

# Challenges and Strategies in Understanding English Idioms: English as a Foreign Language Students' Perception

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## ABSTRACT

This research aimed to find out the challenges in understanding English idioms based on the EFL students' perception and the strategies implemented in understanding English idioms. Based on the research question, this research used qualitative approach to find out and explore the more detailed information about the topic. The researcher also used the descriptive qualitative research to investigate the participants' experience. There were eight English Language Education Department students from one Islamic Private University in Yogyakarta chosen as research participants. The researcher used the interview to collect the data as the instrument of this research. In this research, the researcher found four findings related to difficulties in understanding English idioms based on EFL students' perception. The findings are difficulty in understanding the different meaning of expression from meaning of each word; difficulty caused by the scarcity of students found and use the English idioms; difficulty caused by the lack of discussion of idioms in classrooms; and difficulty in distinguish between idioms and ordinary English phrases. While, in the second research question the researcher found four findings about strategies implemented by EFL students' in understanding English idioms: First was understanding English idioms through context; searching the idioms meaning using the internet; connecting the meanings with the Bahasa Indonesia; and asking others about the meaning of idioms. In general finding the difficulties faced by students is the difference in the meaning of idioms with the meaning of each word. This difficulty is also caused by the scarcity of the use of English idioms in students' daily lives and the lack of learning that teaches about English idioms. The strategy used in solving some of these problems is to use several sources close to students, such as interpreting through context, connecting with their L1, asking to others to find answers on the internet.

**Keywords:** *Learning Challenges, Learning Strategies, English Idioms.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A language is a form of culture from where the language originates. In human life, language and culture seem inseparable, especially in the world of linguistic education on how the language is formed from the existing cultures used by the native speakers. According to J. Bennet, M. Bennet and Allen (2003), someone who learns a language without learning the culture of that language risk, becoming fluent fools. One of the cultures of language is idioms, idioms are the construction of words or expressions whose meaning cannot be interpreted literally. Understanding idioms is an essential part of learning and using a language because it is a big part of one's culture. It is crucial for researchers, teachers, and students to understand how EFL learners acquire and use idioms in the process of communicating and improving their proficiency in order to find the most effective way of language learning.

Understanding and using idioms correctly can facilitate the process of communication using the English language.

Belousova (2015) argued that comprehension and the fluent use of idioms could be seen as a symbol of language skills, as it could be an effective way to help students develop their communication skills in the everyday context. McDevitt (1993) said that idioms are often used in common situations. It is known for English native speakers to use idiomatic expressions daily, and it becomes a challenge for non-native speakers to overcome (Thyab, 2016). Ruhl (1989) stated that learners have difficulty in understanding the meaning and structure of new languages. This is an important issue that should be considered before teaching language items for L2 students. This issue is able to illustrate the fact that while learning idioms, L2 students could experience problems that will affect their communication with the native speakers. Such idioms pose a potential issue for both English native speakers and English second language learners (Cooper, 1998).

Non-native speakers find it difficult to understand for several reasons. The study done by Alhaysony (2017) showed that during the process of understanding English idioms, the

students face some difficulties. The first difficulty is the differences between students' proficiency levels. Liantas (2002) stated that L2 students understood the idiomatic meaning literally and then took some figurative explanations. Moreover, students often used strategies to predict the meaning of idioms, guessing the meaning of idioms from the context, and seeking the relationship of an equivalent expression in their native language. Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) found that students' ability to understand idioms was still very poor. The students were not even aware of the frequently used idioms even though they had a desire to learn them. Shahidipour and Tahririan (2018) stated that idioms are very difficult to learn because it is not a part of the learning system and it is not included in the syllabus. In addition, there is a significant difference in the strategy used by both successful and less successful students in learning idioms.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach is used in this research as a research design. Creswell (2012) stated that the qualitative approach investigates and builds an in-depth interpretation of the key phenomenon. This method is used to find a fact or a new theory as a result of the research. The researcher also used descriptive qualitative method to get clearer and specific results. According to Lambert (2012), descriptive qualitative research aims to get detailed information about the topic. Thus, by applying descriptive qualitative method, the researcher could get detail information about the challenges and causes of difficulty faced by EFL students of a private Islamic university in Yogyakarta in understanding English idioms and also the challenges they faced.

