



Idioms Interpretations and The Construction of Meaning: The case of students from the Italian Departments of Rabat and Casablanca.

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Abstract

Fixed expressions (FE) refer to phraseological units, the subject of study in phraseology. In language teaching, phraseological units represent a challenge for learners in terms of understanding their metaphorical and cultural significance. Highlighting this important aspect of language help foster learner's language mastering and cultural competence. In the process of constructing the meaning of idioms, there are a complexity of strategies that are involved: literal comprehension, metaphorical conceptualization, Language 1 comparison and the cultural context as well.

This research aims to analyze the interpretation process of idioms and identify the strategies that are involved in the construction of meaning. To put this into practice, a survey was carried out on a sample of sample of 25 Moroccan students in the Italian Language and Literature Department at Mohammed V University in Rabat and the Italian Studies Department at Hassan II University in Casablanca. The study involved interpreting a list of 50 Italian idioms, using both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (focus group) approaches. The initial results showed that 64% of learners had inferred the meaning of the FEs through Language 1 comparison, and the cultural context played a crucial role in enhancing comprehension. It was also found that learners also used the literal process to understand transparent EFs.

Keywords: *Fixed expressions - Conceptual Metaphor - Interpretation— Cultural context.*

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تفسير التعابير الاصطلاحية وعملية بناء المعنى:

حالة الطلاب في قسمي الدراسات الإيطالية في الرباط والدار البيضاء.

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ملخص:

تشير التعبيرات الثابتة إلى الوحدات الصياغية، وهي موضوع الدراسة في علم الألفاظ. وفي تعليم اللغة، تمثل الوحدات الصياغية تحدياً للمتعلمين من حيث فهم دلالاتها المجازية والثقافية. ويساعد تسليط الضوء على هذا الجانب المهم من اللغة على تعزيز إتقان المتعلم للغة وكفاءته الثقافية. في عملية بناء معنى التعابير الاصطلاحية، هناك مجموعة من الاستراتيجيات المعقدة التي تنطوي عليها: الفهم الحرفي، والتصور المجازي، والمقارنة اللغوية، والسياق الثقافي أيضاً.

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل عملية تفسير التعابير الاصطلاحية وتحديد الاستراتيجيات التي تشارك في بناء المعنى. ولتحقيق ذلك، أُجريت دراسة مسحية على عينة من 25 طالباً مغربياً في قسم اللغة الإيطالية وآدابها في جامعة محمد الخامس بالرباط وقسم الدراسات الإيطالية في جامعة الحسن الثاني بالدار البيضاء. وتضمنت الدراسة تفسير قائمة من 50 مصطلحاً إيطالياً، باستخدام المنهجين الكمي (الاستبيان) والنوعي (مجموعة التركيز). وقد أظهرت النتائج الأولية أن 64% من المتعلمين قد استنتجوا معنى التعابير الاصطلاحية من خلال المقارنة بين اللغة 1، وقد لعب السياق الثقافي دوراً حاسماً في تعزيز الفهم. كما تبين أيضاً أن الدارسين استخدموا أيضاً العملية الحرفية لفهم التعابير الاصطلاحية الشفافة.

الكلمات المفتاح: التعبيرات الثابتة - المقارنة بين اللغة 1 - التفسير - السياق الثقافي.

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Introduction

Phraseology is a discipline of linguistics that lies between syntax and semantics. Studies in this field were almost rare before the twentieth century (M. Bréal 1897). Phraseology is the discipline that takes as its object of study all the sentences and phrases specific to a given language. The different types of phraseological units are: collocations, proverbial phrases, and figurative expressions (G. Skytte 1988:78). The first type is distinguished by the adoption of a partially fixed syntagmatic order, while the second type represents unmodified phrasal structures that reveal a moral or wisdom message, while the third, on the other hand, is recognized by its crystallized structure, which can vary into several subtypes.

The present study restricts the field of research to the third typology, given that it is shown to be an expression which 'has a singular lexical behavior', the meaning of which cannot be deduced from the meanings of the words making up the expression and by which they cannot be interpreted literally. Federica Casadei (1996) sees the fixed expression as a polylexical expression that links a fixed meaning with a conventional non-literal meaning, ensuring that the meaning is not obtained from the semantics that make up the expression. This raises an intrinsic problem with fixed expressions: their intelligibility in other languages.

Expressions that are equivalent in form and meaning are rarely obtained in other languages, although partial equivalence is frequently manifested.

