



Assessing Comprehension of English Idioms: A Case of University Students in Unguja

Amos Tabley Ngoge

University of Hargeisa

Article History

Received: 04.09.2023

Revised: 04.11.2023

Accepted: 17.11.2023

Published: 19.11.2023

Keywords

English idiom

Compositeness

Idiomatic competence

Proficiency

How to cite:

Ngoge, A. T. (2023). Assessing Comprehension of English Idioms: A Case of University Students in Unguja. *Journal of Linguistics, Literary and Communication Studies*, 2(2), 11-23.

Copyright © 2023 The Author



Abstract

Understanding English idioms is essential to mastering the language. Despite idioms being extensively studied in the African context, showing the importance of idiomatic competence, studies on how Zanzibari students comprehend idioms are still limited. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess the extent of comprehension of English idioms among university students in Unguja to establish if this would enhance their proficiency in English. The study adopted a mixed-method approach and a descriptive research design. The researcher used questionnaires and cloze tests to collect data from 180 respondents from three universities in Zanzibar; the State University of Zanzibar, Sumait University, and Zanzibar University. The findings revealed that the respondents' performance in idiom comprehension was below average. The findings add to linguistic theory and practice, specifically to the studies on idioms.

Introduction

Idioms are fascinating examples of complex communication that explain abstract phenomena and are verbalised through limited words or expressions that make vivid and colourful conversation (Cooper, 1998). With their pervasive nature, they are considered speech instances in communication with deep meaning, popular linguistics, and cultural elements. According to Poppiel and McRae (1988), in the traditional sense, idioms were considered multiword expressions of highly frozen or relatively flexible componential structure. The meaning of idioms should be interpreted as the entirety of the meanings of each constituent that show different frequencies of occurrence throughout natural languages (Mäntylä, 2004).

It implied that, according to the traditional sense, idioms were considered to have little to no link between the literal and figurative meaning. To be precise, idioms have little to no effect on the literal meanings of the constituent parts (Ortony, Turner & Larson-Shapiro, 1985).

Contrary to the conventional view, the cognitive-linguistic perspective of idioms offers a theoretical basis for the construction and interpretation of idioms (Makkai, Boatner, & Gates, 1995). The proposition to figurative language sees idioms as the result of individual intellectual processing that includes interactions among knowledge domains (Mäntylä, 2004). Flores (1993) points out two questions that absorbed most psycholinguistic studies of idioms: 1) Does the reader or listener obtain



both the literal and the figurative interpretation of the idioms, or just the figurative one? 2) which of the two is obtained first.

Throughout the history of the English language, idioms have played a significant role in communication as they are used to express ideas more concisely and effectively. They form an essential pragmatic function in a language as Cooper (1998) advanced and further supported by Makkai, Boatner, and Gates (1995). Furthermore, Gibbs (2011) reiterates that one cannot claim to be fluent in English without knowing and mastering idioms. However, despite idioms being paramount in any language, they are challenging to comprehend compared to other language elements.

The reviewed research studies demonstrated that the factors influencing idiom comprehension vary from one research study to another, yielding varied results whose generalizability cannot be accepted. This claim is further supported by Gibbs (1995) in his general conclusion on the research entitled “challenges facing comprehension and translation of figurative languages”. Gibbs (ibid) recommends that such a study on different subjects with different characteristics will likely yield exciting findings. In this regard, the researcher wanted to explore the comprehension of idioms in the case of university students in Unguja to bridge the knowledge gap in comprehension of idioms.

Research has been carried out in linguistics and communication skills on other idiomatic expressions about idiomatic comprehension and language acquisition (Cooper, 1999; Irujo, 1986b; Kellerman, 1983; Liontas, 2002). Tran (2012) explored the competence of figurative idiomatic expressions of language learners and their perceptions of idiom learning in English as a foreign language (EFL) context in Vietnam. The results revealed that the subjects had poor idiomatic competence. His efforts also uncovered the paradox between students’ situation of using and learning idioms and their desires to learn. Tran (2012) claimed that figurative idioms and the skills for negotiating idiomatic meanings should be taught. Tran (2012) found that the context affects learner’s comprehension of idioms. However, this context is not static because learners are not exposed to the language to the same degree.

