Testing the Ability of EFL Postgraduate Certificate Teachers to Identify Vocabulary Idiomatic Meaning in Nineveh Schools

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Abstract

Given the importance of the idiomatic meaning of expressions, especially for EFL teachers who have the responsibility of writing research, so the present study aims at testing the ability of (40) of EFL teachers in Nineveh schools who have post-graduate certificates and work in schools, to identify two types of the idiomatic meaning in some sentences. The researcher prepared a test consisting of (40) items; each item consisted of four options, one is correct. Two types of idioms are included in the test which is divided equally: idioms of encoding and idioms of decoding. After confirming the validity and reliability of the test, the study concluded that EFL teachers with postgraduate certificates showed a high ability to discern idiomatic meaning. For the variable of gender, male EFL teachers showed greater ability than females in terms of idiomatic meaning. For the variable of years of work, EFL teachers with 15 or fewer years of service showed greater ability to discern idiomatic meaning and for both types: encoding and decoding than those with over 15years of service.

Keywords: idiomatic meaning, EFL teachers, post graduate certificate

1. Introduction

Ball (1968:1) defines idioms as "the use of familiar words in an unfamiliar sense". Accordingly, to avoid misunderstanding of the meaning of expressions, it is important to know that a language is not a combination of words that can be analyzed by giving the meaning of each unit, but language is of two types of meaning: a literal meaning which is defined as "the meaning of a sentence or other expressions as determined solely by the separate words of which it is composed"(Mathews,2007:229) and the idiomatic meaning which means "an extension of a basic or literal meaning"(Mathews,2007:138). It is the contextual meaning that refers to the speaker's intended meaning and communicative face(Thomas,1995:3).

1.1 The Problem of the Study:

Idioms are considered good indicators of proficiency, thus EFL teachers with postgraduate certificates must have a high level of proficiency and mastery of these expressions. Also, EFL teachers, who have postgraduate certificates, are required to write yearly researches during their scientific and professional career. The researcher noticed that EFL teachers did not have direct and strong contact with these idioms, especially the decoding ones in their syllabus and school classrooms. Therefore, EFL teachers may face an obstacle to keeping in touch with such expressions and improving their language.

1.2 The Aim of the Study

The present study aims at testing the ability of EFL teachers, having postgraduate certificates and working in schools, to identify two types of idiomatic meaning in some selected sentences. Also, the study aims to describe if the variables of gender and years of work affect teachers' mastery of the idiomatic meaning or not.

1.3 The Value of the Study

The current study may be useful to raise EFL teachers' awareness, who have a postgraduate certificates and work in schools, to the importance of increasing knowledge and mastering idioms which enables them to develop and improve their linguistic ability, think deeply when dealing with many sources of various difficulty in the field of writing academic researches.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Definitions of Idioms:

Depending on what is presented by the American Heritage Dictionary(2000:1) state that the origin of the word idiom belongs to the Latin idioms which means "own", "personal" or "private". Most of the definitions raised try to assert the main point which is idioms are one unit, fixed phrases and their meaning cannot be predicted easily by giving the meaning of each constituent alone (Philip,2011:15). Thus, the whole meaning of the phrase is different from what its constituents would refer to if read in a composition way(Philip,2011:15). Simpon (2004:93) meets Philip (2011:15) in explaining the concept of idiom where idioms are related and belongs to metaphor in origin which have come fixed phrases in a language and they are frequently referred to as clusters of words whose meaning can be hardly deduced from the meaning of its constituents. Newmark (1988:104) deals with idioms as an extended metaphors with two main functions: pragmatic and referential. The pragmatic function deals with senses, to interest, to surprise, to delight while the referential function is to reflect and describe how the mental processing state is, a person, a concept, an object more than that in literal or physical language. According to Mathews (2007:183) idiom is " a set expression in which two or more words are syntactically related, but with a meaning like that of a single lexical unit".

Changeability and predictability were two characteristics that must be taken into consideration presented by Binza and Bosch (2012:184); they highlight two

characteristics which must be taken into consideration: they are fixed character and unpredictability.

2.2 Characteristics
An Idiom is an expression in which words do not have their literal meaning, but are categorized as multi-word expressions that act in the text as units(Crystal,2003:223). Idioms have some characteristics that cover the nature of this term:

1.**Figurativeness**
The most important feature of idioms is figurativeness in which words are used metaphorically. Thus, the surface structure has no role to describe and understand the meaning of the whole expression(Bell,1974cited in Mohammad,2014:18).

2.Conventionality
The meaning of idioms is known and agreed by the community(Bell,1974cited in Mohammad,2014:18). They cannot be identified by knowing the independent conventions(Cruse,1986:3).

