A SURVEY OF GRADUATE STUDENTS’ COMPREHENSION OF ENGLISH IDIOMS, DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING AND STRATEGIES USED IN PROCESSING ENGLISH IDIOMS

BY

MR. THANOMSAK KRIENGPHAN

AN INDEPENDENT STUDY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN CAREER ENGLISH FOR INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION LANGUAGE INSTITUTE THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC YEAR 2017

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INDEPENDENT STUDY PAPER

BY

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ENTITLED

A SURVEY OF GRADUATE STUDENTS’ COMPREHENSION OF ENGLISH IDIOMS, DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING AND STRATEGIES USED IN PROCESSING ENGLISH IDIOMS

was approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Career English for International Communication on May 30, 2018

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ABSTRACT

It is generally agreed that English idioms are difficult and complex for Thai EFL learners to comprehend. This present study was an attempt to investigate difficulties the Thai graduate students encounter in understanding English idioms, strategies the students employ to comprehend the idioms and types of English idioms that are relatively difficult to comprehend. The participants were 25 first-year graduate students in the academic year of 2017. Data were gathered through the questionnaire and the English idiom test and analysed with the Statistical Package for Social Science software (SPSS). Regarding difficulties in understanding English idioms, the results showed that there are a number of difficulties encountered by the participants which are lack of cultural background behind English idioms, lack of context clues, some low frequent or unknown vocabulary in idioms, and lack of adequate English idiom teaching in classes. In terms of the strategies which the participants employ to understand meanings of idioms, they used a variety of different strategies which are to guess the meaning of the idiom from the provided context, to
use the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning, to use the background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom, and to refer to an idiom in Thai to understand the English idiom. Regarding the types of English idioms which are relatively difficult for the participants to comprehend, unfamiliar opaque idioms are the most difficult type followed by unfamiliar transparent idioms, familiar opaque idioms and familiar transparent idioms, respectively.

**Keywords:** English idioms, difficulties in understanding idiom, idiom processing strategies
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Mr. Thanomsak Kriengphan
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Idiom is one of the important parts of languages and widely understood and used among native speakers of each language, both in writing and speaking. The definitions of idioms are varied based on each scholar’s perspective. According to McCarthy and O’Dell (2002), idioms are fixed expressions whose meaning is not immediately obvious from looking at the individual words in the idiom. Some may think that to understand an idiom is like ‘a piece of cake’; others may feel that comprehending an idiom is like ‘a devil of the job’. Among native speakers using similar L1 language, idioms seem to be simple to use and it’s simple to understand their meanings. On the other hand, speakers of different L1 languages, when having conversations or other forms of communication, are likely to experience difficulty to understand and interpret the meanings of idioms of another language.

In Thailand, English is considered as the first foreign language (EFL or English as a foreign language) that students must study in schools (Wiriyachitra, 2002). The status of teaching and learning English idioms in Thailand is likely to have less priority compared to other English grammatical features like tenses, pronouns, conjunctions, etc. McCarthy and O’Dell (2002) mentioned that “teachers used to argue that it was a waste of time for learners to study idioms as they might start using them in an inaccurate or unsuitable way”. Nevertheless, it seems to be undeniable that English idioms appear in various forms such as in daily life conversations with English native speakers, English-speaking movies and TV shows or books written in English. It is probably true that we Thai EFL learners have read, heard or said at least one English idiom or idiomatic expression. The abilities of understanding and using English idioms significantly benefit EFL learners in English proficiency. In order to succeed in English, McPartland (1981) suggested that every learner of a foreign language needs to develop competence in idioms since they are used by native speakers in spoken as well as in written language.
Personally speaking, the researcher finds that understanding English idioms is particularly difficult most of the times the researcher encounters the idioms. It is almost certain that EFL learners who are not familiar with English idioms can become perplexed and discontented. According to Smith and Zygouris-Coe (2009), English language learners are often among those students that struggle with idioms, along with students with language or cognitive challenges. With this in mind, the researcher aims to examine the first-year CEIC students’ comprehension of English idioms as the target students have more frequent opportunities to encounter the idioms. The results will indicate the types of English idioms which are problematic for the learners, strategies used by the learners to comprehend the idioms and difficulties they faced in learning English idioms. Furthermore, the results will greatly benefit English teachers in Thailand to pay more or less attention on English idioms in their teaching curriculums for Thai EFL learners’ abilities to correctly understand and properly use English idioms.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Previous work has only focused on transferability and translatability of idioms by Thai-speaking learners of English (Cedar, 2004). However, it seems like there has been no study conducted in Thailand that mainly focuses on problematic types of English idioms, strategies used by Thai EFL learners to comprehend the idioms and difficulties the learners experienced in comprehending the idioms. Considering the important role of English idioms for Thai EFL learners, the present study is aimed at filling the research gap.
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is aimed at answering the following questions:

1.3.1 What sort of difficulties do the participants encounter in understanding idioms?
1.3.2 What kinds of strategies do the participants employ to comprehend the idioms?
1.3.3 What types of English idioms are relatively difficult to comprehend?

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as follow:

1.4.1 To research difficulties encountered by the participants in understanding idioms
1.4.2 To investigate strategies which the participants employ to comprehend the idioms
1.4.3 To examine types of English idioms with which learners encounter comprehension difficulties

1.5 DEFINITION OF THE TERMS

1.5.1 English idioms refer to 20 idiomatic expressions adopted from the Idiom Comprehension Measure of Fusté-Herrmann (2008). Twenty English idioms were chosen with regard to semantic transparency (transparent and opaque) and levels of familiarity (familiar and unfamiliar) in American English.

1.5.2 Graduate students refer to 25 of first-year students studying in Master of Arts Program in Career English for International Communication at Thammasat University, Tha Phra Chan campus, in the academic year of 2017, all of whom passed TU-GET.
1.5.3 **Comprehension** refers to the ability of understanding the English idioms and giving the correct meanings of idioms. The English Idiom Test will be the tool to check the participants’ comprehension.

1.5.4 **TU-GET** stands for the Thammasat University Graduate English Test, which is aimed at measuring English language proficiency level. Master’s degree students of the university are required to get greater or equal to 550 points out of 1,000 points in order that they will get accepted to study in the programs.

### 1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The research only considers graduate students of Thammasat University who have already passed the TU-GET test as participants. The study is mainly focused on 20 English American idioms from the study of Fusté-Herrmann (2008) to investigate the participants’ comprehension of English idioms. The classification of the idioms by Fusté-Herrmann (2008) which is divided into four groups, familiar transparent, familiar opaque, unfamiliar transparent and unfamiliar opaque, are used as the theoretical framework. Others classifications of idioms are not focused on in the investigation. The study was conducted within a specified time-period, in just two weeks.