The present study benefited from Tran (2012) to establish if different levels of exposure to idioms could also affect the comprehension ability of students in Unguja and suggest appropriate methods that could be used to help students’ comprehension of idioms. Owing to the vital role of idioms in L2 acquisition and the difficulties EFL learners experience in their learning, finding a way to enhance their learning is significant. However, this would be possible if there was an awareness of the processes and the factors involved in comprehending idioms. Such awareness can help language teaching in universities and other learning institutions together with language practitioners and material developers in decision-making, leading to a better curriculum.

The present study adopted the Lexical Representation Hypothesis (LRH). When encountering an idiom, the Lexical Representation Hypothesis holds that literal and figurative meanings are processed simultaneously, with context as the final determiner for which interpretation fits the best. The Lexical Representation Hypothesis assumes that idioms reside in the mental lexicon as the sets of long words alongside ordinary words. The theory brings the concept of idiom comprehension in a simple description that is easy to understand.

The research was conducted on Unguja Island, in Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous region of Tanzania. Participants were drawn from Zanzibar University, the State University of Zanzibar, and Sumait University. Both State University and Zanzibar University are in the Tunguu area in Unguja, while Sumait University is in the Chukwani area in Unguja. The study adopted a descriptive research design. Descriptive research can employ a cross-sectional or longitudinal design for the survey (cf. Kinyua & Barasa, 2022). In this study, a single cross-sectional design was adopted because raw data from students was collected from individual universities at a time.



The data collected started with Sumait University. It took a single day. Then, the State University of Zanzibar and finally, from Zanzibar University. The target population was students pursuing degree programs in English and any other combination with English as a major from the three universities in Unguja. The total population of students pursuing degree programmes in the three universities was 4330. Simple random sampling was adopted with 180 students undertaking bachelor's degrees in the Departments of Linguistics from the three universities aged 17-30 years. The participants were both males and females.

Findings and discussion

The study aimed to assess the extent of comprehension of English idioms by university students taking English Language and establish if the student's proficiency in English was enhanced. In addition to having idioms presented in an enabling passage and isolation, each was presented in four multiple-choice options for students to select the correct option. The results showed that the three universities' overall percentage mean of idiom comprehension combined was 27.5%.

Three sets of cloze tests containing 40 idioms were supplied to 180 students to determine the extent of comprehension of the English idioms. The first set contained idioms in context enabled, i.e., the idioms in this cloze test were informed of an enabling passage. The second type of a cloze test contained idioms in isolation, i.e., no enabling passage was supplied. In the two cloze tests, the idioms presented in an enabling context differed from those presented minus the enabling context. The third cloze test contained similar idioms in an enabling context and isolation, i.e., the idioms presented in an enabling context were the same as those presented minus an enabling context.

The findings established that the mean raw score of the 180 students' familiarity assessment of the 40 idioms was 40.75%, i.e., the mean familiarity score of context-enabled idioms and those idioms in isolation. It was observed that this percentage score was below the average since, according to the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU), any performance below 40% is considered below average unless otherwise. Therefore, the findings implied that students' awareness of the idioms was somewhat low.

The findings showed that the general trend in comprehension of idioms varied across the two groups. Generally, idioms that were presented in isolation registered a low mean as compared to those idioms that were presented in a context. For example, in the State University of Zanzibar, first-year students' mean percentage in idiom comprehension was 40.5%. Out of this, this group's mean percentage of context-enabled idioms was 43.4%, while those in isolation were 37.6%. It implies that the performance in idiom comprehension with the aid of the context was higher than those of idioms presented in isolation across the years of study.

