Effects of Contextualization, Decontextualization and Picture Cues on Learning Transparent and Opaque Idioms by Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study aimed at assessing the effects of contextualization, decontextualization and picture cues on learning transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In order to carry out the study, 90 Iranian students at the intermediate level were divided into 3 groups of contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning after the administration of the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT). The first group was exposed to forty idioms through short texts that contained 20 transparent and 20 opaque idioms. The second group just received the same number and type of idioms in isolation (i.e., decontextualized idioms), and the third group received the same number and type of idioms accompanied by pictures. Three paired samples t-tests were used to compare the performance of each group on 20 transparent and 20 opaque idioms. Two one-way ANOVAs were also run to compare the posttest scores of the three groups on transparent and opaque idioms. Results revealed that the learning of transparent idioms was much better than opaque idioms in all three groups. Moreover, in learning transparent and opaque idioms, using pictures was the most effective method, then the contextualized learning of idioms proved to be more effective, and finally the decontextualized learning of idioms was the least effective method for learning idioms in comparison with the other two methods of learning idioms.

Keywords: transparent idiom, opaque idiom, contextualized idiom, decontextualized idiom, picture-cued idiom

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INTRODUCTION

Every language has phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally, most of which have historical, philosophical, sociocultural, or even political origins. Over the last two decades, vocabulary has received a great deal of attention in language learning and teaching. During the 1990s, the focus shifted from single words to word strings, phrases, and idioms (Mäntylä, 2004). In fact, "there is a general consensus that the vocabulary of a language is much more than a list of individual words" (Zyzik, 2009, p. 1). Even if we know the meanings of all words in a phrase and understand the grammar completely, the meaning of the phrase may still be confusing. As an important part of language and culture, idioms reflect the transformation in conceptualization of the universe and the relationship between human beings and the universe. This colorful aspect of languages is used to communicate our thoughts and feelings, to give life and richness to the language by taking the existing words, combining them in a new sense, and creating new meanings, just like a work of art (Lennon, 1998).

Idiom is a highly heterogeneous community that stretches on a continuum of compositionality. At one end of the spectrum stand the "transparent idioms," whereas the other end nestles the "opaque idioms." Transparent idioms have a very close meaning to that of the literal one. Hence, transparent idioms are usually not difficult to understand and translate, because their meanings can be easily inferred from the meanings of their constituents, all components have a direct meaning but the combination acquires figurative sense, e.g. *break the ice = relieve the tension*. Opaque idioms are the most difficult type of idioms, because the meaning of the idiom is never that of the sum of the literal meanings of its parts. So, it would be impossible to infer the actual meaning of the idiom from the meanings of its components, because of the presence of items having cultural references. These culture-specific items have a great influence on the comprehensibility of idiomatic expressions, e.g. 't*o burn one's boat' = 'to make retreat impossible'*.

Idiomatic expressions are understood in relation to the context in which they are used. For most idioms different scenarios could be used to support the literal and figurative interpretations, although not all idioms can support a sensible literal interpretation. As a result, the skills used to process and understand language in context are thought to be important for the development of idiom understanding (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995). The role of context is central in language learning. It is common that EFL students do not really understand the various meanings of new words in different contexts. That is why EFL students do not know how to apply the words they have learned practically in various contexts. It is fundamental for teachers to provide a rich context for students' language learning and practice. For instance, linguistic contextual information enhances adolescents' interpretation of idioms (Nippold & Martin, 1989). The contextual cues surrounding a particular word can help readers get its meaning. In contrast, context-reduced language will be hard for readers to tolerate (Brown, 2007).

In order to facilitate learning idioms, pictures or graphics in the form of flashcards, large wall papers, photographs or illustrations have also been used (Harmer, 2001). Then, the

other way to interpret the meaning of idiomatic expressions is using pictures. The present study attempted to examine the effects of contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued instruction on learning transparent and opaque idioms among Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classification of idioms

Idioms have been classified from different points of view, syntactically or semantically. Makkai (1972) divides idioms into two categories: (i) idioms of encoding (identifiable) are those idiosyncratic lexical combinations that have transparent meaning involving collocational preferences and restrictions, e.g. '*at*' in '*he drove at 70 m.p.h'*, and (ii) idioms of decoding (non-identifiable) refer to those non-identifiable and misleading lexical expressions whose interpretations could not be comprehended on the basis of only learned linguistic conventions. In other words, the meaning of decoding idioms is not predictable. Expressions such as '*beat about the bush'* and '*fly off the handle'* are examples of this type of idioms.