In the field of glottodidactics, FEs are the subject of controversy in terms of their teaching, because there are different strategies for exposing learners to these structures, such as exposure in context or exposure out of context. Previous studies (Maha H. Alhaysony, 2017, 78 and Nisreen Al-Khawaldeh and others, 2016, p:124) have shown that the first strategy is the most widely adopted since it facilitates the task of comprehension for the learner by presenting them with key phrases that help them to infer meaning.

This research adopts out-of-context exposure, to verify the extent to which other strategies can be effective in understanding FE.

Research questions

1. To what degree the different strategies of comprehension influence FEs understanding?
2. In what measure the categories of fixed expressions can be structured according to the comprehension strategies?

Theoretical review

1. Definition of FEs

A fixed expression is a sentence whose meaning cannot be deduced from the words that make it up (Cardona, 2008: 50). FEs refer to the lexical heritage of a linguistic community, which determines the context in which they are used. The two characteristics that determine the degree of difficulty in understanding FEs are:

- *The degree of opacity:* the extent to which a fixed expression does not reveal its literal meaning and is therefore completely fixed.
- *The degree of transparency:* this refers to the extent to which a fixed expression supports the literal meaning.

In this sense, we can deduce that the more opaque an FE is, the more it tends towards the figurative rather than the literal meaning.

2. The importance of FEs in foreign language learning

FS play a major role in almost all forms of Italian discourse: in reading, in films, on the radio, in television programs and, more simply, in everyday conversation. It is therefore difficult for foreign language learners to communicate effectively without the regular use of FS. This was also confirmed by Seccord and Wiig's study (1993), which states that knowledge of EFs is essential for reading and social communication. There are also studies by Wood (2002), González Rey (2006) and Millar (2011), who consider FEs to be a means of communication that guarantees agility, ease, precision and naturalness of discourse. Another reason for our choice remains purely didactic: we need to admit that the teaching of Italian FS in the Moroccan context is rather marginalized, or

occurs in a way that prevents it from being fully exploited in the development of students' phraseological competence and in the conveyance of cultural aspects of the target language.

3. Theoretical bases and previous studies

Inferring the meaning of FEs by using equivalent expressions in the mother tongue is a strategy which has its theoretical basis in the concept of interlanguage (Selinker, 1972). Selinker refers to the influence of the mother tongue on the foreign language learning process, as shown by several studies:

- Stevick (1982) stresses the importance of using metaphors and analogies between languages in glottodidactics.
- Irujo (1986) tackles the concept of transfer in the comprehension of English FS, through his essay on Spanish learners, and concludes that there are both positive transfers (when it comes to transparent FS) and negative transfers.
- MacLennan (1994) stresses the need to identify metaphors relating to concepts and the existing correspondences between the metaphorical systems of the MT and the foreign language.
- Charteris - Black (2002) develops the theory of cross-linguistic similarity which emphasizes the cross-linguistic dimensions of literal and figurative meaning, in the sense that there are words and phrases (e.g., expressions relating to the human body) which are used to convey abstract and mental meanings in different languages without necessarily having the same meaning.
- The studies undertaken by Maha H. Alhaysony (2017) on Saudi learners of English as a foreign language. This examines the different strategies used for understanding English FE and the difficulties encountered. The results of the investigation showed that the strategy of Language 1 comparison occupies fourth place preceded by the use of different strategies in third place, the prediction of meaning in second place and the use of context in first place. Similarly, Nisrine Al-Khawaldeh et al's (2016) investigation of Jordanian

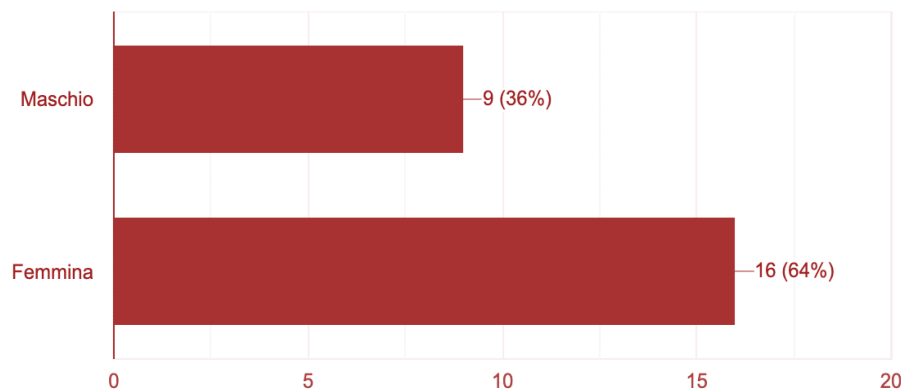
learners of English as a foreign language showed that learners were able to easily induce the meaning of EFs, which share some meaning similarities with Jordanian dialectal Arabic.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The experiment targeted a sample of 25 students, including 16 females and 9 males, aged over 18 and studying in their first, second and third years in the Department of Italian Language and Literature at Mohamed V University in Rabat and the Department of Italian Studies at Hassan II University in Casablanca.

