

# Understanding Idiomatic Expressions: A Scoping Review of Obstacles and Teaching Approaches for Language Learners

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## Abstract

Learning English idioms are challenging for English as a Foreign Language learners as they are figurative in meaning, culturally specific, and semantically opaque. Such challenges can hinder learners' language ability and fluency. Although there have been several studies on idiom understanding, few in-depth reviews exist which gather evidence across various educational settings and learner groups to guide effective instructional strategies. This scoping review integrated current research on the challenges EFL learners encounter in understanding English idioms and explored instructional strategies used to promote idiom learning. Through a systematic search, 12 peer-reviewed articles were analyzed that had explored EFL learners' challenges with English idioms and the instructional methods used to overcome these challenges. Data was extracted according to Arksey and O' Malley's outlined scoping review strategy. The results underscored semantic opacity, cultural unfamiliarity, and lack of contextual cues as main barriers in idiom understanding among EFL learners. Effective instructional strategies as using visual aids, conceptual metaphors, stories, and context guessing strategies were found effective. These have proven effective in enhancing students' understanding and retention of idiomatic language. The application of research indicates integrating multimodal pedagogies and addressing different students' needs when teaching EFL. Adjusting instructional practices to include locally situated materials and motivational interactive tasks will assist in enriching idiom comprehension. Addressing the challenges of idiom acquisition in the EFL context requires a holistic and multidimensional teaching strategy. Teachers need to incorporate diverse teaching methods that take into consideration learners' linguistic ability and cultural background.

**Keywords:** English Idioms, EFL Learners, Semantic Opacity, Idiom Comprehension, Instructional Strategies, Multimodal Teaching, Language Acquisition, Cultural Context, Figurative Language, Language Pedagogy.

## Introduction

Idioms are multiword expressions which have to be learned as a whole and not broken down based on culture and context clues (Milburn et al., 2021). For language acquisition, learners, teachers, and researchers need to know how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners learn and use idioms to convey meaning and construct language. Idioms, or word coinage or statement whose meaning can't be taken literally, are part of the linguistic cultures. Idioms are constituents of languages' cultures; they are word or phrase creations which cannot be used literally (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2021). Mastery of idiomatic idioms is always discovered to be a necessary exercise for foreign language learners in order to achieve proper communication (K. Yunus & M. A. A. Hmaidan, 2021). In lexicology and grammar, an idiom is a word that is used to convey a group of words which are syntactically

or semantically restricted so that they are dealt with as a single unit (Yuldasheva, 2025).

As a link between linguistic competence and cultural awareness, idiomatic expressions are a key part of language and communication (Vasiljevic). By providing a means of expressing meanings that tend to extend beyond the literal meaning of the individual words, these expressions make the language richer (Belousova, 2015). However, because they are figurative, idioms can be very difficult for language learners to understand or use correctly in context (Jiang).

Idioms are language bridges, bridging word acquisition and cultural and context-dependent intricacies. Since idioms play a significant role in one's culture, their knowledge is essential in learning to communicate in a language (Xalilova & Atoyeva, 2023). In order to determine the best way of language acquisition, researchers, teachers,

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and students must know how EFL learners learn and use idioms in communication and competence improvement. Nevertheless, given that idioms are arbitrary, their study can be one of the more challenging parts of learning a foreign language (Ta'ameh, 2021). Foreign language learners find idioms of the figurative type difficult to understand since their meaning cannot be understood fully from their acquaintance with their lexical and grammatical components (Boers & Muñoz-Basols, 2021). This poses problem and difficulty in the systematic instruction of idioms.

In spite of these obstacles, the acquisition of idioms is vital for fluency and cultural proficiency in a second language. Knowledge of idiomatic expressions allows learners to better understand native speakers and to communicate more naturally. Thus, it is important to investigate successful teaching methods that can aid idiom acquisition by language learners.

This scoping review aimed to analyse the current literature surrounding language learners' challenges with idioms and pedagogical methods that have been used to teach these. Through the synthesis of extant research studies, the review aimed to ascertain gaps within the literature and inform future studies and teaching practices to promote idiomatic proficiency among language learners.