Moon (1996) classifies idioms based on a spectrum of idiomaticity: (i) 'transparent idioms' are those idioms which are easy to comprehend and translate and their meaning can be derived from the meanings of their constituent parts, e.g. '*back and forth'*, or *'fight a losing battle',* (ii) 'semi-transparent idioms' that usually have metaphorical meaning and their constituent parts have a little role in comprehending the whole meaning of the expression, e.g. '*break the ice'* (i.e. to reveal the tension), (iii) 'semi-opaque idioms' whose figurative meaning is not related to the meanings of their constituent words. In other words, the idiomatic expression is separated in two parts; a part with literal meaning, and the other part with a figurative meaning, e.g. '*to know the rope'* (i.e. to know how a particular job should be done), and (iv) 'opaque idioms' are the most difficult type of idioms, because the literal meanings of their parts have little to do with the actual sense of idioms; that is, the meaning of an opaque idiom cannot be derived from the meanings of its individual parts because there are items which have cultural references, e.g., '*to burn one's boat'* (i.e. to make retreat impossible), and 's*pill the beans'* (i.e. to reveal a secret).

Idioms and contextual clues

The traditional method teaches idioms in context. Liontas (2003) stated that the context can effectively facilitate understanding as well as learning and teaching of idioms and idiomatic expressions. Liontas maintained that "the absence of context" creates obstacles "on learning and comprehending idioms" (p. 288). Within the methods of teaching idioms explicitly in context, there are two competing views: teaching idioms with an extended context and with a limited context. Kainulainen (2006) emphasized the role of extended context over limited context to assist L2 learners comprehend idioms correctly. Kainulainen concluded her study by stating that the more contexts

surround an idiom, the more likely the L2 learner participants will come to the correct meaning.

As Swinney and Cutler (1979) state, most idioms have the feature of ambiguity. This means that idioms which are grammatically well-formed have an acceptable literal meaning as well as figurative meaning. So, the comprehension of such idioms will be problematic. Swinney and Cutler (1979) believe that idioms are stored and processed in a mental lexicon like other words and sentences, and their literal and non-literal processing take place simultaneously. In the case of normal phrases and sentences, this ambiguity seems to be resolved through prior context. In other words, contextual clues can influence the interpretation of an ambiguous sentence with literal and non-literal meanings (Bobrow & Bell, 1973). Hence, contextual clues can account for ambiguous idioms, too. Context facilitates the interpretation of a figurative expression insofar as it provides the semantic information necessary to extract the figurative sense appropriate to the situation. Context can be used in a unidirectional way, namely from a single word, or string, to context, but most often also bi-directionally, in a 'back and forth' way: an idiom is confronted with the information provided by context and is adapted to it (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995).

Studies on using contextual clues in L2 idiom comprehension have found that guessing from context is an effective strategy and is recurrently used in L2 idiom comprehension. Cooper (1999) used the think-aloud research method to investigate the kind of strategies L2 learners employ in the comprehension of unfamiliar idioms. The results showed that a number of strategies were used to comprehend idioms: guessing from context (28%), discussing and analyzing the idiom (24%), using the literal meaning (19%), repeating or paraphrasing the idiom (7%), using background knowledge (7%), referring to an L1 idiom (5%), and others (2%). The overall results of Cooper's study revealed that the most frequently used strategy, which was the most successful one, was guessing from context, as it led to correct answers 75% of the time.

In a similar study, Cain, Towes, and Knight (2009) investigated the contribution of inference from context to young children's understanding of idiomatic sentences. They compared 7-8 and 9-10 year-old learner's abilities to adults in using the strategy of inferencing from context to comprehend idioms. Multiple-choice tasks with and without a supportive story context were used in this experiment as an instrument. Children's performance was compared to adults' performance after the treatment. Results showed that very young children were sensitive to meanings in context and could process language at the phrasal and discourse level while these processing skills, which help idiom comprehension, were not fully developed in 11-12 year-olds.

Idioms and pictures

Providing appropriate and relevant pictures depicting concrete and relevant scenes makes materials more appealing and may foster comprehension and retrieval of L2 idioms and words. In addition to pictures, using videos, sounds, animated pictures, drawings, and video clips have become common ways of presenting idioms or words.

