

# Difficulties Facing Iranian EFL Senior High School Learners and Strategies They Use to Understand English Idioms

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## **Abstract**

The objectives of the present study were threefold: First, it sought to investigate difficulties Iranian EFL high school learners face to understand English idioms. Second, it attempted to explore intermediate EFL learners' language learning strategy preferences to comprehend idioms. Third, it aimed to examine whether there was a significant difference between successful and less successful students' strategy use in idiom comprehension. To this end, 200 Iranian male and female students from the three grades of different senior high schools in Qom, Iran, were selected through convenience sampling. They responded to a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire (Alhaysony, 2017), investigating the challenges of idiom comprehension. Afterwards, they took the Oxford Quick Placement Test. Ninety-eight of them were selected as intermediate learners. Third, they took a multiple-choice test on idiom comprehension, developed by the researcher, and responded to the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990). Descriptive statistics, frequencies and means, and a one-sample t-test were used to analyze the data. The results indicated that the participants complained that idioms were challenging mainly because they were not taught well in class and were not part of course syllabi. They also revealed that, in understanding idioms, successful learners used all six categories of strategies in the high and medium levels. They employed metacognitive strategies the most ( $M= 3.88$ ), but affective strategies the least ( $M= 2.84$ ). The results of the t-test suggested significant differences between successful and less successful learners' strategy use. The results provide insights into the challenges and strategies of English idiom comprehension.

**Keywords:** Idiomatic expressions, idiom comprehension, language learning strategies, difficulties of idiom comprehension, high school students

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## INTRODUCTION

During the process of foreign language learning, learners face numerous hindrances, the greatest of which is learning idiomatic expressions (Lechner, 2015). Idioms are difficult to understand because their intended meanings often differ from their literal interpretations. When an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learner, for example, hears an English idiomatic utterance, like "*To put it in a nutshell*", or hundreds of others, in conversation, s/he will have trouble interpreting the intended meaning of the speaker, not just the literal meaning of the sentence. While native English speakers are raised listening to idiomatic expressions and using them almost every day, it is a challenge for non-native speakers to learn them like natives (Thyab, 2016).

Nevertheless, every second language (L2) learner must be prepared to meet the challenge of L2 idiom learning because idioms are an intrinsic characteristic of all natural languages in general, and they occur so frequently in spoken and written English (Vasiljevic, 2015). No language practitioner can neglect idioms when the natural use of the language is a purpose (Fernando, 1996).

Due to a lower level of linguistic competence in L2, learners are at a distinct disadvantage in understanding L2 idiomatic expressions (Cooper, 1999). Learners often try to translate word by word in order to get an understanding of the idioms in different contexts; they do not get their correct meaning. What makes the situation worse is that although L2 idioms have received noticeable attention from some researchers in recent years (Boers, 2001), teachers pay little, if any, attention to the teaching of L2 idioms in their classrooms. Teachers are still using traditional methods to teach this subcategory of vocabulary. At best, they simply provide the students with lists of idioms and their equivalents or definitions in the learners' first language (L1). The memorization of idiomatic expressions creates a heavy learning burden on the students, but it is the easiest way for teachers to teach them. Lechner (2015) believes that "such a rigid learning process might be time- and effort-consuming" (p. 154). Teachers have little awareness of the learners' difficulties in idiom comprehension and they rarely provide them with more effective strategies to help them deal with such difficulties.

In the Iranian educational system, English is taught at all grades of high

schools, and it is presented as a compulsory course to all high school students across the country (Mehrani & Khodi, 2014). Although some idiomatic expressions have been addressed in the newly-developed English textbooks for senior high school students (Vision series) since 2016 (see, for example, the last lesson of Vision 3; fourteen figurative expressions were presented in the *vocabulary development* part) and used in the recent University Entrance Examination, and though many students have trouble learning them, there has been insufficient research investigating the challenges they meet and strategies they use for learning idioms at high school. Therefore, it seems necessary to identify the problems they encounter in the process of English idiom learning and find some effective strategies to teach them to deal with this issue. The present study aimed at filling part of this existing gap.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Idioms