3.Inflexibility
Idioms are "frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation informed often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their components"(Baker,1992:63). They are characterized by a limited number of syntactic orders or constructions(Cruse,1986:3). They are not always grammatical, but they have fixed structure meaning accepted by native speakers of the language (Bell,1974 cited in Mohammad,2014:18).

4.Affect
Idioms are used to achieve certain recurrent situation in real-life(Cruse,1986:3).

2.3 Types of Idioms
Idioms have various forms and structures. According to Seidi and Mc Mordie (1988:13), idioms are of three types:
1. Structurally regular, but the meaning is not clear from the words used.
2.Structurally irregular, but the meaning is clear or predictable from the words used.
3.Structurally irregular, the meaning cannot be deduced from the individual words.
To assess the degree of motivation of a given expression, Fernando and flavell (1981:28) present a convenient scheme derived from four categories:

1. **Transparent expressions**
The meaning of this type is derived from the meaning of its constituents straightly.
2. **Semi-Transparent-Phrases**
These phrases allow both a literal meaning and an idiomatic one when extracting meaning.
3. **Semi-Opaque Phrases**
The level of idiomaticity in this type is higher than that of Semi-transparent phrases and somewhat unintelligible.
4. **Opaque Phrases**
The meaning of opaque phrases can never be distinguished by their constituents.

Makka (1972 cited in Fernando,1996:3) presents two terms in describing idioms :

1.Idioms of Encoding(Identifiable)

The meaning can be recognized by making a comparison between different languages taking into consideration proper prepositions like using "at" instead of "with" in the English expression.

2. Idioms of Decoding(Non-Identifiable)

The meaning cannot be guessed by using independently learning linguistic conventions, they are misleading lexical expressions.

Table 1. Encoding Idioms

No.	English Idiom	Idiomatic Meaning	Example	Arabic Equivalence
1.	All ears	Listen carefully and attentively	Everything will be dangerous, so I want you **all ears**.	كلك اذان
2.	Bite the hand that feeds you	To harm or oppose someone who does a favor for you	My neighbour is **biting the hand that feeds him** when he refused to help me	تعض اليد التي تطعمك
3.	On the tip of my tongue	To be almost able to remember a specific fact such as a name or place	I have the trainer's name **on the tip of my tongue**, but I cannot remember	على طرف لساني
4.	Heart to heart	Honesty	All of my friends were here. we discussed many problems, but our talk was **heart to heart**	من القلب للقلب
5.	The twinkling of an eye	In an instant	I cannot believe it! Everything has happened **in an instant**.	في رمشة عين
6.	Do not count your chickens before they hatch	Do not assume to have everything you want until you have them	You may get the job, but **don't catch your chickens before they hatch**.	لاتحصي الدجاج قبل ان يفقس
7.	Cannot judge a book by its cover	Do not be deceived by appearance	That student looks very clever, but **don't judge a book by its cover**. you have to test him before	لا تحكم على الكتاب من غلافه
8.	Out of hand	Out of control	Look! Fire gets **out of hand**.	خارج يدي
9.	Miss the boat	It is too late	No need to wait more, you **missed the boat**.	فات القطار
10.	Necessary Evil	**Something unpleasant must be accepted to achieve a particular result**	I think she considers sport as a **necessary evil**.	شر لابد منه
11.	Your life is in someone's hand	The person can affect whether you live or die	All the **people's lives in this village are in the president's hands**.	حياتك في يده
12.	A train of thoughts	A set of consecutive thoughts	For this project, I have **a train of thought**.	سلسلة او قطار افكار

13.	Be a drop in the ocean	Be very small amount in comparison to what is needed	Your efforts were **a drop in the ocean**.	قطرة في بحر
14.	Open your heart	Share your deepest feelings	I promise you that I will Forgive you if you **open your heart**.	افتح قلبك
15.	Stab someone in the back	Do something harmful to a person who trusted you	His behavior was **a stab in his friend's back**.	طعنه في الظهر
16.	Apple of eye	Someone or something that one cherishes above all others	My mother is **my apple of eye**.	بؤبؤ العين
17.	The silent majority	A large number of people who don't express their opinion publicly	I am one of **the silent majority**.	الاغلبية الصامتة
18.	The salt of the earth	Basically and fundamentally good simple people	I acknowledge that she is **the salt of the earth** among all the girls here.	ملح الارض
19.	Play with fire	To invite danger or trouble	I warn you! Don't **play with fire**.	يلعب بالنار
20.	Give me a hand	Help me	To overcome difficulties, **give me a hand**.	اعطني يدك