Figure 1



They learned Italian in a variety of contexts:

- In Italy
- Self-taught
- Società Dante Alighieri (Italian language and culture teaching body)
- Institute of Italian Language and Culture in Rabat
- At a public secondary school

4.2. Instruments

They were selected 50 FEs, 25 of which were transparent (the first list) and 25 opaque (the second list). We noted the presence of expressions which share the same characteristics as collocations but which are still considered to be FEs because they disclose a figurative and metaphorical meaning.

The selection takes into account the existence of equivalents and semi-equivalents in standard Arabic, or in Moroccan Arabic dialect (the inclusion of the latter is explained by the fact that there is a fairly significant quantity of Italian frozen expressions common to those used orally in Moroccan dialect).

As with the list of FEs, a questionnaire was set up with the aim of verifying the comprehension processes employed by the students in question as well as the strategies generally used to understand the FEs, taking into account the students' academic background. It should be noted that multiple choices were possible for the question: *Where did you learn Italian?* As well as the questions concerning the strategies used for comprehension. This is motivated by the fact that in a comprehension process, a student might use more than one strategy, which is the case for half of this sample.

4.3. Procedure

The experiment took place in digital mode and in two phases:

The first phase lasted 60 minutes using Google Meet to communicate with the participants and Google Classroom to share the experiment material and the questionnaire. In the second phase, the learners answered the questionnaire for the remaining 30 minutes of the time dedicated to the experiment.

5. Results

Students who had learnt Italian in Italy were in first place with 52%, while 30% had acquired the language on their own, both in Italy and in Morocco. The last positions are occupied by those who learnt Italian in a Moroccan school context.

Dove ha imparato l'italiano ?

25 risposte

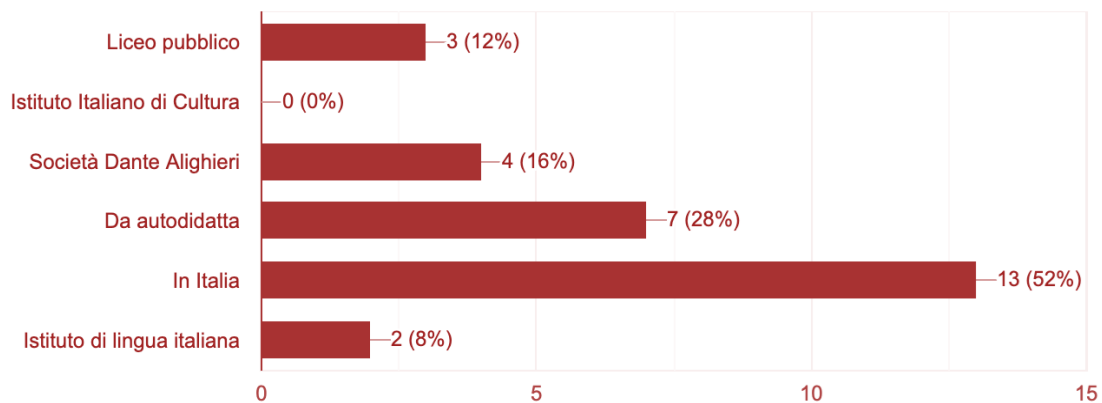


Figure 2: Where did you learn Italian?

Learners were asked to give their impression of the language level of the FEs and 64% found them to be of average difficulty.

Come puoi valutare il livello dei modi dire in questa lista?