## Literature Review

### *Challenges in Idiom Acquisition*

Idioms, being highly figurative and culturally bound, pose considerable challenges to language learners. A study by Jamshed et al. (2024) investigated that Saudi EFL learners underscored that unfamiliarity with idioms, insufficient contextual knowledge, and inadequate classroom exposure hinder idiom understanding (Jamshed et al., 2024). Likewise, RahmtAllah (2024) established that although university-level EFL learners had some idiomatic knowledge, they lacked proper use through insufficient practice and exposure (RahmtAllah, 2024).

Park and Chon's (2019) research offers insights into the nuances of idiom understanding among EFL learners, and most notably the shortcomings of dependence on awareness of high-frequency vocabulary. The research tested 124 Korean middle school students on idioms formed of the first 1,000 English words and on the constituent words alone. The results showed that, even with familiarity with the component words, learners found it difficult to comprehend the idiomatic sense, which shows that knowing separate high-frequency words does not

necessarily equate to knowledge of multiword expressions (Park & Chon, 2019).

### *Instructional Strategies for Idiom Learning*

To address these concerns, many pedagogical strategies have been attempted (Ataafarin & Kiasi, 2017; Tran, 2021)

**Contextual Learning:** The presence of idioms within contextualized authentic situations assists with comprehension. Liontas (2017) advocates for placing idioms in meaningful language use to assist learners with internalization (Liontas, 2017).

**Multimedia Tools:** Tabatabaei and Mirzaei (2014) investigated the use of multimedia glosses, textual, pictorial, and combined; to aid idiom learning. The findings show that combined text and image facilitate understanding and remembering much more efficiently (Tabatabaei & Mirzaei, 2014).

**Gamification:** Ahmed (2022) examined the impact of gamified learning on idiom learning. More interest and idiomatic knowledge were observed in students through the game "Idiomatico" in contrast to conventional approaches (Ahmed et al., 2022).

**Processing Instruction:** Kim and Nam (2017) tested the effectiveness of explicit information and structured input activities combined. The findings indicated that processing instruction is a crucial factor in the appropriate production and understanding of idioms (Kim & Nam, 2017).

**Task-Based Learning:** Ataafarin and Kiasi (2017) measured the effects of tasks with different involvement loads on the learning and remembering of idioms. Findings indicated that more cognitively deep tasks facilitated improved idiom learning and remembering (Ataafarin & Kiasi, 2017).

### *Learner Attitudes and Perceptions*

Attitudes of learners are important to learn idioms. Arab (2021) discovered that there were positive attitudes among Mouloud Mammeri University EFL students learning idioms as they employed diversified methods such as guessing in context and dictionary checking (ARAB, 2021). Likewise, Linh (2021) established that lecturers and students noticed the use of idioms to improve speaking

competence and emphasized sound teaching practices (Tran, 2021).

**Limited Integration of Idioms in Language Curricula**

Various researches suggest that idioms are often underutilized in language learning materials and courses. For instance, it has been seen through research that English idioms are scarcely taught in schools, due to which learners are not familiar with such expressions. Such unfamiliarity deters learners from comprehending and using idioms effectively in real communication (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021).

**Cultural Nuances and Figurative Meanings**

The cultural and figurative specificity of idioms pose serious learning difficulties for learners. It has been found in research that learners are confronted by idioms due to their semantic opacity and cultural dependence. Nevertheless, few studies have examined instructional strategies to bridge cultural gaps effectively and create metaphorical knowledge among learners (Hajiyeva, 2024). Although some studies have explored how learners process idiomatic expressions, results are inconsistent. For instance, research indicates that learners tend to process idioms literally before reaching their figurative meanings. However, more empirical studies are required to clarify the cognitive processes involved in idiom comprehension and retention among L2 learners (Nadeem & Almowalad, 2022).

