E-ISSN: 3031-8629
P-ISSN: 3032-3258

Halaman 253-266
Volume 2 Nomor 3 Tahun 2025

Comparative Analysis of University Students' Understanding of Idiomatic and Literal Meaning

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Abstrak

Pemahaman makna literal dan idiomatik merupakan aspek penting dalam penguasaan bahasa Inggris, khususnya bagi mahasiswa yang mempelajari bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing. Namun, mahasiswa sering mengalami kesulitan memahami ungkapan idiomatik karena maknanya tidak dapat ditafsirkan secara langsung berdasarkan kata-kata penyusunnya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk membandingkan pemahaman mahasiswa terhadap makna literal dan idiomatik serta mengidentifikasi strategi yang digunakan dalam menafsirkan kedua jenis makna tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan melibatkan mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Pendidikan Mandalika. Data dikumpulkan melalui tes tertulis dan wawancara semi-terstruktur, kemudian dianalisis melalui reduksi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa memiliki tingkat pemahaman yang lebih tinggi terhadap makna literal dibandingkan makna idiomatik. Ungkapan literal lebih mudah dipahami karena memiliki makna langsung, sedangkan pemahaman idiomatik dipengaruhi oleh pengetahuan budaya, konteks penggunaan, dan tingkat keakraban terhadap ungkapan tersebut. Mahasiswa menggunakan berbagai strategi, termasuk penerjemahan kata demi kata, penafsiran berdasarkan konteks, pencarian informasi melalui internet, dan interaksi sosial. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pemahaman ungkapan idiomatik membutuhkan kemampuan interpretasi kontekstual dan pengetahuan budaya yang lebih mendalam. Oleh karena itu, pembelajaran bahasa Inggris perlu mengintegrasikan pengajaran makna literal dan idiomatik melalui pendekatan kontekstual untuk meningkatkan kompetensi semantik dan pragmatik mahasiswa.

Kata kunci: makna idiomatik; makna literal; strategi pembelajaran bahasa; pemahaman semantik; kompetensi pragmat

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Abstract

Understanding literal and idiomatic meanings is an essential aspect of English language proficiency, particularly among students learning English as a foreign language. However, students frequently encounter difficulties interpreting idiomatic expressions because their meanings cannot be directly derived from individual words. This study aimed to compare university students' comprehension of literal and idiomatic meanings and identify the strategies they employed to interpret both types of expressions. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, involving students from the English Education Department at Mandalika University of Education. Data were collected through written tests and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings revealed that students demonstrated higher comprehension of literal meanings than idiomatic meanings. Literal expressions were easier to understand because of their direct and relatively stable meanings, whereas idiomatic comprehension was influenced by cultural knowledge, contextual information, and familiarity with expressions. Students employed various strategies, including word-by-word translation, contextual guessing, online searches, and social interaction. The study concluded that understanding idiomatic expressions requires more advanced contextual interpretation and cultural awareness than understanding literal expressions. Therefore, English language instruction should integrate literal and idiomatic expressions through contextualized learning activities to strengthen students' semantic understanding and pragmatic competence.

Keywords: idiomatic meaning; literal meaning; language learning strategies; semantic comprehension; pragmatic competence.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding meaning is a fundamental aspect of English language proficiency, particularly for university students preparing to become English language teachers. Effective communication requires learners not only to recognize the literal meanings of words and sentences but also to interpret expressions whose intended meanings extend beyond their individual lexical components. In this regard, literal meaning generally involves understanding expressions through their conventional vocabulary and grammatical structures, whereas idiomatic meaning requires familiarity with figurative language, cultural conventions, and communicative contexts (Saeed, 2022). Idiomatic expressions such as *break the ice*, *pull strings*, and *spill the beans* may create difficulties for English as a Foreign

Language (EFL) learners because their intended meanings cannot always be determined through word-by-word translation. Ekorini (2022) highlighted that students frequently experience difficulties learning English idioms and require appropriate strategies to understand and use them effectively. Similarly, Griffiths and Cummins (2023) emphasized the importance of contextual information and shared linguistic knowledge in interpreting meanings that extend beyond literal expressions. These perspectives suggest that understanding both literal and idiomatic meanings is essential for developing learners' semantic awareness, pragmatic competence, and ability to communicate appropriately in English.

Previous studies have consistently reported challenges in understanding idiomatic expressions among EFL learners. Alhaysony (2017) found that university students frequently relied on guessing and literal translation when interpreting unfamiliar English idioms, which often resulted in inaccurate comprehension. Similarly, Aydın (2019) demonstrated that learners' understanding of idiomatic expressions was influenced by their language-learning environment, idiom transparency, and the types of instructional support provided. In the Indonesian context, Fathma et al. (2020) stated that university students demonstrated limited familiarity with English idioms, which affected their ability to interpret and use figurative expressions in academic writing. Furthermore, Anjarini and Hatmanto (2021) and Ta'amneh (2021) identified limited cultural knowledge, insufficient exposure to authentic language, and dependence on literal translation as factors associated with difficulties in idiom comprehension.