25 risposte

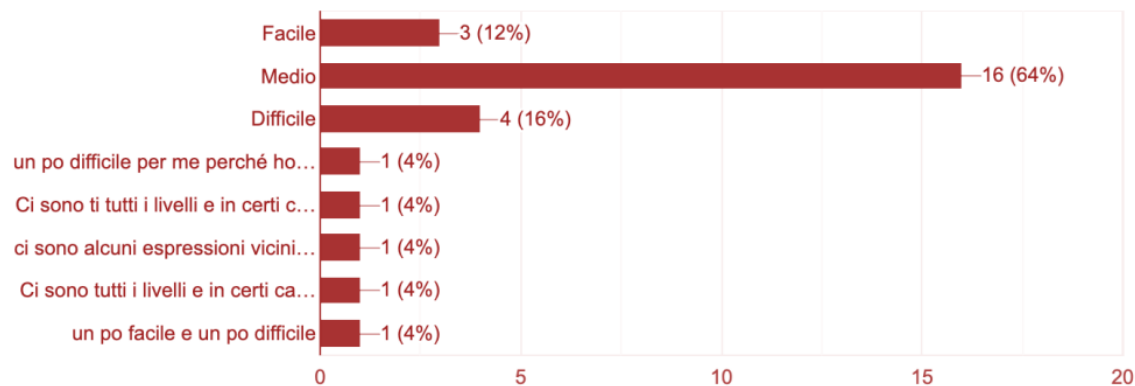


Figure 3: How would you rate the level of the FEs in this list?

With regard to the first list, the data showed that 64% of learners based their opinion on the similarity between the Italian and Arabic FEs and in other cases the French FEs.

Come sei riuscito a trovare i significati dei modi di dire della prima lista:

25 risposte

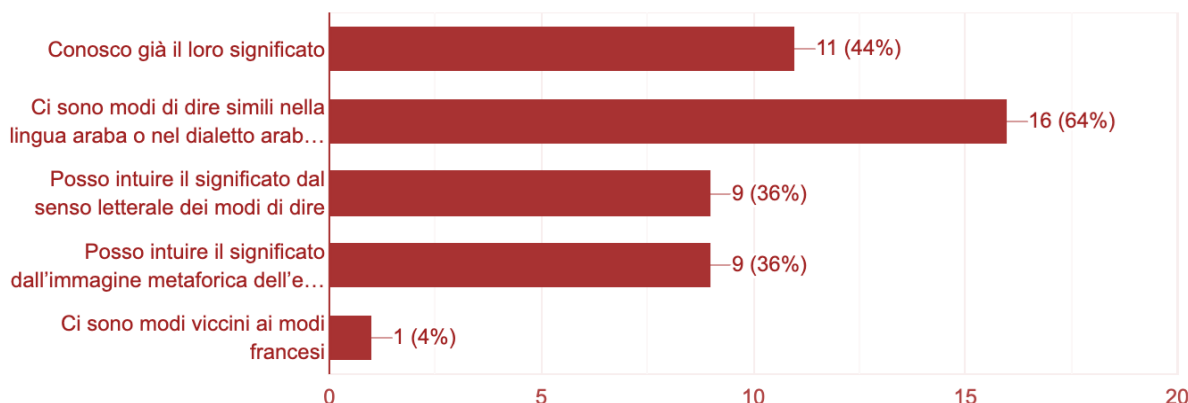


Figure 4: *How did you manage to find the meaning of the EFs in the first list?*

Another 36% inferred the literal meaning of the EFs, 36% from the metaphorical image, and 44% from prior knowledge.

As for the second list, 60% used Language 1 comparison, while only 20% relied on the literal meaning. This can be explained by the opaque nature of the FE, which leaves no room for literal intuitions. The process of understanding was in favor of metaphorical understanding, which accounted for 44%, while students who opted for prior knowledge accounted for 36%.

Come sei riuscito a trovare i significati dei modi di dire della seconda lista?

25 risposte

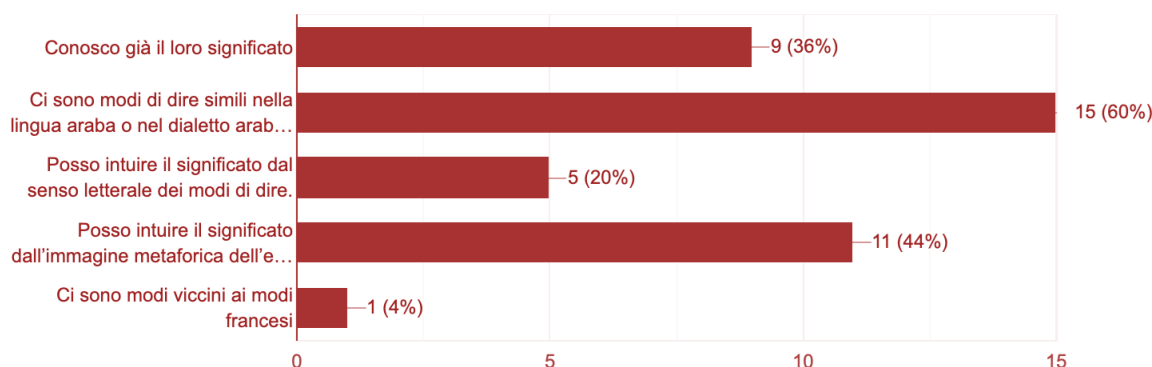


Figure 5: *How did you manage to find the meaning of the EFs in the second list?*

The percentages show that the language 1 comparison strategy prevailed over the other strategies in both lists.