### 1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study will firstly benefit the researcher to understand the types of English idioms which Thai students have difficulty with and their most common strategies used to comprehend English idioms. Secondly, the study will benefit English teachers in Thailand to pay more or less attention to English idioms in their teaching curriculums.
1.8 ORGANISATION OF THE STUDY

This research study is divided into five chapters. Chapter One presents the introduction of the study which consists of background, statement of the problem, research questions, objectives of the study, definitions of terms, scope of the study, significance of the study and organization of the study. Chapter Two provides the review of literature which consists of definitions of idioms, classifications of idioms, strategies used in L2 idiom processing, difficulties faced in understanding English idioms and previous related studies. Research methodology which consists of participants, research tools and procedures (data collection and data analysis) is discussed in Chapter Three. Chapter Four shows results of the study, and conclusions and recommendations are presented in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In reviewing literature to create a theoretical framework for the project, the researcher considered various theories and concepts related to English idioms. This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section gives definitions of the word *idiom*. The second section presents idiom classification. Difficulties faced in understanding English idioms are focused on in the third section. Strategies used in L2 idiom processing are discussed in the fourth section. The last section presents previous related studies.

2.1 DEFINITIONS OF IDIOMS

A number of scholars, linguists and lexicographers have given different definitions of the word *idiom* based on their understanding and knowledge. Various definitions were found by the researcher to clarify the meaning of the word and its characteristics. According to Moon (1998), the word was mentioned to be “an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways”. As pointed out by Trask (2000), the definition of idiom was clarified to be a “fixed expression whose meaning is not guessable from the meaning of its parts”. As stated by McCarthy and O’Dell (2002), idioms are “fixed expressions whose meaning is not immediately obvious from looking at the individual words in the idiom” (p.4). Famous English dictionaries explained the word idiom; Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2003) explained the idiom as “a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own”. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (2004) gave the definition of idiom as “an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but that has a separate meaning of its own”. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010) defined the word as “a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words”.

In order to identify idioms, its two main characteristics, which were explained in Saberian and Fotovania’s (2011) study are: first, idiomatic expressions have a fixed
word order which suggests that they are socially acceptable expressions; second, it is not possible to guess the meaning of an idiom from the individual words it is comprised of. For example, the meaning of the phrase be in the same boat is not that easy to understand; the idiomatic meaning of the phrase is “to be in the same difficult or unfortunate situation” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010, p. 151). Another example is the idiom bury the hatchet, likewise, the meaning is not to literally bury a hatchet, instead its idiomatic meaning is “to stop being unfriendly and become friends again” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010, p. 192). Using English idioms is complicated and difficult for learners, especially for L2 learners due to the fact that English is not their mother tongue or first language. A wide range of factors such as cultural, religious and traditional backgrounds, are involved to correctly understand and properly use idioms. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010) stated that idiom is “the kind of language and grammar used by particular people at a particular time or place” (p. 744).

### 2.2 CLASSIFICATIONS OF IDIOMS

Idioms are classified by various scholars based on their own perspectives and criterions. For example, Irujo (1986) used similarities between the first language and the second language as criterions to classify idioms. The level of lexical variance in idioms is the criteria used by Fernando (1996) to categorize idioms. Semantic transparency and familiarity are applied as criterions in the classification of idioms introduced by Fusté-Herrmann (2008). Each classification is discussed in more detail as follows:

- According to Irujo (1986), the classification of idioms should be divided into three types, based on similarities between the first language and the second language. The first type is identical, which refers to idioms in one language that have counterparts in another language. Identical idioms between two different languages use the same terms or vocabulary in expression, and the meanings of the idioms can be translated and understood word by word. The second is similar, which refers to idioms between two languages that are almost similar but different in a small way. The third type is different, which refers to idioms
between two different languages that use totally different vocabularies or forms, but the meanings are exactly the same. For learners, identical and similar idioms are slightly easy to understand. On the other hand, different idioms are the most difficult to comprehend since the idioms share no counterparts to another language.

• Fernando (1996) classified idioms into three types, which are pure, semiliteral and literal idioms, based on the level of lexical variance in idioms. The first type is a pure idiom, which refers to a “non-literal set expression whose meaning is not a compositional function of its syntactic constituents, but which always has a homonymous literal counterpart” (Fernando, 1981). It is difficult for learners of L2 to understand pure idioms since the accurate meaning of the idioms are drastically different from their literal meaning; for example, pull someone’s leg means, from Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, “to tell someone something that is not true as a way of joking with the person”. The second type is a semiliteral idiom, which refers to an idiom that has “one or more literal constituents and at least one with a non-literal sub sense”. Semiliteral idioms are not as difficult as pure idioms for L2 learners to comprehend since the meaning of some words used in the idiom present its literal meaning. For example, foot the bill means to pay for something, especially something that is expensive. The third type is a literal idiom, which refers to an idiom in which the actual meaning can be understood by its literal meaning. For L2 learners to comprehend this type of idioms is not as complex as the first two types.

• Fusté-Herrmann (2008) used two criteria to classify idioms which are semantic transparency and familiarity. First, semantic transparency refers to the relative correspondence of an idiom’s literal and figurative meanings (Nippold & Taylor, 1995). Semantic transparency is divided into two dimensions, transparent and opaque idioms. By putting each word’s literal meaning together, transparent idioms’ meanings can be guessed or interpreted easily. For example, to see the light means to understand, or a piece of cake can be interpreted as an enjoyable task. On the other hand, opaque idioms refer to idioms which cannot be comprehended by gathering the literal meanings of its parts. The idioms are
elusive and figurative which cause difficulty to understand the idioms. For example, *spill the beans* means to reveal a secret, or *to beat around the bush* means to avoid talking about what is important. Nippold & Taylor (1995) concluded that transparent idioms are generally easier to interpret than opaque idioms. Second, familiarity refers to the frequency with which an idiom occurs in a language (Nippold & Taylor, 1995). According to Nippold and Rudzinski (1993), geographical location, linguistic background (including dialect), culture and age are factors which affect familiarity. It is possible that the more familiar the idiom is, the easier the learner can comprehend it. If an idiom is frequently used, learners will be more familiar with the idiom and use it correctly and properly.

The classification of English idioms, which was based on semantic transparency and familiarity, in *Idiom Comprehension in Bilingual and Monolingual Adolescents* by Fusté-Herrmann (2008) consists of four categories of English idioms, which are familiar transparent, familiar opaque, unfamiliar transparent and unfamiliar opaque. The four categories of English idioms are discussed in detail together with examples below. However, the familiarity’s degree (familiar or unfamiliar) of the idioms is particularly based on the frequency which the idioms are used in American English.

• Familiar transparent

The idioms categorized as familiar transparent are frequently used in American English, and the actual meaning of these idioms can be guessed by their literal meanings since there is a more direct relationship between their literal and figurative meanings. For example, the idiom *the early bird catches the worm* means *the one who arrives early will be successful.*

• Familiar opaque

The idioms categorized as familiar opaque are commonly used in American English, but the actual meaning of these idioms cannot be easily apprehended by their literal meanings since there is less direct relationship between their literal and
figurative meanings. For instance, the idiom *go cold turkey* means *to stop an addictive behaviour immediately*.

