

## The Effect of Three Different Methods in Teaching English Idioms to Iranian Pre-University Students

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### **Abstract**

The present study investigated the effect of using pictures, first Language (L1) translation which in this case is Persian, and second language (L2) definition, i.e. English, on the learning of 20 idioms by 60 Iranian Pre-University female students. They aged between 16 and 17. The focus was on learning the meaning of the idioms. At first, a multiple choice idiom test was given to the participants in order to ensure the participants' unfamiliarity with the idioms. The idioms that were known even by one student were crossed out. Out of 40 items, 20 were selected which were unknown to the subjects. Each group of the participants received the instruction in three sessions (seven idioms each session). The participants received a multiple-choice recognition test in the fourth session. The delayed posttest was given to them in the form of fill-in-the-blanks in order to determine which method had been more effective for a production test. The findings showed that the picture group outperformed the other groups in both recognition and production tests. The results suggested that using pictures had a significant pedagogical value in teaching the meaning of idioms to Pre-University students.

**Keywords:** Idioms, L1 translation, L2 definition, Method of instruction, Production test, Recognition test.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The vibrant side of any language is idioms. They are one of the symbols used when we are expressing our thoughts and feelings. They are used to make the language interesting by taking the usual words and combining them in a new way, and making new meanings, such as a work of art (Lennon, 1998). Native speakers frequently use them in their daily conversations; therefore, idioms form a very important part of any natural language (Vanlancker-Sidtis, 2003; Wray & Perkins, 2000). Some may raise questions as "What are

idioms?” And “How do they differ from other forms of language?” As Baker (1992), declares:

Idioms, fixed expressions and proverbs are frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and, in the case of idioms, they often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. Unlike idioms, however, fixed expressions and proverbs often have fairly transparent meanings. The meaning of a proverb can easily be deduced from the meanings of the words which constitute it (pp. 63-65).

Another definition of an idiom could be deduced as ‘an expression whose meaning cannot be derived from its constituent parts’ (Stein and Su, 1980, p.444). For instance, the idiomatic meaning of ‘he spilled the beans’ has nothing to do with beans or with spilling in its literal sense. Most idioms have literal counterparts as well, which makes them even more difficult to learn. A native speaker will quickly realize which meaning is intended, while the second language learner is left trying to figure out where the beans came from and how they were spilled. With this brief background, the current study examines the effect of different methods to teach idioms to Pre-University students. To put it more precisely, this study compares the performance of three groups of participants on both recognition and production tasks including teaching idioms after they have been exposed to these idioms through providing the first group with the corresponding pictures of those idioms, the second group with L1 translation, and the third group with L2 definition. Learning English idioms is essential to L2 learners, and every L2 learner must prepare himself to meet this challenge. In fact, L2 learners should learn not only the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the target language but the idioms as well to integrate themselves into the culture of the L2.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *A. Defining Idioms*

An idiom is a phrase whose figurative meaning cannot be understood from a word by word or literal meaning. According to Cooper (1998), an idiom can have a literal meaning as well as a figurative one. Via metaphor, the figurative meaning may be grasped. He exemplifies the idiom ‘in the hole’ and explains that although it can mean to be inside of the hole, but the figurative meaning is ‘to be in debt’. D’Angelo Bromley (1994) explains that the meaning of an idiom cannot be determined via its grammatical structure or its word-for-word translation. The meaning could not always be deduced from the surrounding material either. Without a doubt, language learners face a certain vocabulary learning problem by this notion. Idioms, proverbs and collocations are word expressions that have special choice of words and culture specific meaning. Among all the aforementioned fixed expressions, idioms are more neglected in language learning. According to Sinclair (1991), a definition for an idiom is “a group of two or more words which are chosen together in order to produce a specific meaning or effect in speech or writing”. Idioms are used to describe personality, physical appearance, health, illness, success and work. McCarthy and O’Dell (2010), categorize idioms based on the notions of literature and myths, the farm animals, body parts, places, colors, etc.

### *B. Learning Idioms*

As Cooper (1999) mentions, it is beneficial to conduct studies on the second language learners' acquisition of idiom. Three hypotheses are formulated by him regarding the process of idioms which are manifested into a systematic scheme for teaching idioms in the classroom environment. The first one is called the literal hypothesis. It includes two modes: one processes the literal meaning and the other the figurative meaning of an idiom. The former is usually the active mode while the latter functions whenever the literal meaning does not conform correctly into the speech context. The second one, which is called the simultaneous processing hypothesis, holds that idioms are stored and revived in the mental lexicon in the form of chunks. Literal and figurative meaning act upon one another and an interpretation which fits the context most handsomely is retrieved. The third hypothesis is called the direct access model and it only regards the figurative meaning of an idiom. This suggests that it is very seldom to examine the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression.