Considerable attempts have been made to define idioms by various scholars. Irujo (1986), for instance, defines idioms as conventionalized expressions whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts. Fernando (1996) also briefly describes idioms as "conventionalized multiword expressions often, but not always non-literal" (p. 1). Grant and Bauer (2004) insist that the previous definitions can be applied to wide-ranging multiword units (MWUs) found in this category. They, therefore, propose a clearer and more restricted definition of the notion of idioms by classifying MWUs into three categories: Core idioms (non-compositional MWUs, the meaning of which cannot be derived from the meanings of their constituents), Figuratives (MWUs with metaphors), and ONCEs (one non-compositional element). Significant attempts have been also made to categorize idioms. As an example, Fernando (1996) classifies idioms into three categories: Pure or nonliteral idioms (e.g., *kick the bucket*), semi-literal idioms (e.g., *go through*), and literal idioms (e.g., *in sum*).

### Challenges of L2 Idiom Learning

Learning idioms is an integral part of vocabulary learning in an L2 (Irujo, 1986). However, many EFL learners have trouble with idioms due to various reasons (Cooper, 1999). Some research has been conducted to investigate

difficulties that EFL learners face in learning idioms across the world. For example, Saleh and Zakaria (2013) examined the problems that Libyan EFL learners experienced as well as the strategies that they employed to understand figurative language. The results suggested that idioms were difficult for the participants because they were non-decomposable, and they contained low frequent and unknown words. Furthermore, the most successful strategies used by the participant to understand idioms were using contextual clues to guess the meaning and referring to a similar idiom in their L1.

Furthermore, Angel (2016) conducted a study to see the difficulty of learning idioms. Data were collected through questionnaires, and the results showed that many of the learners thought that learning idioms was very difficult because they reflect a cultural situation that could only be perceived in the native country, and the cognitive ability to learn them is more complex and learners have to know in detail in what context or situation those phrases are used.

In another study, Elbushra Mousa (2017) investigated the difficulties of understanding English idioms that Sudanese students encountered. Findings revealed that the students had a weak ability in understanding English idioms, and they did not use any particular strategies while coming across unfamiliar idioms. They had difficulty in understanding idioms because their meanings were not clear; they were not taught well in the classroom; they translated the meaning of idioms literally into their L1; they lacked English cultural background to understand idioms; they did not understand idioms out of context; and little attention was paid to idioms in the university curriculum.

### **Strategies of L2 Idiom Learning**

L2 idiom learning in the case of a lack of appropriate teaching and learning strategies takes up a huge amount of time and effort. Many EFL learners seem to be unaware of the influential roles of language learning strategies (LLSs) in their success toward idiom learning; they employ very limited LLSs in their translation, memorization, and note-taking. Those learners who know how to learn are more likely to take advantage of learning opportunities inside the classroom, and exploit such opportunities outside the classroom effectively, too (Wong & Nunan, 2011). The substantial body

of research suggests that if language learners are taught how to learn by means of LLSs, they will be able to handle their own learning, and they will become more effective and autonomous learners. Interest in LLSs began with studies mostly focusing on the 'good language learner' (Cohen & Weaver, 1998). They have become crucial in language teaching and learning because research has suggested training learners to use LLSs can make them more effective and autonomous learners. As a Chinese proverb goes, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man how to fish and feed him for a lifetime", it seems a reasonable goal for language teachers to promote learner autonomy by teaching how to learn (O'Malley & Chamot, 1995). Similarly, Oxford (1990) opines that learning will be facilitated when learners have an awareness of effective LLSs during the process of learning. Since some students already possess good LLSs while others have few or ineffective strategies, language teachers should know how to familiarize them with effective LLSs regarding particular tasks (Cohen & Griffiths, 2015). From a practical perspective, the types of LLSs used by successful language learners to perform particular tasks can be identified and taught to less successful ones. This teaching may have noticeable effects on the development of L2 skills.

Oxford (1990) defines LLSs as "specific actions employed by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). Oxford (1990) also classifies LLSs into two major groups of direct and indirect strategies. While memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies belong to the first group, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies belong to the second one.

