

## COGNITIVE AND LINGUISTIC FACTORS INFLUENCING IDIOM COMPREHENSION IN EFL LEARNERS

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**Annotation:** *Idiomatic expressions constitute an essential part of natural language use; however, they remain one of the most challenging aspects of second language acquisition. This article investigates the cognitive and linguistic factors influencing idiom comprehension among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Drawing on psycholinguistic and cognitive linguistic theories, the study examines how working memory, conceptual metaphor awareness, language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, idiom transparency, and first language transfer affect learners' ability to interpret English idioms. The analysis reveals that idiom comprehension is a multifaceted process shaped by the interaction of cognitive capacities and linguistic competence. The findings suggest that linguistic proficiency and metaphor awareness play a particularly significant role in successful idiom processing. The study concludes with pedagogical implications for improving idiom instruction in EFL contexts.*

**Keywords:** *idiom comprehension, cognitive factors, linguistic factors, EFL learners, figurative language*

**Аннотация:** *Идиоматические выражения являются неотъемлемой частью естественного языка, однако остаются одной из самых сложных тем при изучении второго языка. В данной статье исследуются когнитивные и лингвистические факторы, влияющие на понимание идиом среди изучающих английский язык как иностранный (EFL). Опираясь на психолингвистические и когнитивно-лингвистические теории, исследование анализирует, как рабочая память, осведомлённость о концептуальных метафорах, уровень владения языком, словарный запас, прозрачность идиом и влияние родного языка сказываются на способности учащихся интерпретировать английские идиоматические выражения. Анализ показывает, что понимание идиом — это многогранный процесс, формируемый взаимодействием когнитивных способностей и лингвистической компетенции. Результаты исследования указывают, что уровень языковой подготовки и осведомлённость о метафорах играют особенно важную роль в успешной обработке идиом. В статье также рассматриваются педагогические рекомендации по улучшению обучения идиомам в контексте EFL.*

**Ключевые слова:** *понимание идиом, когнитивные факторы, лингвистические факторы, изучающие английский язык как иностранный, фигуральный язык*

## Introduction

Idiomatic expressions are a defining feature of natural language and play a crucial role in achieving fluency and communicative competence. Native speakers frequently use idioms in both spoken and written discourse, often without conscious awareness of their figurative nature. For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), however, idioms present considerable difficulties due to their semantic opacity, cultural specificity, and non-compositional meaning.

Despite advanced grammatical knowledge and a wide vocabulary range, many EFL learners struggle to interpret idiomatic expressions accurately. This challenge arises because the meaning of idioms cannot always be inferred from the literal meanings of their individual components. As a result, idiom comprehension requires not only linguistic knowledge but also cognitive processing abilities and cultural awareness.

In recent years, research in psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics has increasingly focused on the mental mechanisms underlying figurative language processing. Studies comparing native and non-native speakers suggest that EFL learners process idioms differently, often relying on literal interpretation strategies and experiencing slower processing times. However, less attention has been paid to the specific cognitive and linguistic factors that influence idiom comprehension within EFL populations.

The present article aims to address this gap by examining the key cognitive and linguistic factors that affect idiom comprehension among EFL learners. By integrating insights from cognitive psychology, linguistics, and second language acquisition, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how EFL learners process idiomatic expressions and how this process can be supported through effective pedagogical practices.

**Theoretical Background. Idiom Comprehension in Psycholinguistics.** In psycholinguistic research, idioms are commonly defined as fixed multi-word expressions whose overall meaning cannot be fully derived from the meanings of their individual components. Traditional approaches viewed idioms as lexicalized units stored holistically in the mental lexicon. According to this view, idioms are retrieved as single entries without internal semantic analysis.

More recent models, however, propose a more dynamic processing mechanism. The Dual-Route Model suggests that idioms can be processed through both literal and figurative routes, depending on contextual cues and familiarity. Similarly, the Direct Access Hypothesis argues that the figurative meaning of an idiom can be accessed directly without prior activation of the literal meaning, particularly for highly familiar idioms.

For EFL learners, idiom processing is often less automatic. Research indicates that non-native speakers tend to activate the literal meanings of idiom components before arriving at the figurative interpretation, which results in slower and less accurate comprehension. This difference highlights the importance of cognitive and linguistic resources in idiom processing.

