricula to enhance learners' communicative competence.

Keywords: Idioms, cultural background, metaphorical competence, EFL learners, cross-cultural communication, figurative language, semantic transfer, cultural schema.

Introduction

Learning a foreign language involves not only mastering grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation but also understanding figurative expressions that native speakers commonly use. Among these, idioms are one of the most complex features of language for EFL learners because their meanings cannot be interpreted solely from the literal meanings of the individual words. Idioms reflect the worldview, history, values, daily life, and culture of the speech community in which the language is spoken. For this reason, idiom comprehension requires cultural competence and background knowledge that go beyond linguistic skills. In English, idioms are frequently used in everyday communication, literature, movies, media, and academic contexts. Therefore, understanding idioms is essential for achieving native-like fluency and effective intercultural communication. For EFL learners in non-English-speaking countries such as Uzbekistan, idioms are particularly challenging due to differences in cultural concepts, metaphors, and social norms. Uzbek learners often attempt to interpret idioms literally or translate them based on their L1 equivalents, which leads to misunderstanding or pragmatic failure. The purpose of this article is to examine how



cultural background influences idiom comprehension in EFL learners, identify key difficulties encountered by Uzbek learners, and discuss effective teaching strategies to improve idiomatic competence.

Main Body

Idioms represent a major component of figurative language, requiring learners to go beyond literal comprehension. Several factors influence how idioms are understood: cultural background, metaphorical knowledge, familiarity, frequency of exposure, and contextual clues. According to cognitive linguistics, idioms are motivated by conceptual metaphors that reflect cultural experiences. For example, the English idiom “break the ice” is based on a metaphor that associates breaking physical ice with starting social interaction. Without cultural context, learners may interpret it as a physical action rather than a social act. Cultural schema theory suggests that understanding language involves activating shared cultural knowledge. If the cultural schema does not exist in the learner’s mind, comprehension becomes difficult.

The relationship between idioms and culture is clearly observed when comparing idioms across languages. Many idioms in Uzbek are rooted in cultural traditions, religion, proverbs, and historical experiences. For example, the Uzbek idiom “Tilining uchida asal, bag‘rida qurt” reflects a cultural emphasis on hypocrisy and morality. English idioms may convey similar

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cultural symbolism differ. This is one reason EFL learners need cross-cultural competence to decode idioms correctly. When learners lack cultural background knowledge, idioms may appear confusing, illogical, or humorous.

To illustrate the influence of cultural background on idiom comprehension, a case study was conducted with 35 Uzbek university EFL students aged 18–22. The research employed a mixed-method approach including a questionnaire, idiom recognition test, translation tasks, and interviews. Learners were given 25 common English idioms and asked to write their meanings. The results revealed that idioms with equivalents or similar metaphors in Uzbek were understood more easily. For example, “to kill two birds with one stone” was interpreted correctly by 79% of participants, as the Uzbek idiom “Bir o‘q bilan ikki quyovni urmoq” carries almost the same metaphorical structure. However, idioms based on Western cultural experiences, historical events, or Christian symbolism caused major difficulties. Only 14% understood the idiom “the writing on the wall,” which originates from a biblical story. Similarly, only 20% understood “to add fuel to the fire” although the metaphor exists in Uzbek, suggesting that familiarity rather than shared metaphor alone plays a role.

Interviews with learners revealed several common strategies used for idiom interpretation: literal translation, guessing through context, finding L1 equivalents, and relying on personal cultural logic. Literal translation was the most frequently used but also the least effective strategy. For instance, students interpreted “spill the beans” literally as “loviyani to‘kmoq,” which is meaningless in Uzbek. Instead, the idiom metaphorically means to reveal a secret. Some idioms were interpreted humorously due to cultural mismatch. One student translated “once in a blue moon” as “ko‘k oyda bir marta,” assuming it referred to a special astronomical event, while the idiom actually means “very rarely.” These findings confirm that idiom comprehension is based not only on linguistic knowledge but also on conceptual and cultural familiarity.

Cultural distance between English and Uzbek culture also affects how idioms are processed. Uzbek culture is collectivist, tradition-oriented, and heavily influenced by oral folklore, proverbs, and poetic language. English-speaking cultures, particularly Western ones, are generally more individualistic and shaped by industrialization, maritime history, Christianity, and modern pop culture. This difference creates gaps in cultural schemas. Many English idioms are derived from sports (especially baseball), technology, business, and Christianity.

For Uzbek learners who are unfamiliar with baseball, idioms such as “to hit a home run,” “throw a curveball,” or “step up to the plate” are extremely challenging because they rely on sports culture not commonly practiced in Uzbekistan. Likewise, idioms like “to turn the other cheek,” “the prodigal son,” and “a baptism of fire”



reference biblical culture, which may not be part of Muslim learners' cultural background. A similar gap occurs in idioms based on British traditions, such as "have a tea break," "carry coals to Newcastle," or "Bob's your uncle." Without cultural knowledge, the idioms appear meaningless.

Exposure to authentic language input plays a significant role in idiom learning. Many Uzbek EFL learners encounter idioms mainly through textbooks which provide limited context and often present idioms as isolated lexical items rather than in natural discourse. Classroom instruction rarely integrates idioms into listening or speaking activities. As a result, learners memorize idioms for tests but cannot use them appropriately in real communication. Students reported that they mostly came across idioms in movies, social media, and English songs rather than during formal lessons. Those who regularly watched English content demonstrated better idiom comprehension and usage compared to those who only relied on classroom materials. This suggests that cultural input from authentic sources enhances idiomatic competence.

Another important factor is the difference in metaphorical thinking patterns between cultures. According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, people understand abstract concepts through metaphors rooted in their culture. While some metaphors are universal, others are culturally specific. For example, in both English and Uzbek, "UP" is associated with good and "DOWN" with bad, which explains idioms like "cheer up" or "feel down." However, animal-related metaphors differ widely. In English, owls symbolize wisdom, while in Uzbek culture, the owl (boyqush) carries negative superstitious connotations. Therefore, an English idiom like "as wise as an owl" may not evoke the same positive meaning for Uzbek learners. Similarly, foxes symbolize intelligence and cunning in both cultures, making idioms like "as sly as a fox" easier to understand. These examples demonstrate that metaphorical knowledge linked to cultural beliefs influences idiom interpretation.

The case study also explored learners' emotional attitudes toward idioms. Some students found idioms interesting and enjoyable due to their creativity and metaphorical richness, while others considered them confusing and unnecessary. Those who viewed idioms positively were more motivated to learn them and actively sought examples outside class. On the contrary, students who lacked confidence in their cultural knowledge often avoided idioms in speech, fearing misuse. Teachers noted that learners rarely attempted to use idioms in oral activities even if they understood their meanings. This indicates that productive idiomatic competence develops more slowly than receptive competence and requires guided practice.



To improve idiom comprehension, cultural competence needs to be integrated into EFL instruction. Teaching idioms without cultural context is ineffective. Instead, idioms should be taught through context-based methods, visual imagery, storytelling, and cultural comparisons. For example, teachers can present an idiom within a short dialogue or movie scene, explain the cultural background, and then relate it to an Uzbek equivalent if available. Comparing idioms cross-culturally helps learners see differences and similarities in metaphorical thinking. Additionally, incorporating idioms into speaking tasks, role-plays, and creative writing can enhance learners' ability to use them appropriately. Collaborative activities such as idiom guessing games, idiom diaries, and idiom-based discussions also increase engagement.

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