Many studies have been conducted to identify strategies used by learners to understand L2 idioms. Almost two decades ago, Cooper (1999) conducted a study focusing on the on-line processing strategies used by non-native speakers of English for finding the meaning of idioms. Data collected through the think-aloud procedure indicated that the subjects frequently used a heuristic approach to idiom interpretation. Cooper also found that the strategies often employed by them to get the meanings of the idioms were guessing based on the contextual information, analyzing and talking about them, and focusing on their literal meanings. However, the most successful one was guessing from the context.

Later, Mäntylä (2004) explored native and non-native English speakers' comprehension of English idioms. The results indicated that most English idioms were difficult for non-native students. The least difficult idioms were the ones that had an identical equivalent in L1. Using L1 knowledge led to erroneous interpretations. The findings also suggested that natives had different interpretations of the idioms. It was difficult for them to understand the right meanings of idioms. Interestingly enough, Mäntylä found that the most frequent strategy used by natives for unfamiliar idioms was skipping them. It implies that they did not want to look for links between literal and figurative meanings or make a guess.

Elsewhere, Liu (2008) conducted a study to find strategies used by L2 learners to comprehend idioms. The results showed that L2 learners used different strategies to comprehend figurative language. The major strategies were as follows: Using contextual information, pragmatic knowledge, L1 linguistic knowledge, and L1 conceptual knowledge. Furthermore, Bulut and Celik-Yazici (2004) and Rohani, Ketabi and Tavakoli (2012) particularly worked on the role of contextual information in understanding L2 idioms. The results indicated that the strategy of using contextual information was the first strategy among others. It was also the most effective strategy leading to correct guesses by the participants.

In their research, Zarei and Shahidipour (2013) explored the relationship between comprehension of L2 idioms and LLSs. The participants were Iranian university students whose majors were the English language. Data from a questionnaire and a test revealed a significantly close relationship between cognitive strategies and L2 idiom comprehension. Alhaysony (2017) also conducted a study aimed at investigating the strategies Saudi EFL students utilized to understand idioms. The results showed that students had difficulty understanding idioms, and they frequently used the context to understand them and looked for their equivalents in their L1 to predict their meanings. Recently, Al-Houti and Aldaihani (2018) did research with the aim of shedding light on Kuwaiti EFL university students' strategies of idioms. The most frequent strategy used by the participants to learn idioms was using contextual clues, whereas the least frequent one was using L1 and etymological elaboration.

So far, studies on the challenges and strategies of understanding L2 idioms have been mainly done in contexts other than the Iranian one. They

have also focused on university students more than high school pupils. Since the participants' L1 can have an effect on the difficulties they face and the strategies they use to understand English idioms, and little research has been conducted to shed light on the status quo of Iranian high school programs in terms of English idiom learning, the present study mainly concentrated on Iranian learners' challenges and strategies of English idiom learning at high schools.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The issue of which strategies are more appropriate to learn idioms is worth examining since it has been found out that some learning strategies and outdated techniques (e.g., rote memorization) have not received empirical support (Zimmerman-Edison, 2015). Many learners complain that idioms make trouble for them and that they are one of the most challenging aspects of English vocabulary. They often lack appropriate strategies or they are not taught how to take advantage of different aspects of idiom learning, such as using contextual clues, to meet the challenges of understanding unfamiliar idioms. On the teachers' side, they are not well aware of the difficulties students face while learning idioms as well as the strategies they use to facilitate L2 idiom learning, so they often use their preferred ways of teaching idioms regardless of such issues. There is a need to first investigate learners' challenges of understanding English idiomatic expressions, and then identify a range of more effective LLSs for overcoming the challenges. To the researcher's best knowledge, previous studies have been mostly conducted with university students, and research on high school students' challenges and strategies has been very limited. The present study is descriptive, aiming to bridge part of the existing gap. It has two objectives. The first aim is to conduct an analysis in which Iranian high school students can voice their concerns, problems, and needs regarding idiomatic expressions in English classes. The second is to investigate the LLSs used by successful students in understanding idioms. Finding and compiling a list of effective strategies used by successful learners to comprehend idioms might be one of the most significant reasons to do research on strategies in this area; a list of which beginners can take advantage, applying those strategies in their own learning. There is a shared belief that good LLSs used by advanced and intermediate EFL learners can be identified and taught to

others who have few or ineffective strategies (Cohen & Griffiths, 2015). It also appears significant to help teachers gain a deeper understanding of the students' difficulties that they encounter during L2 idiom learning. Given the above-mentioned objectives, the present study addressed the following questions:

