

Acquisition of English Idioms by Adult L1 Arabic Speakers

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Abstract

Human beings use language to serve in a number of linguistic domains that comprises language variation with different entities and characteristics. The variation in the use of language is also seen in the use of idioms. The aim of this study was to find out whether the proficiency level of adult L1 Arabic speakers affects their acquisition of English idioms and idioms translated from Arabic. The study also aimed to investigate which constitute the most difficult types of English idioms (e.g. transparent idioms, semi-transparent idioms and opaque idioms) among those selected for the study for adult L1 Arabic speakers to acquire. Finally the purpose of the study was to decide on the kinds of strategies that they employ to comprehend the English idioms chosen for the study. The study task was a questionnaire comprising fifteen idioms translated from Arabic and fifteen English idioms. The findings indicated that the respondents were found to be less proficient in their acquisition of the English idioms selected for the study compared to their knowledge of idioms translated from Arabic. Findings also showed that the most difficult types of English idioms were semi-transparent and opaque idioms. In addition, "guessing from context" strategy used frequently by respondents to comprehend the English idioms selected for the study.

Keywords: L2 acquisition, idioms acquisition, English idioms, L1 Arabic speakers.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings use language in a number of domains. A lot of language varieties which consist of different entities and characteristics are used in these different domains. The use of language varies from one place to another, from one social group to another and from one language situation to another. These variations in the use of language also include geographical variations, social variations and contextual variations. Variation is also seen in the use of idioms. An idiom is a group of words which as a whole has a different meaning from the meaning of the individual words it contains. According to Irujo (1986b), an idiom is a conventionalized expression whose meaning cannot be

determined from the meaning of its parts. An idiom is learned and used as a single unit of language; it would not be understood by a literal meaning of its elements (Mahmoud 2002). Idioms are sometimes referred to as “fixed expressions” because in many cases the users are allowed to make linguistic modification such as changing the order of words, adding or dropping words, or replacing a word with another.

On the other hand, the relationship between language and idioms is more obvious when an idiom refers to a metaphorical lexicalized phrase which is semantically and syntactically restricted. From a semantic perspective, the meaning of each individual word in an idiom may not be summed to produce the meaning of idiomatic expression as a whole. Syntactically, the words of an idiom often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts (To, T'sou, Mok & Man, 2006).

Second language acquisition (SLA) refers to the learning of another language after the native language has been acquired (Gass, 1994, p. 11) and this includes the acquisition of L2 idioms. The acquisition of idioms has been a neglected variable in research in the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Such studies are important as learners with poor competence of English cannot understand or use idioms unless they have reached an advanced level of proficiency in the English language. While there has not been much in the way of current research regarding idiom acquisition by second language learners, what have been done have focused primarily on the issue of interference from the first language.

Irujo (1986a) demonstrated that L2 learners are more likely to recognize an idiom if there is an equivalent in the first language which is closely related both lexically and semantically. This was found to hold true especially for idioms that are more closely related to their literal meanings. Cooper (1999) notes that in this sort of study, “participants comprehended and produce most easily and correctly the idioms that were frequently used in everyday speech, had simple vocabulary and structure, and were metaphorically transparent in their literal meanings.” McPartland (1981) discusses the important role that idioms play in second language learning. He asserts that every language learner needs to develop competence in them since they are used by native speakers in both spoken and written modes. Idioms are difficult to learn and teach for many reasons. McPartland (1981) believes that the main reason is that idioms are not literal: they do not mean what they say. The easiest ones are those which have exact counterparts in the learner's mother tongue, and the most difficult are those which have no counterparts and whose meaning cannot be derived from the conjoined meaning of their constituents.

Irujo (1986a) agrees with McPartland that language idioms are very difficult to learn particularly for second language learners because they are not literal and may not mean what they say. She recognizes the difficulty of idioms for three reasons. Firstly, idioms are frequently omitted in the speech addressed to second language learners whereas native speakers tend to use simple, concrete, every day vocabulary when they address second language learners. In addition, idioms vary in formality from slang and colloquialisms to those which can be used in formal situations. If learners rely on their

first language to help them in their second language, this strategy will be successful in only a very few instances whereas in most cases this strategy will produce an incorrect form. Moreover, a lot of second language materials either ignore idioms or relegate them to “other expression” sections in vocabulary lists, without providing exercises for learning them.