The research was conducted at ELED of a private Islamic university in Yogyakarta. This department was chosen as a research setting because English learners in this department frequently used English to communicate. In addition, they also found some kind of idioms on several occasions for example in learning process or in daily life. This department was suitable to be the setting of this study since the researcher had accessibility to conduct the research in this department.

The participants of this research were ELED students batch 2018 of a private Islamic university in Yogyakarta. The researcher chose these students because they had many experiences related to the use of English and they might find or even use idioms on several occasions. The researcher decided to choose eight students to be the participants in this study. In choosing the participants, the researcher had some criteria. First, the participants must know-English idioms. Second, the participants must have experience in finding or even using the idioms. Third, the participants were willing to be interviewed. . In addition, the researcher used pseudonyms as Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune to present the participants' names. This was done to keep the personal information of the participants.

This research used an interview as the data collection technique. Cohen, et al. (2011) stated that the interview is one

of the instruments for the qualitative analysis process. This is a versatile data collection device, and the usage of multi-sensory networks is verbal, non-verbal, and spoken and heard. Also, this research used an open-ended interview structure in which the answers to each question relied on the statements of the participants. According to Cohen, et al. (2011), the features of the open-ended interview structure are the questions that must be decided in advance and posed to the participants in a certain order.

There are several steps done by the researcher in conducting the interview. First, the researcher made an interview guideline containing a few questions regarding the research topic. Second, the researcher determined the participants matching the criteria of the research. Third, the researcher collected the participants' phone number and contacts them personally via WhatsApp. This was done to asked the participants how interview would be conducted, interviews conducted both online and offline. Fourth, the researcher made an appointment with the participants. Online interviews are conducted in the evening through WhatsApp video calls and offline interviews conducted during working hours around the research setting.

To make the atmosphere more enjoy and simplify the participant in answering the questions, then the interview was done by using Indonesian language because both the researcher and participants are native speakers of Indonesian language so that it could help them avoiding misunderstanding during the interview. The average interview is conducted about 15 minutes.

## 3. FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

### *3.1. Finding 1: The difficulties faced by ELED students in understanding English idioms*

In this section, the researcher focuses on the difficulties faced by ELED students in understanding English idioms. All the participants claimed that they found the difficulties in understanding English idioms. From the interview results, the researcher found four challenges faced by ELED students in understanding English idioms. The first finding is because the different meaning of expression from meaning of each word. The second is because the scarcity of students found and use the English idioms. The third is because the lack of discussion of idioms in classrooms. Last, the students found hard to distinguish between idioms and ordinary English sentences. The detail explanation is showed below:

#### *3.1.1. Difficulty in understanding the different meaning of expression from meaning of each word.*

Based on the interview, all participants felt difficult in understanding English idioms because the idioms had different meaning with the translated of each word. For example, "a piece of cake" if interpreted each word could be concluded that the meaning is part of a cake while the original

meaning is something easy. This makes participants found difficulty because the meaning of English idioms was different if interpreted from the constituent word. Mercury, one of the participant said, “The difficulty is more about the meaning because the translation is very different from the meaning”. It was also said by all the participants such as Earth who said, “The difficulty because of the written and the meaning is different”. Mars stated, “I don't understand English idioms because of the meaning, I mean the real meaning and the English idiom have a different meaning. Yupiter argued, “Difficult to understand because if English idioms are interpreted by each word, it is not the true meaning of that sentence”. Another argument was stated by Saturn, “Idioms almost have same meaning with proverbial. So, if it is translated it is not the real meaning but it has another meaning”. This finding corroborates with Saleh and Zakaria (2013) who said that the main challenge in studying an idiom is because it has an interim meaning that cannot be predicted. In another study, Elbushra Mousa (2017) found that students feel difficult to understand English idioms because of the unclear meanings.

Apart from having a different meaning from the translation of each word, the hidden meaning that idioms have also makes it difficult for students to understand English idioms. As said by Saturn, “The difficulties in understanding idioms were because the meaning of the sentence is different from the meaning of each word and it also has a hidden meaning, so it cannot be interpreted by the each word”. This statement was also reinforced by Neptune's statement, “I don't know what that means, because idioms have a different meaning than their original meaning”. This is in line with Pimoneva (2011), the students felt the difficulties because idioms had unclear meanings, and made the students tend to get confused since idioms were used in a specific context.