The term multimedia means different things on different levels. On the level of technology, it means the use of multiple delivery media such as computers, screens, and loudspeakers. On the level of presentation formats, it means the use of different forms of representation such as texts and pictures. On the level of sensory modalities, it means the use of multiple senses such as the eye and the ear (Mayer, 2005). Chun and Plass (1996) have reported that using annotated pictures with text in vocabulary teaching results in better learning compared to annotated videos with text.

To demonstrate the importance of pictures in education, Yeh and Wang (2003) conducted a study to compare the effectiveness of three types of vocabulary annotations on vocabulary learning of EFL college students in Taiwan: text annotation only, text plus picture, and text plus picture and sound. The results of the study showed that the version with text plus picture was the most effective type of vocabulary annotation.

Similarly, Yoshii (2006) investigated the effects of additional pictorial cues in L1 and L2 glosses, and how these additions affect vocabulary learning in a multimedia environment. One hundred and nine students from two universities in Japan participated in his study. The students were randomly divided into four groups using four different gloss types: the first group read a story with L1 text-only glosses, the second group read it with L2 text-only, the third group used L1 text-plus-pictorial cues in the glosses, and the fourth group had as their glosses L2 text-plus-pictorial cues. The results showed a significant difference between picture and no-picture groups, suggesting the beneficial effects of pictures with regard to learners' retention of the meaning of words.

Aljabri (2009) also investigated the effect of contextual and pictorial annotations on incidental vocabulary learning and concluded that text-picture glosses end in better vocabulary learning. Other scholars also claim that textual pictorial presentation of words helps students learn words more successfully because pictures help form mental images whereby words can better stick in L2 learners' mind (Kost, Foss, & Lenzini, 1999; Yoshii & Flaitz, 2002).

Fotovatnia and Khaki (2012) investigated the effect of using pictures, Persian translation equivalent (L1), and English definitions on the learning of 20 decomposable and non-decomposable idioms by 68 Iranian TEFL undergraduates. The focus was on learning both meaning as well as the form of idioms. The idioms were given to the participants to translate into Persian three weeks before the experiment to ensure the participants' unfamiliarity with the idioms. The idioms that were known even by one student were crossed out. Each group of the participants received instruction in 3 sessions (about 7 idioms each session), and reviewed them in the fourth session. The participants received 2 recognition tests (i.e. one on form and the other on meaning of the L2 idioms) in the form of multiple-choice in the fifth session, and the same recognition tests as well as 2 production tests in the form of fill-in-the-blanks 3 weeks later (i.e. first on form and then on meaning). The delayed posttests were given in 2 consecutive sessions: first, the production test and then the recognition test. The findings showed that the picture group outperformed the other groups in all situations.

The results suggested the pedagogical effect of pictures on teaching the meaning and form of decomposable idioms.

Abbasi, Rohani and Zeidabadi-Nejad (2015) 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. Their results 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.

Empirical background on L2 learning of transparent and opaque idioms

According to Cain, Oakhill, and Lemmon (2005), transparency refers to "the degree of agreement between the literal and figurative meanings of an idiom" (p. 67). Researchers have maintained that idioms are easier to understand when there is a close relationship between their literal and figurative senses, that is transparent (Gibbs, 1991; Levorato & Cacciari, 1999; Nippold & Taylor, 2002). Boers and Demecheleer (2001) maintain that the lower the degree of semantic transparency of an idiom, the more a language learner will have to rely on contextual clues to understand it. However, one can understand highly transparent idioms easily just through lexical components. On the other hand, opaque idioms are the most difficult type of idioms, because the meaning of the idiom is never that of the sum of the literal meanings of its parts. So, it would be impossible to infer the actual meaning of the idiom from the meanings of its components, because of the presence of items having cultural references. These culture-specific items have a great influence on the comprehensibility of idiomatic expressions.

If idioms are culture-bound, it is not so easy to understand their meanings, even if they are transparent. "Knowledge about idiomacity is not based on linguistic analysis, but is essentially a matter of cultural awareness concerning (among other things) the nonliteral-literal association involved" (He, 1990, p. 31). He (1990) gives the idioms *'carry coals to Newcastle'* and *'bury the hatchet'* as examples of this idea. Grace (cited in He, 1990) maintains that if a language user has no knowledge whatsoever about these idioms having conventional and non-literal meanings, s/he will naturally take them literally as ad hoc expressions.