Although the overall mean in idioms comprehension by the three universities varied such that Sumait University had an overall mean of 43.9%, the State University of Zanzibar had an overall mean of 42.4%, while Zanzibar University had registered an overall mean of 39.8%, the results of the familiarity level in idiom comprehension was weak. The findings revealed that the calculated mean percentage of incorrect raw score of the twenty idioms in isolation used in the test was 62.6% which implied low idiom comprehension by students compared to the 37.4% of the correct options as answered by students.

The performance of pre-standardized test by the three universities in Unguja were presented as shown in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3. There were thirty (30) idioms supplied to students using a cloze test tool. Respondents were required to supply the correct option (by circling it) from the four multiple choices given. Each correct and incorrect option selected by students was calculated and tabulated.



The idioms used in this pre-standardized test were from The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 2001) and some from the approved English Course Book for Tanzania Secondary Schools for form three by Kadhege (2014).

Table 1: Performance of Sumait University English students in a pre-standardized test

	Idioms	Correct Score/30	% in idiom comprehensi on	Incorrect scores	% of incorrect score
	Idioms in Context				
1	No stone will be left unturned	12	40%	18	60%
2	Hit the nail on the head;	14	47%	16	53%
3	To earn a feather on a cap.	11	37%	19	63%
4	To be at cross purposes.	9	30%	21	70%
5	To be a backseat driver.	13	43%	17	57%
6	To feel something in your bones	11	37%	19	63%
7	By hook or crook	11	37%	19	63%
8	To keep the wolf from the door.	6	20%	24	80%
9	To lock, stock, and barrel.	8	27%	22	73%
10	To clear the coast was clear	10	33%	20	67%
11	To Batten down the hatches;	5	17%	25	83%
12	To be at sixes and sevens	8	27%	22	73%
13	To take one to know the rope.	13	43%	17	57%
14	To bring home the bacon	7	23%	23	77%
15	To be as cool as a cucumber	10	33%	20	67%
	Mean	9.7	32.9%	20.1	67.1%
	Idioms in Isolation				
16	To act at the switch	9	30%	21	70%
17	To drop the ball	7	23%	23	77%
18	Dean's in the doldrums	4	13%	26	87%
19	Barking up the wrong tree	6	20%	24	80%
20	Beating about the bush	4	13%	26	87%
21	To make a contribution	10	33%	20	67%
22	To buy a pig in a poke.	6	20%	24	80%
23	To add a nail in a coffin.	7	23%	23	77%
24	Down the tools	5	17%	25	83%
25	To pull someone's legs	8	27%	22	73%
26	To put a buy in someone's ear	4	13%	26	87%
27	To have a red herring.	3	10%	27	90%
28	To rock the boat.	9	30%	21	70%
29	To be wet behind the ear.	7	10%	23	90%
30	Give a cold shoulder	6	13%	24	87%
	Mean	6.3	19.6%	23	80.4%
	Overall Mean	8.0	26.3%	21.7	73.7%

Source: *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 2001)*



Key: Correct Score: the correct answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test.

% of Correct Score: the correct answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test multiplied by 100%.

Incorrect Score: the incorrect answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test.

% of Incorrect Score: the incorrect answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test multiplied by 100%.

The mean percentage of correct scores from student’s performance in a pre-standardized test on idiom comprehension was calculated. As presented in Table 1, the statistical analysis of the pre-standardized mean idioms in isolation and those presented in an enabling context for Sumait university was 8.0 out of 30. The 8 out of 30 represents a mean percentage of 26.3%, as shown in Table 1. On the other hand, the mean of idioms presented in an enabling context was 9.7, which translates to 32.9%. Similarly, the mean of idioms presented in isolation registered a mean of 6.3, which translates to 19.6%. The overall mean of idiom comprehension (both in isolation and in an enabling context) as registered by Sumait University English language students was 26.3%.

