

## A Study of the Relationship between College EFL Learners' Vocabulary Size and Idiomatic Reading Comprehension<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Since *idiom* embraces its specific social-cultural implication of the language, mastering idioms is hard for L2 learners since the meanings of the texts cannot be determined through an analysis of their individual word meanings. However, when EFL learners' idiomatic knowledge is developed, subsequently enabling them to use the language appropriately, their proficiency is definitely enhanced. Thus, the purpose of the study is to investigate college EFL learners in the following aspects: (1) how learners' vocabulary size impacts their idiom comprehension, (2) how learners' vocabulary size impacts their ability in reading comprehension with idioms, (3) how their idiom proficiency affects their reading comprehension ability, and (4) what their comprehending difficulties and general learning attitudes are toward idioms.

One hundred and seven sophomores majoring in English at a southern private university participated in this study. The mix-method approach was used for the research design. The findings reveal that learners' vocabulary size and their idiom proficiency, learners' vocabulary size and their ability in reading comprehension, and learners' idiom proficiency and their reading comprehension ability were all positively related, and all of them reached a statistically significance. Regarding learners' attitudes, the majority presented a positive attitude toward idiom learning and also valued its necessity. Most of them agreed that acquiring more idioms can improve their L2 proficiency (86.9%), and 91.6% believed that their idiom knowledge should be enhanced. Among the advocates who stood for integrating idiom teaching into EFL courses, the majority argued that idioms should be taught at the beginning level (65.4%), and 20.6% claimed it should be waited until the advanced level. Some pedagogical implications for classroom teachers to improve idiom teaching in EFL contexts are also included.

**Key words:** vocabulary size, idiom comprehension, reading comprehension, EFL learning attitude

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## 大學生的英語單字量與慣用語閱讀能力相關性之研究<sup>1</sup>

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### 摘要

從語言的含意層面來說，由於「慣用語」包含了社會文化意涵的特殊性，要精通目標語之慣用語在外語學習者來說，實為不容易，因為其釋義並非完全取決於單獨字義的分析與連結。然而，當外語學習者如能在目標語的學習上增加其慣用語知識，他們自然能夠更適切地使用目標語，而使他們的外語能力與程度都相對的提升。本研究的目的是要探究台灣目前大學學生對英語慣用語的熟悉度及其理解過程，研究問題共有以下幾個方向：(1)大學生的英語字彙量是否影響他的慣用語理解？(2)大學生的英語字彙量是否影響他對於含有慣用語的閱讀理解？(3)學生的慣用語理解程度是否影響他的閱讀理解能力？(3)學生對於學習英語慣用語的普遍態度為何？

一百零七位南部某大學應用外語系大二學生參與本研究。研究設計採用混合型之研究方法：量化與質化兩種研究方法都將使用於本研究，包含資料收集及統計工具的分析。研究結果發現，學生的字彙量和慣用語程度皆與其之閱讀理解能力有正向相關性，且皆達到統計上之顯著相關。大多數學生對於學習英語慣用語普遍皆表達正面態度及重視其必要性，高達 91.6%認為增加慣用語知識能提升其英語能力。在贊成應將慣用語教學融入學校英語課程的支持者中，65.4%主張在初級課程就要教，然而有 20.6%認為延至高階課程再教。在匯集自學生「有聲思考法」(think-aloud)的研究資料中，對於學生在理解慣用語的問題及困難，有更深入的了解。最後，研究者就教師在英語教室中提升慣用語教學應用，在結論中提出建議。

**關鍵字：**字彙量、慣用語理解、閱讀理解、英語學習態度

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## I. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

The acquisition of human language competence continually develops from childhood all the way into adulthood, irrespective of country or culture. Although any of the changes that occur are subtle, one aspect of language that reflects this subtle growth is the understanding of figurative expressions (Nippold, 1998). These expressions commonly occur in spoken and written communication such as conversations, newspapers, advertisements, and commercials (Gibbs and Beitel, 1995; Roberts and Kreuz, 1994; Nippold, 1998). English, as native speakers use it, is largely instinctual and intuitive, peppered with informal and nonstandard expressions and idioms. Those who do not share a native speaker's comfort level in English, even after achieving mastery over the formal elements of the language, often generate speech that may be perfectly understandable, but that lacks some of those expressions that make English come alive. Non-native speakers may also be completely bewildered by the idioms they hear or read, due to their infrequent use in the language classroom and the structural inability to define the phrase word-for-word.

For the researcher, to observe how effective linguistic communication can be is a very interesting study topic. Sometimes people convey large amounts of meaning and information only with a few words—idioms. John-Laird (1993) states that “it is difficult to speak spontaneously without lapsing into idiomatic usage” (p. 3); in addition, McDevitt (1993) also argues that “idioms are an important part of any language and may be said to be an indicator of one's fluency in that language” (p. 4). Idioms, therefore, play a significant role in a foreign language as well as in the first language. Foreign language learners learn not only vocabulary and grammatical structures of the target language but also the idiomatic phrases to integrate themselves into the culture of the target language.