The English language is learned as a second or foreign language in most of the Arab countries. Acquisition of a second language requires a lot of effort as it encompasses different language uses and idioms represent one of these uses. The necessity of acquiring English language idioms comes from the fact that these idioms reflect genuine ideas and experiences attributed to L1 English language speakers. Thus proficiency in the English language involves proficiency in acquiring English idioms. A learner’s disability in acquiring idioms may be attributed to the fact that teaching lexis in general and idioms in particular has been relegated to a minor position in contrast to the teaching of syntax.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Idioms have been investigated from different domains based on the ideas of linguistics at any certain time. The aims of idioms’ studies are different and also the description of idiom itself also varies. However, not much has been written on idioms, this does not reduce their value and importance in daily communication. There are few studies on how foreign or second language learners comprehend idioms. For example, Mäntylä, (2004) conducted a research to examine the outcome of the features of idioms on their identification and clarification. Respondents were university graduates at Finnish and British universities. The study was carried out with a questionnaire which had three parts. The first part aimed to assess the meanings of twenty common idioms. The second part dealt with the suitability of the same twenty idioms in different contexts. The third part was a multiple-choice test. The results indicated that native speakers considered the meanings either more acceptable or less acceptable whereas non-native speakers accepted the use of idioms in different contexts more than native speakers. Non-native speakers accepted idioms in informal contexts and they were more willing to use idioms in formal contexts whereas native speakers preferred informal contexts. The results revealed that non-native speakers recognized idioms to a lesser extent compared to native speakers.

On the other hand, few studies have been carried out to examine the strategies that second language learners employ to comprehend idioms. In this respect, Cooper (1999) conducted a study to investigate this issue. Participants were 18 non-native speakers of English and they were ranged from 17 to 44 years old. Cooper (1999) utilized twenty frequently used idioms, eight of them from standard, eight from conversational and the other four from slang expressions. The results showed that 28% of the second language learners were just as likely to guess the meaning of an idiom from its context, as they were to discuss and analyze its meaning (24%). The next most used strategies for identification of an idiom’s meaning is to look at its literal translation (19%). Other

strategies such as requesting information (8%), repeating and paraphrasing (7%), and referring to L1 idioms (5%) were used less frequently.

In the Arabic context, Hussein, Khanji and Makhzoomy (2000) conducted a study to determine the extent to which English major students have understood English idioms and also whether or not identical idioms and similar idioms lend themselves more easily to translation from Arabic into English than the different ones. The researchers developed a 45 item test (15 identical, 15 similar and 15 different). The subjects were sixty students, 30 of them from the M. A. translation program and the others were English seniors and they were requested to translate the idioms from Arabic into English. The results showed that the percentage of correct responses was remarkably lower and ranged from 6% to 26%. In the translation of identical idioms the percentage of correct answers was higher and ranged from 36% to 84%. The findings of the study indicated that the identical idioms are the easiest to translate, whereas different idioms are the most difficult to translate.

However, few studies have been conducted on the acquisition of English idioms by L1 Arabic speakers. The importance of the study was that it linked to the fact that only few studies had been conducted on this area and which had not received much attention so far particularly among adult L1 Arabic speakers of L2 English. So far, a study identified was that by Mahmoud (2002) who conducted a study in which idioms appeared only as sub-factors when the case was interlingual transfer of idiomatic expressions from Arabic to English. Thus, this study was expected to shed light on the knowledge and use of English idioms by adult L1 Arabic speakers which would then be added to the literature in this respect. It also aimed to help L2 learners of the English language to better understand and use different English idioms appropriately. In addition, it meant to find out the proficiency level of adult L1 Arabic speakers of L2 English in their acquisition of English idioms chosen for the study, the most difficult types of English idioms for respondents, and the idiomatic strategies adopted by the adult L1 Arabic speakers.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the proficiency level of adult L1 Arabic speakers of L2 English in their acquisition of English idioms chosen for the study?
2. What are the most difficult types of English idioms selected for the study for adult L1 Arabic speakers to acquire?
3. What kinds of strategies do adult L1 Arabic speakers employ to comprehend the English idioms chosen for the study?

METHOD

Participants

Respondents were basically L1 Arabic postgraduate speakers of L2 English language and they were not taking English language as major course. Respondents' level of proficiency was determined based on the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (Allan, 1992).

Forty (40) L1 Arabic postgraduate speakers from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) (different faculties) who were not taking the English language as major were selected due the OPT results targeted to be the study sample.

Instrument

The study used task as a tool for data collection. The task has two parts; the first part of the study task was background information for the respondents. The second part was the idiom task comprised a multiple choice items adapted from Kainulainen (2006) study. The idiom task comprised two different kinds of idioms (Arabic and English) to be distributed to the target respondents. A task contains 30 idioms (15) Arabic idioms adopted from Baalbaki (1983) and (15) English idioms were adopted from Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms (1995) and Longman Idioms Dictionary (1998). Each of the thirty idioms was supported with an example illustrating the meaning behind the selected idiom to facilitate the understanding of the idiom. Idioms taken from the Arabic language were mainly standard idioms shared by all L1 Arabic speakers and not related to a single linguistic variety. Idioms taken from the English language were classified into three different types; (a) transparent; (b) semi-transparent, and (c) opaque. Each item was accompanied three alternative answers. Respondents were requested to choose the appropriate alternative for each. The three alternatives given for each item in the task represented three strategies in dealing with idioms. These strategies were guessing the meaning from the context, refer to L1 idiom, and refer to literal meaning of the idiom or opposite to the literal meaning.