Table 2: Performance of Zanzibar University English students in a pre-standardized test

	IDIOM	Correct Score/30	% in idiom comprehension	Incorrect scores	% of incorrect score
	Idioms in Context				
1	No stone will be left unturned	9	30%	21	70%
2	Hit the nail on the head;	16	53%	14	47%
3	To earn a feather on a cap.	13	43%	17	57%
4	To be at cross purposes.	9	30%	21	70%
5	To be a backseat driver.	11	36%	19	64%
6	To feel something in your bones	13	43%	17	57%
7	By hook or crook	10	33%	20	67%
8	To keep the wolf from the door.	7	23%	23	77%
9	To lock, stock, and barrel.	7	23%	23	77%
10	To wait until the coast was clear	11	36%	19	64%
11	To Batten down the hatches;	7	23%	23	77%
12	To be at sixes and sevens	8	26%	22	74%
13	To take one to know the rope.	10	33%	20	67%
14	To bring home the bacon	9	30%	21	70%
15	To be as cool as a cucumber	8	26%	22	74%
	Mean	9.8	32.5%		67.5%
	Idioms in Isolation				
16	To act at the switch	9	30%	21	70%
17	To drop the ball	11	36%	19	64%
18	Dean's in the doldrums	6	20%	24	80%
19	Barking up the wrong tree	6	20%	24	80%
20	Beating about the bush	7	23%	23	77%
21	To Make a contribution	6	20%	24	80%
22	To buy a pig in a poke.	8	26%	22	74%



23	To add a nail in a coffin.	9	30%	21	70%
24	Down the tools	5	17%	25	83%
25	To pull someone’s legs	10	33%	20	67%
26	To put a bug in someone’s ear	5	17%	25	83%
27	To have a red herring.	4	13%	23	87%
28	To rock the boat.	9	30%	21	70%
29	To be wet behind the ear.	5	17%	25	83%
30	Give a cold shoulder	7	23%	23	77%
	Mean (in isolation)	7.1	23.7%	22.9	76.3%
	Overall Mean	8.5	28.1%	21.5	70.9%

Source: *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms* (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 2001)

Key: Correct Score: the correct answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test.

% of Correct Score: the correct answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test multiplied by 100%.

Incorrect Score: the incorrect answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test.

% of Incorrect Score: the incorrect answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test multiplied by 100%.

Table 2 shows that the Zanzibar University students registered an overall mean of 8.5 out of 30 idioms, translating to 28.1% of their idiom comprehension ability. The overall mean comprises of the mean of idioms in isolation and those in an enabling context. The mean of those idioms presented in an enabling context was 9.8, which is 32.5%. Those idioms presented minus an enabling context registered a mean score of 7.1, which translates to 23.7%.

Table 3: Performance of the State University of Zanzibar English students in a pre-standardized test

	IDIOM	Correct Score/30	% in idiom comprehension	Incorrect scores	% of incorrect score
	Idioms in Context				
1	No stone will be left unturned	10	33%	20	67%
2	Hit the nail on the head;	10	33%	20	67%
3	To earn a feather on a cap.	8	27%	22	73%
4	To be at cross purposes.	12	40%	18	60%
5	To be a backseat driver.	12	40%	18	60%
6	To feel something in your bones	9	30%	21	70%
7	By hook or crook	11	37%	19	63%
8	To keep the wolf from the door.	9	30%	21	70%
9	To lock, stock, and barrel.	8	27%	22	73%
10	To wait until the coast was clear	10	33%	20	67%
11	To Batten down the hatches;	10	33%	20	67%
12	To be at sixes and sevens	7	23%	23	77%
13	To take one to know the rope.	11	37%	19	63%
14	To bring home the bacon	6	20%	24	80%
15	To be as cool as a cucumber	9	30%	21	70%



