

**Research Report**

**Idiom Comprehension and Processing: The Case of Thai EFL Learners**

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รายงานวิจัย

เรื่อง

กลวิธีการทำความเข้าใจและประมวลผลสำนวนภาษาอังกฤษโดยนักเรียนไทยที่เรียน  
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### Abstract

This study aims to explore strategies used by L1 Thai-L2 English learners in interpreting and comprehending English idioms. Five main research questions were postulated: i) what are the strategies the L2 learners used to comprehend idioms in L2, ii) whether the proficiency level affects the learners' idiom comprehension, iii) whether the types of idioms (core vs. non-core idioms) play a role in the idiom comprehension and processing, iv) whether the frequency of the idioms retrieved from the corpus affects the idiom comprehension and processing, and v) which models of L2 idiom processing leads to the most correct predictions for the case of L2 learners.

60 L1 Thai-L2 English learners were asked to do an Oxford Quick Placement Test to measure their proficiency levels and the results showed that the students could be divided into three different proficiency groups: beginner, low-intermediate, high-intermediate and advanced. Then, they were asked to do the idiom recognition task, where they would be presented with 50 idioms embedded in context. They had to verbalise their thought of what the idioms might mean. The protocol was recorded and transcribed. Idioms included in this study were divided based on their types (core vs. non-core idioms). For core idioms alone, their frequency of occurrence retrieved from corpus was also taken into account to see whether it had an effect upon comprehension and processing.

The overall results show that all groups of learners used a cohort of strategies in comprehending idioms during the pre-guessing, guessing and post-guessing stages, especially the use of context clues, the literal meaning of the words and the use of keywords in the idiom string. However, learners' proficiency levels played an important role in the sense that each group of learners employed different strategies.

The highly-proficient learners depended more on context clues, rather than analyzing the literal meanings of the words, which implies that the learners might have developed their idiomatic competence, realizing that idioms cannot always be interpreted literally. The use of context clues became less frequent in the case of lower proficient learners. The low-intermediate group depended more on the literal meaning of the constituents in the idiom string while the beginner group selected only one keyword in the idiom string that they were familiar with and accessed to the concept of that word to create the meaning of the idioms. Regarding the type of idioms, non-core idioms (decomposable idioms) were easier to comprehend than the core idioms because the constituents in the string contributed to the whole idiomatic meaning of the words. The frequency of the core idioms retrieved from corpus played a very trivial role in idiom processing and comprehension.

Given the present results, there are several models that cast the most correct predictions on L2 idiom processing. The Relevance-Theoretic Model casts the most correct prediction in the case of upper-intermediate/advanced learners in the sense that the learners used both top-down and bottom-up processes in idiom comprehension as they depended on both contextual clues and the lexical information of the words. Both types of information were used interchangeably and the learners would revise their hypothesized idiom meaning until the relevance was satisfied. For the lower-proficient learners, the models which predicted that literality plays an important role in idiom processing e.g. the Dual L2 Idiom Representation, the Literal Salience Hypothesis lent better insight into the processing issue. The Idiom Decomposition Model casts the correct prediction in the sense that the degree of decomposability of idioms posed different degrees of difficulty to the learners: idioms

with high degree of decomposability (non-core idioms) were easier to comprehend than non-decomposable (core idioms).

The implications that could be drawn from the present study are that idioms should be taught in a more systematic way in the classroom. ELT scholars should be more concerned about developing learners' idiomatic competence: material developers should be more careful in introducing idioms in a step-by-step manner, with an explicit explanation of what idioms really mean. Idioms should not be selected at random. The clear definition should be given, especially on how idioms differ from other types of multi-word units and figurative expressions. Teachers themselves should use a more deductive approach with the learners: the learners should learn how to tackle the meaning of idioms by themselves, not just learning idioms by rote memorization.

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