**Methodology**

This scoping review follows the methodology outlined by Arksey and O’Malley (2005) as modified by Levac et al. (2010), and the guidelines of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Pham et al., 2014). It is divided into six phases:

**Research Question**

The central research question guiding this review is:

1. What are the primary challenges language learners face in acquiring idiomatic expressions, and what instructional strategies have been employed to address these challenges?

**Search Strategy**

The research was undertaken based on a rigorous literature search using various databases across: Academic Databases: ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Boolean operators were utilized in order to narrow down the results. The limit was placed for English-language study reports from the years 2018-2025 to gauge relevance to the topic. Keyword search terms like “idiom learning,” “language learners,” “ESL idioms,” “idiom instruction,” and “figurative language acquisition” were employed.

| Database       | Search Terms   | Search String  |
|----------------|--|--|
| ERIC           | "idioms", "EFL learners", "language acquisition", "teaching strategies"                                  | ("idioms" AND "EFL learners") AND ("language acquisition" OR "teaching strategies")                                  |
| Scopus         | "idiomatic expressions", "English as a Foreign Language", "learning challenges", "instructional methods" | ("idiomatic expressions" AND "English as a Foreign Language") AND ("learning challenges" OR "instructional methods") |
| Web of Science | "idioms", "EFL students", "comprehension difficulties", "pedagogical approaches"                         | ("idioms" AND "EFL students") AND ("comprehension difficulties" OR "pedagogical approaches")                         |
| Google Scholar | "English idioms", "foreign language learners", "teaching techniques", "language education"               | ("English idioms" AND "foreign language learners") AND ("teaching techniques" OR "language education")               |
| ProQuest       | "idiom learning", "second language acquisition", "educational strategies", "EFL context"                 | ("idiom learning" AND "second language acquisition") AND ("educational strategies" OR "EFL context")                 |

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

1. Peer-reviewed journals addressing idiom acquisition by language learners.
2. Studies regarding difficulties in learning and applying idioms.
3. Research assessing teaching approaches to learning idioms.

### ***Exclusion Criteria***

1. Non-idiom learning or teaching studies directly related to idiom learning.
2. Non-English literature.

3. Articles with no empirical evidence or well-defined methodological frameworks.

The process of selection included screening titles and abstracts for relevance. Full-text articles were subsequently screened against inclusion and exclusion criteria. Discrepancies were settled by discussion or by referral to a reviewer.

#### **Chart the Data**

A standard data extraction form was designed to systematically map information from included studies. The following data were extracted:

| <b>Authors (Year)</b>       | <b>Country</b> | <b>Study Design</b> | <b>Participants</b>                    | <b>Challenges Identified</b>   | <b>Instructional Strategies</b>   | <b>Outcomes</b>   |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---------------------|--|--|---|---|
| (Jamshed et al., 2024)      | Saudi Arabia   | Mixed-methods       | Not specified                          | Semantic opacity; cultural unfamiliarity; limited exposure               | Emphasis on contextual learning and cultural immersion                        | Highlighted need for integrating idioms into curriculum to enhance comprehension      |
| (Tran, 2021)                | Vietnam        | Qualitative         | Freshmen at FOE, Thuongmai University  | Difficulty in understanding idioms in speaking contexts                  | Integration of idioms into speaking activities; contextual teaching           | Found that contextual teaching improved idiom comprehension in speaking skills        |
| (Park & Chon, 2019)         | South Korea    | Quantitative        | EFL learners                           | Overreliance on high-frequency words hindering idiom comprehension       | Emphasis on holistic language exposure beyond high-frequency vocabulary       | Suggested that focusing solely on high-frequency words may impede idiom understanding |
| (RahmtAllah, 2024)          | Saudi Arabia   | Mixed-methods       | 85 female undergraduate English majors | Partial familiarity with idioms; challenges in deeper comprehension      | Suggests enhanced idiom instruction in curricula                              | Recommended incorporating idioms more thoroughly in language programs                 |
| (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021) | Indonesia      | Qualitative         | EFL students                           | Semantic opacity; lack of idiom usage in daily life; limited instruction | Use of contextual interpretation; leveraging L1 connections; peer discussions | Emphasized the importance of context and L1 in understanding idioms                   |