Despite the growing attention given to idiomatic expressions, an important research gap remains in understanding how university students interpret idiomatic and literal meanings comparatively within the same learning context. Previous investigations have primarily examined difficulties in idiom comprehension, learners' familiarity with figurative expressions, or instructional approaches to improving idiomatic understanding (Alhaysony, 2017; Aydın, 2019; Fathma et al., 2020). However, these studies provide relatively limited insight into how the same learners distinguish between literal and idiomatic expressions and what strategies they employ when interpreting each type of meaning. This issue is particularly relevant to English Education students at Mandalika University of Education.

Classroom observations conducted during the Interpreting course between September and December 2023 indicated that students could generally interpret literal expressions such as *open the door* and *read the book*, but experienced difficulties understanding idiomatic expressions such as *pull strings*, *jump the gun*, and *play with fire*. Some students attempted to translate these expressions word by word, resulting in interpretations that differed from their intended figurative meanings. These observations highlight the need for a comparative investigation that examines not only differences in students' comprehension of literal and idiomatic meanings but also the strategies underlying their interpretations. Oxford (2017) emphasized that language learning strategies, including cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies, play an important role in helping learners process unfamiliar linguistic information and develop meaningful understanding.

To address this research gap, the present study aims to compare university students' comprehension of literal and idiomatic meanings and identify the strategies they employ when interpreting both types of English expressions. Specifically, the study focuses on English Education students at Mandalika University of Education who have completed the Interpreting course. The investigation draws on the distinction between conceptual and associative meaning through Leech's theoretical framework, while employing Oxford's (2017) language learning strategy framework to examine how students approach meaning interpretation. Contemporary discussions of semantics and pragmatics by Saeed (2022) and Griffiths and Cummins (2023) further support the distinction between linguistically encoded meaning and context-dependent interpretation. By examining students' comprehension alongside their strategies, this study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the challenges involved in interpreting literal and idiomatic expressions in an Indonesian EFL university context. The findings are expected to contribute to research on semantic and pragmatic comprehension and offer practical insights for English language educators in developing instructional approaches that integrate vocabulary knowledge, contextual interpretation, cultural awareness, and appropriate language learning strategies.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design with a comparative approach to investigate university students' understanding of literal and idiomatic meanings

in English. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to explore students' interpretations, comprehension difficulties, and language learning strategies in depth. As explained by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research provides an opportunity to understand participants' experiences and perspectives through systematic interpretation of descriptive data. The comparative approach was applied to identify similarities and differences between students' comprehension of literal expressions and their interpretation of idiomatic expressions.

The participants consisted of five students from the English Education Program at Universitas Pendidikan Mandalika who had completed the Interpreting course. They were selected through purposive sampling based on their academic experience and familiarity with interpreting English expressions. The participants were drawn from semesters six to nine, comprising two students from Class A and three students from Class B. Purposive sampling was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to select participants who possessed characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Campbell et al., 2020). The primary object of investigation was students' comprehension of literal and idiomatic meanings and the strategies they employed to interpret these expressions.

Data were collected through written tests and semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face. The written test consisted of ten items, including five literal sentences and five idiomatic expressions. Participants were required to explain the meaning of each expression in their own words. Their responses provided information about comprehension accuracy and patterns of misinterpretation. Subsequently, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the strategies students used when interpreting the expressions. The interview questions were informed by Oxford's (2017) language learning strategy framework and adapted to participants' written responses. Semi-structured interviews were used because they allowed the researcher to explore participants' experiences while maintaining flexibility in asking follow-up questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis framework consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, as described in the

original research methodology. During data reduction, written responses and interview transcripts were examined and classified according to literal understanding, idiomatic understanding, misinterpretation, and interpretation strategies. The reduced data were then organized into tables and descriptive matrices to identify recurring patterns and differences across participants. Finally, conclusions were drawn by comparing students' written interpretations with their interview explanations and reviewing the original data to ensure consistency. This systematic process was supported by the principles of qualitative data analysis described by Miles et al. (2020). The findings were interpreted using the theoretical perspectives of Leech on meaning and Oxford (2017) on language learning strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

Students' Comprehension of Literal and Idiomatic Meanings

The study examined five English Education students at Mandalika University of Education through a written test and semi-structured interviews. The written test consisted of ten expressions, including five literal expressions and five idiomatic expressions. The results revealed that students demonstrated better comprehension of literal expressions than idiomatic expressions.