Even though idioms are an important feature in language, few studies have focused on the way foreign or second language learners comprehend English idioms (Mäntylä, 2004). Most of the existing studies have dealt with the types of idioms that should be taught to learners of English, whether the mother tongue had an effect on idiom recognition, and the role of familiarity, transparency, and contextual characteristics on idiom comprehension, resulting in suggestions on how to teach idioms more effectively.

Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) studied the effects of both familiarity and transparency in idiom explanation. They established levels of familiarity and transparency for a number of idioms based on adolescents' and adults' judgments. They also studied the

development of idiom explanation in children and adolescents, using an explanation task. Results showed that performance improved gradually as the participant's age increased, that high-familiarity idioms were easier to explain than others, and that easier-to-explain idioms tended to be more transparent.

One of the few researchers to investigate idiom familiarity and transparency was Laval (2003). She investigated the role of contextual characteristics and linguistic conventions in the comprehension of idiomatic expressions by 6- and 9- year-old French-speaking L2 learners. She found that context had a substantial impact on idiom comprehension and that linguistic conventions had an effect in children aged 9 and was particularly strong in adults. She also found that the role of familiarity also affected results in the 9-year-old subjects and the adults.

Mäntylä (2004) investigated the characteristics of English idioms and their effects on comprehension and interpretation by native and non-native speakers. In order to examine how different characteristics of idioms affected subjects' interpretations and how non-native speakers recognized English idioms, 180 Finnish university students completed a three-part questionnaire, in which the first section dealt with the acceptability of idioms, the second concerned the appropriateness of idioms in different contexts, and the third offered multiple-choice items, asking participants to choose the correct meaning for idioms. Results showed that idioms with identical equivalents in Finnish were easier for these subjects to interpret. Native speakers of English considered the meanings as more acceptable or less acceptable whereas there was some variation among the responses of non-native speakers. Non-native speakers recognized idioms much less easily than native speakers of English.

Kainulainen (2006) replicated Mantyla's study to investigate the effects of the students' backgrounds on idiom comprehension. A group of 115 Finnish third-grade students in the senior year of secondary school completed a questionnaire in two sections: a background section, which asked students about how much they were involved with the English language outside school, and a forced multiple-choice test of 20 English idioms presented within a brief context to elicit how they could be used. Results showed that Finnish third-grade students comprehended idioms quite well, answering about 71% of the items correctly. Results were not in accordance with previous studies in that the degree of transparency did not significantly help the comprehension process, and even though Finnish equivalents assisted understanding, the participants also considered some idioms easy that were opaque without any corresponding expressions in Finnish.

Elkilic (2008) investigated the understanding of transparent and opaque English idiomatic expressions of Turkish students. According to the result of this study, Turkish students can understand transparent and common opaque idioms more easily. However, if the idioms are both opaque and uncommon, they cannot get their meanings if they haven't learned them directly. The result of the study indicated that there is no significant difference between intermediate and advanced students in understanding transparent, opaque/common and opaque/uncommon idioms. However, a significant difference was observed between the subjects' understanding of transparent, opaque/

common and opaque/uncommon idioms in their translations from Turkish to English and English to Turkish. The highest scores were obtained on transparent idioms, which were followed by opaque/common and opaque/uncommon idioms, respectively.

METHOD

Research design

The present study used a pretest-posttest design with a quasi-experimental method, i.e. an experiment in which the participants were assigned to two experimental groups and one control group with no randomization procedure. The independent variables of the study were contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued types of instruction, whereas the dependent variables were learning transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Research questions

1. Is there any difference between contextualized learning of transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners?
2. Is there any difference between decontextualized learning of transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners?
3. Is there any difference between picture-cued learning of the transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners?
4. Are there any differences among contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning of transparent idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners?
5. Are there any differences among contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning of opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

Participants

From among an initial cohort of 173 students, who took EFL classes at a language institute in Dezful, Iran, 90 students were randomly chosen as the participants of this study. All of the students were female learners whose native language was Persian, with an age range of 17 to 25 years old. Based on the criteria of the institute, they were at the intermediate level. The Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT), however, was administered to make sure that the participants were placed at the intended level of proficiency. The students were not aware of the goals of the study in order to reduce the practice effect of the study. Students with the same level of proficiency (i.e. intermediate level) were randomly assigned to three groups. Transparent and opaque idioms were taught in contextualized form for the first group. The second group received idiomatic expressions in decontextualized form, and the third group were exposed to picture-cued idioms.