Cont. Table

| Authors (Year)                  | Country    | Study Design  | Participants                    | Challenges Identified  | Instructional Strategies   | Outcomes   |
|---------------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------------------|--|--|--|
| (Shahidipour & Tahririan, 2018) | Iran       | Quantitative  | 200 senior high school students | Idioms not well-taught; absent from syllabi                    | Successful learners employed metacognitive strategies; need for curriculum integration | Highlighted the effectiveness of metacognitive strategies in idiom comprehension |
| (Phan et al., 2022)             | Vietnam    | Mixed-methods | English majors                  | Cultural specificity; unfamiliarity with idioms                | Encourages strategy instruction and cultural context teaching                          | Suggested that cultural context aids in idiom learning                           |
| (Vo & Nguyen, 2020)             | Vietnam    | Quantitative  | Teenage EFL learners            | Limited idiom knowledge among teenagers                        | Recommends explicit idiom instruction; use of common idiom lists                       | Found that explicit instruction improved idiom knowledge                         |
| (Hajiyeva, 2024)                | Azerbaijan | Qualitative   | EFL learners                    | Challenges in understanding idiomatic expressions              | Suggests incorporation of idioms into language teaching materials                      | Recommended integrating idioms into teaching materials to enhance understanding  |
| (Ta'amneh, 2021)                | Jordan     | Quantitative  | 129 university students         | Difficulty in learning idioms; reliance on literal translation | Strategies include context prediction, L1 translation, use of dictionaries             | Identified effective strategies for idiom learning among students                |
| (Zarei, 2020)                   | Iran       | Experimental  | EFL learners                    | Challenges in idiom retention                                  | Advocates for multimedia-enhanced instruction; visual and auditory aids                | Demonstrated that multimedia tools enhance idiom retention                       |
| (K. Yunus & M. Hmaidan, 2021)   | Malaysia   | Qualitative   | Lecturers                       | Difficulty in translating idioms                               | Use of comparative analysis between L1 and English idioms                              | Found that comparative analysis aids in teaching idiomatic expressions           |

### Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting the Results

Data were synthesized thematically to identify

universal challenges and pedagogical approaches across studies. Results were organized by the nature of challenges

(e.g., semantic opacity, cultural specificity) and the types of pedagogical interventions (e.g., contextual learning, multimedia assistance). A narrative summary was constructed to present results, highlighting patterns, gaps, and avenues for future research.

