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## **The Effect of Teaching Compositional, Semi-compositional, and Non-compositional Idioms on Intake of EFL Learners**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed at investigating how 30 Persian learners of English at intermediate level used their first language knowledge to comprehend and produce three types of English idioms, which were included as compositional, semi-compositional, and non-compositional idioms. The learners were divided into two groups; one experimental and one control. A pre-test which included both comprehension and production tests were administered to each group. Then, experimental group was received treatment in the form of small conversations, but control group was not received any treatment. In the last session both groups were received immediate post-test and after one month, a delayed post-test was taken. For the analysis of data a t-test and ANOVA were employed. Results in both groups showed that compositional idioms had the highest correct responses, followed by semi-compositional idioms, and non-compositional idioms were the most difficult to comprehend and produce. In addition, in both groups learners performed better in comprehension rather than production test.

**Keywords:** Idiomatic expressions, Compositional, Semi-compositional, Non-compositional idiom, Idiom comprehension, Idiom production

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### **1. Introduction**

Language plays a crucial role in humans' life, and the ability to learn a language is one of the greatest cognitive and mental gains among humankind. Although language can be learned and achieved from various points of view, but showing a satisfactory picture of how human beings gain a native or foreign language and specially their specific expressions can be difficult. However, in recent years

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many researchers and linguists have been found a lot of information about what is language and how it is used as a first or second language.

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In second language research, there has been much less attention paid to the lexicon than the other parts of language, although this picture is quickly changing (Nation, 2001). In reality the lexicon are important and essential parts of the language that without them the L2 learners cannot produce sentences to understand them. Second language learners have difficulty in vocabulary learning since many English words have two or more meanings especially when they occur in idioms or expressions and deciding the correct meaning is demanding for learners.

Idioms cannot be defined clearly and comprehensively. This lack of clear and exact definition of idioms causes teachers and learners some difficulty dealing with idioms (Grant & Bauer, 2004). To overcome this problem, idioms should be taught and defined very clearly.

Mäntylä (2004) argued that in the past, when language was studied through its structure rather than meaning, idioms were studied on the basis of their form, and from was on the basis of idioms definition. Idioms were considered as frozen and multi-word expressions that have little or no structural variation. Idioms were also seen as dead expressions because there was no relationship between their meaning and origin. But after the emergence of functionalist approach to the study of language, the focus shifted from idiom structures to idiom meaning.

Not only are idioms commonly and frequently used in all forms of discourse such as conversations, lectures, movies, television programs, and so on, but also they are very difficult for L2 learners to comprehend and produce effectively (Fotovatnia & Khaki, 2012).

Gibbs study stated that idioms are found in all of the languages and some types of the idioms are culture-specific; it means that these idioms express the same meaning but the way they used and words which are included in them is different from one culture to another. This explanation opens some ways to make a classification for idioms in different cultures.

Idioms are classified into three types based on their translation according to the learners' mother tongue, which is the purpose of the current study.

The first type which was named as compositional, literal (Fernando, 1996), transparent (Gibbs, 1987), identical idioms, refers to the word by word translation of idioms. For example; English idiom: He is only skin and bone. Persian idiom: فقط پوست و استخوان است.

The second type was known as semi-compositional, similar, and semi (Fernando, 1996) idioms. This type refers to the idioms that are similar in some words. For example; English idioms: rainy day. Persian idiom: روز می‌بارد.

The last type was addressed as non-compositional, transparent (Gibbs, 1987), different and pure (Fernando, 1996) idioms, which are totally different but express the same meaning. For example; English idiom: pulling his leg. Persian idiom: او را دست انداختن.

In recent years many works have been done in the area of language transfer and that they have emphasized on the importance of transfer strategy in the process of second language acquisition, but a very little work has been done on the role of transfer in the acquisition of English idioms EFL English language learners especially in Iran. So the findings of the current study open some ways for

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researchers to explain the power of transfer strategy with regard to Iranian English language learners' performance in comprehension and production of English idioms. Generally, the result of this study help linguists and language teachers to gain some knowledge about which types of idioms show positive and which type of idioms show negative transfer. In addition, this study will help language teachers to make a comparison between teaching idioms to different students with different proficiency levels.