When finding an idiom, participants interpreted it directly to their first language so that they found it difficult because that meaning was not related and felt strange. The other participants, Venus stated, “It is because we are not a native. So if we translate the English idioms to the Indonesian language the meaning of the word is different”. Another participants Uranus also said, “The meaning of idioms with the real meaning of the structure has an unconnected meaning”.

### *3.1.2. Difficulty caused by the scarcity of students found and use the English idioms.*

Another difficulty that participants encounter was the students rarely found the use of English idioms. Participants said that English idioms were a form of culture from a country, namely English culture. Participants in this research were Indonesian native speaker, so they rarely used English idioms. The first participant, mercury said, “The language is strange because it is rarely used and in fact it seems that we never get a lesson about idioms during school”. The same opinion was also stated by Venus, “English idioms are strange for us while native speakers often used them. Because we

rarely use them and hear them, we do not know their meaning”. Similar point was stated by Yupiter, in which he said that English idioms were rarely used. The last opinion on the difficulty of understanding idioms was raised because the students rarely found the use of English idioms expressed by Neptune. He stated, “Because we are unfamiliar with that language and rarely use English idioms. If we use English idioms often, we can probably become accustomed”

Those statements indicated that English idioms were rarely used by students, so this caused the students feel difficulties in understanding English idioms. The findings were in line with Saleh and Zakaria (2013) and Alhaysony (2017), in which they found that one of the greatest difficulties in understanding idioms is the lack of experience of the students' working with idioms.

### *3.1.3. Difficulty caused by the lack of discussion of idioms in classrooms.*

In addition to following on from the difficulties experienced by students as presented above, students rarely found English idioms because English idioms were never taught specifically to them. In fact, in school lessons they did for 12 years, English idioms were rarely even never been taught in English subjects. The interview revealed that the target language was commonly overlooked in learning in Indonesia. This resulted in the students' lack understanding of English idioms.

From the result of the interview, the researcher found that one of the difficulties students had in understanding English idioms was because English idioms were rarely or never been taught. The third participants Earth stated, “English idioms are never taught in school so it causes difficulties because students are unfamiliar with the term”. The fifth participants, Yupiter, also said, “Only a few idioms are taught and it can even be said that there is never a lesson that actually learns about idioms”.

The findings showed that English idioms were rarely or never been taught. It was supported by Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016), who said that idioms were difficult to understand by the students because they were not found in the syllabi of the courses. Even in Department of English where they learned more about the concentration of English, the participants also did not find any specific lessons in the syllabus on English idioms. In addition, this is also in line with Saleh and Zakaria (2013) who said that the majority of students showed about the feeling in understanding English idioms as a challenge for them because they feel this learning seems neglected or not learned properly in class. According to Alhaysony's (2017), since the English idioms has not been included in the course syllabus, English idioms are problematic.

### *3.1.4. Difficulty in distinguishing between idioms and ordinary English phrases.*

Based on the interview data, the participants felt difficult to understand English idioms because the students found it hard to distinguish between idioms and ordinary English phrases. The findings revealed that there was no specific sign to whether the sentence was an English phrases or a regular phrases. This caused them try to understand English idioms in the same as way as they tried to understand ordinary English phrases. The fourth participants, Mars stated that she felt “difficulty in distinguishing between idioms and ordinary English sentences”. Besides that, the same difficulty was also experienced by Neptune, who stated that he did not know if the sentences were idioms or not. This in line with Pimoneva (2011), one of the difficulties experienced by students was because of unspecified vocabulary and foreign language so they are difficult to distinguish the sentence was an idioms or regular phrase.