Many L2 learners' main purpose is to develop their communicative skills of the target language to be able to speak and write as native speakers. A great majority of EFL students believe that to achieve this goal all they need to master is pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. But after obtaining sufficient language knowledge in these areas, they find that their dream is still out of reach: their writing, though grammatically correct, sounds foreign, and their speech does not sound ‘natural.’

### 1.2 Rationale for the Study

Unlike literal language, idioms cannot be understood through their individual word meanings, as Cooper (1999) elucidates “because figurative meaning is unpredictable, idioms present a special language learning problem for virtually all groups of learners” (p. 233). Mastering English idioms is not easy for EFL learners who may see them as a stumbling block (Cooper, 1999). According to Buchwald (1992), foreigners often misinterpret what Americans say since they take everything Americans say literally. Thus, English idioms are probably the most problematic aspect for EFL learners to comprehend and interpret in their English learning.

To sum up, non-native speakers of English, even if they understand standard literary American English, may feel frustrated and confused when they hear idiomatic expressions since the true meaning of the idiom generally cannot be determined by a knowledge of its component parts. Therefore, learning idiomatic phrases and expressions of a specific language is important, not only for the acquisition of that language itself, but also its social communication and culture. Unfortunately, studies aiming at the teaching of idioms to EFL students have not been able to catch the attention of many EFL teachers. Idioms

are thus often ignored during the process of teaching and learning. This is to be regretted as it handicaps EFL learners' command of the target language in the long run. Few studies to date have investigated whether Taiwanese college-level EFL students share the problem of comprehending English idioms and where exactly their difficulties lie.

### 1.3 Purpose of the Study

Idioms are expressions that abound in English and are easily produced and understood by native speakers. Traditionally, idioms are described as fixed expressions, i.e., as phrases or sentences whose figurative meaning is not clear from the literal meaning of their individual constituents. Given the commonness of figurative expressions, it is important to know how people learn their meanings. Especially for EFL learners, this information can be used to facilitate figurative understanding in non-native speakers who have difficulty in this area.

When EFL learners' language knowledge of idioms is developed, they are able to use the language appropriately, and their language proficiency is definitely enhanced. Thus, the purpose of the study is to investigate Taiwanese college students' familiarity of English idioms in the following aspects: how students' vocabulary knowledge impacts their comprehension of English idioms, how students' vocabulary size and idiom proficiency affect their ability of reading comprehension, and what their attitudes are toward learning this L2 idiomatic language.

### 1.4 Research Questions

This study attempted to address the following research questions in order to arrive at conclusions about English idiom comprehension by non-native speakers and implications for L2 instructions:

1. How does Taiwanese college EFL learners' vocabulary size impact their idiom comprehension?
2. How does Taiwanese EFL learners' vocabulary size impact their ability in reading comprehension with idioms?
3. How does Taiwanese college EFL learners' idiom proficiency affect their reading comprehension ability?
4. What are college EFL learners' comprehending difficulties and general learning attitudes towards L2 idioms?

## II. Literature Review

Traditionally, idioms are described as fixed expressions, as phrases or sentences whose figurative meaning is not clear from the literal meaning of their individual constituents. As a consequence, most authors have drawn a fundamental distinction between literal and figurative language and have assumed that idioms and their figurative meanings must be stored separately in the mental lexicon, and that this meaning must be learnt as a whole unit. For linguistic theories, which are mainly concerned with literal language, idioms have always caused serious problems. This is why, over the last four decades, linguists and psycholinguists have developed a number of hypotheses to describe the special grammatical characteristics of idioms and to explain their processing and representation (Abel, 2003).

Expressions such as *shed crocodile tears*, *play cat and mouse* are common English idioms. Moon (1997, p. 46) finds that "idioms are a very complex group: not least because the term 'idiom' frequently occurs in the literature with a variety of different meanings." According to Cruse (1995, p. 37), an idiom needs to be lexically complex and

non-compositional; that is, an idiom should “consist of more than one lexical constituent...it should be a single minimal semantic constituent.” Therefore, lexical complexity as a distinguishing feature of idioms is prevalent in the various definition of idiom (Carter, 2000; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). Although those definitions of idiom are based on the two criteria of lexical complexity and non-compositionality, they still show how significant these two criteria are in identifying idioms.

The relevance of idioms for linguistic studies undoubtedly derives from the pervasiveness in everyday language. Pollio *et al.* (1977) estimated that, on average about four figurative expressions are produced in every minute of speech. One of the issues in previous work has been the varying availability of literal and figurative senses of idioms in the course of comprehension. Different theoretical proposals have been developed for both first and second language idiom processing.