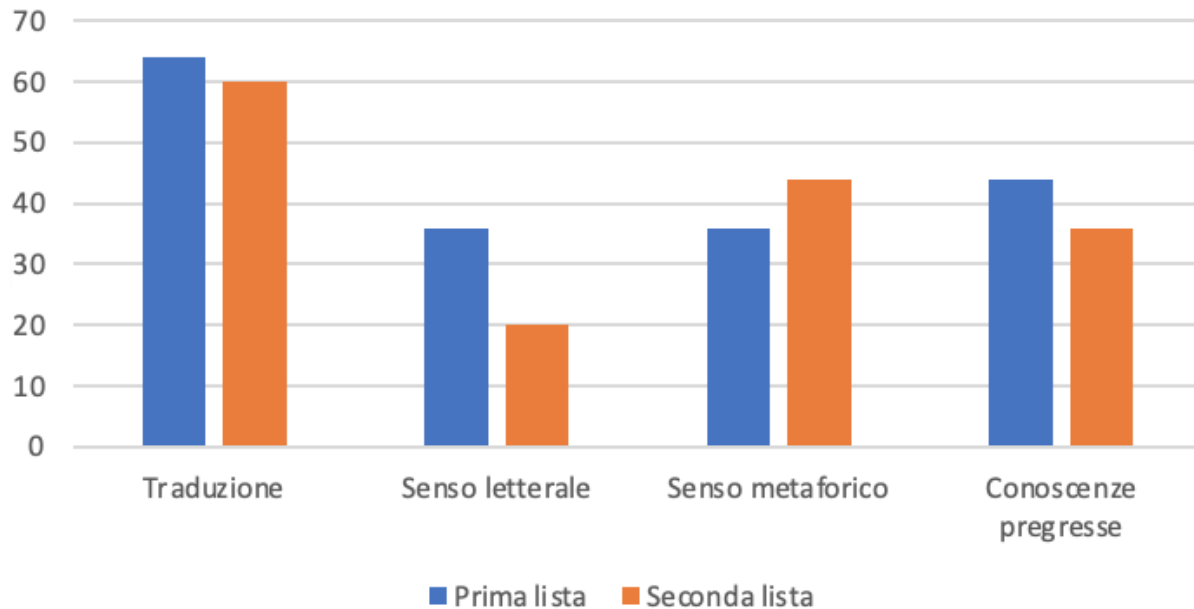


Figure 6

An important point to highlight is the important position occupied by the other strategies based on the understanding of metaphorical and literal meaning. This refers to the mental lexicon recall processes discussed by Swinney & Cutler (1979) and Gibbs (1980, 1986). The former assert that EFs are stored as individual items and retrieved like other lexical items. On the other hand, they indicate that the recall process occurs once the first word of an EF is encountered simultaneously with the processing of the literal meaning of the EF, whereas Gibbs stresses that recall occurs before the processing of the literal meaning, which only takes place when the idiomatic interpretation cannot be integrated in context.

Both hypotheses take the same position on the fact that the recall of the literal meaning does not occur, or is not processed more quickly than the idiomatic interpretation.

6. Discussion and didactic implications

The aim of this study was to answer two fundamental questions:

1. To what degree the different strategies of comprehension influence FEs understanding?

The answer to this question is obtained from the structuring of the corpus, to which the students were introduced. This corpus is based on a selection of FEs which necessarily have a degree of equivalence in the learner's mother tongue which explains more the reason why the conceptual metaphor had relatively high percentages. The existence of a common cultural context between the Italian and Moroccan culture enhanced the metaphorical cognition.

The design of the strategy, which is based on the processing of meaning by comparing the idiomatic structures of the mother tongue with those of the target language, is based on the concept of 'acculturation' (Balboni, P. E: 2012, 248), which is one of the educational objectives of language learning. The concept indicates the student's ability to acquire the cultural dimensions of the language they are learning through two processes:

- Inculturation, which is when the student acquires the cultural models of their own community. The aim of this process is to maintain the student's link with the culture to which they belong.
- Acculturation, on the other hand, is when students acquire the cultural models of the foreign language they are learning.