Table 1. Overall Written Test Results

Meaning Type	Correct Answers	Incorrect Answers	Accuracy
Literal meaning	20	5	80%
Idiomatic meaning	15	10	60%
Total	35	15	70%

As shown in Table 1, students achieved 80% accuracy in interpreting literal expressions, compared with 60% for idiomatic expressions, representing a 20-percentage-point difference. Most literal expressions were interpreted correctly because their meanings could be identified through vocabulary and grammatical structure. The few errors mainly involved pronoun translation, particularly the incorrect interpretation of "they" and "I."

In contrast, idiomatic expressions presented greater difficulty. Students frequently interpreted unfamiliar idioms word by word rather than identifying their conventional figurative meanings. For example, several participants translated "kick the bucket" as physically kicking a bucket instead of understanding it as referring to death. This pattern indicated that students' knowledge of individual English words did not necessarily enable them to interpret idiomatic expressions accurately.

1.2 Differences in Comprehension Across Idiomatic Expressions

Students' comprehension also varied considerably across the five idiomatic expressions. Some expressions were understood by all participants, whereas others were correctly interpreted by only one participant.

Table 2. Students' Comprehension of Individual Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic Expression	Correct (n = 5)	Accuracy
Over the moon	5	100%
A piece of cake	5	100%
Spill the beans	3	60%
Kick the bucket	1	20%
Under the weather	1	20%

The results showed that "over the moon" and "a piece of cake" were the easiest idioms, with all participants providing correct interpretations. Interview responses suggested that these expressions were familiar because students had encountered them through social media, games, films, and everyday conversations. Conversely, "kick the bucket" and "under the weather" had the lowest accuracy, suggesting that unfamiliar expressions were particularly challenging.

These findings highlighted the importance of prior exposure and familiarity in idiomatic comprehension. Students appeared more successful when they recognized an expression from previous experiences, whereas unfamiliar idioms frequently led to literal interpretation.

1.3 Individual Differences in Students' Comprehension

The written test also revealed differences in idiomatic comprehension among participants.

Table 3. Individual Idiomatic Comprehension and Dominant Strategies

Participant	Correct Idioms	Accuracy	Dominant Strategy
Amri	4/5	80%	Translation, context, social interaction
Naufal	3/5	60%	Translation and context
Mey	3/5	60%	Context and translation
Marco	3/5	60%	Translation
Tami	2/5	40%	Translation

Amri obtained the highest idiomatic comprehension score (80%), while Tami obtained the lowest (40%). The remaining three participants achieved 60%. Interview findings suggested that participants who combined translation with contextual interpretation and previous exposure were generally more successful than those who relied heavily on word-by-word translation.

However, these differences should be interpreted descriptively because the study involved only five participants and did not establish a statistically significant relationship between strategy use and comprehension.

1.4 Strategies Used to Understand Literal and Idiomatic Meanings

The semi-structured interviews identified three main categories of learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies.

Cognitive strategies included word-by-word translation and guessing meanings from contextual clues. Four of the five participants using word-by-word translation as an initial approach to unfamiliar idioms. Although this approach was generally sufficient for literal

expressions, it frequently produced inaccurate interpretations of idiomatic language.

Metacognitive strategies involved monitoring and reconsidering initial interpretations. For instance, Naufal checking whether his interpretation was appropriate to the context when encountering idioms. Mey preferred examining the context before attempting literal translation, demonstrating a more flexible approach to interpreting unfamiliar expressions.

Social strategies included asking friends, consulting other speakers, searching online, and learning expressions through digital media. Several participants encountering idioms through social media platforms, games, classroom interactions, and informal conversations.

Overall, the interviews suggested that students used different combinations of strategies depending on their familiarity with an expression. Contextual interpretation and opportunities for meaningful exposure appeared particularly important when direct translation failed.

2. Discussion

2.1 Differences Between Literal and Idiomatic Comprehension

The findings demonstrated that university students understood literal expressions more accurately than idiomatic expressions. The 80% accuracy in literal comprehension suggested that students could generally interpret expressions through their lexical and grammatical components. In contrast, the 60% accuracy in idiomatic comprehension indicated that understanding figurative language required additional knowledge beyond individual word meanings.

This difference can be explained through Leech's (1981) framework of conceptual and associative meaning. Literal expressions primarily involve conceptual meaning, whereas idiomatic expressions often require learners to recognize conventional figurative meanings and their contextual associations. Recent semantic and pragmatic perspectives also emphasize the relationship between encoded meaning, contextual interpretation, and language use (Saeed, 2022; Griffiths & Cummins, 2023).