## Results

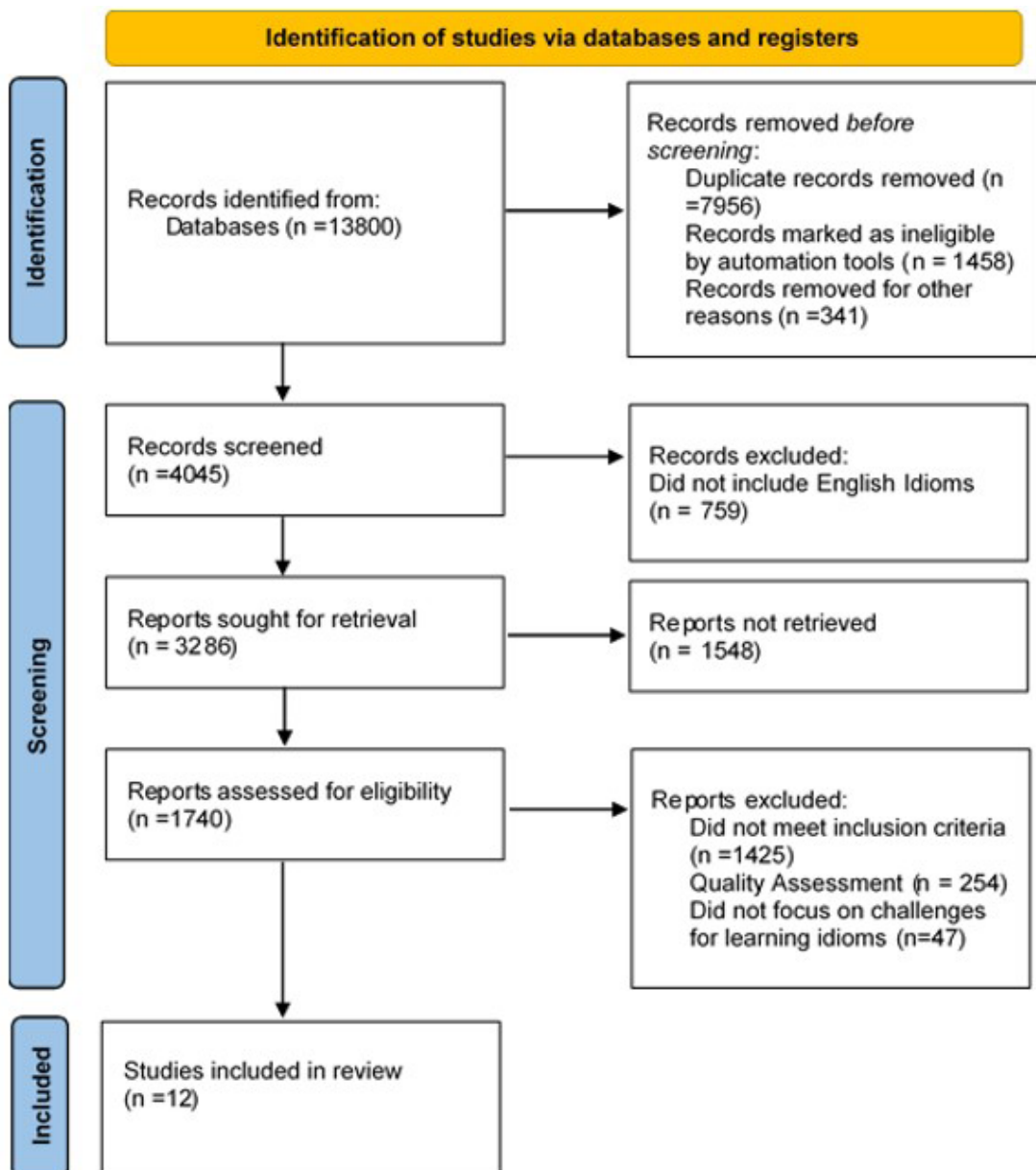
The scoping review integrated evidence from 12 peer-reviewed articles between 2018 and 2024 on the difficulties encountered by EFL learners in idiom learning and the teaching methods used to mitigate these difficulties. The studies were geographically representative, covering

Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Iran, and Jordan, to give an extensive overview of the international idiom learning situation in EFL contexts.

## Challenges in Idiom Acquisition

### *Semantic Opacity and Figurative Meanings*

A problem encountered in studies is semantic transparency of idioms. Learners find it challenging to figure out the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions since they are non-literal in nature. For instance, Jamshed et al. (2024) reported that Saudi EFL learners struggled to comprehend idioms due to the fact that their meaning could



not be derived from words (Jamshed et al., 2024). Similarly, RahmtAllah (2024) noted that students at university level studying EFL were faced with issues in comprehending idioms in the absence of context (RahmtAllah, 2024).

### ***Cultural Specificity***

Idioms are also rooted within cultural milieus and hence are therefore challenging to second language learners without cultural experience exposure. Phan et al. (2022) added that Vietnamese students were struggling with coping with idioms that carried culturally diverse content common in the target but not at home. Mismatch due to culture would always lead to misunderstanding or dropping out of idiomatic language (Phan et al., 2022).

### ***Limited Exposure and Practice***

Various research showed that EFL learners have limited exposure to idioms during classroom and everyday contexts. Anjarini and Hatmanto (2021) found Indonesian students received little exposure to idioms in the classroom, which led to little practice and reinforcement. Limited exposure prevents internalization and spontaneous application of idiomatic expressions (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021).