## 2.1 Non-native Speakers' Idiom Processing

Numerous research studies on native speakers' processing of idiomatic expressions have been done in the past; however, research which looked into the representation and processing of idiomatic expressions by second language learners has not received the same interest from applied linguistic researchers. Several researchers (i.e. Cooper, 1999, Liontas, 2002, Bortfeld, 2004), confirmed the lack of research on non-native speakers' processing of figurative language. In other words, we know very little about how EFL learners process unknown English idioms.

While some researchers suggested that non-native speakers comprehend idioms by direct retrieval of their figurative meanings (Nelson, 1992), others claimed that non-native speakers first process idioms literally and only then access their figurative readings (Liontas, 2002). In addition, Kecskes (2000) argued that owing to the lack of metaphorical competence in L2, non-native speakers are more likely to rely on literal meanings of figurative utterances and on their first language conceptual system when producing and comprehending figurative phrases.

Research in the foreign and second language teaching area has shown that L2 speakers, similar to L1 speakers, apply some strategies while processing unfamiliar idioms despite the lack of sufficient input in the classroom setting and the lack of language contact. In order to interpret the meaning of idioms, L2 speakers recall the strategies acquired during their first language acquisition, and they rely on the literal meaning conveyed in the context and guess at the intended meaning (Bulut, 2004). According to Katja's (2004) study, the results suggested that English idioms were fairly difficult for Finnish EFL students: the easiest were the idioms that had an identical equivalent in Finnish. However, the tendency to seek assistance in the mother tongue at times led to erroneous interpretations.

Matlock and Heredia (2002) suggested that the role of literal and figurative meanings in the processing of L2 idioms will be determined by the L2 learner's proficiency in the language. Accordingly, they have proposed that L2 learners of the beginning-level must first establish direct connections between literal and non-literal meanings of figurative expressions. Proceeding from this assumption, Matlock and Heredia (2002) envisaged idiom comprehension at early stages of L2 learning as consisting of three steps. In the first step, an L2 idiomatic expression is translated literally into L1. Next, the learner accesses the literal meaning of the expression and attempts to make sense of it. Finally, in the third stage, the figurative meaning is accessed. On the other hand, at more advanced stages of L2 learning the non-native speaker may process figurative expressions in the same manner as a native speaker, without having to access their literal meanings first. This suggests it is very likely that the status of literal and figurative meanings in

processing idiomatic expressions will be different for native speakers and for non-native speakers.

## **2.2 Previous Studies on L2 Idiom Comprehension**

Some researchers in recent years have claimed that conceptual metaphor can facilitate the learning and comprehension of idioms which was based on the Conceptual Metaphor theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The research results suggested that metaphorical and metonymical understanding played an important role in idiom comprehension (Gibbs, 1992; Hamblin & Gibbs, 1999).

In a series of Bortfeld's (2002) experiments, native and nonnative speakers of English were asked to form mental images of familiar American English idioms. Even when given explicit instructions to base their images on the phrases' literal meanings, both groups of speakers reported images that reflected fusions of the phrases' literal and figurative meanings. In a subsequent rating task, non-native speakers were judged to have produced more natural sounding sentences using the target idioms after the imaging task than they did before the task. In a second experiment, non-native English speakers were asked to form images of unfamiliar American English idioms both before and after being told the phrases' figurative meanings. The result shows non-native speakers' images did not noticeably change between the first and the second imaging session. Bortfeld's (2002) study indicated that their images were not dependent on explicit knowledge of the phrases' figurative meanings.

A couple of related studies were conducted in the Taiwanese EFL classroom context. Based on Krashen's (1982) idea that linguistic input is crucial to language acquisition and Swain's (1985) postulate that linguistic output should be viewed as important as linguistic input, Huang (2007) investigated the effectiveness of input and output instruction via pictures in Taiwanese college students' comprehension. Idioms were taught with not only metaphors and metonymies but also visual aids. Her results showed that three groups all positively increased their comprehension of unfamiliar idioms and improved their understanding of the underlying metaphors and metonymies. In addition, the visual output group outperformed the other two groups in idiom comprehension and retention of memory. Also, the ability to comprehend conceptual metaphors and metonymies was correlated with the complexity of conceptual metaphors underlying idioms. In other words, Huang's (2007) study implied that visual aids and hand-on experience would facilitate the comprehension of idioms by linking the metaphorical meaning with life experience.