- **Unfamiliar transparent**

The idioms categorized as unfamiliar transparent are not generally used in American English but translated from European idioms. However, the actual meaning of these idioms can be simply comprehended by their literal meanings since there is a more direct relationship between their literal and figurative meanings. For example, the idiom *to throw flowers to someone* which is translated from the French idiom *jeter des fleurs* means *to speak highly of someone*.

- **Unfamiliar opaque**

The idioms categorized as unfamiliar opaque are not commonly used in American English but translated from European idioms, and the actual meaning of these idioms cannot be simply understood by their literal meanings since there is no direct relationship between their literal and figurative meanings. For instance, the idiom *between dog and wolf* which is translated from the French idiom *entre chien et loup* means *at dusk*.

The descriptions of four types of English idioms along with examples above were summarized and exerted from the study of Fusté-Herrmann (2008). Fusté-Herrmann’s English idiom classification is likely to be the most recent and updated classification, therefore; it is applied in this study to identify types of idioms which are problematic for learners.
2.3 DIFFICULTIES FACED IN UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH IDIOMS

It is probably true that understanding English idioms is not an easy task for EFL learners, and it seems like EFL learners have difficulties with idiom comprehension. Saleh and Zakaria (2013) stated that the low frequent vocabulary is one of the factors that affect students understanding of idioms. If learners are not familiar with words comprised in an idiom, they may not be able to interpret instantly its meaning because of those unknown words. It is possible that an idiom which consists of words used frequently by learners seems to be easy to comprehend. Lack of adequate English idiom teaching in class is also one of the difficulties. McCarthy and O’Dell (2002) stated that teachers sometimes argued that it was a waste of time for students or learners to study English idioms as they might use them in an inaccurate or unsuitable way. Cultural background is another cause of difficulties in understanding idiom. As described by Glucksberg & McGlone (2001), idioms are like a secret language and a language owned by a culture that one has to be steeped in. It is a good possibility that an idiom originally created by one culture and frequently used may not be understood by learners of another culture thanks to lack of cultural background related to an idiom. Context clues given for each idiom play an important role in understanding idioms. According to Levorato & Cacciari (1992), context appears to facilitate idiom comprehension more in older elementary school-age children and beyond. It is certain that a learner who is unfamiliar with an idiom will understand the idiom better if context clues are provided.
2.3 STRATEGIES USED IN L2 IDIOM PROCESSING

Generally speaking, English idioms are particularly difficult to comprehend for learners who learn English as a foreign language. Whenever L2 learners encounter idioms which are beyond their acquisition, they might adapt some strategies to comprehend the idioms or to guess their actual meaning. According to Cooper (1999), strategies that the learners apply to comprehend L2 idioms are divided into two phases, preparatory and guessing. The preparatory phase is composed of three strategies which are 1.) to repeat or paraphrase the idiom without giving an interpretation, 2.) to discuss and analyze the idiom or its context without guessing at the meaning and 3.) to request information about the idiom from the context. The guessing phase consists of four strategies. The first strategy is to use the literal meaning of the idiom to understand its figurative meaning. The second is to use a mental image to understand the idiom’s meaning. The third strategy is to refer to an idiom in the L1 to comprehend the L2 idiom. The last one is to use background knowledge to understand the meaning of the idiom. These strategies were mentioned by Cooper (1999) to show how L2 learners interpret idiom’s actual meanings. However, learners need more time to utter the guess which allows them to clarify meanings of idioms in the preparatory phase. Therefore, this present study pays more attention on the guessing phase due to the fact that the phase focuses more on comprehension.

2.5 PREVIOUS RELATED STUDIES

Saleh and Zakaria (2013) examined the difficulties experienced in understanding English idioms and strategies used in processing the idioms by 40 Libyan students in Malaysia, and the participants were purposively sampled. The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire in order to define their backgrounds which consisted of English proficiency based on IELTS test scores, their experiences of being in English-speaking countries and their communication with native English speakers. The third section of the questionnaire was aimed at investigating their knowledge of English idioms. The results showed that a lack of cultural background related to the idiom and a lack of English idiom teaching were
the reasons why idioms were difficult for the participants. Moreover, the unfamiliar vocabularies used in idioms affected the participants’ interpretations of the expressions’ meanings. The strategies used for understanding idioms by the participants were to guess from the context and to refer to L1 meaning. The non-decomposable idioms were complex to comprehend because their figurative meanings were not able to be inferred by guessing from each word’s literal meaning. However, the students who had high proficiency level, visited English-speaking countries and had contact with native English speakers outperformed those students without the mentioned factors.

Huang (2007) investigated 145 Chinese EFL learners, freshmen and seniors from Shaoguan University so as to find out their comprehension of L2 idioms based on effects of idiom type and proficiency level. The participants were divided into two groups, an intermediate group and an advanced group, by first using a vocabulary size test. Later on, an English idiom comprehension test was completed, followed by an individual verbal test, think-aloud protocols. Both qualitative and quantitative perspectives were applied in data collection. In order to understand the idioms’ meanings, both groups of participants used the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning and applied an idiom in the L1 to understand the L2 idiom. Idioms which had a conceptual basis that was similar to a figurative meaning were understood readily by both groups. However, the advanced group performed better than those learners in the intermediate group. Huang stated regarding the implications for teaching and learning English idioms that (1) a cross-linguistic comparison of L2 and L1 regarding conceptual basis is needed for better and easier comprehension, (2) comparing literal and idiomatic meaning of idioms is a practically useful activity for teaching and (3) using background knowledge and mental imagery should be taught for understanding idioms’ meanings.

Hsu (2011) conducted a research study to analyze the English idiom comprehension of Taiwanese college students. The research questions were about strategies they applied to understand idioms, effects of L1 transferring and types of idioms they described as difficult. Four students were selected for data collection, using think-aloud protocol. The participants were categorized into two levels,
intermediate level and elementary level. The data was verbally collected during the think-aloud process, including the Idiom Recognition Test, in order to individually analyze their thoughts and strategies. The results showed that the frequent strategies the participants used to understand idioms were guessing from provided context and using literal meaning. A lack of understanding of the cultural background of each idiom affected participant’s comprehension; moreover, encountering unfamiliar words in each idiom lessened their acquisition. The idioms, which were similar or comparable to their mother tongue’s idiomatic expressions (Chinese), were well comprehended by the participants.

Funtek (2015) conducted a research study of English idiom comprehension as a second language in Croatia, University of Rijeka. The data of the study was quantitatively collected by studying secondary texts and gathering information into a united whole. The study presented a collection of idiom definitions given by famous scholars and a selection of classifications of idioms categorized by outstanding scholars. Transfer in the acquisition of idioms was analyzed in depth, and similarities and differences between Croatian and English idioms were discussed in detail, along with comprehension of idioms. The researcher claimed that the teachers did not devote adequate attention and time for teaching idioms, and students were given a list of idioms to learn by heart with any discussion provided.

The next chapter discusses the research methodology which is comprised of participants, research tools and the procedure of the investigation.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methods to be used in the study. It also describes the participants of the study, the research tools used, the procedure of data gathering and the statistical treatment of the data.