Data Collection Instruments

In order to gather data for the study, the following instruments were used.

Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT)

To ensure that the three experimental groups enjoyed the same level of general English proficiency level prior to the treatment, the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) was administered as a homogenizing test. Based on the criteria of the QPT, the learners whose scores are between 40-47 are at the intermediate level. So, after the test was given to the initial population of participants, those who obtained scores in this range were chosen as the research samples, and others were excluded from the study. Table 1 below represents the score bands based on the rubric of the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT):

Table 1. Interpretation of Scores based on QPT Rubric

Score	0-17	18-29	30-39	40-47	48-54	55-60
CEFR	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Level	Beginning	High Beginning	Low Intermediate	Intermediate	High Intermediate	Advanced

Pretest

In order to make sure that the participants were not familiar with the idiomatic expressions of the target language, before the treatment a multiple-choice test including 40 transparent and opaque idioms was made and given to the participants. For calculating the students' marks on the test, one mark was assigned for each correct answer; hence a maximum score of 40. The validity of the pretest was checked by two qualified ELT professors. The reliability of the pre-test was measured by Cronbach's alpha, which was calculated to be 0.93 (i.e. Coronbach's alpha= 0.93), suggesting that the reliability of the test was high enough.

Posttest

A 40-item posttest that assessed the learners' knowledge of idiomatic expressions was designed. It was done in order to explore the effects of the treatment on the participants' knowledge of idioms. The number of the items in the posttest and pretest were the same. In addition, the same idioms, which were used in the pretest, were used in the posttest, but in different orders in order to reduce the practice effect. This was done in order to make sure that any changes on the participants' knowledge was due to the treatment that was employed. Just as in the pretest, each correct answer was assigned one mark and zero for the incorrect answers; hence a maximum score of 40. The validity of the posttest was also judged by the two qualified ELT professors. The reliability of the post-test was measured by Cronbach's alpha, which was calculated to be 0.89 (i.e. Coronbach's alpha= 0.89), showing that the reliability of the posttest was also high enough.

Materials

The transparent/opaque idioms used as the instructional materials were the same for the contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued groups (Appendix). The mode of

input delivery, however, differed. That is, idiomatic expressions were presented and practiced in context for the first group, out of context for the second group, and with pictures for the third group.

Procedure

After administering the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT), from among 173 female students, who took EFL classes at a language institute in Dezful, Iran, a homogenous sample of EFL learners was selected to serve as the participants of the study. The sample included one control group of contextualization, and two experimental groups of decontextualization and picture cues. There were 30 students in each group.

While the contextualization group underwent a conventional way of teaching and learning idioms, where the students were required to work on different texts and sentences, the decontextualization group had to learn the meaning of idiomatic expressions out of context. The third group received transparent and opaque idioms with related pictures in order to induce their meanings.

The study was completed in 7 sessions, including the sessions dedicated to administration of the QPT, the pretest and the posttest. The general procedure for the implementation of the study was as follows. In the first session, the learners were assigned to three groups after they took the QPT in order to make sure that they were at the same level of proficiency. The result of this test showed that they were all at the intermediate level. In the second session, a pretest of 40-item multiple-choice questions was conducted. In the next four consecutive sessions, the three groups received instruction for the opaque idioms (N=20) and transparent idioms (N= 20), yet in different forms: (I) contextualized idioms, (II) decontextualized idioms, and (III) picture-cued idioms. Each session, they received relevant instructions on 5 transparent idioms and 5 opaque idioms. After the treatment period, a 40-item multiple-choice posttest was conducted in the seventh session of the experiment.

RESULTS

Results of the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT)

As it was stated, to ensure that all of the participants in the study had the same level of English language proficiency prior to the treatment, the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) was administered. This test includes 60 items. Based on the QPT rubric, as seen in Table 2, the learners whose scores fell between 40 and 47 were considered to be at the intermediate level and were chosen as the research sample. In this study, 90 students were selected in order to take part in the treatment sessions. After assuring that all of the participants were homogenized, 30 students were randomly assigned to the contextualized group, 30 students to the decontextualized group, and another 30 students to the picture-cued group.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of OPT Scores

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
OPT	90	7	40	47	42.96	2.68	7.18