According to this perception, the comparison strategy can be considered a tool for:

- The reflection and production of meta-skills.
- The development of controlled processes in psycholinguistic terms aimed at learning rather than acquisition.
- Analyzing and comparing blocks of socio-pragma-cultural scope.

The two processes of acculturation can be seen in the case of our study, in the student's exposure to the corpus of Italian FEs (acculturation), and the meanings that the students attributed to the expressions using Arabic or Moroccan FEs which share the same metaphorical system with the Italian ones (inculturation). This could be explained by the fact that the two cultures share a

common geographical context: the Mediterranean, which at various times in history has been brought closer together by reciprocal migratory flows.

The students in question were surprised by the large number of Italian FEs similar to those of the Arabs and Moroccans. Moreover, we can already consider the activity presented as an introduction, which aims to inculturate the student and bring him/her closer to Italian metaphorical structures close to his/her mother tongue, and then introduce an activity involving fixed expressions, which targets acculturation in the full sense.

2. In what measure the categories of fixed expressions can be structured according to the comprehension strategies?

From the outset, this research focused on structuring the activity in such a way as to simulate the approximate processing of meaning by the student, following a gradual order that consists of presenting transparent FEs first, considered the least complex for the student, separated from opaque FEs presented last.

Referring to the students' performance, we noted a good performance when it came to transparent expressions as opposed to opaque ones in the first list (Figure 3). In the second list (Figure 4), on the other hand, there was an increase in the performance of the comprehension process based on the metaphorical meaning, which is explained by the opaque nature of the Fes.

In both cases, we noted good results for transparent FEs. Consequently, it is necessary for the teacher to focus on transparent expressions in the first phase of learning FEs, and to continue in a process in which the expressions become progressively more complex by becoming more opaque, i.e. with a more metaphorical scope or with a meaning relating to the history of the appearance of the expression.

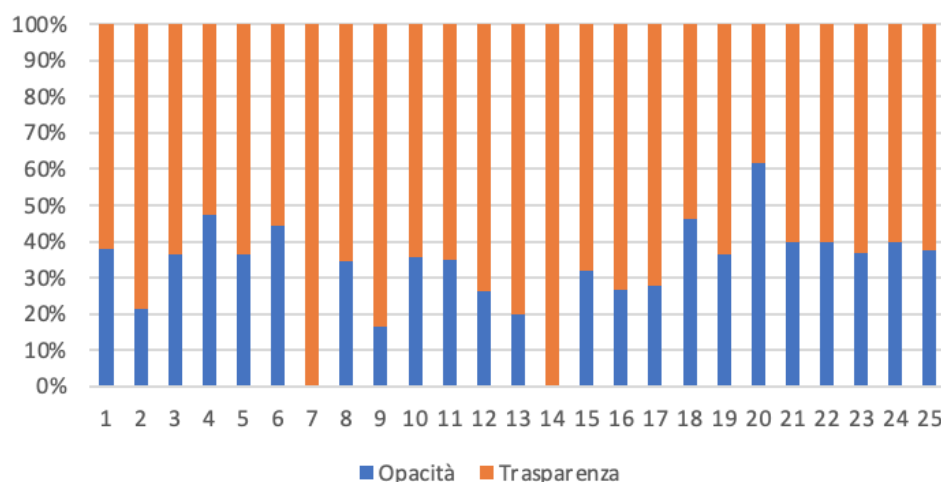


Figure 7

This was demonstrated by the high percentage reached by the process of understanding the literal meaning in the first list and the high percentage reached by the process of understanding the metaphorical meaning in the second list.

- **The inclusion of different strategies:** The vision of the activity took into consideration the inclusion of transparent FEs which allow the common literal meaning to be inferred from the meaning of the equivalent expression in the learner's own language and culture. The same applies to opaque expressions which leave room for metaphorical reflection. This is useful for capturing the complex structure of the expression, which shares the same metaphorical image in the learners' mother culture.

As a result, we can see that for each category of FE, we have put into practice a particular process of comprehension that corresponds to the semantic nature of the expression. This leads us to reflect on the need to include not only a single strategy for teaching all the categories of FE, but to put into practice other strategies that correspond to the processes of comprehension.