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study were 25 first-year graduate students at a public university in Bangkok in the academic year of 2017. The reason that those students were qualified as the population is due to the fact that they passed the TU-GET test (at the score of 550 and above) and the written entrance test which consists of reading, writing, and listening parts and a speaking section by interview. It is almost certain that they completed some English courses, read English textbooks and communicated with native English speakers previously. As a result, it seems to show that the participants have high proficiency in English skills. The students were selected with purposive sampling as the participants of the study, all of whom passed the TU-GET test (as of February, 28th 2018).

3.2 RESEARCH TOOLS

There are two research tools for this investigation which are the questionnaire and the English idiom test. In order to investigate the participants’ difficulties in understanding and strategies used in processing English idioms, the questionnaire adopted from the study of Saleh and Zakaria (2013) was used. To measure the English idiom comprehension of the participants, the English idiom test which was partly adapted from the Idiom Comprehension Measure of Fusté-Herrmann (2008) was used in the investigation.
3.2.1 Questionnaire (see Appendix A)

The questionnaire was divided into the two following sections.

**Section 1: Participants’ background information**

Each participant was asked to complete the closed-ended questions to compile personal background information. The section is formed to obtain the demographic information such as age, gender, year of bachelor’s degree graduation, experience in English-speaking countries and opportunity of communicating with English-native speakers in daily life.

**Section 2: Knowledge of idioms (Difficulties and Strategies)**

This section is adopted from the questionnaire of Saleh and Zakaria (2013) in order to determine the participants’ knowledge of idioms which includes difficulties in understanding and strategies used in processing English idioms. This section consists of 16 questions. A four-point Likert scale was used for answering the questions in this section. The scales are ranged as follows:

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Agree
4 = Strongly agree

3.3.2 English idioms test (see Appendix B)

The English idiom test was partly adopted from the Idiom Comprehension Measure of Fusté-Herrmann (2008). Twenty English idioms were chosen regarding semantic transparency (transparent and opaque) and levels of familiarity (familiar and unfamiliar) in American English. The classification of the 20 English idiom for the test are divided into four types which are five of familiar transparent idioms, five of familiar opaque idioms, five of unfamiliar transparent idioms and five of unfamiliar opaque idioms (see Table 3.1). The familiarity levels of the idioms were previously rated by 47 monolingual English speaking students in Polk County Public Schools, Florida, United States, from the study of Fusté-Herrmann (2008). Each idiom was
provided with three multiple choices (one is a literal but a wrong meaning of the idiom, one is a figurative and correct meaning of the idiom, and the third is figuratively related to the idiom but incorrect) and out of context clues. All of 20 idioms were randomly ordered in the English idiom test. The participants were asked to complete the test by choosing each idiom’s correct meaning.

Table 3.1 The list of the selected 20 idioms for the English idiom test

| Familiar transparent idioms | 1. Burning the candle at both ends  
| 2. Take a shot in the dark  
| 3. Hold one’s head up  
| 4. Cry over spilled milk  
| 5. Go by the book  |
| Familiar opaque idioms | 6. Go to pot  
| 7. Wet behind the ears  
| 8. Paint the town red  
| 9. Jump through hoops  
| 10. To flip one’s lid  |
| Unfamiliar transparent idioms | 11. To fall into the apples  
| 12. To fall down with four horseshoes up in the air  
| 13. For a good hunger there is no hard bread  
| 14. It’s the water drop that makes the vase overflow  
| 15. To try to make a hole out of water  |
| Unfamiliar opaque idioms | 16. The turtle is shrouded  
| 17. To eat the leaf  
| 18. To have salt in your pumpkin  
| 19. To pick up a log  
| 20. To eat on the thumb  |

In order to answer the three research questions, the questionnaire is aimed at answering research questions no. 1 and no. 2 which are what sort of difficulties the participants encounter in understanding idioms and what kinds of strategies the participants employ to comprehend the idioms, respectively. The English idiom test is aimed at explaining what types of English idioms are relatively difficult for the participants to comprehend (research question no.3).
3.3 PROCEDURES

3.3.1 Pilot study

For reliability and validity of the research tools which are the questionnaire and the English idiom test, the advisor of this present study was requested to check these research tools. Moreover, a pilot survey was applied by asking five first-year ELT (English Language Teaching) graduate students of Language Institute, Thammasat University who passed TU-GET as the sample to complete both of the questionnaire and the English idiom test. During the 30 minutes provided for these students to finish both of the research tools, none of questions or ambiguities was mentioned for clarification by the students.

3.3.2 Data collection

The researcher asked for permission from the lecturer of the research methodology class (a morning and an afternoon class) to collect the data from the participants for the last 30 minutes of each class. The paper-based questionnaire and the English idiom test were distributed to all of the students in the classrooms. The questionnaire and the English idiom test are in English. Consulting any form of dictionary was not allowed during the investigation. The participants were limited to complete both the questionnaire and the English idiom test within thirty minutes. Only the copies of the students who passed TU-GET (at the score of 550 and above) were selected for the process of data analysis.
3.3.3 Data analysis

To get the findings of the study, the researcher used the Statistical Package for Social Science software (SPSS). The program was used to reveal the statistics as follows.

Questionnaire, Section 1: Background information was analyzed in percentage and frequency.

Questionnaire, Section 2: Knowledge of idioms was analyzed based on frequency, percentage and mean value.

English idiom test: The answers provided by the participants were manually checked by the researcher. Of all 20 English idioms, the correct answer of each idiom was scored at 1 point, and the incorrect answers were scored at zero points. However, if a participant selected more than one choice or did not select any choices, the participant received zero points for that item. The total possible score was 20 points for 20 English idioms. The results were examined with SPSS software and presented in frequency and percentage.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

The research methodology has been mentioned in the preceding chapter. This chapter presents the findings of this study. From the results of the 25 questionnaires and English idiom test which the participants completed, the findings are divided into five main sections which are:

4.1 Background of the participants
4.2 General knowledge of English idioms of the participants
4.3 Difficulties faced in understanding English idioms of the participants
4.4 Strategies used by the participants in L2 idiom processing
4.5 Types of English idioms which are relatively difficult for the participants to comprehend

4.1 BACKGROUND OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The background of the participants were collected from Section 1 of the questionnaires distributed to the participants to indicate the demographic information of those participants which consists of age, gender, year of bachelor’s degree graduation, experience in English-speaking countries and opportunity for communicating with English-native speakers in daily life. The results are described in the following figures.
Figure 4.1 Genders of the participants

Figure 4.1 provides genders of participants. Of the 25 participants of the study, 80% (20) of the participants were female; five of the participants (20%) were male.

Figure 4.2 Ages of the participants

As can be seen in Figure 4.2, the minimum age of the participants was 24, and the maximum age of them was 44.
As revealed in Figure 4.3, participants’ year of bachelor’s degree graduation varied from the year of 1996 to the year of 2016. Twenty percent of the participants obtained their bachelor’s degree in 2015, while 4% did it in 1996, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010.