Procedure

The first step was to ensure that the target respondents were placed in groups according to their proficiency level in the English language. This was done on the basis of the use Oxford Placement Test. The target respondents were then divided into three groups of proficiency: advanced, upper-intermediate, and lower-intermediate. The researcher started grouping her acquaintance respondents and they provided other respondents by names and location at *Universiti Putra Malaysia* different setting. The researcher regrouped respondents according to their proficiency level in the English language. Not all respondents who sat for the OPT were selected for the study task but only those who scored 65% of the OPT and above were selected for the study task and they were given adequate time to complete the task. The researcher distributed the questionnaire; she was waiting while respondents were working and she handled in their responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are discussed in order to answer the three research questions. The first research question addressed, what is the proficiency level of adult L1 Arabic speakers of L2 English in their acquisition of English idioms chosen for the study? In order to answer this question, the researcher conducted a placement test (OPT) to select appropriate respondents for the study at UPM. However, not all participants who sat for

the OPT qualified to sit for the idiom task and only those who qualified in terms of their proficiency levels were chosen. Table 1 below shows the mean scores of respondents and the distribution of scores in the OPT.

Table 1. Respondents' Scores in the OPT

Group	Mean Score	Distribution of Scores	Frequency
Advanced	98	96 - 100	01
	93	91 - 95	02
	88	86 - 90	05
	82.5	80 - 85	06
		Total	14
Upper-intermediate	77	75 - 79	06
	72	70 - 74	07
		Total	13
Lower-intermediate	67.5	66 - 69	09
	62.5	60 - 65	04
		Total	13

Further, the researcher conducted idiom task for Forty (40) respondents at *Universiti Putra Malaysia* who scored within the target ranges in the OPT. The findings of this idiom task indicated that adult L1 Arabic speakers of L2 English were less proficient in their acquisition of the English idioms selected for the study compared to their knowledge of idioms translated from Arabic. They only scored a percentage of 67.75% overall. The findings of the task showed that the respondents have scored 67.75% overall for all items and this result seem to point to the fact that respondents were less accurate in their acquisition of English idioms selected for the study. Table 2 below shows the overall score of the respondents in the idiom task.

Table.2 Respondents' Overall Scores of the Idiom Task

Category	Overall score (%)
Correct responses	67.75
Incorrect responses	32.25

Due to the fact that the task had two different types of idioms, the first 15 idioms being Arabic and the rest being English, a comparison was made between respondents' scores for the first 15 idioms (1 - 15) and the rest of the idioms (16 - 30). With regard to the first 15 items (1 - 15) respondents scored 73.33% correct responses and 26.66% incorrect responses. With respect to the other 15 items (16 - 30) which were English idioms, respondents scored 62.16% correct responses and 37.83% incorrect responses. This result shows that respondents had better scores with respect to the Arabic idioms and they were less adequate with regard to the English idioms. It is important to state that some previous studies indicated that L2 English speakers seem to be affected by their first languages as a result of interference in their acquisition of English idioms (see e.g. Irujo, 1986a). The findings of this study lend some support in this direction. Hussein, Khanji and Makhzoomy, (2000) state that Arabic idioms are easier to comprehend compared to the English idioms for L1 Arabic speakers. The findings of

this study are in line with Hussein *et.al*, (2000) in that respondents were found to be better in their acquisition of the Arabic idioms compared to the English idioms. Respondents' overall scores were affected by their scores for the English idioms. Table 3 provides a comparison of respondents' overall scores that is scores of Arabic idioms and scores of English idioms.

Table 3. Respondents' Overall Scores in the Two Types of Idioms

Category	Overall score (%)	Arabic idioms (%)	English idioms (%)
Correct responses	67.75	73.33	62.16
Incorrect responses	32.25	26.66	37.83

However, it was observed that the advanced group of respondents scored the highest marks in the study task and they were registered 82.15% followed by the upper-intermediate group 70.00% and lower-intermediate group 47.20% respectively. The following Table shows Respondents' Scores among the Three Groups.

Table 4. Respondents' Scores among the Three Groups

Category	Advanced Group	Upper-intermediate Group	Lower-intermediate Group
Correct Responses (%)	82.15%	70.00%	47.20%
Incorrect Responses (%)	17.85%	30.00%	52.80%

The findings of the study task suggest that adult L1 Arabic speakers are found to be less accurate in their acquisition of those English idioms selected for the study. They only scored a percentage of 62.16% overall. However, it was observed that advanced group of respondents in the English language scored the highest marks in the study task. Moreover, the findings suggest some kind of interference of respondents' first language. This is shown in the better results obtained for the idioms translated from Arabic. In spite of the fact that all respondents were postgraduate students and the English language is used as a medium of instruction at this level and most of them use the English language for international communication, they have not achieved near-native level in their acquisition of English idioms, that is items (16-30). This finding is in line with Irujo's results (1986a) in terms of L2 learners relying on their knowledge of their first language to comprehend the English idioms.