## **3.2. Finding 2. The strategies implemented by ELED students in understanding English idioms.**

In this section, the researcher focuses on the strategies implemented by ELED students in understanding English idioms. From the interview results, the researcher found four strategies implemented by ELED students in understanding English idioms. The first is understanding English idioms through context. The second is searching the idioms meaning using the internet. The next is connecting the meanings with the Bahasa Indonesia. The last is asking others about the meaning of idioms. The detail explanation is showed below:

### *3.2.1. Understanding English idioms through context.*

The findings revealed that one of the strategies carried out by students to understand English idioms was through the context. As stated by the participants, context played an important role in understanding English idioms. The first participant, Mercury said, “I look more to the context where the idioms is used by connecting the phrases with the previous phrases”. The third participant, Earth stated that he used strategies such as adjusting the meaning to the context. Another participant, Mars said, “I use context to understand the meaning of the English idiom in that sentence. For example the test is like a piece of cake, then I try to connect this English idioms with the context in which this sentence is used by the speaker. The speaker said that English idioms when I go to the test, so I know that means easy test”. The last participant who used this strategies was Saturn, who said that “Indirectly the meaning can be seen from the sentence, seen from when the idiom used and from the discussion. Although the meaning of the idiom is not yet known, I can guess the purpose of the use of the idioms”.

This finding showed that understanding the English idioms through context was the first method they applied. This method did not require devices or the others help to understand the English idioms. So, this method was considered as the easiest way to understand English idioms independently. The findings are in line with Rohani et al. (2012), who stated that contextual specifically played a role in understanding L2 idioms. This can be known because idioms have a relationship with the sentences before or after, so the students can understand the English idioms through the context of language use. This finding corroborates with Al-khawaldeh (2016) who stated that when used in context, idioms have a relationship with context and the definitions are easier to find out.

### *3.2.2. Searching the idioms meaning using the internet.*

Based on the interview, almost all of the participants searched the idioms meaning using the internet. Therefore, searching the meaning of idioms from the internet was the most frequently used strategy. Other participants, Yupiter, Saturn and Uranus said that they used internet for searching the meaning of English idioms. Saturn specifically mentioned ‘Google’ for searching the meaning of idioms.

The participants implied that internet was used to understand the meaning of English idioms and figure out the deeper meaning of idioms. Earth explained, “I’m looking for more about the meaning of the English idioms by searching on the internet to understand the English idioms”. Earth implied that the way to understand the English idiom was not by searching for the meaning of the English idiom through the online dictionary, but by using the keywords of the idiom which were search for. This method was also applied by Earth who said, “When I want to seek the meaning of idioms I tried to search on the internet by using the keywords to search the meaning of certain idioms. Using google translate was felt strange for me because the translated words were not the meaning of idioms but only changes the language of the phrases”. Venus also said, “When I faced the difficulty in understanding English idioms, I Google and found on the website about the meaning of idioms”.

Based on the important points of the interview about the strategies in understanding idioms, the participants considered that searching the meaning of English idioms through internet was the easiest strategy to do. Moreover, searching the meaning of English idioms using internet was perceived by participants as more valid because internet was resourceful. This strategy was also used as the last choice if the participants could not understand the English idioms using others strategies. This was for example expressed by Neptune, “If I do not find the answer, I will google it because today is the era of advanced technology so everything could be found on Google”.

This finding contradicts with Bellos (2012), who said that Google Translate is an exceptionally well-developed

translation tool that produces acceptable target texts quite frequently due to the enormous amount of data it relies on. In interpreting the English Idioms, Google Translate is less reliable. However, the results of the translation via the internet are still widely used by students to find answers to the meaning being sought. This finding is in line with Hutchins (2006) who stated that use of machine translation is now reaching a much wider audience than before, despite the fact that the quality of the translation is often considered poor compared to human translations.

### 3.2.3. *Connecting the meanings with the Bahasa Indonesia.*

The other strategies implemented by the students in understanding English idioms was connecting the meanings with the Bahasa Indonesia. The first participant Mercury said, "I connect the meaning to the Bahasa Indonesian to understand the meaning of idioms". In addition, Neptune also said, "I connect the English idioms with Bahasa Indonesian because sometimes there are English idioms that look like Indonesian phrases or sentence, so I immediately know what it means". As mentioned that there are several Indonesian phrases that can be found in English idioms such as "one bad apple". The meaning of one bad apple is a bad person who makes other people bad, and in the language there is the term "nila setitik, rusak susu sebelanga" which has the same meaning as one bad apple. These two things have a connection and there is a similar meaning conveyed between the two.