Table 2. Decoding Idioms

No.	**English Idioms**	**Idiomatic Meaning**	**Example**
1.	A piece of cake	Easy	Preparing for a huge party, was **a piece of cake**.
2.	The long run	The last attempt	I cannot stand more, I hope I can solve the puzzle in **the long run**.
3.	A part and parcel	A necessary or important part	Getting up early became **a part and parcel of our life**.
4.	Feel blue	feel depressed	I expect, you will **feel blue** during this period.
5.	Don't beat about the bush	Speak directly	Be frank and **don't beat about the bush**.
6.	Under the weather	Sick	You look a bit **under the weather**.
7.	Let the cat out of the bag	uncover the secret	The meeting is secret, so promise me don't **let the cat out of the bag**.
8.	Hit the hay	go to sleep	I am so exhausted, I need to **hit the hay**.
9.	Sit on the fence	avoid involvement	Wait! leave them and **sit on the fence**.
10.	Be in my shoe	be in a similar position	Believe me, I suffer from him, **be in my shoe**.
11.	By hook or crook	Whatever method, it is necessary to do it.	**By hook or crook**, I have to achieve my aim.
12.	Play second	To be second in	Lebanese team **plays second fiddle to**

	fiddle to	importance to someone	Iraqi team
13.	Pass the buck	To shift responsibility for something to someone else	My manager **passes the buck** to me.
14.	Over a barrel	To have someone in a helpless or trapped position	Because our friend is **over a barrel**, we have to help him
15.	Nothing to sneeze at	Something that you should take seriously and respect	This step of the new program is **nothing to sneeze at**.
16.	Be on the breadline	Be very poor	If you don't work hard, you will be **on the breadline**.
17.	Be on the run	Try to avoid being caught especially by police	The thief was **on the run** from the authorities for twelve years before arresting him.
18.	Clear the deck	Get ready for action	I am **clearing the decks** now because we are going to meet the delegation.
19.	Promise the moon	To promise something impossible	many merchants **promise the moon** to bring perfect goods.
20.	On a fool's errand	Involved in a useless journey or task	All our attempts to arrest the killer was a **fool's errand**.

3. Methodology and Data Analysis

3.1. Participants

The subjects selected for this study are EFL teachers who have postgraduate certificates and work in Nineveh schools. (40) EFL teachers out of (86) in Nineveh schools are chosen and we excluded those who also work at universities as lecturers to ensure the accuracy of the results and to avoid the answers of some teachers who may be possessed by teaching expanded and developed university curricula.

3.2 Tools

The researcher prepared a multiple-choice test for measuring EFL teachers' ability to identify the idiomatic meaning. It consists of (40) items; each item consists of four options, only one is correct. (20) of them are of one type called Encoding idioms, a type which can be predicted by comparing English idioms to that similar in the Arabic, and the other type is called decoding idioms(a type which cannot be predicted easily as it is not found in Arabic language). The researcher chose these idioms from the dictionary entitled: **English Idioms Advanced in Use (2010).** The teachers are asked to choose the correct idiomatic meaning of the expression written in bold from four options.

3.3. The Validity of the Test

Six experts at University of Mosul were asked to judge and assess the process of selecting idioms used in the test, and their appropriate, effectiveness and appropriateness of the options as well. They agreed on the number, type of idioms

and the options with some modifications which were taken into consideration as well. It was found that the test was valid in both face and content validity. The test validity was 0.82.It was found by the arithmetic mean of all the scores given by the experts.

3.4. The Reliability of the Test
In order to measure the reliability of the test, the researcher used Cronbach's Alpha which shows how closely related a set of items are as a group. The researcher asked (10) teachers who were not of the same sample (teachers) used in the test and he found that the reliability of the test is 0.83.

3.5 Scoring
The scheme applied in scoring this test is (one score is given for correct answer and 0 for incorrect one).

3.6 Data Analysis

Overall Differences According to Test Value

N	Mean	Test Value	Std. Deviation	T – test		Sig.
				Cal.	Tab.	
40	31.0750	20	4.10995	17.043	2.023	Sig.

P≤ 0.05 , df =39

It appears from the table (1) that the research sample (EFL teachers) has a level of identification of the idiomatic meaning raised because the mean is greater than the hypothetical mean of the test and the calculated value of T is greater than the tabular value of T. This result can be explained by the fact that the members of the research sample have a high level of the ability in identifying the idiomatic meaning because the research sample is EFL teachers who have a postgraduate certificate and this ensures the proficiency of this category in particular.

Differences According to the Variable of Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T – test		Sig.
				Cal.	Tab.	
Male	15	31.6667	2.96808	0.701	2.025	Non. Sig.
Female	25	30.7200	4.68615			

P≤ 0.05 , df =38

For the variable of gender in the table (2), even though there is no statistical significance, males Englis teachers, by reference to the arithmetic mean, are more likely than female teachers to recognize idiomatic meaning.