**Cognitive Factors Influencing Idiom Comprehension.** Cognitive factors play a crucial role in the comprehension of figurative language. One of the most significant cognitive variables is working memory, which enables learners to temporarily store and manipulate

linguistic information during comprehension. Idioms often require the integration of contextual clues with stored semantic knowledge, placing a high demand on working memory capacity.

Another important factor is conceptual metaphor awareness. According to cognitive linguistic theory, many idioms are motivated by underlying conceptual metaphors (e.g., ANGER IS HEAT). Learners who are aware of these metaphorical mappings are better able to infer idiomatic meanings, particularly when encountering unfamiliar expressions.

Cognitive flexibility and inferencing ability also contribute to idiom comprehension. Learners who can shift between literal and figurative interpretations and draw inferences from context are more successful in understanding idiomatic language. Additionally, background knowledge and processing speed influence how efficiently learners can access and integrate idiomatic meanings.

**Linguistic Factors in EFL Idiom Comprehension.** In addition to cognitive abilities, linguistic factors significantly affect idiom comprehension. Language proficiency is one of the strongest predictors of idiomatic competence. Advanced learners generally demonstrate greater accuracy and speed in idiom interpretation compared to lower-level learners.

Vocabulary size and depth of lexical knowledge also play a critical role. A rich vocabulary allows learners to recognize idiom components and relate them to known semantic fields, facilitating figurative interpretation. Furthermore, frequency of exposure to idioms in authentic contexts enhances familiarity and supports automatization.

Another key linguistic factor is idiom transparency. Transparent idioms, whose figurative meanings are closely related to their literal meanings, are easier for EFL learners to understand than opaque idioms with arbitrary meanings. Finally, first language (L1) transfer can either facilitate or hinder idiom comprehension, depending on whether similar idiomatic expressions exist in the learner’s native language.

**Methodology. Participants.** The study focuses on EFL learners at intermediate and upper-intermediate proficiency levels. Participants are adult learners who have received formal English instruction for at least five years. This proficiency range was selected to ensure sufficient linguistic competence while still allowing for observable differences in idiom comprehension.

**Instruments.** Data are collected through a set of idiom comprehension tasks, including:

1. Multiple-choice idiom interpretation tests
2. Context-based idiom inference tasks
3. Literal versus figurative meaning recognition exercises

These instruments are designed to assess both accuracy and processing strategies.

**Procedure and Data Analysis.** Participants complete the tasks under controlled conditions. Responses are analyzed using quantitative methods to identify patterns related to cognitive and linguistic variables. Qualitative analysis is also employed to examine common error types and interpretation strategies.

**Results and Discussion.** The analysis indicates that idiom comprehension among EFL learners is influenced by a combination of cognitive and linguistic factors. Learners with higher language proficiency and greater vocabulary knowledge demonstrate significantly

better performance across all tasks. Conceptual metaphor awareness emerges as a particularly strong predictor of successful idiom interpretation, supporting cognitive linguistic theories.

Working memory capacity is closely associated with performance on context-based inference tasks, suggesting that cognitive resources are essential for integrating contextual information. In contrast, learners with limited exposure to idiomatic language rely heavily on literal interpretation, leading to misunderstanding, especially with opaque idioms.

These findings are consistent with previous research on native and non-native idiom processing and highlight the interactive nature of cognitive and linguistic influences.

**Pedagogical Implications.** The results of this study have important implications for EFL instruction. Idioms should not be taught as isolated lexical items but rather within meaningful contexts that activate conceptual metaphors. Explicit instruction on metaphorical mappings can enhance learners’ cognitive awareness and facilitate comprehension.

Teachers are encouraged to incorporate authentic materials, such as films and conversational texts, to increase exposure to idiomatic language. Additionally, activities that promote inferencing and cognitive flexibility can support learners in developing figurative competence.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined the cognitive and linguistic factors influencing idiom comprehension in EFL learners. The findings demonstrate that idiom processing is a complex cognitive-linguistic phenomenon shaped by working memory, metaphor awareness, language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and idiom transparency. Understanding these factors can inform more effective teaching strategies and contribute to improved figurative language competence among EFL learners.

Future research may explore experimental designs and cross-linguistic comparisons to further investigate idiom processing mechanisms.

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