As can be seen in Figure 4.4, 52% of the participants indicated that they had experiences in English-speaking countries both for travelling and studying purposes, and 48% of those participants revealed that they had no experience in any English-speaking countries.
Figure 4.5 Participants’ opportunities for communicating with English native speakers in daily life

Figure 4.5 provides the percentages of participants’ opportunities to communicate with native speakers of English. As can be seen, 56% of the participants had opportunities to have contact with English native speakers regularly. However, 44% of the participants negatively revealed that they had no chance to communicate with English native speakers in daily life.

Figure 4.6 Participants’ TU-GET scores

All of the participants of the investigation had already passed the TU-GET (with the scores of 550 and above). As shown in Figure 4.6, the minimum score of the participants was 550, and 860 was the maximum score.
4.2 GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH IDIOMS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

In order to find out about the participants’ general points of view towards English idioms, the first three items from Section 2 of the questionnaire (see Table 4.1) were aimed at explaining their general points of view towards English idioms. As can be seen from the statement ‘I’m good at idioms’ in the table, the numbers of the participants who showed strong disagreement and disagreement were 4 (16%) and 19 (76%), respectively. However, 2 (8%) of the participants agreed, and no one strongly agreed with it. Referring to the item ‘I like to use idioms’, 4 (16%) of the participants showed strong disagreement, and 13 (52%) participants disagreed. On the other hand, the number of the participants who agreed with the statement was 8 (30%), and none of participants showed strong agreement. As for the statement ‘Idioms are easy to use’, 6 (24%) of the participants indicated that they strongly disagreed, and 18 participants (72%) agreed. In contrast, only 1 participant (4%) showed agreement with the above statement, and none of participants strongly agreed.

Table 4.1 Participants’ knowledge of idioms (General knowledge)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of Idioms</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f (%)</td>
<td>f (%)</td>
<td>f (%)</td>
<td>f (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I’m good at idioms.</td>
<td>4 (16)</td>
<td>19 (76)</td>
<td>2 (8)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I like to use idioms.</td>
<td>4 (16)</td>
<td>13 (52)</td>
<td>8 (32)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>0.688</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Idioms are easy to use.</td>
<td>6 (24)</td>
<td>18 (72)</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>0.500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2 Participants’ knowledge of idioms (Difficulties)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of Idioms</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f (%)</td>
<td>f (%)</td>
<td>f (%)</td>
<td>f (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Idioms are difficult because there are some low frequent or unknown vocabulary in idioms.</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (8)</td>
<td>16 (64)</td>
<td>7 (28)</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background behind the idioms.</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
<td>10 (40)</td>
<td>14 (56)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>0.586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Idioms are difficult without context clues.</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (12)</td>
<td>11 (44)</td>
<td>11 (44)</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>0.690</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Idioms are difficult because they are not taught well in class.

In Table 4.2, the findings from this table were gathered to answer the first research question which is what sort of difficulties the participants encounter in understanding idioms. Referring to the item ‘Idioms are difficult because there are some low frequent or unknown vocabulary in idioms’, none of the participants strongly disagreed with this item, and only 2 participants (8%) disagreed with the statement. However, the numbers of the participants who agreed and strongly agreed were 16 (64%) and 7 (28%), respectively. In response to the statement ‘Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background behind the idioms’, no one strongly disagreed with the statement, and only one participant (4%) disagreed with the statement. However, 10 (40%) participants agreed, and 14 participants (54%) strongly agreed with the statement. With reference to the item ‘Idioms are difficult without context clues’, none of the participants showed strong disagreement, and 3 participants (12%) disagreed. On the other hand, 11 of the participants (44%) agreed with the above statement and also 44% strongly agreed. The response to the statement ‘Idioms are difficult because they are not taught well in class’ indicated that the numbers of the participants who strongly disagreed and disagreed were 1 (4%) and 2 (8%) respectively. For this statement, 14 participants (56%) agreed, and 8 (32%) of them strongly agreed.
### 4.4 Strategies Used by the Participants in L2 Idiom Processing

Table 4.3 Participants’ knowledge of idioms (Strategies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of Idioms</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Mean (%)</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( f ) (%)</td>
<td>( f ) (%)</td>
<td>( f ) (%)</td>
<td>( f ) (%)</td>
<td>( f ) (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>1 I guess the meaning of the idiom from the context.</th>
<th>0 (0)</th>
<th>0 (0)</th>
<th>21 (84)</th>
<th>4 (16)</th>
<th>3.16</th>
<th>0.374</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 I use the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning.</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (8)</td>
<td>20 (80)</td>
<td>3 (12)</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>0.455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 I use the background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom.</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (12)</td>
<td>18 (72)</td>
<td>4 (16)</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>0.539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 I refer to an idiom in L1 to understand the L2 idiom.</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>10 (40)</td>
<td>11 (44)</td>
<td>4 (16)</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>0.723</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ref. code: 25605921040522EYX
As can be seen from Table 4.3, the findings were obtained from the participants to answer the second research question which is what kinds of strategies the participants employ to comprehend the idioms. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire, Section 2 (item 8-12), to investigate the strategies they applied when processing English idioms. The results of these mentioned items are discussed as follows. With reference to the item ‘I guess the meaning of the idiom from the context’, surprisingly, none of the participants strongly disagreed and disagreed. However, the number of the participants who agreed and strongly agreed with the item were 21 (84%) and 4 (16%), respectively. The response to the item ‘I use the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning’ showed that no one strongly disagreed with the statement, and only 2 (8%) participants disagreed. On the contrary, the participants showed agreement and strong agreement that they use the literal meaning of each idiom to understand its figurative meaning at 20 (80%) and 3 (12%) respectively. Referring to the item ‘I use the background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom’, none of the participants showed strong disagreement and only 3 participants (12%) disagreed with the item. On the other hand, the number of the participants who agreed with the statement is 18 (72%), and 4 of the participants (16%) strongly agreed. As for the item ‘I refer to an idiom in L1 to understand the L2 idiom, no one strongly disagreed with the item. The number of the participants who disagreed and agreed were approximately similar at 10 (40%) and 11 (44%), respectively. Nevertheless, only 4 participants (16%) showed strong agreement with the item. In response to the item ‘I use many different strategies when learning idioms’, none of the participants showed strong disagreement, and only 2 participants (8%) disagreed. However, the numbers of the participants who agreed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I use many different strategies when learning idioms.</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3.08</th>
<th>0.493</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ref. code: 25605921040522EYX
and strongly agreed that they use many strategies to understand English idioms are 19 (76%) and 4 (16%), respectively.

As can be seen from Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3, the highest mean score is 3.52. It was obtained from the participants who indicated that idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background behind the idioms. On the other hand, the lowest mean score is 1.80. It was obtained from the participants who thought that idioms are easy to use.