The use of context is a widely used strategy for inferring the meaning of FEs (M. H. Alhaysony: 2017, p: 78 - N. Al-Khawaldeh: 2016, p:126). However, we can notice that the adoption of the language 1 comparison-only strategy has reduced the use of context. This is evidenced by the

percentage of students who usually use context to understand FEs (64%) alongside the Language 1 comparison strategy (44%) and understanding the literal meaning (48%). Furthermore, these results serve as evidence of the importance of both comparison and literal process as comprehension strategies.

Di solito, quando vuoi capire un modo di dire, qual è la strategia che usi di più:

25 risposte

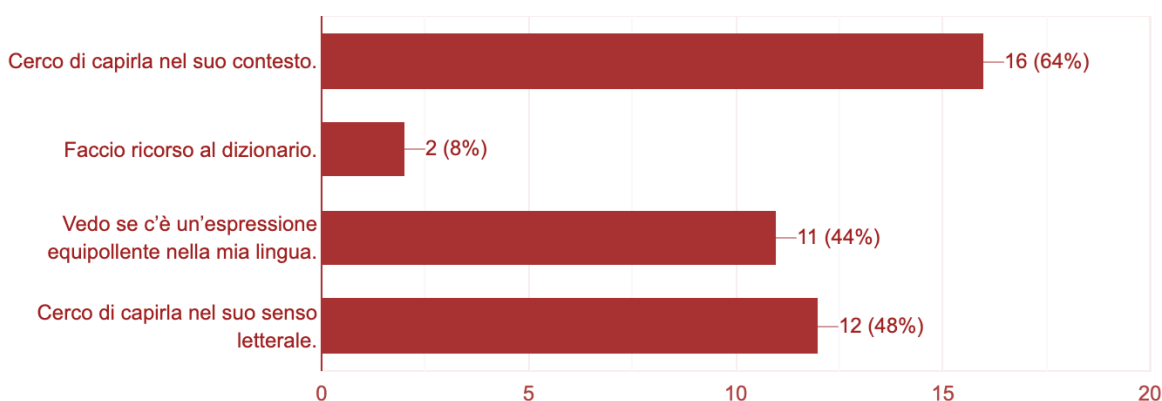


Figure 8: Usually, when you want to understand an FE, which strategy do you use most?

Bearing this in mind, the teacher is called upon to put into practice a planning of activities aimed at the FEs which take the following points into consideration:

- **Graduality:** select the FEs in a gradual order from the most transparent to the most opaque, i.e. start with expressions that leave room for intuitions about the meaning of the expression, such as *gettare olio sul fuoco* (throw oil on the fire): we can already deduce from the literal meaning of the expression that putting oil in a hot container causes a fire, and so the full meaning of the expression refers to increasing the gravity of something.
- **Equivalence:** when selecting FEs, take into consideration the inclusion of those that are completely similar to the students' mother tongue, especially when it comes to those who share the same mother tongue as in our case.

It should be mentioned that there are some FEs which may be similar in structure but not in meaning. These are excluded from the equivalence criterion, but it is important to introduce them by emphasizing the different meanings.

- **Diversification of strategies:** the present experiment has shown that, in addition to the Comparison strategy, which is significantly applied, other strategies are involved in the understanding of FEs:
- The literal process, adopted more with FEs of a transparent nature.
- The metaphorical process, used in most FEs of a more or less opaque nature, such as *avere le mani d'oro* (to have golden hands), whose literal meaning does not allow us to predict much about the complex meaning of the expression, since it may suggest a connotation of wealth. However, the true meaning refers to the high capacity for creation, taking into account the symbol of the hand that connotes the act of operating.
- The comparative process - the subject of our study - is considered to be a choice made by the teacher in order to adopt an instrument that enables the student to establish intercultural reflection. This moment of reflection can be the object of a metalinguistic activity, which serves first to think about the common points of the FEs between the mother tongue and the target language, and then to introduce the FEs which present diversity of meaning and form.

Conclusion

It should be recalled that the present research is concerned with the subject of FE comprehension from the perspective of the student. The use of FE is considered to be one of the main challenges that students need to overcome in order to master a language in an appropriate way, so as to be able to integrate into a linguistic community.

The ability to understand FE has been a critical point in many previous studies and is worth investigating, since it represents the first obstacle in the path of FE acquisition. Previous experiments have shown that inserting FEs into a context has positive results for comprehension. However, this research shows that not only context can be adopted but other strategies can come into play, including the comparative process which was the focus of this research. Language comparison as a key strategy in this process was not very successful in the past 50 years, since it was seen as a barrier that prevented the student from communicating with the target language in a typical way and acquiring a 'negative' habit of communicating by relying on language 1 instead of immersing themselves directly in language 2. As a result, Language comparison has been excluded from glottodidactic techniques. However, the discourse on Language comparison as a glottodidactic technique was always open to the discovery of its strengths and weaknesses. Thus, our aim was to analyze the comprehension strategies effectiveness in a contextually isolated setting, something which yielded relatively high returns in the results. The presentation of FEs in this way revealed other comprehension processes such as the literal process compatible with FEs of a transparent nature.