Results of the first hypothesis

The first research question posed in this study examined if there was any significant difference between contextualized learning of transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Its corresponding null hypothesis would assume that there was no significant difference between contextualized learning of transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To test this hypothesis, the posttest scores of the contextualization group on transparent and opaque idioms were compared through a paired-samples t-test. What follows is the descriptive and inferential statistical findings obtained from this comparison.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Contextualization Group

	Mean	N	SD	Std. Error Mean
Opaque idioms	26.43	30	4.30	.20
Transparent idioms	30.87	30	4.08	.18

Given the information in Table 3, one can clearly see that the mean score obtained on the transparent idioms (i.e. 30.87) is higher than the one obtained on the opaque idioms (i.e. 26.43). However, a paired-samples t-test was run to ensure that the observed difference was statistically significant.

Table 4. Paired Samples T-Test Comparing the Post-Test Results of the Contextualized Learning of Opaque and Transparent Idioms

		Paired Differences			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Opaque-Transparent	4.44	4.26	.19	.79	1.07	14.00	29	.00

Table 4 shows that there is a significant difference in the scores obtained from the post-test scores on opaque and transparent idioms because the probability value is substantially smaller than the specified critical value (0.00<0.05). Accordingly, it can be claimed that the contextualized learning of transparent idioms improved significantly more than the contextualized learning of opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Results of the second hypothesis

The second research question investigated if there was any difference between decontextualized learning of transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate

EFL learners. Its corresponding null hypothesis would assume that there was no significant difference between decontextualized learning of transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To test this hypothesis, the posttest scores of the decontextualization group on transparent and opaque idioms were compared through a paired-samples t-test. The descriptive and inferential statistical findings obtained from this comparison are given below.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for the Decontextualization Group

	Mean	N	SD	Std. Error Mean
Opaque idioms	21.34	30	2.17	.42
Transparent idioms	23.79	30	2.26	.48

Given the information in Table 5, it can be seen that the mean score obtained on the transparent idioms (i.e. 23.79) is higher than the one obtained on the opaque idioms (i.e. 21.34). A paired-samples t-test, however, was used to make sure that the observed difference was statistically significant.

Table 6. Paired Samples T-Test Comparing the Post-Test Results of the Decontextualized Learning of Opaque and Transparent Idioms

		Paired Differences							
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Opaque-Transparent	2.45	3.71	.35	.42	.87	12.00	29	.00

It can be concluded from the information presented in Table 6 that there is a significant difference in the performance of the decontextualized learning group on opaque and transparent idioms. This conclusion can be drawn because the probability value in Table 6 is observed to be 0.00, which is less than the critical value (i.e. 0.05). Therefore, it can be safely claimed that the decontextualized learning of transparent idioms improved significantly more than the decontextualized learning of opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Results of the third hypothesis

The third research question addressed if there was any significant difference between picture-cued learning of the transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Its corresponding null hypothesis would assume that there was no significant difference between picture-cued learning of the transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To test this hypothesis, the posttest scores of the picture-cued group on transparent and opaque idioms were compared through a paired-samples t-test. The descriptive and inferential statistical findings of this comparison are as follows.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for the Picture-Cued Group

	Mean	N	SD	Std. Error Mean
Opaque idioms	29.64	30	2.38	.44
Transparent idioms	35.61	30	2.45	.42

As illustrated in Table 7, the mean score obtained on transparent idioms (i.e. 35.61) is higher than the one obtained on opaque idioms (i.e. 29.64). However, the researchers had to go still further to find out whether or not the observed difference was statistically significant. So, a paired-samples t-test was employed, as given in Table 8.

Table 8. Paired Samples T-Test Comparing the Post-Test Results of the Picture-Cued Learning of Opaque and Transparent Idioms

		Paired Differences							
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Opaque-Transparent	5.97	2.40	.41	.72	1.15	13.00	29	.00

It can be concluded from the data presented in Table 8 that there is a significant difference in picture-cued learning of transparent and opaque idioms. This conclusion can be drawn because the probability value is observed to be 0.00, which is less than the critical value (0.05). So, it can be claimed that picture-cued learning of transparent idioms by intermediate EFL learners improved significantly more than the learning of opaque idioms.

Results of the fourth hypothesis

The fourth research question examined if there were any differences among contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning of transparent idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Its corresponding null hypothesis would assume that there were no significant differences among contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning of transparent idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To test this hypothesis, the students' posttest scores were compared through a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), as given in Table 9 below.