This study intended to address the following research questions:

1) Which of the three kinds of idioms, including compositional, semi-compositional, and non-compositional idioms will be comprehended and produced easily by intermediate EFL English language learners?

2) Do learners perform better in comprehension or production of English idioms?

Based on the above research questions we come up with the following null hypothesis

H01: There are no significant differences between the comprehension and production of three different idioms by intermediate EFL English language learners.

H02: There are no significant differences between the Iranian students' performance in comprehension and production of English idioms.

## **2. Method**

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were 30 Persian, English language learners at intermediate level. They were randomly divided into two groups; 15 students in experimental and 15 students in control group. Both men and woman were selected for this study.

### *Instrument*

The materials that were used for this study included as: a pre-test, immediate post-test, and a delayed post-test. The idioms and conversations were selected from the books entitled as 101 American English Idioms; speak English like an American and thesis of Sirus Izadpanah (1996). The pre-test consisted 15 multiple choice questions and 15 production questions and immediate and delayed post-test which were exactly the same, had 30 multiple choice questions and 30 production questions and all of the tests were selected from the thesis of Sirus Izadpanah. For the analysis of data a t-test and ANOVA were employed.

### *Procedure*

This experiment was lasted for about 10 sessions; a pre-test which included both comprehension and production tests were administered to both groups at first and second session. Then, from

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session 3 until session 10, experimental group was received treatment in the form of small conversions which included these three kinds of idioms. The total numbers of idioms were 60 and they were received 6 of them each session. But control group was not received any treatment. On session 10 both groups were received immediate post-test and after two weeks or one month, a delayed post-test was taken. In all of the tests content of comprehension and production tests were exactly the same.

### **Data Analysis**

For the analysis of data a t-test and ANOVA were employed through the SPSS program.

### **Results and Discussion**

Before answering research question, first of all the normality was checked in order to demonstrate that whether our data were normal or not, or in the other words they were normally distributed. As shown in Table 2 in the following, all four groups in each test showed normality since the sig of Kolmogorov-smirnov in all of them is greater than 0.05.

The first research question aimed to examine which three types of idioms in each exam such as pre, post, and delay test were comprehended and produced easily by high school English language learners. For answering this question repeated measure ANOVA was used followed by post hoc for determining the relation between three types of idioms. For both, multiple choice and production test, correct answers were awarded 1 point, whereas wrong answers received 0 points.

The empirical results in SPSS showed that in both groups and in both tests of comprehension and production, identical or compositional idioms were the easiest to comprehend and produce, followed by similar or semi-compositional idioms which were well comprehended, and different and non-compositional idioms were the most difficult to comprehend and produce. In the other words, there is a significant difference between three types of idioms ( $\text{sig} < 0.05$ ) in both groups. So in here the null hypothesis is rejected because there is a significant difference between the comprehension and production of three different idioms by intermediate English language learner. The purpose of the second question was to find whether the students performed better in comprehension or production test of idioms. For answering this question a paired t-test was used.

The results showed that both groups in three tests performed better in comprehension rather than production test. The null hypothesis is rejected since there is a significant difference between the students' performance in comprehension and production of English idioms.

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What we conclude from the previous part is that, compositional idioms are the easiest one to comprehend and produce since they are word by word translation of students' mother tongue idioms, so comprehension and production and in the other words, their remembrance is easier for students which is followed by semi-compositional idioms which are a bit difficult than compositional idioms and differ in some small details and words and well comprehend by students; and finally non-compositional idioms which are totally different from the students mother tongue idioms, are the most difficult one for students to remember in order to comprehend and produce.

On the other hand, comprehension of idioms is easier for learners rather than production of idioms, since in comprehension the learners just understand its meaning and relates it to their mother tongue idioms but in production they should be able to produce a new expression by using new words.

This study had following limitations and delimitations:

1. The participants in this study were 30 students, so the generalizability of the results must be treated curiously.
2. The background knowledge of the learners could have affected their answering to the comprehension and production test; however this was not the concern for this study. For example they might have passed an idiom course in institutes.
3. In this study only intermediate English language learners involved.

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