Another similar study done by Feng (2007) regarded the utility of conceptual metaphors and metonymies in enhancing the idiom comprehension of EFL learners. Her results showed that in the pre-test, participants were not aware of the connection of the underlying metaphorical and/or metonymical knowledge and the figurative meanings of idioms. However, the underlying knowledge, including two kinds of metaphors and metonymies, of idioms could be to some extent taught to learners, which in turn facilitated and increased their comprehension of unfamiliar idioms. In addition, the ability to comprehend conceptual metaphors and metonymies was not only connected to universal and cultural knowledge but also correlated with the participants' language proficiency.

While previous studies have provided enlightening theoretical and practical insights into L2 idiom comprehension, little research has been done regarding the comprehension of English idioms by college EFL students in Taiwan. Therefore, the current study focuses on the examination of the relationship between Taiwanese college EFL learners' vocabulary size, idiom comprehension, and their reading comprehension, and their

learning attitudes toward learning English idioms.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

One hundred and seven sophomores who major in English at a private university in southern Taiwan were selected as the subjects for the study. All subjects were non-native speakers of English who on average had had at least seven years of EFL instruction since junior high school. The study was conducted during the fall semester of 2011 while the subjects enrolled in Intermediate English Listening as a required course.

#### **3.2 The Instrument and Procedure of the Study**

A pilot study was conducted before the semester when the materials were designed. Two native teachers of English and two Taiwanese teachers of English checked all the items of the tests, as well as the survey questionnaire and interview items designed by the researcher. After all the necessary fixes and modifications carried out according to the suggestions and opinions of both native and non-native English teachers, four English major students were asked to answer the tests, the survey, and the interview questions. The instruments were all carefully reviewed and adjusted before the semester.

The study was conducted at the beginning of the semester. Two testing instruments, a vocabulary test and a general English-idiom test were administered by the researcher in order to determine the level of English language proficiency of the students, especially their vocabulary and idiomatic knowledge of English. Based on the scores of the two tests, the researcher observed if any statistical significance could be found to prove the first hypothesis of the current study: the larger the students' vocabulary, the better they understand the meanings of idioms.

On the second week, forty-two subjects were assigned in the high-level group and 65 were in the low-level group according to the mean performance and the standard deviation of the vocabulary test ( $M = 36.78$ ). To protect all subjects' anonymity throughout the study, the researcher applied S initial (which stands for every Student) and a number given to every participant indicating his or her order in each group as High: S1-S41, and Low: S42-S107. In the third and fourth week, all participants were given the Reading Comprehension Test and the Idiom Interpretation Test. The Reading Comprehension Test (RCT) included two American cultural reading texts chosen from the book, *Take It Easy: American Idioms* (McPartland-Fairman, 2000), and each text came with several idiomatic phrases. After students read the text, they were asked to complete comprehension questions about the reading in the multiple-choice format. The purpose of RCT was to evaluate EFL students' reading comprehension ability when some idioms existed in a contextual situation. Finally, all participants were asked to complete a survey including their personal information and some questions regarding students' opinions and attitudes toward English idioms. Moreover, the following individual interview was conducted by the researcher: six volunteer students would be interviewed individually. The purpose of the individual interviews with the students was to explore details regarding their opinions of learning English idioms, such as difficulty and motivation. Finally, all the collected data would be processed and analyzed.

#### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship among college EFL students' vocabulary size, idiom familiarity, and their reading comprehension, to see if their language proficiency impacts their process of idioms and reading comprehension,

and their attitudes toward learning English idioms. All of the collected data aimed to answer research questions of the present study.

In terms of investigating students' attitudes toward idiom learning, the descriptive statistics of the results from the survey "Attitudes toward Learning English Idioms" would answer the question. Based on students' scores of the three tests, the vocabulary-size test, the general English-idiom test, and the reading comprehension test, the researcher could examine if any statistical significance can be found to prove the hypothesis: the more the awareness of vocabulary knowledge students have, the more accurate idiomatic meaning they comprehend. Therefore, the paired samples test and paired samples correlations of the students' two test scores would be computed by SPSS 15.0 for Windows to see if any statistical significance exists.

#### IV. Results

This study, focusing on the question of how familiar the Taiwanese students majoring in English major in a private university is with English idioms, aimed to examine: (1) if their vocabulary size has a relationship with their idiom proficiency and reading comprehension ability, and (2) what college EFL students' attitudes are toward learning L2 idioms.