Table 9. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Comparing the Results of the Three Groups on Learning Transparent Idioms

	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig
Between groups	1154.53	2	1154.53	13.62	.00
Within groups	664.34	87	107.846		
Total	1759.40	89			

Based on Table 9, the difference among the posttest scores of the participants learning transparent idioms through contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning is significant, F(2, 87) = 13.62, P = 0.00 (P < 0.05). So, the null hypothesis can be safely rejected. In other words, the participants in the contextualized, decontextualized, and picture-cued learning contexts performed significantly differently on transparent idioms.

Results of the fifth hypothesis

The fifth research question explored if there were any differences among contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning of opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Its corresponding null hypothesis would assume that there were no significant differences among contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning of opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To test this hypothesis, the students' posttest scores were compared through a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), the results of which are given in Table 10 in the following.

Table 10. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Comparing the Results of the Three Groups on Learning Opaque Idioms

	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig
Between groups	1844.12	2	1844.12	12.03	.001
Within groups	13733.00	87	164.84		
Total	1632.10	89			

According to Table 10, the difference among the posttest scores of the participants learning opaque idioms through contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning is significant, F(2, 87) = 12.03, P = 0.001 (P < 0.05). So, the fifth null hypothesis can also be comfortably rejected. Simply put, it can be said that the participants in the contextualized, decontextualized, and picture-cued learning contexts also performed significantly differently on opaque idioms.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design to unearth the effects of different input delivery methods (i.e. contextualization, decontextualization, and picture cues) on learning transparent and opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The results of study demonstrated significant effects for using all three modes of teaching transparent and opaque idioms. However, the comparison of the pretest and posttest scores of the three groups revealed that learning transparent and opaque idioms with picture cues was the most effective type of instruction. The next effective type of treatment was teaching transparent and opaque idioms in short contexts, and the performance of the decontextualized group proved to be the least effective method of teaching idioms. So, presenting transparent and opaque idioms in context and with pictures was far more effective than presenting them in isolation.

Based on the results of first research question of this study, instructing idioms through contextualization had statistically significant effect on L2 idiom learning. Cooper (1999)

also found evidence in favor of the benefits of the contextual clues compared with other strategies which were investigated in his study. Cain et al. (2005) maintained that 'context might facilitate the interpretation of figurative language by providing the necessary semantic information from which reader (listener) can extract or infer the appropriate sense of expression' (p. 67). For them, 'contexts are important for less common idioms whose meanings are not yet fully known, particularly for unfamiliar opaque idioms whose meanings are not fully derivable through semantic analysis of phrases' (p. 67). Also, as shown by the results of the first research question, transparent idioms are generally better learned by L2 learners than those that are opaque. This is in line with the findings of previous research in that idioms are easier to understand when there is a close relationship between their literal and figurative senses (Levorato & Cacciari, 1999; Nippold & Taylor, 2002).

The results of second research question revealed that instructing idioms out of context had statistically significant effect on just learning transparent idioms, not opaque idioms. Learners could guess the meaning of transparent idioms much better than opaque idioms. As evinced by the results of third research question of this study, instructing idioms with picture cues had statistically significant effect on L2 idioms learning. Students performed much better in learning transparent idioms than opaque idioms through picture-cued learning. Regarding the positive effect of pictures, it seems that addition of a picture enhanced the learner's understanding of the meaning of idioms as well as preserving the forms of idioms in their memory. The positive effect of pictures on word learning was shown by Chun and Plass (1996). As Mayer (2005) believes, it is through two channels that human beings represent and manipulate knowledge: a visual-pictorial and an auditory-verbal. Cognitively, it could be argued that presentation of the information visually and textually might cause L2 learners to process information through different channels. This may engage L2 learners in active processing within the channels, including selecting relevant words and pictures, organizing them into coherent pictorial and verbal models, and integrating them with each other and with the previous mental knowledge.

As for the results of the fourth research question, it was shown that there were significant differences among the contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning of transparent idioms. The picture-cued group again outperformed the contextualized and decontextualized groups, and the contextualized group outperformed the decontextualized group in learning transparent idioms. The same findings as to the remarkable effectiveness of picture-cued learning of idioms have also been reported by Yeh and Wang, (2003), Yoshii (2006), Aljabri (2009), Fotovatnia and Khaki (2012), and Abbasi et al. (2015).