### *C. Teaching Idioms*

Students certainly will encounter idiomatic expression on a daily basis; whether in an English-speaking country or via movies and TV shows. This is definitely a sheer reason as to why they are needed to develop idiom awareness during their language learning. Besides, idioms look like to be difficult to acquire and understand. This difficulty and complexity of idiom acquisition within language learning is another reason why teachers should expound and teach idioms to students. Since the necessity of teaching idioms to English learners has been mentioned earlier, the studies which were conducted on learning and teaching idioms will be discussed in this section. Although numerous studies have been conducted regarding vocabulary acquisition very little research concentrates specifically on acquiring idiomatic expressions. Instead, idioms are seen as a crucial factor regarding fluency in a language and are often mixed in the term vocabulary. Nation (2001) holds that "[i]dioms need to be dealt with as if they were words; they should be given attention on the basis of their frequency and range of occurrence" (p. 335). The word used is MWUs (multi word units) – a term that is much broader than idioms. Although Nation and Meara (2002), pay considerable attention to learning individual words, they hold that "learning MWUs can occur across the four learning strands as well (p. 44). Schmitt (2000) and Nation and Meara (2002) compare explicit and incidental learning as two approaches for learning vocabulary. Schmitt (2000) shows that "[e]xplicit learning focuses attention directly on the information to be learned, which gives the greatest chance for its acquisition" (p. 120). Nation and Meara (2002) support this notion, and they say further that "deliberate learning is more focused and goal-directed than incidental learning" (p. 41). They regard that "[e]xplicit vocabulary teaching is one way of encouraging deliberate vocabulary learning" (Ibid., pp. 42 – 43). However, Schmitt (2000), as well as Nation and Meara (2002), recognize that incidental learning is fruitful although Schmitt (2000) declares "it is slower and more gradual, lacking the focused attention of explicit learning" (p. 102). A great deal of studies (Boers, PiquerPíriz, Stengers & Eyckmans, 2009, Boers & Lindstromberg,

2005, Boers & Lindstromberg, 2006) have investigated the effect of using image and sounds for teaching idioms. The articles explain if images or sounds can help learners to recall, and even reproduce idioms. Pedagogical implications are explored by Cooper (1998) for idiom teaching “for teaching idioms to native language learners, bilingual students and, foreign language learners” (ibid, p.255). These are manifested into teaching propositions which involves a systematic plan. He provides idiom definition, statistics regarding the use of idioms and various ways of classifying and processing them as well. D’Angelo Bromley (1984), declares that children “do not have the linguistic competence of adults nor do they know as many idioms” (ibid, p. 273). This claim is also applicable to non-native speakers. Thus, it is essential for teachers to take into account how to teach idiomatic meanings. Boers (2001) conducted a study to investigate if whether an idiom’s etymological origin can help L2 learners remember the meaning of it. He declares that not all subjects shared the same insights about the origins of the idioms but if the aim of the task is to include image processing that might not be significant. Boers and Lindstromberg (2005) investigated an experiment that showed “students were consistently more likely to remember expressions that happen to alliterate than ones which don’t” (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2005, p. 5). They concluded that the alliteration significantly increased students’ awareness of certain alliterative phrases. Thus, they propose some exercises that go beyond noticing and activate the mnemonic potential of alliteration in a functional manner. A large number of the activities involve a chanting phase since alliterations are more conspicuous in speech rather than in writing. Some studies propose that pictures of idioms help some learners to grasp and recall them and their figurative meaning. Boers et al. (2009), conducted a study regarding this notion. It concludes that “[w]hile [...] (good) pictorial elucidation is likely to facilitate retention of the meaning of idioms, [...] its contribution to retention of the form of idioms - i.e. their precise lexical composition - for purposes of re-production may well be negligible” (ibid, p. 377). Applying pictures can make education more pleasant to learners; however, teachers will use pictures with other materials in the class. The researchers of this study recommend that pictures be applied in the context after the verbal information has been provided. Regarding using pictures while teaching idioms, Fotovatnia and Khaki (2012) conducted a research on the effectiveness of three methods in teaching idioms to TEFL undergraduates, it was concluded that pictorial aids are favored among other methods.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Participants