Table 4.1 *Participants' Personal Information (N=107)*

Item	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
1. Gender		
Male	22	20.6
Female	85	79.4
2. Off-campus English Lesson		
Attended	16	15.0
Not attended	91	85.0
3. On-campus English Lesson		
Attended	78	72.9
Not attended	29	27.1
4. Be Interested in English		
Not at all	-	-
So-so	23	21.5
Some	53	49.5
A lot	31	29.0
5. Learning English in daily life		
Seldom	5	4.7
Yes, on the Internet	24	22.4
Yes, material reading	34	31.8
Yes, cram school	8	7.5
Yes, TV/movies	76	71.0
Yes, songs	78	72.9
Yes, other activities	3	2.8
6. Best skill in English		
Listening	34	31.7
Speaking	16	15.0
Reading	42	39.3
Writing	15	14.0



7. Worst skill in English		
Listening	24	22.4
Speaking	36	33.7
Reading	6	5.6
Writing	41	38.3

One hundred and seven sophomores majoring in Applied Foreign Languages at a private university in southern Taiwan were selected as the subjects for the current study, twenty-two were male (20.6%) and eighty-five were female (79.4%). Among the participants, forty-two were assigned in the high-level group (39.3%) and sixty-five were the low-level group (60.7%) according to the mean performance and the standard deviation of the vocabulary test. Among the high-level group, eleven were male (50% within gender) and 31 were female (36.5% within gender), while among the low-level group, eleven were male (50% within gender) and sixty-five were female (60.7% within gender). The first part of the *Student Survey: Attitudes toward Learning English Idioms* is concerned with students' personal information, and the results are shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 illustrated that among one hundred and seven respondents, only sixteen students (15.0%) attended out-of-school English lessons, but seventy-eight (72.9%) attended extracurricular English lessons offered by school. Regarding their interest in learning English, eighty-four students (78.5%) showed positive attitudes. Regarding their self-learning English in daily life, only five students replied that they seldom learn English (4.7%). The majority stated that they watch English TV programs and movie as their way of self-learning (71.0%) or listen to English songs (72.9%), while 31.8% stated that they read English materials such as magazines or novels, and 22.4% prefer learning English on the Internet. From students' self-report regarding their best and worst English skills, the findings indicate that their receptive skills (listening and reading) are better than their productive skills (speaking and writing).

Table 4.2 *Participants' English Learning Motivation and Difficulty (N=107)*

Item	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
8. English learning motivation		
Helpful for academic achievement	39	36.4
Helpful for future job and employment	90	84.1
Enjoy learning foreign languages	57	53.3
Go abroad or travel to a foreign country	70	65.4
Make friends with foreigners	49	45.8
Passive learning motivation	5	4.7
9. The most difficulty in English listening or reading		
Lack of vocabulary	54	50.4
Poor grammar	26	24.3
Classroom teaching is useless	5	4.7
Not understanding English they heard and read	22	20.6

Items 8 and 9 were concerned with EFL learners' learning motivation and learning difficulty in reading and listening. As the results shown in Table 4.2, most of their motivation came from the belief that learning English was beneficial helpful for their employment and job-hunting in the future (84.1%)—they believed that one with better competence in English were more competitive in their career. Also, 65.4% of the participants' motivation was to go abroad/travel to a foreign country, and 45.8% stated their desire for making friends with foreigners—of course good English conversation

skills were definitely needed. In addition, nearly half of them (53.3%) were motivated in English learning since they enjoyed learning foreign languages. In terms of students' learning difficulty in listening and reading, half of them (50.4%) blamed their lack of vocabulary, and 24.3% imputed their learning difficulty to their poor grammar.

#### 4.1 The Results of Research Question One

Research Question One intended to examine if there was a linear relationship between EFL students' vocabulary size and their idiom proficiency.

Ho: There is no linear relationship between college EFL students' vocabulary size and their idiom proficiency.

The descriptive statistics of participants' vocabulary and idiom tests were shown in Table 4.3. Pearson's correlation was used to test the hypothesis of a linear relationship between students' vocabulary size test score ( $M = 36.78$ ,  $SD = 10.46$ ) and their idiom proficiency test score ( $M = 47.99$ ,  $SD = 12.96$ ).

Table 4.3 *Descriptive Statistics of Students' Vocabulary and Idiom Test*

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>N</i>
Vocabulary Size	36.78	10.46	107
Idiom Proficiency	47.99	12.96	107

Table 4.4 *Pearson Correlations between Vocabulary Size and Idiom Proficiency*

		Vocabulary Size	Idiom Comprehension
Vocabulary Size	Pearson Correlation	1	.422**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Idiom Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	.422**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

Note. \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The results in Table 4.4 revealed a significant linear relationship,  $r(105) = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.01$  ( $p = 0.00$ ); therefore, we rejected the null hypothesis of no relationship between the two variables and concluded that students' vocabulary size and idiom proficiency were significantly related. Subjects who had a larger vocabulary size significantly did have better idiom proficiency.

#### 4.2 The Results of Research Question Two

Research Question Two intended to examine if there was a linear relationship between college EFL students' vocabulary size and their ability in reading comprehension with idioms.

Ho: There is no linear relationship between college EFL students' vocabulary size and their ability in reading comprehension with idioms.