Just as in the previous research question, the results of fifth research question evinced significant differences among contextualized, decontextualized and picture-cued learning of opaque idioms by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The same hierarchy as to the effectiveness of the three types of teaching transparent idioms was observed with

the opaque idioms, emphasizing the outstanding effectiveness of picture-cued learning of idioms over contextualized and decontextualized modes of learning idioms:

Picture-cued idioms > Contextualized idioms >Decontextualized idioms

The findings of the present study can have significant implications for EFL teachers. First, rather than applying a single technique in teaching idioms, they can use multiple techniques in their classes in order to enhance their students' comprehension of idioms. As an example, associating context with related pictures for opaque idioms can be more effective than presenting them out of context. Secondly, by knowing the advantages of using pictures in comprehending knowledge of idioms, teachers can use this technique to improve students' idiom learning. The finding can also have implications for syllabus and textbook designers, who can provide idioms books which are more comprehensible for students through accompanying idioms by related pictures, short story, and short sentences as a context as well as definitions of constituent parts of each idiom. Syllabus designers can design activities and tasks for learning idioms based on each of these techniques according to students' interests, level, gender, and culture.

Several limitations and delimitations were involved in the present study. One of the limitations of this study was that the participants were just selected only from one English language institute. So, the generalizability of findings must be treated more cautiously as a small sample of participants was included in the study. Another limitation of the study was the sex of the participants, which was limited to female learners. As gender is an important variable in language learning, it can of course affect idiom comprehension and production; hence, the results of the present study may be different with male L2 learners. Moreover, the participants' level of proficiency, which was limited to the intermediate level, could be regarded as another limitation of the study. Finally, due to learners' linguistic background, the results of the study must be cautiously interpreted with L2 learners with other L1 backgrounds.

The present study did not aim to investigate the effect of the age of the participants on learning idioms. As learners in different age groups tend to use specific strategies in learning idioms (for example in Cain, Towes, and Knight (2009), very young learners were more successful in inferring from context than adults), age can be an important independent variable that has not been taken into account in this study. In the same vein, further research can be conducted with male learners at different levels of proficiency.

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APPENDIX

The list of transparent/opaque idioms used in the study

Types of Idioms	Idioms	Definitions
	Kill two birds with one stone	To achieve two things at the same time with one action
	To leave somebody high and dry	To leave someone helpless
	To lose one's temper	To become angry
	Open a whole new can of warm	A complex or difficult problem
	Red tape	Official routine
	Burn bridge	To cut off all means of retreat
	To bury the hatchet	To stop fighting or arguing
	To give someone the cold shoulder	To ignore someone

Transparent idioms	Use one's head	To be rational and calm, think smart
	Until the cows come home	For a long time; forever
	To hold one's tongue	To refrain from saying something unpleasant
	Under one's nose	Directly in front of one; clearly visible
	To keep one's chin up	To keep one's spirit high
	To roll up one's sleeves	To get ready to do some work
	To give/ land a hand	To help someone
	A storm in a teacup	A lot of unnecessary anger and worry about a matter that is not important
	The dead of night	The quietest, darkest part of the night
	Behind the times	Old-fashioned
	To twist somebody's arm	To force or persuade someone
	To step into one's shoes	To take over a job or some role from someone
Opaque idioms	To do/serve time	To spend time in prison
	To smell a rat	To suspect that something is wrong
	To give someone the slip	To escape from or elude someone
	To hold one's horses	To wait a minute and be reasonable
	To talk through one's hat	To be talking about a subject as if you know a lot about it when in fact you know very little
	To laugh up one's sleeve	To secretly find something funny
	To hit the roof	To become very angry
	To make a bundle	To make a lot of money
	In black and white	Formally, on paper and in writing
	Out of the blue	Happening suddenly and unexpectedly
	Blue pencil	To edit, revise, or correct with or as if with a blue pencil
	To bite the dust	To fail or to stop existing
	To hit the books	To begin to study
	To catch someone red-handed	To discover someone while they are doing something bad or illegal
	To kick the bucket	To die
	Root and branch	Entirely; completely; utterly
	To put all one's eggs in one basket	To make everything dependent on only one thing
	To be in the soup	To be in trouble
	To pull someone's leg	To tell someone something that is not true as a way of joking with the person
	Every now and then	Sometimes, but not regularly