In relation to the research question number 2, what are the most difficult types of idioms selected for the study for adult L1 Arabic speakers to acquire? The findings showed that the most difficult types of idioms selected for the study encountered by the respondents were items numbered 16 (a slap on the wrist), 23 (go against the grain), 24 (a chip on your shoulder), 28 (put your foot in your mouth) and 29 (find your feet). Items numbered 16, 23, 28 and 29 are semi-transparent idioms and item numbered 24 is opaque idiom. Item 16 (a slap on the wrist) was difficult for respondents as they had more than one option of meanings because it may be referring to escaping a punishment for a crime or referring to a punishment that is very mild. Item 23 (go against the grain) was difficult for respondents as this difficulty might be linked to the word "grain" which

also refers to rice or wheat. Furthermore, item 24 (a chip on your shoulder) was difficult for respondents and this difficulty may be a result of saying something that has a burden to bear or it could be due to the word "chip". In addition, item 28 (put your foot in your mouth) was difficult for respondents as it is difficult to imagine one putting one's foot in one's mouth. Finally, item 29 (find your feet) was difficult for respondents, it may be referring to spending a long time in one place or referring to gain experience and more confidence in a new situation. This finding is in line with Cooper's results (1999) in which he claimed that opaque idioms are difficult to comprehend by second language learners.

In terms of research question number 3, what kinds of strategies do adult L1 Arabic speakers employ to comprehend the English idioms chosen for the study? the findings indicate that adult L1 Arabic speakers mainly used the strategy of "guessing from context" 813 times with a percentage of 67.75%. They used the strategy of "referring to an L1 idiom" 211 times with a percentage of 17.58%. The frequency use of the strategy of "literal meaning" was 176 times with a percentage of 14.66%. This result indicates that the frequency order of use with regard to the three strategies provided by respondents was as follows: guessing from context > referring to an L1 idiom > using literal meaning. Table 5 shows the frequency of strategy use by respondents.

Table 5. Frequency of Strategy Use by Respondents

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Guessing from context	813	67.75%
Referring to an L1 idiom	211	17.59%
Using Literal meaning	176	14.66%

The findings revealed that adult L1 Arabic speakers mainly used the strategy of "guessing from context" to comprehend the English idioms selected for the study. The higher percentage scored by respondents with respect to the "guessing from context" strategy indicate that respondents concentrated on the meaning of the context and thereafter they were able to get the meanings of the idioms. This finding is in line with Cooper's results (1999) where respondents used the "guessing from context" strategy to help them understand the meaning of idioms under the study. In this, the proficiency level of the respondents affects their knowledge of idioms. The more advanced they are, the better they are in their knowledge of both types of idioms-English and those translated from Arabic. Proficiency level also seemed to influence respondents' use of strategies in understanding the idioms.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that adult L1 Arabic speakers were found to be less proficient in their acquisition of the English idioms chosen for the study. They were also found to have difficulty with particular semi-transparent and opaque English idioms. This difficulty maybe resulted of the unfamiliar vocabulary and the multiple meanings of some of the vocabulary. Other findings indicated that proficiency in the English language has an impact in the acquisition of English idioms selected for the study. The

more proficient the respondents were, the better their performance in the task was. However, they used the "guessing from the context" strategy most frequently among the three tested. There seemed to be some kind of interference from the learners' L1 as they performed better on the idioms that were taken and translated from the Arabic language. Respondents were not students of English language programmes. However, they had studied the language for many years and they used English in their academic affairs and in their communication at the university. Yet it was found that they were not quite near native-like in their acquisition of the English idioms selected for the study. It is also important to state that this study did not set out to prove or contradict any SLA theory such as the interference theory as in Dipietro (1971, p. 6); rather it was meant to highlight points for further studies in SLA in general and in particular in the acquisition of idioms by L2 English speakers in different linguistic settings.

The present study has focused on three kinds of idiom strategies. Further studies may extend the scope of investigation to other kinds of idiom strategies such as discussing and analyzing the idiom, using background knowledge and repeating and paraphrasing idioms. The idiom task used quantitative methods by means of a written questionnaire. Studies using qualitative methods by means of oral testing, interviewing, recording of responses, or other techniques might yield data that complement our data. In addition, such studies could be expanded to examine the effect of the students' background and involvement with the language on idiom comprehension. Other studies could be conducted to compare data from different universities and from different contexts.

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