The descriptive statistics of students' vocabulary and reading comprehension tests were shown in Table 4.5. Pearson's correlation was used to test the hypothesis of a linear relationship between students' vocabulary size test score ( $M = 36.78$ ,  $SD = 10.46$ ) and their reading comprehension test score ( $M = 59.79$ ,  $SD = 15.21$ ).

Table 4.5 *Descriptive Statistics of Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension Tests*

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>N</i>
Vocabulary Size	36.78	10.46	107
Reading Comprehension	59.79	15.21	107

**Table 4.6 Pearson Correlations between Vocabulary Size and Reading Comprehension**

		Vocabulary Size	Idiom Comprehension
Vocabulary Size	Pearson Correlation	1	.284**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
Reading Comprehension	Pearson Correlation	.284**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	

*Note.* \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

As shown in Table 4.6, a significant linear relationship was revealed,  $r(105) = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$  ( $p = 0.00$ ). Therefore, we rejected the null hypothesis of no relationship between the two variables and concluded that students' vocabulary size and reading comprehension ability were significantly related. Students who had larger vocabulary size did have a significantly better ability in reading comprehension.

#### 4.2 The Results of Research Question Three

Research Question Three intended to examine if there was a linear relationship between students' idiom proficiency and their ability in reading comprehension with idioms.

Ho: There is no linear relationship between college EFL students' idiom proficiency and their ability in reading comprehension with idioms.

The descriptive statistics of students' idiom proficiency and reading comprehension tests were shown in Table 4.7. Pearson's correlation was used to test the hypothesis of a linear relationship between students' idiom proficiency test score ( $M = 49.77$ ,  $SD = 12.96$ ) and reading comprehension test score ( $M = 59.79$ ,  $SD = 15.21$ ).

**Table 4.7 Descriptive Statistics of Idiom Proficiency and Reading Comprehension**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Idiom Proficiency	47.99	12.96	107
Reading Comprehension	59.79	15.21	107

**Table 4.8 Pearson Correlations between Idiom Proficiency and Reading Comprehension**

		Vocabulary Size	Idiom Comprehension
Idiom Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	.362**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Reading Comprehension	Pearson Correlation	.362**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

*Note.* \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As shown in Table 4.8, a significant linear relationship was revealed,  $r(105) = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$  ( $p = 0.00$ ); therefore, we rejected the null hypothesis of no relationship between the two variables and concluded that students' idiom proficiency and their ability of reading comprehension were significantly related. Students who had better idiom proficiency were able to perform significantly better in their reading comprehension test.

#### 4.6 The Results of Research Question Four

Research Question Four intended to explore learners' attitudes toward general English and idiom learning. The data was collected from students' responses on Part II of the questionnaire. Items 10 to 14 were related to learners' learning experience of idioms, and Items 15 to 18 were related to their attitudes toward English idioms.

The result of Item 11 indicated that the majority was tormented by English idioms since they felt their use of English was not like the locals (59.8%). Likewise, around one-third was bothered by English idioms while they could not understand the dialogues in English movies and TV programs (34.6%), and another one-third by their inability to comprehend foreigners' conversations (33.6%). Nearly one fourth stated that English idioms did annoy them when they could not understand English texts, such as the texts in advertising and the articles in the newspapers (25.2%).

Regarding if there were any difficulties for the participants' understanding English idioms, the result of Item 10 indicated that the majority admitted that difficulties did exist: 42.1% chose 'very difficult' while 40.2% chose the 'somewhat difficult' option. Only 17.7% of the participants did not express any difficulty in understanding idioms. Furthermore, the result of Item 12 explores three major reasons for the EFL students' difficulties in idiom comprehension: (1) there is no connection between the idiom and its literal meaning (37.4%), (2) their lack of background information in idioms (28.0%), and (3) their lack of related vocabulary and phrasal knowledge (26.2%).

Table 4. 9 *Students' Responses to Idiom Learning Experience (N=107)*

Item	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
10. The difficulty for understanding English idioms		
Not at all	19	17.7
Somewhat difficult	43	40.2
Very difficult, because...	45	42.1
11. English idioms bother me when...		
My use of English is not 'local' enough	64	59.8
Cannot understand English texts	27	25.2
Cannot make sense of TV/movie dialogues	37	34.6
Cannot understand foreigner's conversation	36	33.6
12. The reason why you cannot understand idiom because of...		
No connection with its literal meaning	40	37.4
Lack of its background information	30	28.0
Lack of vocabulary and phrasal knowledge	28	26.2
Others	9	8.4
13. Particular study in English idioms		
None	82	76.6
Yes, I...	25	23.4
14. Methods used when encountering unknown idioms...		
Leave them alone	4	3.7
Repeat a couple of times to figure them out	25	23.4
Check with a dictionary	30	28.0
Do the Internet search	20	18.7
Ask native-English speakers	14	13.1
Ask someone whose English is better than me	11	10.3
Others	3	2.8

Also, nine participants provided other reasons, such as S45, S56, and S60 stated they only translated the idiom word by word so they could not figure out their real meanings, S77 and S102 followed only their instincts to deal with unfamiliar words that led to misunderstanding, and S16, S22, S38, and S89 thought idioms were too difficult to

understand when no context was provided.