4.5 TYPES OF ENGLISH IDIOMS WHICH ARE RELATIVELY DIFFICULT FOR THE PARTICIPANTS TO COMPREHEND

In order to answer the third research question, which is what types of English idioms are relatively difficult to comprehend, the English idiom test was formed to research the findings. The findings are divided into four sections regarding types of English idioms which are familiar transparent idioms, familiar opaque idioms, unfamiliar transparent idioms and unfamiliar opaque idioms. As can been seen from the data in Tables 4.4 - 4.7, the results of each idiom were analyzed based on frequency and percentage of accuracy and inaccuracy of the answers chosen by the participants. Each type of idioms is discussed in detail below.
4.5.1 Familiar transparent idioms

Table 4.4 Results of the participants’ English idiom test (Familiar transparent idioms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of English idioms</th>
<th>Idioms</th>
<th>Accurate answers $f$ (%)</th>
<th>Inaccurate answers $f$ (%)</th>
<th>Average percentage of inaccuracy per type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar transparent</td>
<td>1. Hold one’s head up</td>
<td>24 (96%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Cry over spilled milk</td>
<td>23 (92%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Go by the book</td>
<td>22 (88%)</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Take a shot in the dark</td>
<td>20 (80%)</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Burning the candle at both ends</td>
<td>13 (52%)</td>
<td>12 (48%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are five familiar transparent idioms in which the participants had to choose the correct answer from the three multiple choices. In response to the idiom *hold one’s head up* in which the figurative meaning is *to be brave and/or proud*, the total number of the participants who selected the correct meaning was 24 (96%); only 1 participant (4%) failed to choose the accurate meaning. Referring to the idiom *cry over spilled milk* which means *to cry over something that has already happened*, 23 participants (92%) selected the right answer while only 2 participants (8%) chose the wrong meaning. 22 of the participants (88%) opted for the right meaning of the idiom *go by the book* which is *to follow the rules* whereas only 3 participants (12%) gave the inaccurate meaning. For the idiom *take a shot in the dark* for which the accurate meaning is *to take a guess*, 20 participants (80%) selected the correct answer, and only 5 of them (20%) answered incorrectly. The last idiom of this category is *burning the candle at both ends*. Only 13 participants (52%) selected the correct meaning of
the idiom which is *to work and/or play too hard without enough rest.* However, 12 of the participants (48%) chose the wrong meaning of the idiom.

### 4.5.2 Familiar opaque idioms

Table 4.5 Results of the participants’ English idiom test (Familiar opaque idioms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of English idioms</th>
<th>Idioms</th>
<th>Accurate answers f (%)</th>
<th>Inaccurate answers f (%)</th>
<th>Average percentage of inaccuracy per type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wet behind the ears</td>
<td>23 (92%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jump through hoops</td>
<td>18 (72%)</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paint the town red</td>
<td>14 (56%)</td>
<td>11 (44%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar opaque</td>
<td>To flip one’s lid</td>
<td>10 (40%)</td>
<td>15 (60%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Go to pot</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
<td>16 (64%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five familiar opaque idioms were presented in the test in order to elicit the participants’ degree of accuracy by choosing the correct figurative meaning of each idiom. Of the 25 participants, 23 of them (92%) correctly selected the meaning of the idiom *wet behind the ears* which means *to be inexperienced*; however, only 2 participants opted for the wrong meaning. 18 participants (72%) selected the choice of *to do whatever you are told* which is the correct figurative meaning of the idiom *jump through hoops.* Conversely, 7 of the participants (28%) chose the incorrect meaning of the idiom. Referring to the idiom *paint the town red,* 14 participants (56%) selected the correct meaning of the idiom which is *to go out and celebrate.* In contrast, 11 participants (44%) elected the wrong meaning. For the idiom *to flip one’s lid* which means *to be very angry,* 10 participants (40%) opted for the right answer whereas 15

Ref. code: 25605921040522EYX
participants (60%) incorrectly chose the answer. In response to the idiom *go to pot* which means *to deteriorate*, the result negatively shows that only 9 participants (36%) selected the correct answer. On the other hand, 16 of the participants (64%) failed to choose the accurate answer.

### 4.5.3 Unfamiliar transparent idioms

Table 4.6 Results of the participants’ English idiom test (Unfamiliar transparent idioms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of English idioms</th>
<th>Idioms</th>
<th>Accurate answers</th>
<th>Inaccurate answers</th>
<th>Average percentage of inaccuracy per type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>f</em> (%)</td>
<td><em>f</em> (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar transparent</td>
<td>1. To try to make a hole out of water</td>
<td>24 (96%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. For a good hunger there is no hard bread</td>
<td>23 (92%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. It’s the water drop that makes the vase overflow</td>
<td>12 (48%)</td>
<td>13 (52%)</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. To fall into the apples</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
<td>19 (76%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. To fall down with four horseshoes up in the air</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
<td>21 (84%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the English Idiom test, five of the idioms are categorized into unfamiliar transparent idioms, and the participants had to provide the correct answer of each idioms. A total of 24 participants (96%) surprisingly opted for the correct figurative meaning of the idiom *to try to make a hole out of water* which means *to try to do something that is impossible*; however, only 1 participant (4%) selected the incorrect meaning of the idiom. In response to the idiom *for a good hunger there is no hard bread*, 23 participants (92%) selected the correct meaning of the idiom which is *anything tastes good when you are hungry* while only 2 participants (8%) chose the
inaccurate answer. For the idiom it’s the water drop that makes the vase overflow in which its figurative is the last thing that happened that finally made you upset, a total of 12 participants (48%) opted for the accurate answer, and 13 participants (52%) failed to provide the correct meaning of the idiom. Only 6 participants (24%) opted for the accurate meaning of the idiom to fall into the apples which means to pass out. On the other hand, 19 participants (76%) answered the figurative meaning of this idiom incorrectly. Referring to the idiom to fall down with four horseshoes up in the air, only 4 participants (16%) chose the correct meaning which is to fall flat on your back whereas 21 of those participants (84%) chose the incorrect answer.

4.5.4 Unfamiliar opaque idioms

Table 4.7 Results of the participants’ English idiom test (Unfamiliar opaque idioms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of English idioms</th>
<th>Idioms</th>
<th>Accurate answers</th>
<th>Inaccurate answers</th>
<th>Average percentage of inaccuracy per type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>( f ) (%)</td>
<td>( f ) (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar opaque</td>
<td>1. To eat the leaf</td>
<td>13 (52%)</td>
<td>12 (48%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. To pick up a log</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
<td>16 (64%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. To have salt in your pumpkin</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
<td>16 (64%)</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. To eat on the thumb</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
<td>19 (76%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. The turtle is shrouded</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>23 (92%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants had to select the correct figurative meaning of the idioms, five of which are unfamiliar opaque idioms. Referring to the idiom to eat the leaf in which its figurative meaning is to keep a secret, 13 participants (52%) chose the accurate meaning of the idiom. On the other hand, a total of 12 participants (48%)
failed to choose the accurate answer of the idiom. For the idioms *to have salt in your pumpkin* and *to pick up a log*, 9 participants (36%) selected the correct meanings of those idioms which are *to be intelligent* and *to fall down and hurt oneself* respectively. However, 16 participants (64%) selected the incorrect meanings of both mentioned idioms. Only 6 participants (24%) opted for the correct meaning of the idiom *to eat on the thumb* which means *to eat too much*; however, 19 participants (76%) failed to choose the correct meaning. In response to the idiom *the turtle is shrouded*, only 2 participants chose the accurate meaning of the idiom which is *the sky is foggy*. On the contrary, a total of 23 participants (92%) selected the incorrect meaning of this idiom.