### ***Influence of First Language (L1)***

The first language interference can hamper idiom understanding and usage. Shahidipour and Tahririan (2018) suggested that Iranian EFL learners were more likely to translate idioms from Persian to English literally, thus using them inaccurately and failing to understand (Shahidipour & Tahririan, 2018).

## **Instructional Strategies for Idiom Learning**

### ***Contextualized Teaching***

The use of idioms in contextualized contexts enhances comprehension and retention. Tran (2021) emphasized the importance of teaching idioms using speaking tasks to allow learners to comprehend their use in real-life situations. The process de-mystifies idiomatic language and promotes active use (Tran, 2021).

### ***Use of Multimedia Resources***

The utilization of multimedia resources, such as videos and interactive software, has been shown to improve the learning of idioms. Zarei (2020) established that instruction with multimedia improved the ability of learners to understand and retain idiomatic expressions. The

visual and auditory hints provide situational information that helps in understanding the idioms (Zarei, 2020).

### ***Strategy Instruction***

Instruction of students in specific strategies for cracking idioms can enable them to confront unfamiliar phrases. Ta'amneh (2021) emphasized the power of strategies such as context analysis, keyword identification, and referencing idioms to personal experience. These metacognitive strategies promote independent learning (Ta'amneh, 2021).

### ***Translation and Comparative Analysis***

L1 learners' idioms and English idioms compared can highlight similarities and differences and facilitate understanding. Yunus and Hmaidan (2021) identified that translation activities allowed students to learn the connotation of idiomatic expressions and to steer away from literal translation (K. Yunus & M. Hmaidan, 2021).

### ***Learners' Perceptions and Attitudes***

Students' attitude toward idioms strongly impacts what and how much they learn. Vo (2020) concluded that Vietnamese EFL learners considered idioms as difficult but vital in becoming language competent. A positive attitude corresponded with stronger learning motivation as well as to utilize idiomatic phrases. Avoidance and reduced motivation resulted from a negative mindset (Vo & Nguyen, 2020).

The results emphasize the diverse difficulties that EFL learners experience when learning idioms due to semantic difficulty, cultural uniqueness, insufficient exposure, and L1 influence. Yet these difficulties can be mitigated using contextualized instruction, multimedia support, strategy training, and translation work. Furthermore, positive attitudes on the part of the learner toward idioms are paramount for successful learning (Al-Houti & Aldaihani, 2018). Long-term effectiveness and cross-cultural transferability of such methods should be investigated by future studies.

## **Discussion**

Including idioms in EFL teaching provides diversified advantages that surpass language skills. Idioms have profound roots in culture, granting students an exposure to the value system, humor, and history of English communities. This introduces them to culture, promoting intercultural communication and sensitivity crucial in

multicultural settings. 12 studies were synthesized to identify the common themes concerning the difficulties of the students and how teaching strategies were utilized to overcome the difficulties.

### ***Semantic Opacity and Contextual Support***

Among the common issues raised in the study is the semantic transparency of idioms. The learners find it difficult to infer the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions since they are not literal. For instance, Jamshed et al. (2024) quoted that Saudi EFL learners found it difficult to understand idioms since their meanings could not be inferred from individual words (Jamshed et al., 2024). Similarly, RahmtAllah (2024) stated that EFL university learners had difficulty comprehending idioms when contextual information was not provided (RahmtAllah, 2024).

These findings were supported by the Ranong (2014) study, which reported that Thai EFL learners applied a subset of strategies in processing idioms, including looking at literal sense and employing contextual clues. The findings varied along proficiency levels because more proficient learners benefited most from contextual information while lower-proficiency learners benefited most from the use of literal senses working in their favor (Ranong, 2014).

### ***Instructional Strategies: Visual Aids and Conceptual Metaphors***

The reviewed studies also enlightened instructional methods to aid idiom understanding. Albaqami (2023) established that Arab EFL learners were greatly assisted by visual cues on social media to understand idioms more than contextualization in isolation (Albaqami, 2023). Similarly, Karim and Fatah (2023) demonstrated that conceptual metaphor-based instruction enabled Kurdish EFL university students to comprehend idioms more thoroughly because suggesting idioms through utilization of sets similar to equivalent conceptual metaphors was more effective than presenting them randomly (Karim & Fatah, 2022).