Regarding if the participants had used any methods to study English idioms in particular, the result of Item 13 revealed that the majority said no (76.6%) while only less than one fourth said yes (23.4%). In terms of the methods or strategies the participants used when they encountered unknown English idioms, the result of Item 14 indicated that they would: (1) check with a dictionary (28.0%), (2) repeat the idioms many times and try to figure them out by themselves (23.4%), (3) do the Internet search (18.7%), and (4) ask English experts (e.g. native speakers) (13.1%). Only four participants said they would leave them alone without asking any help when they encountered unknown idioms. It should be noted that three participants provided another method to deal with unfamiliar idioms: S6, S17, and S38 all stated that they would look for context to figure out the meanings.

Table 4.10 *Students' Attitudes toward L2 idioms (N=107)*

Item	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
15. Knowing more idioms can improve L2 proficiency		
Agree	93	86.9
No opinion	12	11.2
Disagree	2	1.9
16. Idiom learning is important for L2 learning		
Agree	94	87.9
No opinion	12	11.2
Disagree	1	.9
17. Idiom teaching should be integrated into course		
Agree, at the beginning level	70	65.4
Agree, at the advanced level	22	20.6
No opinion	12	11.2
Disagree	3	2.8
18. Enhancing English idiom knowledge for you is...		
Much needed	22	20.6
Somewhat needed	76	71.0
No opinion	9	8.4
Not needed	-	-

Regarding students' attitudes toward idioms, the result of Item 15 indicated that most of them (86.9%) agreed that acquiring more English idioms can improve their proficiency, while only 1.9% disagreed. Likewise, the majority (87.9%) believed that idiom learning is important for their target language learning. When the participants were asked if idiom teaching should be integrated into general school English courses, the majority agreed (86.0%) while only 2.8% disagreed. Among those advocates, nearly two-thirds stated that it should be taught at the beginning level (65.4%) while one fifth thought it should be taught at the advanced level (20.6%).

Finally, the result of Item 18 showed that the majority believed that enhancing English idiom knowledge for them is needed (91.6%). Surprisingly, none of the participants stated "not needed" in this item.

## V. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the experiences of two former research projects supported and granted by the National Science Council, the researcher found that Taiwanese college students

sometimes were frustrated with the figurative expressions of English. Even those students who are English majors or with an intermediate level of general English language proficiency still encounters difficulties to figure out or misinterpret the meanings from the contents they read or listen to. Mastering these multiword units or ‘language chunks’ is not easy for EFL learners since the meanings of these texts cannot be determined through an analysis of their individual word meanings. However, a high frequency of figurative language is a feature for native speakers in their daily communication and in mass media. Thus, having such language knowledge is vital for EFL learners to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Moreover, Chen (2010) mentions that in this era of *Global English* Taiwanese students should accumulate enough English vocabulary, enhance their English competence on the go, and use English continually in order to face the challenge of globalization and internationalism. The core of learning English is how to *use* it appropriately instead of perfect grammar—as the ultimate goal of L2 language learning is cross-cultural communication. However, EFL learners are not considered competent speakers of English until they master the various idiomatic expressions.

### 5.1 Summary of the Results and Findings

The findings revealed that EFL learners who had a larger vocabulary received significantly higher scores in their idiom proficiency test, and a positive relationship between learners’ vocabulary size and their idiom proficiency was shown—it reached a statistical significance. Likewise, learners who had a larger vocabulary also received significantly higher scores in their reading comprehension tests, and the result proved that there was a positive significant linear relationship between students’ vocabulary size and their reading comprehension of idioms as well. Similarly, regarding EFL learners’ idiom proficiency and their reading comprehension, the results showed that learners who had better idiom proficiency received higher scores in their reading comprehension tests. Moreover, a significant linear relationship was also revealed, showing that learners’ idiom proficiency and their reading comprehension were strongly related.

Regarding learners’ attitudes, the majority presented a positive attitude toward idiom learning and also valued its necessity. The results indicated that most of them agreed that acquiring more idioms can improve their English proficiency; likewise, the majority believed that idiom learning is important for target language learning, and 91.6% believed that their English idiom knowledge should be enhanced. Among the advocates who stood for integrating idiom teaching into school EFL courses, 65.4% argued that idioms should be taught at the beginning level while 20.6% claimed it would be better to wait until the advanced level.