The participants were selected from 120 Iranian female pre-university students who were studying in three extracurricular classes at Tarbiat High School in Sirjan. All 120 participants took a multiple choice idiom test in order to ensure their unfamiliarity of the idioms. Out of 120 participants only 60 students were selected based on their grades on the aforementioned idiom test. Based on a computer-generated table of random numbers, those 60 students who were selected based on their grades on the idiom test were randomly assigned into three groups. The number of subjects in each group was 20. They were all aged

between 17 and 18 since they were in the same grade. They also matched each other in grade (pre-university students), and school (Tarbiat High School for Girls). As noted earlier, they came mostly from the same neighborhood and were the same gender and age. Since the students came from the same country, i.e. Iran, where English is a foreign language, therefore, they had little prior knowledge of target idioms in the study since most of them were not proficient enough in English to be familiar with English idioms. Thus, their background knowledge of English was limited to their textbook which contained nothing about English idioms. However, a few of the subjects attended extracurricular English courses outside their regular classes in their high school.

### *B. Materials*

**a.** Harry Collins' (2007) '101 American English Idioms' book was used as the source of idioms, both for the treatment and idiom tests.

**b.** A pretest was given to the participants three weeks before the experiment in order to find out whether the learners knew the meaning of idioms or not. Then, based on the results of the pretest, the idioms that were known even by one student were crossed out and replaced by other unknown idioms.

**c.** A recognition test in the format of a multiple-choice test on the meaning of idioms, was given to the participants. It included 20 items. It should be noted that in the recognition test, the participants were asked to choose the best answer that completed each idiom.

**d.** After two weeks, the participants took the delayed production posttest on the meaning of the idioms in the form of fill-in-the-blanks. This test included 20 English idioms, and the participants were asked to complete the idioms in the blanks.

### *C. Procedure*

First, a multiple choice idiom test was prepared, involving 40 idioms selected from Collis (2007). It was given to the participants three weeks before the experiment in order to find out whether the learners knew the meaning of idioms or not. Then, based on the results of the pretest, the idioms that were known even by one student were crossed out and the other unknown idioms were retained. Out of the 40 idioms tested, only 20 were completely unfamiliar to the participants. Therefore, they became the source of the treatment. Then the idioms were typed with their corresponding pictures based on Collis' (2007) book in a booklet format and were handed out to the first group. The same procedure was performed for the translation and the definition groups, but no picture was involved. The former received the Persian translation of those 20 idioms, and the latter was provided with their English definitions. The 20 idioms, which were selected after the first idiom test, were taught to the subjects in three sessions. In each session, the meanings of about seven idioms were explained to each group. The language of instruction was English in all the three groups. At the end of each session, the subjects were asked to clarify the meaning of each idiom in their own words in order to ensure the explanations were clear. After the end of the treatment

sessions, assessments followed which contained two tests: the first one was a multiple choice recognition idiom test which was given to the participants one week after the end of the treatment. It contained the 20 instructed idioms chosen from 101 American English Idioms (Collis, 2007). The subjects were required to choose the correct answer among four options. The second test taken by the participants was a delayed production posttest with a fill-in-the-blanks format two weeks after the recognition test. The posttest included all those 20 idioms which were presented to the subjects in a multiple-choice format. The participants were required to complete a sentence by putting a suitable idiom into a blank in the sentence, according to the context. The test aimed to measure participants' productive knowledge of the idioms since they needed to write the idioms out based on context clues and explanation hints which were given to them in the treatment sessions. A test is valid when "it measures what it is supposed to measure" (Oller, 1979, p. 70). Therefore, to ensure that the tests employed in the present investigation were valid, face, content and construct validity was used. The construct validity was measured via Winsteps software (Linacre, 2012). The test items were evaluated by some experts in the field to validate the suitability of the tasks to the subjects' abilities, the clarity of the instructions, the feasibility of test items, the suitability of the allotted time, and test organization. Necessary changes to the test items and their format were made based on the advice given by the corresponding author's supervisor and advisor (see Acknowledgements section) of this article. For the reliability of the test, a similar idiom test was designed with another sample of the same population. It included 75 subjects and the idiom test contained 25 items. The reliability of the pilot idiom test was measured by SPSS software (SPSS Inc., 2009). The value of Alpha reached .736. In the first treatment session, the aims of the experiment were explained. The participants were familiarized with the notion of idioms and their vast usage in daily conversations among English native speakers in general. In addition, the students were asked to learn some random idioms so that they can feel more confident while trying to communicate with their classmates. In the second and third session, it was crucial for the students to acquire the idioms simultaneously while they were engaged in group interactions without forcing them to participate and without demanding them to master the idioms use. In order to do that, lengthy presentations were avoided and the use of dialogues in everyday situations and the booklet which contained the selected idioms in context was the focus of attention. The students' seats were arranged in groups of four or five in order to practice the idioms easily. The idioms were explained to them (about 7 in each session) in a lecture-question format. At the end of each session, they were asked to clarify the meaning of the idioms in order to make sure there were no vague points in the explanations. It should be mentioned that English was the main language which was used in all classes in order to give the instruction to the subjects. In the next session, the participants received a recognition test in the form of multiple-choice. Two weeks later, they took a delayed posttest which was in the form of a fill-in-the-blanks test. Before giving the instruction, the recognition and production tests were piloted with a similar group of students in order to ensure the clarity of instructions and questions and to determine the reliability of the test as well as the time needed for answering the tests. The time allocated for taking the recognition test was about 20 minutes, and the time needed for the production test was about 40 minutes.