	Mean	9.5	31.5%		68.5%
	Idioms in Isolation				
16	To act at the switch	7	23%	23	77%
17	To drop the ball	7	23%	23	77%
18	Dean's in the doldrums	6	20%	24	80%
19	Barking up the wrong tree	8	27%	22	73%
20	Beating about the bush	7	23%	23	77%
21	To make a contribution	14	46%	16	54%
22	To buy a pig in a poke.	8	27%	22	73%
23	To add a nail in a coffin.	7	23%	23	77%
24	Down the tools	9	30%	21	70%
25	To pull someone's legs	7	23%	23	77%
26	To put a buy in someone's ear	3	10%	27	90%
27	To have a red herring.	3	10%	27	90%
28	To rock the boat.	11	37%	21	63%
29	To be wet behind the ear.	9	30%	21	70%
30	Give a cold shoulder	6	20%	24	80%
	Mean	7.5	24.8%	22.7	75.2%
	Overall Mean	8.5	28.2%	21.6	71.8%

Source: The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms (Gulland& Hinds-Howell, 2001)

Key: **Correct Score:** the correct answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test.

% of Correct Score: the correct answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test multiplied by 100%.

Incorrect Score: the incorrect answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test.

% of Incorrect Score: the incorrect answers supplied by each student out of 30 idioms in a test multiplied by 100%.

Table 3 presents data for the State University of Zanzibar students with an overall mean of 8.5, which translates to 28.2% of students' ability to comprehend English idioms. The mean percentage of idioms in isolation was 7.5, 24.8%. The mean of those idioms in an enabling context was 9.5, which also translates to 31.5%. The distinctions of correct answers by university students between the two arrangement methods (context and isolation) for all three idioms in the forced-choice task (transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque) were presented as shown in the descriptive statistics in Table 4 and Table 5.

The results suggest that students performed better in context-enabled idioms than those presented in isolation (IS). The contrast between the two groups indicated that the forced-choice task generated higher scores for both groups in any situation. When examining the results in Table 4.4 and Table 4.5, it was noticeable that there is a more significant difference between scores for individual idioms in isolation and those presented in context. Significant differences between idioms in isolation and context enabled the idioms to be seen in several areas. Although the results on context and isolation comparison were different, the presentation mode is more likely to change when the task becomes more challenging.

This would be the case when the idioms are less familiar or more opaque. That is why opaque idioms like *Not My Cup of Tea* had fewer students registering the correct score.



Table 4: Students' knowledge of context-enabled idioms

S/N	Context(enabled) idioms	Correct raw scores/ 180	% in familiarity	Incorrect raw score/ 180	% in Unfamiliarity	Familiarity
1	To develop a cold feet	65	36%	115	64%	0.36
2	Last straw	72	40%	108	60%	0.40
3	To see eye to eye	61	34%	119	66%	0.34
4	Do something by the book	49	27%	131	73%	0.27
5	To face the music	83	46%	97	54%	0.46
6	Have a long face	47	26%	133	74%	0.26
7	Hit the roof	77	43%	103	57%	0.43
8	Make up one's mind	94	52%	86	48%	0.52
9	Take advantage of	85	47%	95	53%	0.47
10	Money talks	94	52%	86	48%	0.52
11	Hang out	68	38%	112	62%	0.38
12	Tip of the iceberg	76	42%	106	58%	0.42
13	On the right track	110	61%	70	30%	0.61
14	Green snake in a green grass	75	42%	105	58%	0.42
15	Cross someone's mind	81	45%	99	55%	0.45
16	Cold hearted	87	48%	93	52%	0.48
17	Pull someone's leg	65	36%	115	64%	0.36
18	Piece of cake	119	66%	61	34%	0.66
19	Break a leg	63	35%	117	65%	0.35
20	In the same boat.	118	66%	62	34%	0.66
	Mean % score		44.55%		55.45%	

Key: Raw score: number of respondents in this research =180 (Total number of students).

Correct raw score: numbers of respondents who scored correctly on the meaning of given idiom.

Incorrect raw score: number of respondents who scored the meaning of a given idiom incorrectly.