On a practical level, it is necessary for teachers of Italian for foreigners to be more aware of the importance of language comparison as a technique for teaching linguistic-cultural blocks, given its capacity to reinforce intercultural mediation. It is included in an activity aimed at intercultural meta-knowledge which would serve as a tool for the integration of the student as an individual in the culture of the other.

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Appendix

Table 1

Prima lista	Seconda lista
1. Abbassare le armi	1. Entrare in gioco
2. Dare nell'occhio	2. Ridursi a un filo
3. Essere sulla bocca di tutti	3. Lavorare sott'acqua
4. Lavarsene le mani di	4. Dire peste e corna
5. Tagliare la strada a qualcuno	5. Essere di giornata
6. Togliere la parola di bocca	6. Essere in acque basse
7. Far salire il sangue alla testa	7. Essere un eroe da caffè
8. Essere un libro aperto	8. Essere al verde
9. Intorbidare le acque	9. Giocare sulle parole
10. Essere tutto orecchi	10. Mettere in ginocchio
11. Avere qualcosa nel sangue	11. Essere in quattro gatti
12. Avere le mani bucate	12. Mangiare coi piedi
13. Appuntare gli occhi su (qualcosa)	13. Aver le mani d'oro
14. Andare con i propri piedi	14. Avere le mani in pasta
15. Avere il compasso negli occhi	15. Dare l'ultima mano
16. Ammazzare il tempo	16. Aprire gli occhi a qualcuno
17. Alzare le mani al cielo	17. Avere gli occhi pesanti
18. Avere la faccia tosta	18. Uscire dagli occhi
19. Essere tra due fuochi	19. Essere in parola con qualcuno
20. Essere fra l'incudine e il martello	20. Macinare parole
21. Essere in una torre d'avorio	21. Pesare le parole
22. Mordersi le dita	22. Nuotare in un mare di latte
23. Essere in mani sicure	23. Vivere nel fango
24. Alzare le mani su qualcuno	24. Mettere troppa carne al fuoco
25. Gettare olio sul fuoco	25. Averne fin sopra la testa

L'uso della traduzione nella didattica delle espressioni idiomatiche: Il caso degli studenti del dipartimento di italianistica di Rabat

Il presente questionario è stato strutturato per l'obiettivo di verificare a quale punto la traduzione possa essere efficace usandola come strategia per la comprensione delle espressioni idiomatiche. L'apprendente sarà chiamato a dare informazioni sulla sua identità, dove ha imparato l'italiano e il suo livello di italiano.

Genere: Maschio

Femmina

Età: Da 18 a 25 anni - Da 26 a 35 anni - Oltre i 36 anni.

Dove ha imparato l'italiano?

- Liceo pubblico
- Istituto di lingua italiana
- Società Dante Alighieri
- Da autodidatta
- In Italia

Di seguito, l'apprendente sarà chiamato a rispondere a domande a risposta multipla:

1- Come puoi valutare il livello dei modi dire in questa lista:

- Facile
- Medio
- Difficile
- Altro:

2- Come sei riuscito a trovare i significati dei modi di dire della prima lista:

- Conosco già il loro significato.
- Ci sono modi di dire simili nella lingua araba o nel dialetto arabo marocchino.
- Posso intuire il significato dal senso letterale dei modi di dire.
- Posso intuire il significato dall'immagine metaforica dell'espressione idiomatica.
- Altro:

3- Come sei riuscito a trovare i significati dei modi di dire della seconda lista:

- Conosco già il loro significato.
- Ci sono modi di dire simili nella lingua araba o nel dialetto arabo marocchino.
- Posso intuire il significato dal senso letterale dei modi di dire.
- Posso intuire il significato dall'immagine metaforica dell'espressione idiomatica.
- Altro:

4- Di solito, quando vuoi capire un modo di dire, qual è la strategia che usi di più:

- Cerco di capirla nel suo contesto.
- Faccio ricorso al dizionario.
- Vedo se c'è un'espressione equipollente nella mia lingua.
- Cerco di capirla nel suo senso letterale.
- Altro: