

Exploring L2 Idiom Comprehension: A Case of Thai EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study explores idiom comprehension strategies employed by Thai EFL learners when they dealt with English idiomatic expressions. Ten university students whose native language is Thai were asked to verbalize their thoughts in two tasks. Task 1 was a fill-in-the-gap exercise which required the participants to complete 15 English idioms whose constituents included animal vocabulary items and to identify the Thai equivalents. Task 2 consisted of 15 dialogs, and the participants were asked to supply English idioms in the blank, determine their interpersonal functions, and match them with the Thai counterparts. The results show that the most frequently-used strategies in Task 1 and Task 2 were *referring to prior knowledge* and *discussing and analyzing the context* respectively. Moreover, the participants tended to rely on L1 to deal with English idioms as reflected in *translating an idiom literally* and *referring to an L1 idiom*. The results also imply that the participants seemed to use the *referring to the ideational metafunction* strategy in their idiom comprehension as they made use of figurative meanings or connotations; however, they rarely referred to the interpersonal roles of idioms when making meanings. A close observation on the strategies derived from the think-aloud data reveals participants' thought processes which are valuable to the enhancement of idiom teaching in class.

Keywords: idiom comprehension, learners' strategies, L1 transfer, Functional Grammar

การศึกษาการทำความเข้าใจสำนวนภาษาอังกฤษ: กรณีผู้เรียนไทยที่ศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้มุ่งศึกษาการทำความเข้าใจสำนวนภาษาอังกฤษของผู้เรียนไทยที่ศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ ผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัย คือ นักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีจำนวน 10 คน โดยผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยทุกคนจะต้องคิดออกเสียง (Think Aloud) ในระหว่างการเก็บข้อมูลเพื่อการวิจัย แบบทดสอบที่ 1 มีจำนวน 15 ข้อ โดยผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยจะต้องเลือกคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษที่เกี่ยวกับสัตว์เต็มลงในช่องว่าง เพื่อให้สำนวนภาษาอังกฤษนั้นมีความหมายถูกต้อง และจับคู่กับสำนวนภาษาไทยที่มีความหมายเหมือนกัน แบบทดสอบที่ 2 เป็นบทสนทนาจำนวน 15 ข้อ โดยผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยจะต้องเลือกสำนวนภาษาอังกฤษให้เหมาะสมกับบทสนทนาในแต่ละข้อ จากนั้นระบุหน้าที่ของสำนวนในแต่ละบทสนทนา และจับคู่กับสำนวนภาษาไทยที่มีความหมายเหมือนกัน ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่ากลวิธีที่ผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยใช้มากที่สุดในแบบทดสอบที่ 1 และ 2 คือ การอ้างอิงถึงความรู้ที่มีมาก่อน และการวิเคราะห์บริบท ตามลำดับ นอกจากนี้ผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยยังใช้ภาษาไทยในการทำความเข้าใจสำนวนภาษาอังกฤษ ดังปรากฏในกลวิธีการแปลตรงตัว และการอ้างอิงถึงสำนวนไทย ผลการวิจัยยังแสดงให้เห็นว่าผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยอ้างอิงถึงภาษาภาพพจน์และความหมายแฝงเพื่อทำความเข้าใจสำนวนภาษาอังกฤษ ซึ่งปรากฏในกลวิธีการอ้างอิงถึงหน้าที่สื่อความคิดของภาษา (Ideational Metafunction) อย่างไรก็ตามผู้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยอ้างอิงถึงหน้าที่ปฏิสัมพันธ์ของภาษา (Interpersonal Metafunction) อยู่น้อยครั้ง ทั้งนี้ผลการวิจัยอันเกิดจากการรวบรวมข้อมูลโดยการคิดออกเสียง ซึ่งแสดงถึงกลวิธีต่าง ๆ ในการทำความเข้าใจสำนวนภาษาอังกฤษสามารถนำไปประยุกต์ใช้เพื่อการสอนสำนวนภาษาอังกฤษในห้องเรียนได้

คำสำคัญ: การทำความเข้าใจสำนวน กลวิธีของผู้เรียน การถ่ายโอนของภาษาแม่ ไวยากรณ์หน้าที่

Introduction

Idiom comprehension seems to cause some difficulties for non-native speakers of English because their idiomatic meanings are likely to be different from the literal translations of each constituent. *Spill the beans*, for example, does not refer to the action of scattering seeds of climbing plants but of revealing a secret. Even advanced learners of English are likely to find it difficult to recognize that the formulaic expressions they encounter are idioms which might not be interpreted literally. Various studies (Cieślicka, 2006; Cooper, 1999; Irujo, 1986; Na Ranong, 2014) have attempted to find out what strategies English language learners use to comprehend idioms. Cieślicka (2006) asserted that literal meanings were quite dominant in L2 idiom comprehension. Cooper (1999) and Na Ranong (2014) posited that context played a key role in L2 idiom comprehension, and Irujo (1986) stated that a native language was likely to have an influence on L2 idiom comprehension. Although Cieślicka (2006) emphasized the importance of literal meanings in idiom comprehension, some of her examples, such as an apple is precious and grinding an axe is difficult, seemed to reflect the role of figurative meanings as shown in two strategies: *analogy between literal and figurative senses* and *guessing based on literal analysis*. Moreover, contexts in previous studies (Cooper, 1999; Na Ranong, 2014) appeared to be a few sentences rather than dialogs which could reflect how idioms are used in daily communication. Given the gap in the previous research, this present study, thus, aims to further explore whether figurative or literal meanings play more role in idiom comprehension and if context changes to conversation, learners will still depend more on contextual clues or literal meanings to comprehend idioms.

Definition of Idioms

According to Irujo (1986), “an idiom is a conventionalized expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts” (p.288). Her definition seems to conform to the one proposed by Cooper (1999) suggesting that “an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot always be readily derived from its constituent elements” (p.233). The significant features

of idioms are reflected in these definitions. First, an idiom is an expression or a multiword unit, and second, a meaning of an idiom might not be obtained from a word-for-word translation of its constituents. Besides the two features of idioms, Fernando (1996) clearly asserted that idioms are institutionalized; that is, idioms should be well-recognized and widely-accepted within a linguistic community. Some examples of idioms are *to kick the bucket*, *to pull one's leg*, and *to bite the dust* as they are conventionalized multiword units whose meanings cannot be derived literally from their constituents; instead, their meanings are *to die*, *to play a joke*, and *to fail* respectively.

Fernando (1996) reviewed various works on idioms (Cowie et al., 1975; Cowie et al., 1983; Fillmore et al, 1988; Fraser, 1970; Jespersen, 1975; Makkai, 1972; Roberts, 1944; Weinreich, 1969) and argued that scholars tended to categorize idioms based on forms and overlooked the functions of idioms. In other words, the existing categorization of idioms does not take into account the language functions. Fernando (1996) proposed that Halliday's Functional Grammar should be used as a framework to understand how idioms are used in discourse to observe the roles of idioms in different contexts and to categorize them.

Functional Grammar

The basic functions of language are “making sense of our experience and acting out our social relationships” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p.30). Language is used to name and categorize things so that human beings can refer to things around them with different designations. For example, a place to live for human beings can be referred to as *a house*, *a hut*, *a homestead*, *a mansion*, and *an igloo*. Since several types of buildings are available, words are coined so that humans can put their ideas across. Thus, the first function of language is referred to as the ideational metafunction which reflects human experience and allows human beings to express their views differently. Language is also used to show personal and social relationships, referred to as the interpersonal metafunction. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), “we inform or question, give an order or make an offer, and express

our appraisal of and attitude towards whoever we are addressing and what we are talking about” (p.30). To elaborate their argument, take *Good morning* and *You’re telling me* as examples of the interpersonal roles of language. The former can be used to exchange greetings while the latter to show an agreement.

Analyzing the functions of idioms based on the Hallidayan framework of Functional Grammar, Fernando (1996) posited that content words have referential meanings and are used to reflect how speakers or writers see the world; however, when content words are strung together to form a multiword unit whose referential meaning is different from its literal translation and which typically conveys an evaluative message, it is referred to as an ideational idiom. To illustrate her argument, *The pot calls the kettle black* is comprised of four content words: *pot*, *call*, *kettle*, and *black*. *Pot* and *kettle* are two different kitchen utensils, *call* an action, and *black* a color. Combined as a multiword expression, it means “someone who criticises failings in others that he himself possesses” (Flavell & Flavell, 2008, p.197) and carries a rather negative evaluation. An interesting feature of an ideational idiom is that its evaluation tends to change depending on context. For example, *Fine feathers make fine birds* is usually used as a compliment to show great admiration for someone’s attractive appearance because of what he or she wears. In a different context, it could possibly be used as a satirical remark when someone looks better than usual, but he or she fails to impress the speaker. That is, context can determine the interpersonal metafunction of an idiom. Thus, given that language metafunctions play quite an important role in interpreting idiomatic meanings, it is worth investigating if Thai EFL learners refer to these metafunctions to recover idiomatic meanings in addition to common idiom comprehension strategies which are referring to the literal meanings of the idioms, using contextual clues, and referring to L1 idioms.

In fact, the framework of Halliday’s Functional Grammar seems to be appropriate for investigating the roles of figurative versus literal meanings in idiom comprehension and for elucidating how learners make use of contexts or literal meanings to understand idioms since it points out two major

functions of language: the ideational metafunction and the interpersonal metafunction. The former shows how humans construe their experience by assigning literal and figurative meanings to things around them. For example, the word *fox* refers to a four-legged animal of the dog family, or it may be used to convey cunning or trickery. The latter function of language highlights how humans use language to interact with each other for communication, such as giving a warning and expressing sympathy. The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What are the strategies Thai EFL learners incorporate into their comprehension of English idioms?
2. Do Thai EFL learners employ a literal meaning of an English idiomatic expression in their idiom comprehension?
3. Do Thai EFL learners employ the ideational metafunction and the interpersonal metafunction in their idiom comprehension?

Previous Works on L2 Idiom Comprehension Strategies

Since a meaning of an idiomatic expression is not usually derived from a word-for-word translation, previous studies (Cieślicka, 2006; Cooper, 1999; Irujo, 1986; Na Ranong, 2014) have looked into a variety of strategies adopted by non-native speakers of English to comprehend English idioms. The overall results tended to point out to the same direction that non-native speakers of English seemed to use a combination of strategies – referring to L1 transfer and using contextual clues and literal meanings of the constituents in the idiom string to recover the meaning. However, the results are still conflicting: on the one hand, many studies argued that learners depended more on contextual clues (Cooper, 1999; Na Ranong, 2014) while others found that literal meanings and L1 transfer were the most common strategies (Cieślicka, 2006; Irujo, 1986).

Irujo (1986) investigated whether 12 advanced Venezuelan learners of English would use their L1 to comprehend and produce English idiomatic expressions. She categorized 45 idiomatic expressions into three types: identical, similar, and different, and the results showed that the participants

were comfortable with the comprehension and production of the English idioms which were identical to the Spanish ones. They tended to comprehend the similar English idioms better than the different ones; however, when they dealt with the production of both similar and different idioms, they found it difficult. Evidence of L1 transfer was reported in her study. For instance, when the participants were asked to supply an English equivalent to *costó un ojo de la cara* (whose direct translation was *it cost an eye of the face*), they tended to refer to the Spanish expression *estaba por las nubes* (meaning that something cost a lot). Then they translated the latter Spanish idiom directly, so their answer was *it was by the clouds* which was an incorrect response.

Cooper (1999) examined the comprehension of English idioms in written context. Eighteen non-native speakers of English participated in this study, and they were asked to orally give the meanings of 20 English idioms through the think aloud protocols. Unlike those in the study of Irujo (1986), the idioms were chosen from A Dictionary of American Idioms and were divided into three groups: standard English, informal or colloquial, and slang expressions. The study revealed that the most frequently-used strategy to comprehend the English idioms was *guessing from context* while *referring to an L1 idiom*, which reflected L1 transfer, was ranked in the bottom two as it was adopted 5% by the participants. The results of the study seemed to be predictable because the idioms used as the test items were embedded in context. Providing no contexts would have significantly impacted the findings.

Cieślicka (2006) studied how 36 advanced Polish learners of English tackled English idioms in two tasks. The comprehension task was composed of 21 test items, asking the participants to give the meanings of the idioms, write down their thought processes, and supply Polish equivalents. The production task consisted of 21 test items embedded in context, and the participants were asked to fill in the gap with a word to complete the idiomatic expressions and to provide the English equivalents to the Polish idioms. The results indicated that Polish as a native language seemed to have an influence on the participants' idiom comprehension since the participants employed the *reference to or association with idiom in Polish* strategy 16% when they

coped with lexical-level idioms (identical idioms), 20% with semi-lexical level idioms (similar idioms), and 4% with post-lexical level idioms (different idioms). Moreover, the results showed that the participants seemed to rely on literal translations of the constituents to ascertain the overall meanings of idioms, irrespective of the idiom type. Asking the participants to express their thought processes in writing seemed to be quite similar to the think aloud protocols; nevertheless, whether the participants wrote down everything about which they were thinking was questionable.

Na Ranong (2014) explored how 60 Thai university students processed 50 English idioms which were divided into two types: non-core idioms and core idioms. The results revealed that the highly-proficient group seemed to depend heavily on contextual clues, showing that they seemed to have idiomatic competence, while the low-proficient groups usually made use of literal translations. Thus, language proficiency seemed to affect the participants on how they tackled English idiomatic expressions.

To summarize, previous works on L2 idiom comprehension have yielded conflicting results due to different research designs and methods. The test items in Cooper's (1999) and Na Ranong's (2014) studies were embedded in context, and the results from the think-aloud data revealed that contextual clues were adopted the most. Irujo (1986) also observed the idioms presented in context, but she made no observation on thought processes. She, then, relied heavily on the final responses the participants wrote on the questionnaire, and what she discovered was mainly evidence of L1 transfer. Cieślicka (2006), on the other hand, provided her participants with no context in the comprehension task, and she argued that the participants usually referred to the literal meanings of the idioms which finally led to figurative meanings or mental images to deal with L2 idioms. To obtain a thorough understanding of how non-native speakers of English tackle English idioms, this present study scrutinizes L2 idiom comprehension in two circumstances: the test items without context in Task 1 and the test items embedded in context in Task 2. Apart from L1 transfer, contextual clues, and literal meanings as reported in previous studies, the participants might refer to the ideational

metafunction (figurative and connotative meanings) or the interpersonal metafunction to understand English idioms.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 20 Thai university students, majoring in English or an international program, in their third or fourth year at a reputable university in Thailand. All of them were asked to do a 30-minute English proficiency test developed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. Then they were divided into three groups – advanced (55-60 points), upper-intermediate (41-50 points), and intermediate (31-40 points). According to the placement test scores, seven participants were in the advanced group, ten in the upper-intermediate group, and three in the intermediate group. Five participants from the advanced group and five from the upper-intermediate group were randomly selected for the data collection: the think-aloud protocols. Three of the selected participants were male, and seven were female. Eight of them were fourth year students in an international program while two were third year students majoring in English.

Research design

The participants were asked to complete two tasks in this research. Task 1 consisting of 15 test items was a fill-in-the-blank exercise which required the participants to select animal vocabulary items from the list provided to complete English idioms and to match the English idioms with the Thai equivalents. Task 2 required the participants to choose English idioms from the list provided to be suitable for 15 dialogs, to identify the functions of the English idioms, and to match the English idioms with the Thai counterparts. All of the idioms in this present study were proverbs or ideational idioms according to Fernando (1996). Thirty animal-related idioms were selected from (1) *Dictionary of Proverbs and Their Origins* written by Linda and Roger Flavell, (2) *English Proverbs with Thai Equivalentents* and (3)

Thai Idioms and Proverbs Relating to Animals. The two Thai books are written by Assoc. Prof. Rachanee Sosothikul and are recommended for school libraries in Thailand for the year 1999 and 2000 respectively by the Office of the National Primary Education Commission, and they provide useful explanations of English idioms with Thai equivalents.

Data collection

Think-aloud protocols were incorporated into this study to collect immediate responses from the participants. Using the think-aloud technique to explore the thought process of non-native speakers of English in idiom processing, Cooper (1999) asserted that think-aloud data are beneficial and “provide evidence of what is on the subject’s mind during the task, thereby allowing the researcher to zero in on the mental efforts involved at the very moment an NNS [a non-native speaker] encounters a potentially problematic idiom” (p.241). The think-aloud data were audio-recorded and then classified into idiom comprehension strategies, namely *discussing and analyzing the context, referring to an L1 idiom, referring to an L2 idiom, referring to English grammar, referring to prior knowledge, referring to the ideational metafunction, referring to the interpersonal metafunction, using a constituent as a keyword, using the meaning of the L1 idiom, using the meaning of the L2 idiom, and translating an idiom literally*.

The data collection period was around four months (October 2014-February 2015), and the think-aloud data collection took approximately 1.5-2 hours for each participant, producing around 27500-word transcriptions. The participants were explained about the tasks in detail; for example, how many items there were in each task and what they were expected to do during the data collection. All of the participants were introduced to the think-aloud protocols, and a short demonstration was given to show how the think-aloud tasks should be performed. During the data collection period, the participants were encouraged to give further explanations on their answers. To illustrate, in the gap-filling task, a participant answered *dog* in *Barking _____ seldom bites* without giving any supporting idea. Then he or she would be

asked to elaborate further with the question like “What makes you think that *dog* is the best answer?” On the occasion that a participant said nothing or remained silent during the data collection, he or she would be stimulated to verbalize his or her thoughts with the questions like “What’s in your mind right now?” and “What are you thinking about?”

Data analysis

The think-aloud data were transcribed verbatim. Then they were categorized into idiom comprehension strategies which were adapted from those in Cooper’s (1999), Cieślicka’s (2006), and Na Ranong’s (2014) works with further modifications to reflect participants’ thought processes in this research. The participants often employed more than one strategy to tackle one idiom; therefore, the results were presented in terms of frequency of use. Table 1 shows the idiom comprehension strategies employed in this present study.

Table 1: Examples of Idiom Comprehension Strategies Used in Task 1 and Task 2

Strategy	Example
Discussing and analyzing the context	เพราะว่า B เขาพูดว่า คุณทำถูกแล้ว แม้ว่ามันจะเป็นบริษัทเล็ก แต่คือเพื่อนเขาก็ได้เป็น Engineering Director เลย ตำแหน่งใหญ่ (Because B says that you do the right thing. Although it is a small company, his friend is taking on Engineering Director, a senior role.)
Referring to an L1 idiom	เหมือนแบบ คบบัณฑิต บัณฑิตพาไปหาผล อะไรอย่างนี้ (It is like [a Thai equivalent which is] <i>If you associate with a scholar, he will lead you to success.</i> Something like this.)
Referring to an L2 idiom	เคยได้ยิน <i>Where there's a will, there's a way</i> แต่คิดว่ามันไม่น่าใช่ (I have heard that <i>Where there's a will, there's a way</i> , but I don't think it's right.)
Referring to English	<i>butterfly</i> เพราะเป็น singular

grammar	([The answer is] <i>butterfly</i> because it is a singular noun.) ก็น่าจะเป็นสัตว์เอาไว้เลี้ยงในฟาร์ม ไม่เป็น <i>horse</i> ก็น่าจะเป็น หมู มั่น ไม่มีวัว
Referring to prior knowledge	(It has to be an animal which is fed on a farm. It might be <i>horse</i> or <i>pig</i> because there is no <i>cow</i> [on the list provided].)
Referring to the ideational metafunction	น่าจะเป็นสัตว์อะไรสักอย่างที่มีอำนาจ ไม่ <i>tiger</i> ก็ <i>leopard</i> น่าจะเป็น <i>leopard</i> นะครับ (It has to be an animal with power. <i>Tiger</i> or <i>leopard</i> . It might be <i>leopard</i> .)
Referring to the interpersonal metafunction	ถ้าเป็นภาษาไทยนะ warning แต่ถ้าเกิดเป็นภาษาอังกฤษมันน่าจะเป็น ทั้ง warning ทั้ง affirmative (The [function of the] Thai idiom is a warning, but [that of] the English equivalent can be both a warning and an affirmative.)
Using a constituent as a keyword	คำว่า ละเลิง show happiness คือหนูจะ happy ซึ่งตรงกับ <i>will play</i> (The word <i>play</i> [in the Thai idiom] shows happiness, and mice will be happy which relates to <i>will play</i> [in the English equivalent].)
Using the meaning of the L1 idiom	ดูที่ภาษาไทยมากกว่า เวลาเราพูด แกะดำ ก็จะความหมายว่าทำไมแก เป็นอย่างนี้อยู่คนเดียว (I look at the Thai idiom. When we say <i>black sheep</i> , it means why it is only you who is different.)
Using the meaning of the L2 idiom	ก็น่าจะเหมือนเราที่แบบว่า สักวันมันต้องเป็นวันของเรานั้นแหละ (It [which is <i>Every dog has his day</i>] is like one day it will be our day.)
Translating an idiom literally	<i>One beats the bush, and another catches the birds</i> ความหมายตรงตัวก็คือ เวลาไปจับนก ไปสองคน แต่ว่าคนหนึ่งทำหน้าที่ ตีพุ่มไม้ แล้วคนหนึ่งก็รับนกไป (<i>One beats the bush, and another catches the birds</i> has a direct meaning. Two are after the bird. While one beats the bush, the other catches the bird.)

Results and Discussions

Frequencies of the employment of idiom comprehension strategies were counted and presented in Table 2 and Table 3. The numbers in the tables indicate how often the participants referred to such strategy; for example, in Table 2, Participant 1 were marked 3 under the *translating an idiom literally* strategy, meaning that he referred to the literal meanings of the idioms three times during the data collection in Task 1. Table 2 shows that in Task 1, *referring to prior knowledge* (31.72%) was the most frequently-used strategy, and the participants seemed to make no use of *discussing and analyzing the context*, *referring to the interpersonal metafunction*, and *referring to an L2 idiom*. That the idioms in Task 1 were presented without dialogs might account for the participants not incorporating context and the interpersonal metafunction into their idiom comprehension. Table 3 shows that the most-frequently used strategy in Task 2 was *discussing and analyzing the context* (54.57%).

Table 2: Frequency of Strategies Used by Participants in Task 1

Participant	Strategy										
	Discussing and analyzing the context	Referring to an L1 idiom	Referring to an L2 idiom	Referring to English grammar	Referring to prior knowledge	Referring to the ideational metafunction	Referring to the interpersonal metafunction	Using a constituent as a keyword	Using the meaning of the L1 idiom	Using the meaning of the L2 idiom	Translating an idiom literally
Participant 1	0	3	0	1	7	8	0	5	1	3	3
Participant 2	0	1	0	2	11	12	0	2	2	1	4
Participant 3	0	0	0	1	8	6	0	1	1	0	8
Participant 4	0	0	0	3	7	7	0	2	2	0	1
Participant 5	0	1	0	1	8	7	0	6	1	0	6
Participant 6	0	0	0	0	12	6	0	1	3	2	1
Participant 7	0	1	0	4	10	7	0	2	1	0	6
Participant 8	0	2	0	0	7	3	0	0	0	0	6

Participant 9	0	0	0	4	5	4	0	1	0	1	11
Participant 10	0	0	0	5	17	5	0	4	1	2	13
Total	0	8	0	21	92	65	0	24	12	9	59
Percentage of all uses	n/a	2.76%	n/a	7.24%	31.72%	22.41%	n/a	8.28%	4.14%	3.10%	20.34%

Remark: Evidence of discussing and analyzing the context, referring to the interpersonal metafunction, and referring to an L2 idiom was not reported in Task 1.

Table 3: Frequency of Strategies Used by Participants in Task 2

Participant	Strategy										
	Discussing and analyzing the context	Referring to an L1 idiom	Referring to an L2 idiom	Referring to English grammar	Referring to prior knowledge	Referring to the ideational metafunction	Referring to the interpersonal metafunction	Using a constituent as a keyword	Using the meaning of the L1 idiom	Using the meaning of the L2 idiom	Translating an idiom literally
Participant 1	22	1	0	0	2	2	2	3	6	2	10
Participant 2	14	1	0	4	2	5	2	2	8	1	7
Participant 3	24	0	0	0	1	2	0	3	2	1	4
Participant 4	29	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	4	4	7
Participant 5	17	0	1	0	1	3	0	3	1	0	13
Participant 6	20	1	0	0	2	1	1	0	3	4	3
Participant 7	32	1	1	0	4	0	0	4	5	0	7
Participant 8	25	1	0	0	1	0	0	5	2	1	3
Participant 9	37	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	10
Participant 10	31	1	0	0	7	4	0	2	6	1	13
Total	251	6	2	4	21	17	5	25	37	15	77
Percentage of all uses	54.57%	1.30%	0.43%	0.87%	4.57%	3.70%	1.09%	5.43%	8.04%	3.26%	16.74%

Research Question 1: What are the strategies Thai EFL learners incorporate into their comprehension of English idioms?

The think-aloud data reveal that the participants usually employed a combination of idiom comprehension strategies to tackle an English idiom. The top three strategies in Task 1, according to frequency of use, were *referring to prior knowledge* (31.72%), *referring to the ideational metafunction* (22.41%), and *translating an idiom literally* (20.34%) while those in Task 2 were *discussing and analyzing the context* (54.57%), *translating an idiom literally* (16.74%), and *using the meaning of the L1 idiom* (8.04%). This section focuses on *referring to prior knowledge*, *discussing and analyzing the context*, and *using the meaning of the L1 idiom*; meanwhile, *translating an idiom literally* showing the employment of literal meanings will be discussed in Research Question 2 and *referring to the ideational metafunction* in Research Question 3.

Referring to Prior Knowledge (Frequency of Use: 31.72% in Task 1 and 4.57% in Task 2)

In this research *referring to prior knowledge* refers to background knowledge or previous experience the participants have and make use of in order to comprehend idioms. It was reported to be the most frequently-used strategy in Task 1, but it was ranked number 5 in Task 2. Below are examples of how previous experience led to correct responses.

Stimulus Situation: A _____ has nine lives.

Participant 1: ตั้งแต่เด็กทราบมาอยู่แล้วว่าแมวมีเก้าชีวิต เป็น cultural background (Since I was young, I have heard that *A cat has nine lives*. It is a cultural background.)

Participant 2: เพราะว่าเคยได้ยินประโยคว่าแมวเก้าชีวิต คิดว่าต่างประเทศเขาน่าจะคิดว่าแมวเก้าชีวิตเหมือนกัน แมวเก้าชีวิต เหมือนมีถ่านชื่อ แมวเก้าชีวิตด้วยหรือเปล่า (Because I think I have heard that *A cat has nine lives*, and foreigners might think that *A cat has nine lives*, too. *A cat has nine lives*. Is there a battery named *A cat has nine lives*?)

The participants seemed to make use of their past experience to deal with the English idioms. Participant 1 mentioned cultural background, an interesting term showing that he would probably have experienced *A cat has nine lives* as a set of beliefs that may have an influence on how he was raised. Besides, Participant 2 recalled that there was a product which was sold under the brand *A cat has nine lives*, helping her arrive at a correct response.

Discussing and analyzing the context (Frequency of use: n/a in Task 1 and 54.57% in Task 2)

Since the idioms in Task 1 were not embedded in context, the participants seemed to make no use of the *discussing and analyzing the context* strategy in their idiom comprehension. On the contrary, in Task 2, it was reported to be the most frequently-used strategy. Below are examples of how *discussing and analyzing the context* navigated the participants to correct responses.

Stimulus Situation:

A: We need to find out who stole the money from the cash register. Otherwise, we're going to be wrongly suspected, and the managers are going to lose their trust in us although we have worked so hard this year.

B: I agree. _____, and we may not get a bonus at the end of the year if we can't find who did this.

Participant 4: เหมือนมีคนหนึ่งที่ทำงานผิดพลาด ก็เลยทำให้ทั้งกลุ่มดูแย่ไปเลย
(It seems like someone makes a mistake, and it negatively affects the whole group)

Participant 8: ถ้าเกิดว่าเขาไม่สามารถหาคนร้ายได้ เขาก็จะชวยไปด้วย เพราะคนนี่คนเดียว ทำให้ชวยกันหมดทั้งร้าน
(If they cannot find the thief, they will be in trouble. Because of one person, all of them will be in trouble.)

Nine participants discussed and analyzed the context to cope with *One scabbed sheep will mar a whole flock* and ปลาเน่าตัวเดียวเหม็นหมดทั้งข้อง (*One*

rotten fish and the whole creel stinks). They made an interesting observation of how one person will bring the others unpleasant results which, in this context, referred to losing trust and a bonus, and the contextual clues finally navigated the participants to correct responses.

In short, the participants were likely to employ their background knowledge to tackle the English idioms presented without context, but they seemed to depend on contextual clues when they comprehended the English idioms embedded in context. The results are consistent with Cooper's (1999) and Na Ranong's (2014) findings that the participants relied heavily on context to understand English idioms, but both studies made no empirical observation on the comprehension strategies of the idioms presented without context. That the participants employed background knowledge and contextual clues as their most-frequent strategies seems to imply that they have idiomatic competence which, according to Lontas (2015), is an ability to comprehend and use idioms appropriately in diverse situations. He also gave a brief yet comprehensive argument that idiomatic competence "includes both linguistic (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics) and pragmatic (nonlinguistic, paralinguistic, sociolinguistic/functional, discourse, personal/world, intra/intercultural) knowledge" (Lontas, 2015, p.625).

Using the meaning of the L1 idiom (Frequency of use: 4.14% in Task 1 and 8.04% in Task 2)

The participants sometimes tended to be familiar with the Thai test items, so they verbalized the meaning of the L1 idioms right away during the data collection. Below are examples exemplifying this strategy at work.

Stimulus Situation:

- A: Good news! I have been accepted to College of Art, and the semester will start next month.
- B: Really? Mom is a dentist! Dad is a surgeon. I, your brother, am going to be a dentist next year, but you want to be a portrait painter. _____.

- Participant 1: คำว่า แกะดำ สิ่งที่แตกต่างกันจากคนอื่น ข้อ A คนนี้คือ เขาเป็นคนเดียวที่แตกต่างจากคนในครอบครัว
(*Black sheep* [refers to] something which is different from others. A is the only person who is different from his family members.)
- Participant 8: ดูที่ภาษาไทยมากกว่า เวลาเราพูด "แกะดำ" ก็จะความหมายว่า "ทำไมแกเป็นอย่างนี้อยู่คนเดียว"
(I look at the Thai idiom. When we say *black sheep*, it means why it is only you who is different.)

Two participants seemed to be familiar with the Thai idiom แกะดำ (*Black sheep*), so they used the meaning of the L1 idiom to understand the English idiom *There's a black sheep in every family*. According to Abel's (2003) Model of Dual Idiom Representation, native speakers usually judge idiomatic expressions as nondecomposable and stockpile idioms as multiword units in their idiom entries. Thus, the participants in this present study might have seen the Thai test items beforehand and stored the meanings of those Thai idioms in their mental lexicon. Encountering those Thai idioms on the list provided, they were likely to retrieve the meanings promptly to cope with the English idioms. This strategy seems to reflect L1 transfer in this research since the participants referred to the meanings of the Thai idioms to understand the English test items.

Research Question 2: Do Thai EFL learners employ a literal meaning of an English idiomatic expression in their idiom comprehension?

Although a referential meaning of an idiom is normally different from a literal translation of its constituents, the results of this present study reveal that a literal meaning comes into play in Thai EFL learners' idiom comprehension as reflected in the *translating an idiom literally* strategy.

Translating an idiom literally (Frequency of use: 20.34% in Task 1 and 16.74% in Task 2)

Sometimes, the participants were quite straightforward by translating the idioms word-for-word to ascertain the meanings. Below are examples of how the participants used the *translating an idiom literally* strategy to comprehend idioms with correct responses.

Stimulus Situation: Kill two _____ with one stone.

Participant 5: ยิงทีเดียว ใช้ one stone ก็คือ ยิงทีเดียวได้นกสองตัว ก็คือสองตัว แล้วดึง birds มา

(Shoot once [in the Thai idiom] means one stone [in the English idiom]. *Shoot once and get two birds*, and *birds* could fill the gap here.)

Participant 9: *birds* เพราะว่า ถ้ายิงนก 2 ตัวด้วยหินอันเดียว เหมือนยิงทีเดียวได้นก 2 ตัว มันตรงตัวเลย

([The animal vocabulary is] *birds* because *Kill two birds with one stone* is the same as *shoot once and get two birds*. They have the same meaning.)

Participant 5 and Participant 9 suggested that the literal translation of *kill with one stone* in the English idiom was quite similar to *shoot once* in the Thai counterpart. Then they noticed *two birds* in the Thai idioms, and based on the literal translation, they completed the English idiom with the word *birds*. L1 influence, however, is quite noticeable especially in an example below with an incorrect response.

Stimulus Situation: Fine feathers make fine _____.

Participant 9: ไก่งามเพราะขน *hen* เพราะว่าขนสวยทำให้ไก่สวยก็เหมือนกับไก่งามเพราะขนคนงามเพราะแต่ง

(*Hen is beautiful because of feathers*. [The answer is] *hen* because fine feathers make fine hen. It is like *Hen is beautiful because of feathers and woman because of make-up*.)

The literal translation of *Fine feathers make fine* was quite similar to the Thai equivalent *Hen is beautiful because of feathers*, so Participant 9 jumped to the conclusion that *hen* was her answer to this test item which was an incorrect response. In fact, the correct animal vocabulary for this English idiom is *birds*.

In conclusion, a literal meaning of an idiom plays a role in L2 idiom comprehension as demonstrated in the *translating an idiom literally* strategy, and it shows L1 transfer. *Translating an idiom literally* was also reported in Cooper's (1999) and Na Ranong's (2014) works; however, they used the term *using the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative meaning* to suggest that the participants in their studies translated an English idiom literally, and then they made use of its connotation to understand an idiomatic meaning. Abel (2003) posited that non-native speakers seem to treat idiomatic expressions as decomposable; therefore, they are likely to access a literal meaning of a constituent to understand an L2 idiom. Although considered highly-proficient learners of English, the participants in this research still relied on literal translations to deal with the English idiomatic expressions in both tasks.

Research Question 3: Do Thai EFL learners employ the ideational metafunction and the interpersonal metafunction in their idiom comprehension?

The proverbs used in this present study are considered ideational idioms according to Fernando (1996). The results show that the participants occasionally use the ideational metafunction of content words to help them understand idioms (22.41% in Task 1 and 3.70% in Task 2), and when they tackled the idioms embedded in context, they rarely referred to the interpersonal metafunction (n/a in Task 1 and 1.09% in Task 2).

Referring to the ideational metafunction (Frequency of use: 22.41% in Task 1 and 3.70% in Task 2)

The ideational metafunction refers to the meaning which is attached to a vocabulary item or a constituent. Beyond a surface meaning, it might include a figurative meaning, gender, and conceptual analogy which help non-native speakers of English comprehend idioms. Below are examples of how the participants employed the ideational metafunction in idiom comprehension, leading to correct responses.

- Stimulus Situation: If two men ride on a _____, one must ride behind.
- Participant 2: two men ไซ้ใหม่ ราชสีห์ทั้ง gender เดียวกัน เป็น male เหมือนกัน (Two men? It relates to lions. The same gender; they are male.)
- Participant 6: เหมือนผู้ชายสองคน มีความเท่าเทียมเหมือนกัน ถ้าเป็นผู้ชายผู้หญิงก็ว่าไปอย่าง แต่นี่ผู้ชายทั้งสองคน ก็น่าจะเป็นราชสีห์สองตัวอยู่ถ้าเดียวกันไม่ได้ คือ ไม่มีใครจะสามารถนั่งหน้าได้ทั้งสองคน (It is like two men in the same rank. If it is a man and a woman, it will be another story, but this is about two men, which might refer to [the Thai idiom] *Two lions cannot live in the same den*. Both cannot take the front seat at the same time.)
- Participant 7: เหมือนผู้ชายเขาจะไม่ยอมกัน เขาก็แบบอีกคนต้องอยู่ข้างหลังมันอีกคนก็ไม่ได้ ผู้ชายเค้าจะมี pride ในการเป็นผู้ชาย (Men usually do not yield up to each other. When one leads, the other cannot accept it. Men take pride in themselves in being a man.)

The idiom above is about two men and their positions when riding a horse, and gender seems to be a key idea leading three participants to the right equivalent in the Thai language. Participant 2 stated that *lion* in the Thai counterpart referred to male while Participant 6 described the conflict of two men when they were in the same position or status. Participant 7 also added that pride in being a man might be the underlying cause for the disagreement between two men. Apart from gender, some participants scrutinized a concept

of a constituent which is beyond a literal meaning. Then they analyzed how the concept formed a relationship with the idiom to find the right equivalent. Below are examples of how the participants made use of concepts to understand L2 idioms with a correct response.

Stimulus Situation: Throw out a sprat to catch a _____.

Participant 3: เอาปลาตัวเล็กไปจับ *mackerel* เป็นปลาตัวใหญ่ ตกปลากะพง ตัวเล็กตกตัวใหญ่เหมือนกัน

(Use a small fish to catch *mackerel* which is a bigger fish. To catch a sea bass. They are the same because the smaller fish is used to catch a bigger one.)

The big-small relationship was key to the correct response. Making a conceptual analysis of *shrimp* and *sea bass* in the Thai idiom, the participants obtained the qualities of being small and big from the two types of animals respectively. In the English idiom, *sprat* was seen as a small fish, and based on the big-small analogy, the suitable word to complete the idiom was *mackerel*, a bigger type of fish compared to *sprat*. However, evidence of the *referring to the ideational metafunction* strategy leading to an incorrect response was reported in the following example.

Stimulus Situation: Fine feathers make fine _____.

Participant 1: ทั้ง *chickens* ทั้ง *hen* มีขนทั้งคู่ แต่ผมว่าน่าจะเป็น *hen* เพราะมันเกี่ยวกับผู้หญิงและ *hen* หมายถึงไก่ตัวเมีย

(Both *chickens* and *hen* have feathers, but I think [the answer] is *hen* because it is about women, and *hen* means a female chicken.)

Participant 1 referred to gender when trying to fill the gap with an animal vocabulary item. Although he was certain that it must contain a woman-related meaning, he selected *hen* while the correct answer was *birds*. In addition to the *referring to the ideational metafunction* strategy, it is worth observing if the participants used the *referring to the interpersonal metafunction* strategy to deal with English idioms embedded in context.

Referring to the interpersonal metafunction (Frequency of use: n/a in Task 1 and 1.09% in Task 2)

Ideational idioms, when embedded in context, carry interpersonal messages from a speaker or a writer, and in the real-life situation, idioms are used with a purpose, such as to give advice, to express disapproval, and to offer comfort (Can, 2011). Thus, in Task 2, the participants were asked to deal with the idioms embedded in dialogs to see if they would make use of the interpersonal role in their idiom comprehension. The results show that the frequency of the *referring to the interpersonal metafunction* strategy employed by the participants in Task 2 is low (1.08%), and surprisingly, all of them seemed to navigate the participants to incorrect responses. Examples are cited below.

Stimulus Situation:

A: I can't wait for the live show this Saturday. I have been rehearsing so hard, and the voice coach has given me tons of useful tips. I am sure that I have what it takes to win this singing competition.

B: _____. As far as I can remember, you have been in the bottom two for three weeks, and I have had the highest public votes since the very first week. Do you really think that you are going to beat me in the grand final? I don't think so.

Participant 2: คิดว่า imagine น้ำเสียงที่อยู่ในหัวนี้น่าจะพูดในเชิง Satire ว่าก็เป็นได้นะ แต่ว่าเธอก็ยังด้อยอยู่ดี
([I am trying to] imagine the tone of voice in my mind, and it might be a satire. It is like you could be [a winner], but you are still inferior [to me].)

Participant 2: น่าจะเป็น ความพยายามอยู่ที่ไหน ความสำเร็จอยู่ที่นั่น แต่ถ้าในเชิงแบบ Satire เหมือนแบบเสียดสีนิดหนึ่ง เธอพยายามนะ แต่คิดว่าคงไม่ชนะหรอก
([The answer might be] *Where there is an effort, there is a success*, but it is used as a satire. So, it means you can try, but you will not win.)

Participant 2 had supplied *There's many a good cock come out of a tattered bag* in the blank in the above dialog, and she was quite certain that it was a satire. Then she looked for a Thai counterpart which could function as a satirical expression, and her answer was *Where there is an effort, there is a success* or ความพยายามอยู่ที่ไหน ความสำเร็จอยู่ที่นั่น. She gave a further explanation that the Thai idiom could be considered an offensive remark which suggested inferiority and failure. Although she was able to identify the satirical function of the idioms, her answers were incorrect. The correct ones were *Catch your bear before you sell its skin* and ไม่เห็นกระรอก อย่าโค้งหน้าไม้ (*Don't bend a crossbow if you don't see a squirrel*).

To sum up, the participants used the *referring to the ideational metafunction* strategy and the *referring to the interpersonal metafunction* strategy in their idiom comprehension despite small percentages of frequency of use. Since the *referring to the ideational metafunction* strategy in this research refers to the employment of a connotation beyond a surface meaning, it seems to be in line with the definition of concept suggested by Jarvis (2010) as it refers to “a mental representation of an object, quality, action, event, relationship, situation, sensation, or any object perceivable or imaginable phenomenon for which the mind creates a mental category” (p.4). Jarvis (2010) also suggested that concept can be transferred which is referred to as conceptual transfer as he found in his observation that non-native speakers of English with different mother tongues seemed to use different pronouns to refer to their breakfast cereal. However, whether the *referring to the ideational metafunction* strategy in this present study can be transferred or not requires a further study because most connotations are not clear-cut if they belong to the Thai language of the English one, and more possibly, most of them seem to be universal. For example, *tiger* can be seen powerful in both Thai and English, and *swine* as lazy. Meanwhile, evidence of the *referring to the interpersonal metafunction* strategy seems to show that the participants were rarely aware of the interpersonal roles of idioms although their main function in an everyday circumstance is to convey an interpersonal message, such as warnings and compliments. That other idiom comprehension strategies might be more

convenient and precise for the participants to deal with English idioms might explain the low frequency of the employment of the *referring to the interpersonal metafunction* strategy.

Conclusion

The results reveal that the participants used a combination of strategies to understand an English idiom. Dealing with the idioms presented without context, the participants tended to rely on background knowledge, figurative and connotative meanings, and word-for-word translation as their frequent strategies. However, when they encountered the idioms embedded in context, contextual clues were significantly taken into account, followed by literal translation and L1 transfer. Despite provided with dialogs, the participants seldom made use of the interpersonal metafunction. To enhance idiom teaching, the think-aloud protocols should be adopted in class to identify idiom comprehension strategies which demonstrate how students tackle idioms. Students might find the strategies helpful to ascertain idiomatic meanings instead of memorizing a large number of idiomatic expressions or relying on a dictionary which may or may not include the idioms students are facing. Since this present study focused on advanced and upper-intermediate learners of English, a further study with low-proficient learners is recommended to see if their idiom comprehension strategies converge. For future research, idioms might include various topics apart from animals, such as body parts and food in order to see how the ideational metafunction and the interpersonal metafunction come into play.

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Appendix A: Task 1

Task 1 asks the participants to match the English idioms with the Thai equivalents from the list provided and fill the gap with one word about an animal. Examples of the test items in Task 1 are as follows:

English Idioms	Thai Idioms	Vocabulary
When the cat is away, the _____ will play.	ราชสีห์สองตัวอยู่ถ้ำเดียวกันไม่ได้	hares
If you run after two _____, you will catch neither.	แมวไม่อยู่ หนูละเลิง	horse
If two men ride on a _____, one must ride behind.	อย่าจับปลาสองมือ	mice

English idioms and Thai equivalents:

1. When the cat is away the mice will play.
แมวไม่อยู่หนูละเลิง
2. Big fish eat little fish.
ปลาใหญ่กินปลาเล็ก
3. Barking dogs seldom bite.
หมาเห่าไม่กัด
4. A cat has nine lives.
แมวเก้าชีวิต
5. Kill two birds with one stone.
ยิงปืนนัดเดียว ได้นกสองตัว
6. Fine feathers make fine birds.
ไก่อ่างเพราะขน คนงามเพราะแต่ง
7. If you run after two hares, you will catch neither
อย่าจับปลาสองมือ
8. Throw out a sprat to catch a mackerel.
เอากุ้งฝอยไปตกปลากะพง
9. It's too late to shut the stable door after the horse has been stolen.
วัวหายล้อมคอก

10. The leopard cannot change his spots.
ชาติเสือไม่ทิ้งลาย
11. Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.
ไม่เห็นกระรอก อย่าโก่งหน้าไม้
12. Take not a musket to kill a butterfly.
อย่าชี้ข้างจับตักแตน
13. The bull must be taken by the horns.
ใจดีสู้เสือ
14. If two men ride on a horse, one must ride behind.
ราชสีห์สองตัวอยู่ถ้ำเดียวกันไม่ได้
15. It is a sad house where the hen crows louder than the cock.
สามีเป็นข้างเท้าหน้า ภรรยาเป็นข้างเท้าหลัง

Appendix B: Task 2

Task 2 asks the participants to match the dialogs with the appropriate English idiom provided, identify the function of the English idioms used in the dialogs, and supply Thai equivalents. An example of test item in Task 2 is as follows:

Dialog:

1. A: I've heard that you won 100 dollars in the lottery. How lucky you are!
- B: Yeah, but I want a bigger prize. I'm planning to buy more lottery tickets with that sum of money so that I could win a 3-million-dollar jackpot.
- A: You should set aside some money for your unpaid bills.

Function of the Proverb:

Thai Equivalent:

Functions of Idioms:

- Warning: A statement, an event, etc. telling somebody that something bad or unpleasant may happen in the future so that they can try to avoid it
- Satire: A way of criticizing a person, an idea or an institution in which you use humor to show their faults or weaknesses; a piece of writing that uses this type of criticism
- Sympathy: The feeling of being sorry for somebody; showing that you understand and care about somebody's problems
- Affirmative: An affirmative word or reply means 'yes' or expresses agreement

English idioms and the Thai equivalents:

1. There's a black sheep in every family.
แกะดำ
2. Better be the head of a dog than a tail of a lion.
เป็นหัวหมาดีกว่าเป็นหางราชสีห์
3. Birds of a feather flock together.
เข้าฝูงหงส์ก็เป็นหงส์ เข้าฝูงกาก็เป็นกา

4. You can lead a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink.
อย่าข่มเขาโคขึ้นให้กินหญ้า
5. One scabbed fish will mar the whole flock.
ปลาเน่าตัวเดียวเหม็นหมดทั้งข้อง
6. A bird in the hands is worth two in the bush.
สิบเบี้ยใกล้มือ ยี่สิบเบี้ยไกลมือ
7. The cat and the dog may kiss, yet are none the better friends.
หน้าเนื้อใจเสือ
8. If you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas.
คบคนพาล พาลพาไปหาผิด
9. Catch your bear before you sell its skin.
ไม่เห็นกระรอก อย่าโก่งหน้าไม้
10. One beats the bush, and another catches the birds.
ชูปมือเปิบ
11. Every dog has his day.
วันพระไม่มีคนเดียว
12. Feather by feather, the goose is plucked.
ความพยายามอยู่ที่ไหน ความสำเร็จอยู่ที่นั่น
13. The bird loves her nest.
ลงกระไดสามชั้นไม่มีความสุข
14. You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
ไม้แกัดดัดยาก
15. One must howl with the wolves.
เข้าเมืองตาหลิว ต้องหลิวตาตาม

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