Familiarity: correct raw score divided by the total number of respondents who participated in this research multiplied by 100.

Table 5: Students' competence of English idioms in isolation

S/n	Idiom (in isolation)	Correct raw score/ 180	% Raw score	Incorrect raw score/ 180	% incorrect raw score	Familiarity
1.	To be a slippery slope	76	42%	104	58%	0.42
2.	To be on a roll	62	34%	118	66%	0.34
3.	To be a couch potato	55	31%	125	69%	0.31
4.	To throw in the towel	67	37%	113	63%	0.37
5.	To give someone a hand	81	45%	99	55%	0.45
6.	At the top of one's lungs	61	34%	119	66%	0.34



7.	To be at one's fingertips	63	35%	117	65%	0.35
8.	Keep someone at one's toes	59	33%	121	67%	0.33
9.	Over my dead body	64	36%	116	64%	0.36
10.	To turn the tables	47	26%	133	74%	0.26
11.	Rule of thumb	60	33%	120	67%	0.33
12.	To get a head-start	48	26%	132	74%	0.26
13.	To take charge	96	53%	84	47%	0.53
14.	To beat about the bush	107	59%	73	41%	0.59
15.	To talk of the devil	71	39%	109	61%	0.39
16.	To make up one's mind	97	54%	83	46%	0.54
17.	To roll up one's sleeves	52	29%	128	71%	0.29
18.	To break somebody's heart	90	50%	90	50%	0.50
19.	To add an icing on the cake	53	29%	127	71%	0.29
20.	To be not my cup of tea	41	23%	139	77%	0.23
	MEAN RAW SCORE%		37.4%		62.6%	

Key: *Raw Score*: Number of respondents in this research= 180

Correct Raw Score: number of respondents who correctly scored the meaning of a given idiom.

Incorrect Raw Score: number of respondents who incorrectly scored the meaning of a given idiom.

Familiarity: Correct Raw Score divided by the total number of respondents who participated in this research.

From the data presented in Table 4 and Table 5, a paired-sample t-test was performed using the GRAPH PAD PRISM 5.01 program to compare the performance of university students on idiom comprehension among the isolation group and the context-enabled group. With the help of this program, average and standard deviation values were calculated for each treatment.

The hypotheses below were tested:

H0: There is no substantial distinction in students' knowledge in comprehension of context-enabled idioms.

H1: There is a significant difference in student's knowledge in comprehension of context-enabled idioms.

The result from the paired samples t-test described a statistically significant mean difference in test scores between the two groups, i.e., the context-enabled idiom group versus the idiom in isolation group as follows: $t = 2.347$, $df = 19$, $p = <0.0299$, $CI -40.11$ to -2.295 was found, suggesting that students familiarity on knowledge on context-based enabled idioms ($M = 79.45$, $SD = 20.19$ and $STD\ error = 4.514$, $n = 20$) has a significantly lower mean on test scores compared to unfamiliarity in terms of idiom comprehension ($M = 100.7$, $SD = 20.201$ $STD\ error = 4.519$, $n = 20$).

The correlation test examined whether the difference between the results is meaningful or not. From the statistical analysis, a correlation coefficient (r) was -0.9998 , indicating a strong negative correlation



between the students' knowledge in idiom context enabled idioms comprehension. The negative correlation is that the higher the negative correlation between two variables, the closer the correlation coefficient is to the value -1. Two variables with a perfect positive correlation would have a correlation coefficient of +1.

In contrast, a correlation coefficient of zero implies that the two variables are uncorrelated and move independently of each other. The researcher's data shows a strong correlation between students' comprehension of idioms in context enabled.

To further determine whether the mean difference between the two groups (context-enabled group versus idiom in isolation group) was statistically significant, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also applied to the data. Results from the ANOVA indicated that the group mean is statistically significant. This is because the (p) value was <0.0001, which is less than α 0.05, the significance level of alpha. A multi-comparison test (post-statistical analysis) was conducted to test whether the results between the groups were meaningful. The findings from the groups were recorded in Table 6.

Table 6: Summary of ANOVA findings from idioms in isolation and those in context

One Way Analysis of Variance					
P value	0.0001				
P value summary	***				
Are means significant Different?	Yes				
Number of groups	4				
F	29.59				
R squared	0.52984				
Bartlett's statistics (correlated)	2.218				
ANOVA Table		Ss	Df	ms	
Treatment between columns		29200	3	9732	
Residual within columns		24990	76	328.9	
Total		54190	79		
Tukeys multiple comparisons	Mean diff	Q	Significance	Summary	95%cl of diff
Correct raw scores (isolation vs correct raw scores context)	-14.3	3.527	yes	***	-29.40 to 0.7971



Correct raw score (isolation) vs incorrect raw score (isolation)	-49.7	12.26	yes	***	-64.80 to -34.60
Correct raw scores (isolation) versus incorrect raw scores context	-35.5	8.755	yes	***	-50.60 to -20.40
Correct raw scores (context) vs incorrect raw score (isolation)	-35.4	8.73	yes	***	-50.50 to -20.30
Correct raw scores (context) vs incorrect raw score (context)	-21.2	5.228	yes	**	-36.30 to -6.103
Incorrect raw score (isolation vs incorrect raw score(context)	-14.2	3.502	no	Ns	-0.8971 to 29.30

A Tukey multi-comparison post-statistical analysis test was done comparing all four groups. The results showed that the main effect of group $F = 29.59, p < .0001$, and a significant main effect of task, $F(1, 119) = 2.2.18$ and a correlation coefficient of $p < .0001$. This statistical analysis implies that the mean difference between the two groups (context-enabled group versus idiom in isolation group) was statistically significant. This has alluded to the fact that there were statistical differences in performance between the two groups. Further, in examining the extent of comprehension of English idioms by university students, a mean of performance of idiom comprehension by students as per individual University was calculated and recorded in Table 7.

Table 7: Students' competence in idioms comprehension per year of study of students

	First-year	Second-year	Third-year	Mean
State University of Zanzibar	40.5%	41.5%	45.3%	42.4%
CEI	43.4%	44.7%	46.2%	44.8%
IA	37.6%	38.3	44.3%	40.1%
Zanzibar University	40.2%	40.3%	38.9.%	39.8.%
CEI	40.9%	43.5%	40.1%	44.2%
IA	39.5%	37.0%	37.6%	39.6%
Sumait University	43.6%	39.5%	48.7%	43.9%
CEI	47.6%	48.1%	50.4%	48.7%
IA	40.1%	30.9%	47.0%	42.7%

Key: CEI= Context enabled idioms

IA =Idioms in Isolation

Out of the 20 sampled students who participated in this research, each class's mean percentage of idiom comprehension is calculated and recorded, as shown in Table 4.7. In the State University of



Zanzibar, the performance of context-enabled idioms for the first year was 43.4%, while the mean percentage of idiom comprehension for idioms in isolation was 37.6%. The mean percentage of second-year students in CEI was 44.7%, while the mean percentage of IA was 38.3%. For the third-year class, the mean percentage score for CEI was 46.2%, while that IA was 44.3%. From the statistical data analysed above, it was clear that whenever the context was enabled in a given idiom, comprehension increased through the year of study compared to the idioms provided in isolation. The same trend is realized by Zanzibar University and Sumait University consecutively. From first-year to third-year classes, the comprehension performance of CEI was seen to be higher than those idioms in isolation.

The scores from the three universities showed that students from the three universities performed better in CEI idioms than IA idioms, even though the overall performance was generally below average as presented in Table 8.

Table 8: The overall mean score in idiom comprehension per university

University	Mean for (CEI)	Mean for (IA)
State University	48.8%	39.9%
Zanzibar University	39.6%	28.7%
Sumait University	45.1%	43.8%
Overall mean	44.5%	37.5%

From the data in Table 8, the results indicate that in the State University of Zanzibar, the mean standard score for CEI was 48.8%, while in isolation, IA was 39.9%. Zanzibar University and Sumait University realized the same trend. In Zanzibar University, a mean score of 39.6% was recorded in CEI, and a mean score of 28.7% was recorded in IA. Sumait recorded a mean score of 45.1% in CEI and 43.8% in IA. The overall mean percentage in idiom comprehension for context-enabled idiom for the three universities was found out to be 44.5%. This is arrived at by taking the sum percentage of CEI divided by the total number of universities in this study. The procedure of arriving at the mean percentage of idioms in isolation (IA) is the same as the one for CEI.

Conclusion

The mastery of idiomatic expressions or idioms should not be neglected and should not be taken for granted. Idioms are used daily and repeatedly by native speakers of the English language. They are a part of every language's vocabulary and are based on its history, heritage, and culture. Mastery of idiomatic expressions helps non-native speakers of a language become more fluent and sound more native-like. Mastery of idiomatic expressions increases the vocabulary and lexicon of the English Language learner.

Moreover, idiomatic knowledge leads to a better understanding of the culture and customs of that particular language. English language teachers should teach idiomatic language to their students and not overlook such a vital issue. Becoming more native-like in the English language is by learning idiomatic expressions, understanding their meanings and using them frequently parallel to English language native speakers.

References

Cooper, T., C. (1998). Teaching idioms. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31(2), 255-266.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1998.tb00572.x>

Cooper, T., C. (1999). Process of idioms by L2 learners of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33 (2), 233-262.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3587719>



- Flores, G., B. (1993). The comprehension and semantic interpretation of idioms. In C. Cacciari & P. Tabossi (Eds.), *Idioms: Processing, Structure, and Interpretation*, 79-90. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Gibbs, Jr. R. W. (2011). Evaluating conceptual metaphor theory. *Discourse Processes*, 48 (8), 529-562.
- Gibbs, R. W. (1995). Idiomaticity and human cognition. In M. Everaert, E. van der Linden, A. Schenk and R. Schreuder (Eds.) *Idioms: Structural and psychological perspectives*, 97- 116. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Irujo, S. (1986 b). Don't put your leg in your mouth: Transfer in the acquisition of idioms in a second language. *Tesol Quarterly*, 20(2), 287-304. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586545>
- Kadeghe, M. (2014). Tanzania Secondary Schools English Course Book for Form Three. Dar es Salaam: Afroplus Industries.
- Kellerman, E. (1983). Now you see it, now you don't. In S. Gass, & L. Selinker (Eds.), *Language Transfer in Language Learning* (pp. 112-134). Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House.
- Kinyua, S., & Barasa, D. (2022). Anthroponymy in Eastern Nilotic: A Case of Turkana Personal Names. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 3(2), 58-78.
- Liontas, J. (2002). Context and idiom understanding in second languages. *EUROSLA Yearbook*, 2 (1), 155-185.
- Makkai, A., Boatner, M., T., & Gates, J., E. (1995). *A dictionary of American Idioms* (3rdEdt.). New York: Barons Educational Series.
- Mäntylä, K. (2004). *Idioms and language users: the effect of the characteristics of idioms on their recognition and interpretation by native and non-native speakers of English* (No. 13). Jyväskylän yliopisto.
- Ortony, A., Turner, T. J., & Larson-Shapiro, N. (1985). Cultural and instructional influences on figurative language comprehension by inner-city children. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 25-36. www.jstor.org/stable/40171002
- Popiel, S. J., & McRae, K. (1988). The figurative and literal senses of idioms or all idioms are not used equally. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 17(6), 475-487.
- The Penguin Dictionary of English of Idioms 3rd Edition. (2004).
- Tran, H. Q. (2012). An explorative study of idiom teaching for pre-service teachers of English. *English Language Teaching*, 5 (12), 76-86. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1080172>