![Average percentage of inaccuracy per type of English idiom](image)

Figure 4.7 Average percentage of inaccuracy per type of English idiom

As can be seen from Figure 4.7, it is almost certain that familiar transparent idioms with the average percentage of inaccuracy of 18.4% are the least difficult for the participants to understand the accurate figurative meanings of those idioms. It is possible that familiar opaque idioms (average percentage of inaccuracy = 40.8%) are more difficult than familiar transparent idioms for the participants’ comprehension. With the average percentage of 44.8%, unfamiliar transparent idioms are more complicated than those two types of idioms which are discussed earlier. It is likely that the most difficult type of idioms for the participants to select the correct figurative meaning of each idiom is unfamiliar opaque with the average percentage of inaccuracy of 68.8%.
In summary, the descriptions in this chapter are aimed at providing the details of the findings from the study. The findings are obtained from the questionnaire adapted from Saleh and Zakarie (2013) and the English Idiom test adapted from Fusté-Herrmann (2008), as the tools in this study’s investigation about English idiom comprehension, difficulties in understanding and strategies used in processing English idioms. The results of this study will be summarized, discussed and concluded, and recommendations for further study will be suggested in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter contains the summary of the study, the summary of the findings, discussion, conclusion, and the recommendations for further research.

5.1 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The study is aimed at investigating difficulties which learners encounter in understanding idioms, strategies used by learners in processing English idioms and types of English idioms which are relatively difficult for learners to comprehend. In order to obtain findings, the questionnaire and the English idiom test were used as the tools of the study and distributed to 25 first-year CEIC students who passed TU-GET.

5.2 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

This part is aimed at answering the three research questions as follows:

5.2.1 What sorts of difficulties do the participants encounter in understanding idioms?

There are a number of difficulties the participants encounter in understanding English idioms. It is possible that lack of cultural background behind English idioms is the most considerable difficulty for L2 learners to comprehend the idioms. It is probably that context clues are necessary for the learners so as to understand the idioms. In other words, lack of context clues seems to be another difficulty in English idiom comprehension. Some low frequent or unknown vocabulary in English idioms is likely to be one of the difficulties for understanding English idioms. Moreover, teaching English idioms is not largely focused on in classrooms. As a result, lack of adequate English idiom teaching in class causes difficulty for L2 learners to understand English idioms.
5.2.2 What kinds of strategies do the participants employ to comprehend the idioms?

The participants employ various strategies while processing English idioms. The first and most employed strategy is to guess the meaning of the idiom from the provided context. The second strategy is to use the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning, and using the background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom is also ranked as the second most selected strategy by the participants. The least employed strategy by the participant is to refer to an idiom in L1 to understand the L2 idiom. Nevertheless, the participants use many different strategies when processing idioms.

5.2.3 What types of English idioms are relatively difficult to comprehend?

The classification of English idioms introduced by Fusté-Herrmann (2008) consists of four categories of English idioms, which are familiar transparent, familiar opaque, unfamiliar transparent and unfamiliar opaque. The first and most difficult type of English idioms for the participants to comprehend is unfamiliar opaque, followed by unfamiliar transparent idioms which are ranked as the second most difficult. The less difficult type of English idioms, compared to those two types mentioned above, is familiar opaque. The least difficult or simplest type of English idioms for the participants to understand its figurative and accurate meaning of each idiom is familiar transparent.

5.3 DISCUSSION

There are a number of aspects to be discussed in this study. The discussion section is aimed at examining and comparing the findings of this study to a variety of previous studies mentioned in Chapter 2, both similarities and differences.

This paragraph presents the difficulties that the participants encountered in understanding English idioms. A majority of the participants strongly agreed that idioms are difficult to understand because of a lack of cultural background behind the idioms. As described by Glucksberg & McGlone (2001), idioms are a secret language
and a language owned by a culture that one has to be steeped in. The participants also strongly agreed that idioms are difficult without context clues, and this is similar to what Nippold and Martin (1989) and Levorato and Cacciari (1992) mentioned, that L2 learners would be more successful in interpreting figurative meanings of idioms presented with supportive context than without context. Low frequent or unknown vocabulary in English idioms is one of the difficulties that the participants agreed with. As said by Saleh and Zakaria (2013), learners who cannot recognise the meaning of a word in the whole expression may not able to understand the meaning of the whole expression. Lastly, lack of adequate English idiom teaching is also one of the difficulties in idiom comprehension, and the participants thought and agreed that idioms are difficult because they are not taught well in class. As mentioned by McCarthy and O’Dell (2002), teachers used to argue that it was a waste of time for learners to study idioms as they might use the idioms in wrong or improper ways.

In terms of the strategies which the participants employ to understand meanings of English idioms, they agreed that they use a variety of different strategies to apprehend English idioms. This is in line with the study of Saleh and Zakaria (2013) in the way that the participants did not apply a single strategy to comprehend the meaning of idiomatic expression. The most selected strategy is to guess the meaning of the idiom from the context, which is also in line with the study of Saleh and Zakaria (2013). The participants additionally used the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning along with using the background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom. Referring to an idiom in L1 to understand the L2 idiom is the least selected strategy of this study, however, this is in contrast with the study of Saleh and Zakaria (2013) which indicated that this strategy was the second most successful strategy that the participants employ to comprehend English idioms.

The observed similarities between the findings of the present study and those of the above-mentioned studies could be partially attributed to the following factors. It is generally seen that English idiom tests or exercises in Thailand always provide contexts clues for each English idiom so that learners can logically guess the actual meaning. On the other hand, if no context clues are provided, the only simple and
possible way to comprehend is probably to guess the figurative meaning of the idiom, since the learners may not be allowed to consult any dictionaries at that instant. It is also possible that the more frequently the idioms are used, the easier and faster the leaners can comprehend those idioms because they become background knowledge of the learners. However, the differences of the findings of the present study compared to those in related studies is probably due to the fact that learners acknowledge that there is less relationship between Thai and English idioms since the cultures of these two languages are apparently different. Therefore, the students in this study less use the strategy of referring an idiom in Thai to understand the English idiom.