The findings were consistent with Alhaysony (2017), who experienced difficulties interpreting unfamiliar English idioms and frequently relied on literal translation or guessing. Similarly, Fathma et al. (2020) identified limited familiarity with idiomatic expressions among Indonesian university students. The present study extended these observations by directly comparing literal and idiomatic comprehension within the same participant group, showing that relatively successful literal interpretation did not guarantee accurate idiomatic understanding. Nafisah and Setianingsih (2025) investigated translation techniques used by EFL students at Mandalika University of Education. Their findings revealed that students employed different translation techniques and experienced difficulties in preserving intended meaning when dealing with contextual and cultural differences. These findings are relevant to the present study, in which students demonstrated higher accuracy in understanding literal expressions (80%) than idiomatic expressions (60%)

2.2 The Role of Familiarity, Context, and Cultural Exposure

A major finding was that familiarity appeared to influence students' success in understanding idiomatic expressions. All five participants correctly interpreted "over the moon" and "a piece of cake," whereas only one participant correctly interpreted each of "kick the bucket" and "under the weather." The interview findings suggested that students were more familiar with idioms frequently encountered through social media, games, and informal communication.

This finding was consistent with Aydın (2019), whose research discussed how idiom transparency and learning context influenced second-language idiom comprehension. It also supported Anjarini and Hatmanto (2021) and Ta'amneh (2021), whose studies in relation to contextual knowledge, cultural familiarity, and difficulties with figurative expressions in EFL learning.

Nevertheless, familiarity and semantic transparency should not be treated as identical factors. The present study did not independently measure the effects of either variable. The higher accuracy for familiar idioms therefore suggested an association with previous exposure rather than demonstrating that media exposure directly caused better

comprehension.

2.3 Language Learning Strategies in Idiom Comprehension

The interview findings indicated that students employed cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies when interpreting unfamiliar expressions. Word-by-word translation was the most frequently initial strategy, although it was often unsuccessful for idioms whose figurative meanings differed substantially from their literal components.

These findings were consistent with Oxford's (2017) language learning strategy framework, which emphasizes learners' strategic regulation of language learning. Cognitive strategies supported initial interpretation, metacognitive strategies enabled students to reconsider inappropriate meanings, and social strategies provided opportunities to clarify expressions through interaction.

Participants who combined translation, contextual inference, and consultation with others appeared to demonstrate greater flexibility when interpreting idioms. Amri, for example, achieved the highest idiomatic comprehension score and using several strategies. In contrast, Tami relied primarily on word-by-word translation and obtained the lowest score. In line with Sandiarsa and Firman (2024) discussed strategies, challenges, and opportunities in English language teaching, emphasizing communicative approaches, task-based learning, and the integration of technology into language education. Their discussion provides a pedagogical foundation for teaching idiomatic expressions through meaningful communication rather than isolated word translation

This pattern was also relevant to Alhaysony's (2017) findings concerning the limitations of literal interpretation among EFL learners. However, the present results should not be interpreted as evidence that one strategy was statistically more effective than another. The small participant group and descriptive design only allowed the identification of observed differences in strategy use.

2.4 Pedagogical Implications and Research Limitations

The findings suggested that idiomatic expressions should receive more explicit attention in university EFL instruction. Lecturers could introduce idioms through authentic

conversations, short videos, digital media, and contextualized reading activities. Students could also be encouraged to compare literal and figurative interpretations, identify contextual clues, and evaluate whether their interpretations fit the communicative situation.

Instruction should not depend exclusively on memorizing idiom definitions. Instead, repeated exposure and opportunities to interpret expressions in meaningful situations may help learners develop greater awareness of conventional figurative meanings. These recommendations align with Oxford's (2017) emphasis on strategic learning and with the contextual approach to idiomatic comprehension discussed by Aydın (2019).

The study nevertheless had several limitations. Only five students participated, and the written test contained five literal and five idiomatic expressions. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to a wider EFL population. In addition, the test setting did not fully represent spontaneous communication, and the study did not experimentally examine the effectiveness of particular learning strategies. Future studies could involve larger samples, more varied idiomatic expressions, and instructional interventions to examine how contextual learning influences comprehension.

Overall, the findings indicated that students' ability to interpret literal expressions was stronger than their ability to understand idiomatic language. Idiomatic comprehension appeared to be associated with familiarity, contextual interpretation, and flexible strategy use. These results highlighted the importance of integrating semantic knowledge, figurative language awareness, and authentic language exposure in EFL instruction.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that university students demonstrate a better understanding of literal meaning than idiomatic meaning, with success rates of 80% and 60%, respectively. Literal expressions are generally easier to interpret because their meanings can be understood directly from individual words, whereas idiomatic expressions require contextual understanding, cultural knowledge, and prior familiarity. The findings also reveal that students employ several strategies to interpret meaning, including word-by-word translation, contextual guessing, online searching, and social interaction. However,

relying solely on literal translation often leads to incorrect interpretations of unfamiliar idioms. These findings indicate that students' understanding of idiomatic meaning depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on contextual awareness and exposure to authentic English expressions.

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