This finding was in line with Violetta (2015) who said that perhaps understanding of English idioms is influenced by the fact that someone who has a good knowledge of idioms in their language can understand English idioms very easily. In addition, this should also be followed by the fact that the English idioms should have something in common with the students's mother tongue. However, this finding contradicts with Alhanosy (2017) who stated that many of the respondents appeared to have trouble in understanding English idioms because their L1 may not have an analogue in English idioms. Connecting the idioms with language becomes a strategy that can be used in understanding English idioms for students who have good knowledge in their L1. The reason for the contradiction maybe due on the differences between the L1 of the participants in the research. In the Alhanosy's study, the first language of participants was Arabic while the first language of the current research was Bahasa Indonesia. So it can be concluded that connecting first language with English idioms can be a strategy if the translation of the English idioms can be understood in the first language.

### 3.2.4. *Asking others about the meaning of idioms.*

The data showed that the students used the strategies by asking others about the meaning of idioms to understand the English idioms. Asking questions here certainly refers to asking both of experts or people who understand the meaning

of the idioms asked. The third participant Earth said, "I've also asked friends or teachers and they explained the meaning". The sixth participants, Saturn stated that he asked a friend who understands better or is an English expert to understand the meaning of English idioms. The seventh participants, Uranus also said, "When I wanted to find the meaning of idioms I asked others". Similarly, Neptune explained that he would find out the meaning of English idioms by asking someone else who used the idioms. This implied that people who use English idioms certainly understand what their meaning means, so asking the person who uses the English idioms can make the students find the answer to the meaning of the idiom used. This finding in line with Cooper (1999), who stated that students have discussions to analyze the meaning of idioms. This strategy is also able to help improve their thinking skills to solve idiomatic expressions. This discussion was conducted by asking someone who knows the meaning of idioms, so the students are able to better understand the meaning of idioms.

In summary, the researcher divided the finding based on the research questions. Based on the first research question, the researcher found four findings related to difficulties in understanding English idioms based on EFL students' perception. The findings are difficulty in understanding the different meaning of expression from meaning of each word; difficulty caused by the scarcity of students found and use the English idioms; difficulty caused by English idioms were scarcity or never been taught; and difficulty in distinguish between idioms and ordinary English phrases. While, in the second research question the researcher found four findings about strategies implemented by EFL students' in understanding English idioms: First was understanding English idioms through context; searching the idioms meaning using the internet; connecting the meanings with the Bahasa Indonesia; and asking others about the meaning of idioms.

In general finding the difficulties faced by students is the difference in the meaning of idioms with the meaning of each word. This difficulty is also caused by the scarcity of the use of English idioms in students' daily lives and the lack of learning that teaches about English idioms. The strategy used in solving some of these problems is to use several sources close to students, such as interpreting through context, connecting with their L1, asking to others to find answers on the internet.

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

### 4.1 *Conclusion*

The aim of this research was to explore the challenges and strategies that students used to understand the idioms. There were two purposes of this study, the first was to explore the challenges in understanding English idioms based on the ELED students' perception. The second is to explore the strategies implemented by the ELED students in

understanding English idioms. The researchers found several findings related to the purposes.

The researcher used the qualitative research approach in conducting this research to get real and better results based on the L2 language learners' experience. To get clearer and specific results, the researcher decided to use the descriptive qualitative method to conduct this research. The participants of this research were eight ELED students. The participants had experiences in understanding English idioms. Moreover, the researchers used interview as data collection technique.

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#### **4.2 Recommendation**

Based on the research findings, the researcher provides some recommendations related to the research. It is expected that this research could serve some benefits and good impacts for some parties. These recommendations are addressed to the students, the teachers, and the future researchers. The detailed explanation of recommendation is presented below:

Based on the result of this research, difficulty and the causes of difficulty that students find in learning English is because of its different meanings with the each word meaning, the lack of English idioms known, studied and used. In anticipation of this, students should explore their knowledge of English idioms more.

Based on this research, students' difficulties are caused because English idioms are rarely taught to students, so students are less familiar with English idioms. Teachers should introduce idioms more often in the learning process so

that students become more familiar with idiomatic expression terms.

This study only focuses on difficulties and strategies in understanding English idioms. The researcher suggests the next researcher to discuss the correlation between causes of difficulty and difficulty faced by students, how effective the use of strategies by searching using the internet because almost all participants use these strategies, or what teachers should do in teaching and introducing English idioms in learning English.

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