Differences According to the Variable of Years of Work

Years of work	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T – test		Sig.
				Cal.	Tab.	
15<	30	30.6000	4.23125	1.276	2.025	Non. Sig.
≥15	10	32.5000	3.53553			

$P \leq 0.05$,   df =38

For the variable of a number of years of work in the table (3), even though there is no statistical significance, teachers of English with service less than 15 years, by reference to the arithmetical average, are better to discern the idiomatic meaning of those with service 15 years or more. This may be due to the limited scope that schools impose on teachers of English and the simple and specific curriculum taught by the teacher, which is defunct with no linguistic expansion to match the student's level, as opposed to the extensive and sophisticated curriculum developed at universities which is not free of idiomatic language and indirect meaning on both sides: linguistics and literature.

The Percentage of the Sample Answers According to the two types of Idiomatic Meanings

Sample type		Direct (easy)		Indirect (difficult)	
		Mean	%	Mean	%
Total		17.5500	87.75%	13.5250	67.63%
Years of work	15<	17.2333	86.17%	13.3667	66.83%
	≥15	18.5000	92.50%	14.0000	70%

According to the above table (4), English language teachers have demonstrated the ability to discern the idiomatic meaning of the first type (idioms of encoding), whose meanings are transmitted by making comparisons between English and Arabic, as their responses show higher percentages than indirect one called(idioms of decoding), the meaning of which cannot be conjectured by its literal meaning, but it depends on how teachers know these expressions and his/her deep way of thinking.

Concerning the variable of years of work, EFL teachers with 15 years of work or less have been able to discern the idiomatic meaning of encoding idioms more clearly than those with more than 15 years of work.

7. Conclusion:

In the light of the research results, the researcher concludes the following:

1. EFL teachers who have a postgraduate certificate and work in schools have a high level of proficiency in identifying idiomatic meaning.
2. According to the variable of gender, the results show that male EFL teachers, who have postgraduate certificates, were more capable and proficient in distinguishing meaning than females. It may be attributed to the desire of males to search and survey because they are more full-time than females, as well as their propensity to study outside Iraq, which increases the opportunity to develop their language abilities.
3. For the variable of years of work, the results show that EFL teachers who have over 15 years of service, are less capable of distinguishing meaning than those with only 15 years of service. That might be due to their tendency to search, to use surfing, and follow what's new in the linguistic field.
4. For the two types of idioms: encoding and decoding, the percentages show that EFL teachers, in general, were more able to distinguish encoding idioms than

decoding idioms. This may be attributed to the fact that idioms of encoding , which have similar L1 equivalents and are of total equivalence, are more easily understood than those of decoding i.e. idioms of transparent meaning. EFL teachers with more than 15 years of work were less able to discern idiomatic meaning than those with fewer than 15 years of work. This may be due to the teacher's adherence to a simple, specific curriculum that may prevent them from developing and learning all aspects of language, unlike those at universities, which are not free of metaphors, indirect use of language, and being constantly up to date.

8. Recommendations:

1. Inclusion of idioms in the curriculum to improve their linguistic knowledge for both teachers and students.
2. Preparing developmental courses for English language teachers, including idioms to expand their linguistic comprehension.

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اختبار لقدرة مدرسي اللغة الانكليزية من حملة الشهادات العليا على استخدام المفردات المصطلحية في مدارس نينوى

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الملخص

بالنظر إلى أهمية المعنى الاصطلاحي للتعبيرات ولاسيما لمدرسي اللغة الانكليزية بعدّها لغة أجنبية، ممن تقع على كاهلهم مسؤولية كتابة الابحاث، لذا هدفت الدراسة الحالية الى اختبار قدرة (40) من مدرسي اللغة الانكليزية، في مدارس نينوى الحاصلين على الشهادات العليا حصرا على تحديد نوعين من المعاني الاصطلاحية في عدد من الجمل. اعدّت الباحثة اختبارا يتألف من (40) بندا، كل بند يتألف من اربع خيارات واحد فقط صائب، اذ تم تضمين نوعين من المصطلحات في الاختبار بشكل متساوٍ: مصطلحات الترميز، ومصطلحات فك الترميز، وذلك بعد التأكد من صحة الاختبار، وموثوقيته، اذ توصلت الدراسة الى ان مدرسي اللغة الانكليزية (كلغة اجنبية) الحاصلين على الشهادات العليا، اظهروا قدرة عالية على تمييز المعنى الاصطلاحي، أما بالنسبة إلى متغير الجنس، فقد أظهر مدرسو اللغة الانكليزية الذكور قدرة اكبر من الاناث من حيث تمييز المعنى الاصطلاحي. اما بالنسبة إلى مُتغير سنوات العمل، فأظهر مدرسو اللغة الانكليزية الذين امضوا (15) او اقل في الخدمة، قدرة اكبر على تمييز المعنى الاصطلاحي لكلا النوعين: الترميز، وفك الترميز، من اولئك الذين امضوا اكثر من (15) سنة في الخدمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: معنى اصطلاحي، مدرسي اللغة الانكليزية، شهادة الدراسات العليا