#### IV. RESULTS

##### A. The significant effect of the three methods on learning the meaning of English idioms measured through a recognition task

**Table 1: One-Way ANOVA for the Meaning Scores of Idioms in the Recognition Posttest**

	Sum of Squares	F	Sig.
Between Groups	603.700	58.294	.000
Within Groups	295.150		
Total	898.850		

Table 1 shows that there was no significant differences among the participants,  $F$  (58.294),  $p = 000$ . Post hoc tests were run to spot where the differences are laid down and to determine which of the three groups have performed differently.

**Table 2: Post Hoc Test on the Mean Difference of Participants' Performance on the Meaning of Idioms in 1<sup>st</sup> Recognition Posttest**

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
picture	translation	2.950*	.720	.000	1.22	4.68
	definition	7.700	.720	.000	5.97	9.43
translation	picture	-2.950	.720	.000	-4.68	-1.22
	definition	4.750	.720	.275	3.02	6.48
English definition	picture	-7.700*	.720	.000	-9.43	-5.97
	Translation	-4.750	.720	.275	-6.48	-3.02

\*.The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The performance of the picture group on learning the meaning of idioms was significantly better than the translation group (mean difference 2.950) and the English definition (-7.700). In addition, no significant difference between the English definition and the translation groups was found. However, the performance of the translation group (mean

difference-2.950) was significantly better than the English definition (mean difference - 7.700) .

*B. The significant effect of the three methods on learning the meaning of English idioms measured through a production task*

**Table 3. ONE-WAY ANOVA for the Meaning Score of idioms the Delayed Production Posttest**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	867.033	2	433.517	54.675	.000
Within Groups	451.950	57	7.929		
Total	1318.983	59			

Table 3.indicates there was no significant differences among the participants,  $F(54.675), p = 000$ .

**Table 4. Post Hoc Tests on the Mean Differences of Participants' Performance on Meaning of Idioms in Delayed Production Test**

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
picture	translation	3.700*	.89	.000	1.56	5.84
	definition	9.250	.89	.000	7.11	11.39
translation	picture	-3.700	.89	.000	-5.84	-1.56
	definition	5.550	.89	.310	3.41	7.69
English definition	picture	-9.250*	.89	.000	-11.39	-7.11
	translation	-5.550	.89	.310	-7.69	-3.41

\*.The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

As the post hoc tests show, the following means were significantly different. The performance of the picture group (mean difference 3.700) on learning the meaning of idioms was significantly better than the translation group (mean difference -3.700) and

the English definition group (-9.250). However, no significant difference between the English definition and the translation groups was found.

*C. The effect the format of the tests; either multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blanks*

**Table 5: Descriptives of ANOVA for the Recognition Test**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Picture	20	17.50	2.013	.450	16.56	18.84	12	20
Translation	20	14.55	1.605	.359	13.80	15.30	10	17
Definition	20	9.80	2.984	.667	8.40	17.20	5	16
Total	60	13.95	3.903	.504	12.94	14.98	5	20

**Table 6: Descriptives of ANOVA for the Production Posttest**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Picture	20	16.30	2.227	.498	15.26	17.34	12	20
Translation	20	12.60	2.349	.525	11.50	13.70	7	16
Definition	20	7.05	3.694	.816	5.34	8.76	1	15
Total	60	11.98	4.728	.610	10.75	13.20	1	20

The highest scores were obtained in the recognition test which was taken by a multiple-choice format test, whilst the lowest scores were gained by the production test which was in the form of a fill-in-the-blanks test. Therefore, it is concluded that giving idiom test in a format of multiple-choice will produce a better result than a fill-in-the-blanks format.