From learners’ self-report regarding their best and worst English skills, the results indicated that their receptive skills (listening and reading) were better than their productive skills (speaking and writing). However, 82.3% admitted that idioms were difficult for them. Three reasons were identified that learners were tormented by L2 idioms due to their non-local-like English expressions, misunderstanding those dialogues in movies/TV programs, and the texts in advertising and newspapers. Furthermore, regarding comprehension difficulty in idioms, three major reasons were reported: no connection with its literal meaning, lack of its background information, and lack of certain phrasal knowledge. Besides, four learners mentioned that idioms were hard to understand if no context was provided. In terms of the methods or strategies the learners used when they encountered unknown English idioms, four methods were presented: look them up in dictionaries, figure it out by oneself, do an Internet search, and ask English experts (e.g. native speakers). Finally, EFL learners’ learning motivation and difficulty in reading and listening skills were also concerned: most of their motivation came from the belief that

improving English ability is helpful for their future employment development; namely, the person with better competence in English is more competitive in their career development. In addition, their desires to go abroad and make friends with foreigners also motivated them to learn English; that is, good conversation skills are definitely a plus.

## 5.2 Conclusion

The researcher expected that the results and findings of this study shed light on L2 idiom familiarity and comprehension in general. The findings of this study bear some pedagogical implications for EFL teaching. According to the language experience hypothesis proposed by Nippold and Haq (1996), language speakers' meaningful exposure to idiomatic expressions and figurative language will enable them to deal more competently with the mentioned language items. This hypothesis predicts that the more familiar the subjects are with given idioms, the better they will be at interpreting them. Based on the research findings, the researcher also believes that the bridge between L2 and L1 cultures which greatly affects the cognitive and conceptual system as well as misunderstandings of the context and the idiom's literal meaning. During L2 instruction, instead of treating all the idioms in the same way, differential attention therefore should be paid to different types of idioms. For instance, for those L2 idioms which have L1 equivalents (e.g., ET and PT idioms), due to their easy comprehension, teachers can focus on the productive use of these them. On the other hand, for those idioms which cannot be translated directly into the learner's L1 (e.g., NET and FF idioms), as Zuo (2008) suggests, comprehension however should be privileged over production in classroom instruction.

In addition, idioms taught in isolation are generally not retained and the full meaning of words can only come from encountering them in a rich linguistic environment; therefore, it is advisable to create a sense of need for idioms by presenting idioms in a natural linguistic context in which learners need to use the idioms they have learned to achieve a certain communicative purpose. Nevertheless, since many idioms are culture-dependent and even culture-specific, they can only be fully integrated into a learner's natural speech patterns after extensive exposure to the type of English which native speakers use within their culture. In order to recognize idioms and understand the context in which they are used, learners should be exposed to real-life language in which idioms are freely incorporated and can be studied in context. Therefore, the researcher expects this study to bring up the idea that both cultural literacy and idiomatic language should be integrated into L2 classrooms. According to the findings of the current study, the following pedagogical implications might be helpful to the improvement of idiom teaching in EFL situations:

1. In the EFL classroom, teachers should encourage students to guess the meaning of idioms during reading but direct teaching of idioms and explicit idiom learning (such as learning the meaning of an idiom from a dictionary) should go along with such encouragement.
2. It is advisable that teachers try to offer more opportunities and exercises in class where students can be exposed to idioms contextualized in authentic language to generate natural, meaningful discourse using those idioms—a wide range of activities and exercises will ensure that students hear, read, and use the idioms in interesting and engaging ways.
3. To avoid learners' failure in tackling idioms whose images do not often exist in learners' every life, EFL teachers should encourage students to analyze the semantics of the idioms as a problem-solving task.
4. EFL teachers should pay attention to the conceptual metaphor aspect of idiom learning. Since many conceptual metaphors can be found in authentic materials in

English (magazines, best selling stories and novels, TV news, movies, talk shows, and so on), students' schemata can be enriched by experiencing real things in their daily life. Therefore, they are able to relate background information presented in the idiom with the information stored in their long-term memory, activate and use that knowledge to interpret it, and reconsider and revise hypotheses about the idioms' meanings.

Finally, more research needed to assess the best method to use when teaching idioms in the L2 classroom. Use of authentic materials will prove that idioms are employed quite often in certain genres, and knowledge of them by progressing learners will increase learners' understanding of these materials. Also, if knowing idioms and using them appropriately truly forms a part of communicative competence, then L2 teachers would do well to introduce them more regularly and systematically to their students in a positive motivational way. In this way, as the researcher believes, not only can Taiwanese students overcome their English learning difficulties, but teachers can also help them to enhance their English language proficiency in an effective and successful way.

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