Regarding the types of English idioms which are relatively difficult for the participants to comprehend as categorized by Fusté-Herrmann (2008), unfamiliar opaque idioms seem to be the most difficult type followed by unfamiliar transparent idioms and familiar opaque idioms. Familiar transparent idioms are the least difficult or most uncomplicated type of English idioms. This is in line with the studies of Nippold & Taylor (1995) and Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) which summarized that transparent idioms are generally easier to interpret than opaque idioms ,and familiar idioms are also easier than unfamiliar idioms. The factor of similarity between the findings of this study and those of the above-mentioned studies is that it is theoretically proved that unfamiliar opaque idioms are the most difficult idioms followed by unfamiliar transparent idioms, familiar opaque idioms and familiar transparent idioms, respectively.
5.4 CONCLUSION

It is possible that English idioms are not a piece of cake for graduate students who learn English as a foreign language. The students may encounter difficulties in understanding English idioms. Consequently, the students may apply strategies so as to comprehend the idioms. However, some idioms can be easily comprehended but some cannot. In order to clarify those ambiguities, this study is aimed at finding out what sorts of difficulties the graduate students encounter in understanding idioms, what kinds of strategies the students employ to comprehend the idioms and what types of English idioms are relatively difficult to comprehend. The analysis leads to the following conclusions.

There are a number of main difficulties which the students encounter while processing English idioms. Firstly, idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background behind the idioms. The second difficulty is that idioms are difficult without context clues provided. Some low frequent or unknown vocabulary in idioms is also one of the main difficulty with understanding idioms. The final difficulty is lack of adequate English idiom teaching. In other word, idioms are not taught well in class.

Various strategies are used by the students to comprehend English idioms, however, the students use many different strategies when processing idioms. The most frequently used strategy is to guess the meaning of the idiom from the context. To use the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning and to use the background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom are also strategies which learners apply. The least frequently used strategy by the students is to refer to an idiom in L1 to understand the L2 idiom.

Unfamiliar opaque idioms are the most difficult type of English idioms for the students to understand its figurative meaning followed by unfamiliar transparent idioms and familiar opaque idioms. Familiar transparent idioms are the least difficult or most uncomplicated type of English idioms for the graduate students to comprehend English idioms.
5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the present study indicates several areas for additional research.

In this study, the main focused participants were only a small number of graduate students of CEIC. For further study, the number of the participants should be more than in this study, and participants of the study should be students or learners in primary or secondary schools. It is also recommended to compare English idiom comprehension between students with high English proficiency and low proficiency by using the t-test. Moreover, the findings gathered from those students will be directly used as references for further English teaching curriculum.

The English idioms which are used for the present study are limited as they are only from one single study. For future study, idioms which will be used for the investigation should be from various sources. The number of English idioms in the test should be more than 20 items in order to obtain reliable findings. However, English idioms which are frequently used by L2 students or in non-English speaking countries from reliable sources seem to be more suitable with Thai EFL learners.

Future studies could fruitfully explore this issue further by using other research tools for data collection in a qualitative approach. For example, open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews or in-depth interviews should be used for further studies to provide findings with different perspectives.
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APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire: Knowledge of idioms (Difficulties and strategies)

Title: A Survey of Graduate Students’ Comprehension of English Idioms, Difficulties in Understanding and Strategies Used in Processing English Idioms

This questionnaire is for an independent study in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master’s of Arts in Career English for International Communication, Language Institute, Thammasat University.

**Direction:** This questionnaire is formed to explore difficulties in understanding idioms and strategies used in processing English idioms. Please complete the questionnaire truthfully related to your consideration. Your personal information and answers will be kept strictly and confidentially and used for academic purpose only. The questionnaire consists of two sections which are background information and knowledge of idioms.

Section 1: Background information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>☐ Male</th>
<th>☐ Female</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year of Bachelor’s degree graduation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year in A.D.________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in English-speaking countries</td>
<td>☐ Yes</td>
<td>☐ No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities in communicating with English native speakers in daily life</td>
<td>☐ Yes</td>
<td>☐ No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TU-GET Score</td>
<td>__________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Section 2: Knowledge of idioms (Difficulties and strategies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of Idioms</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I’m good at idioms.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 I like to use idioms.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Idioms are easy to use.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Difficulties</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Idioms are difficult because there are some low frequent or unknown vocabulary in idioms.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Idioms are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background behind the idioms.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Idioms are difficult without context clues.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Idioms are difficult because they are not taught well in class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I guess the meaning of the idiom from the context.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I use the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 I use the background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the idiom.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I refer to an idiom in L1 to understand the L2 idiom.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I use many different strategies when processing idioms.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B
ENGLISH IDIOM TEST

English Idiom Test

**Direction:** This English idiom test is designed to explore types of English idioms are relatively difficult for L2 learners to comprehend. Read these idioms and circle the answer that provides the correct figurative meaning of each idiom. There may be idioms that you do not know and will guess their meanings. It is important to work forward, and not to go back to change answers. There is only one answer for each question.

1. **Take a shot in the dark**
   a) To shoot a gun at night
   b) To be worse than expected
   c) To take a guess

2. **Paint the town red**
   a) To make everyone mad in town
   b) To go out and celebrate
   c) To paint a big city, like New York, red

3. **To have salt in your pumpkin**
   a) To make something sour
   b) To be intelligent
   c) To be arrogant

4. **To fall down with four horseshoes up in the air**
   a) To be embarrassed
   b) To fall flat on your back
   c) To fall down while playing horseshoes

5. **To flip your lid**
   a) To open the hood
   b) To be ecstatic
   c) To be very angry
6. To fall into the apples  
a) To pass out  
b) To become rich  
c) To fall while picking fruit  

7. For a good hunger there is no hard bread  
a) Hard bread is better when you are starving  
b) To bore someone  
c) Anything tastes good when you are hungry  

8. To try to make a hole in water  
a) To dive into the water  
b) To make a good impression  
c) To try to do something that is impossible  

9. Hold your head up  
a) To prop your head up with your hand  
b) To be brave and/or proud  
c) To be angry and/or upset  

10. Burning the candle at both ends  
a) To let a candle’s wick burn at the top and the bottom  
b) To work and/or play too hard without enough rest  
c) To not be wasteful  

11. To eat on the thumb  
a) To grab a bite to eat  
b) To eat small appetizers  
c) To eat too much  

12. Wet behind the ears  
a) To be inexperienced  
b) To be a good swimmer  
c) To comb your hair back behind your ears  

13. To pick up a log  
a) To fall down and hurt oneself  
b) To hurry up  
c) To gather wood for a fire
14. **It’s the water drop that makes the vase overflow**  
   a) The last thing that happened that finally made you upset  
   b) To exaggerate the situation  
   c) To waste water  

15. **Cry over spilled milk**  
   a) To cry because the milk was split on the floor  
   b) To cry over something that has already happened  
   c) To complain about someone’s cooking  

16. **Go to pot**  
   a) To put in the trash can  
   b) To deteriorate  
   c) To go to the bathroom  

17. **To eat the leaf**  
   a) To be a vegetarian  
   b) To be late to work  
   c) To keep a secret  

18. **The turtle is shrouded**  
   a) The sky is foggy  
   b) Someone is undercover  
   c) To be selfish  

19. **Jump through hoops**  
   a) To be in the circus  
   b) To do whatever you are told  
   c) To be a good athlete  

20. **Go by the book**  
   a) To admire a novel’s character  
   b) To read a lot  
   c) To follow the rules
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