## V. CONCLUSION

The first research question was whether there was any significant effect of the type of instruction, by using pictorial aids, L1 translation, and using L2 definitions, on learning the meaning of idioms measuring through a recognition task. The data analyses regarding the meaning of idioms indicated that the participants in the picture group outperformed the other two groups. Regarding the positive effect of pictures, it seems that

addition of a picture increased the learners' understanding of the meaning of the idioms. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the participants' recognition test means was carried out to see if the groups had made significant improvements on their recognition idiom test based on the three types of instructional techniques (pictures, L1 translation and L2 definition). The ANOVA analysis indicated that the picture group had made significant improvements and outperformed the other groups. The main finding of the analysis shown in Tables 1-6 had a positive answer to the major question of the study. It was found that the use of picture as a tool for teaching idioms has a positive effect on the students' learning ability. This was supported through the higher mean scores that the first experimental group (picture group), obtained in recognition test. Plass, Chun, Mayer, and Leutner, (1998), indicated the useful effect of pictures on word learning. This notion is approved by Mayer's (1997, 2001) generative theory of multimedia teaching. Cognitive researchers including Mayer state that multimedia facilitates the way that the human beings' brain learn any kind of new information. They declare that a person learns something better by a combination of words and pictures than of only words, this notion is referred to as the multimedia principle (Mayer 2005a). As Mayer (2005b) holds, humans represent knowledge through two channels: a) visual-pictorial and b) auditory-verbal (Mayer, 2002, 2005b). It is discussed that manifestation of the information visually and textually may cause L2 learners to process information through different channels from a cognitive point of view. This might engage L2 learners in processing via two channels actively, which includes the relevant pictures and words selection, a coherent pictorial and verbal model organization, and previous mental knowledge integration, combines them with each other. The second research question mentioned whether there was any significant effect of the type of instruction, by using pictorial aids, L1 translation, and using L2 definitions, on learning the meaning of idioms as measuring via a production task. The answer to this research question is "affirmative." A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the participants' production test means was carried out to see if the groups had made significant improvements on their delayed production idiom test based on the three types of instructional techniques (pictures, L1 translation and L2 definition). The better performance of the translation group over the definition group in terms of meaning might indicate that in production task the need for closer proximity to the conceptual system is mandatory. This proximity looks to be via L1. The ANOVA analysis showed because of the picture technique, the picture group outperformed the other groups. The results illustrated that the pictures could significantly enhance learners' production of English idioms regarding the meaning. The third research question asked what kind of the two test format will be more effective for giving an idiom test to the subjects, a multiple choice or a fill-in-the-blanks one. The answer to this question was drawn from the ANOVA analysis indicated the scores of the recognition idiom test which was in a multiple choice format were higher than the production idiom test, in which the participants were required to write down the correct answer in the blanks. All in all, the picture group thoroughly outperformed the other two groups in all conditions and a few differences that existed between the translation group and the definition group was not seriously noticeable. The multiple-choice format is a better way for giving idiom tests to the students rather than a fill-in-the-blanks format in which the students are required to write the answers by their hearts. It was also obvious from their grades in both recognition and production tests. In other words, the subjects' performance was more satisfying when they were asked to answer the idiom test through a recognition task which was in a multiple-

choice format. The data analyses regarding the meaning of idioms indicated that the participants in the picture group outperformed the other two groups. Regarding the positive effect of pictures, it looks that addition of a picture increased the learners' understanding of the meaning of the idioms. The results illustrated that the pictures could significantly enhance learners' production of English idioms regarding the meaning. The better performance of the translation group over the definition group in terms of meaning might indicate that in production task the need for closer proximity to the conceptual system is mandatory. This proximity looks to be via L1. The data analysis of the recognition test illustrated, all in all, the picture group thoroughly outperformed the other two groups in all conditions and a few differences that existed between the translation group and the definition group was not seriously noticeable. The multiple-choice format is a better way for giving idiom tests to the students rather than a fill-in-the-blanks format in which the students are required to write the answers by their hearts. It was also obvious from their grades in both recognition and production tests. To sum up, the findings showed that the picture group outperformed the other groups in all situations. The results suggested that using pictures have significant pedagogical value in teaching the meaning of idioms to high school students.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Akbar Abassi Bagherian Pour who guided this research and has been so generous in devoting his time and knowledge to me. I thank him for his precious advice, suggestions, understanding and encouragements. I also wish to convey my heartfelt thanks to my advisor, Dr. Reza Rohani for his help and support.

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