This is in agreement with Aydın (2019), who had researched the cognitive processes involved in understanding L2 idiomatic expressions using visual instructional methods. The research found that understanding idioms varied with learning context, instructional method, and type of idiom, and highlighted the need for specific instructional methods (Aydın, 2019).

Effectiveness of Contextual Guessing Strategies

The contextual guessing strategies in facilitating idiom understanding were also emphasized. Rohani et al. (2012) explored the contribution of context to the processes utilized by EFL learners in understanding idioms and concluded that presentation of video-graphic animated cartoons strengthened long-term retention of idioms more than written contexts. This is consistent with the dual coding theory, which emphasizes the contribution of mental imagery in enabling retention (Rohani et al., 2012). Moreover, Al-Ghazo and Ta'amneh (2023) evaluated the effects of applying the contextual guessing technique on improving learners' vocabulary skill and reading proficiency. The research conclusion was that the learners made notable improvement due to the treatment, indicating the effectiveness of language learning contextual guessing technique (Al-Ghazo & Ta'amneh, 2022).

The primary objective of the present review was to summarize the challenges EFL learners face in learning idioms and the best pedagogical approaches to employ when teaching them. The recurrent status of semantic opacity as the most frequent challenge across a range of linguistic contexts indicates the nature of the challenge as a global issue. Besides, several empirical studies have provided evidence for employing methods like visual aids, analogy of concepts, and guessing through context to prove effective.

These findings suggest that contextual and visual information in multimodal instruction has the potential to significantly affect idiom learning for EFL learners. Teachers can and should use these practices in the classroom to counteract the difficulties caused by idiomatic language. The review summarizes that semantic opacity in EFL learners' comprehension of idioms and the effectiveness of teaching by way of conceptual metaphors, visual supports, and contextual guessing is important. These strategies must be researched further in multilingual and multicultural environments to confirm their applicability and relevance.

### **Conclusion**

This scoping review emphasizes the various challenges facing EFL learners in understanding English idioms based mainly on semantic opacity, cultural specificity, and minimal contextual hints. These normally hinder learners from comprehending idiomatic expressions and ultimately influence their general language skills. The discussion finds that despite different instructional approaches—such as contextual guessing, storytelling, and visual aids, used to tackle these challenges, their

efficiency depends on the level of learners' proficiency and cultural backgrounds. Although considerable progress has been achieved in the understanding and treatment of the difficulties of idiom understanding in EFL settings, there is a continued need for research to create more effective, culture-sensitive teaching methodologies that address the varying needs of learners.

### **Strengths and Limitation**

This scoping review systematically mapped a heterogeneous range of studies on EFL learners' understanding of English idioms. By covering different educational settings and learner groups, it offers a comprehensive picture of the current research environment. By bringing together evidence from various studies, the review is successful in pointing out gaps in research areas, e.g., empirical investigations on the long-term retention of idiom comprehension strategies among EFL learners. The use of the scoping review method provided room for heterogeneity across numerous study designs and methodologies, thus encouraging a broader understanding of the subject matter.

The scope of scoping reviews can be so wide that it results in a general overview lacking the intensity present in more narrow systematic reviews, which might curtail the level of specificity of the conclusions. The time and resources required to carry out a scoping review are significant, especially when working with a large amount of literature from various sources.

### **Future Recommendations**

Including multiple digital materials like TED Talks, digital posters, and short videos has been proved to increase students' participation and speaking skills. Effects of similar multimodal materials on idiom understanding and recall could be researched further. How effective are planned YouTube-based lessons and the effect of learner independence in such learning environments could be explored in further research. Examine how students of different cultural backgrounds learn and understand idioms can guide more culturally responsive instructional strategies. Although several studies emphasize proximal outcomes of instructional interventions, longitudinal research to evaluate long-term retention and usage of idioms learned using a variety of instruction strategies is called for.

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