1. What difficulties do Iranian EFL senior high school students encounter in L2 idiom comprehension?
2. What are the most and least used categories of LLSs by Iranian successful and less successful EFL senior high school students in L2 idiom comprehension?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference between successful and less successful students' strategy use in L2 idiom comprehension?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The present study was administered in various senior high schools in Qom, Iran. The participants were 200 Iranian male and female senior high school students of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. They were selected through convenience sampling. All of them were native speakers of Persian, taking a course of general English as part of the requirements of their school programs. Their ages ranged from fourteen to eighteen. Prior to using any instrument, the participants were given information about the objectives and the significance of the study.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument employed to assess the proficiency level of the participants was the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) (2001) with 60 items of vocabulary, grammar and cloze test. It was a timed test and the participants had to complete it within 30 minutes. The test was divided into two parts. Part 1 included 40 questions, and it was given to all 200 participants. Part 2 included 20 questions, and those participants who scored above 15 in Part 1 were also asked to answer them. At the end, those who scored between 1 to 34 were placed at the elementary level, between 35 to 47 were placed at the intermediate level, and between 48 to 60 were placed at the advanced proficiency level.

An English idiom comprehension test containing 30 multiple-choice



items was used to assess the participants' understanding of English idioms. The time allocated to this test was 30 minutes. The idioms used in the test were selected from an idiom book titled "*English Idioms in Use*" by McCarthy and O'Dell (2002). The book is designed for intermediate level learners. Since the idiom comprehension test was constructed by the researcher, its validity and reliability had to be checked. The reliability index of the test using the KR-21 method turned out to be 0.80. A correlation procedure was used to check the validity that showed a correlation between the participants' scores on the idiom comprehension test with their scores on the vocabulary subtest of OQPT. The validity index of the comprehension test turned out to be 0.71.

Furthermore, two different questionnaires were administered in the study. A questionnaire on LLSs developed by Oxford (1990), based on her classification of LLSs, called SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) was utilized to identify the LLSs the participants used. It comes in two versions, but the study used Version 7, designed for measuring the strategy use of EFL learners. It was a self-scoring questionnaire consisting of 50 statements related to Oxford's six subcategories of LLSs (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies) on a five-point Likert-scale. Oxford (1996) argues that reliability indexes of SILL, employed by a great deal of research, ranged from 0.91 to 0.95. Another five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was also administered to see what difficulties the participants encounter while understanding English idioms. It was developed by Alhaysony (2017), which included eight statements on the challenges of L2 idiom learning. The questionnaire was translated into the participants' L1 (i.e., Persian) to make sure that they could understand the statements well. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the translated version of the questionnaire was found to be 0.73.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The current research was done in two phases. In Phase 1, a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was given to 200 participants to see what problems they face in understanding idioms. In Phase 2, the same 200 participants took the OQPT to determine their proficiency levels. Participants who scored between 35 and 47 were selected as intermediate language learners and were included in this section. Later, the L2 idiom comprehension test was

administered to collect data about the intermediate students' receptive knowledge of L2 idioms. Based on the results of the test, the students were divided into two groups of successful and less successful students. Then, both groups took part in the SILL questionnaire to report which LLSs they used. They were requested to respond to each statement using a five-point rating scale ranging from 'Never' (one point) to 'Always' (five points).

### **Data Analysis**

The first research question attempted to explore the students' difficulty of understanding English idioms. The participants' responses to the eight-item questionnaire were analyzed as follows: 'Strongly agree' and 'agree' responses were considered positive responses and given three points; the 'neutral' response was given two points; and 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' responses were considered negative responses and given only one point. Later, the descriptive statistics were computed to analyze the participants' responses. For the second research question, the descriptive statistics were also used to investigate the differences between successful and less successful students in their application of LLSs in understanding L2 idioms. Finally, a one-sample t-test was used to see if the difference between successful and less successful students' strategy use was significant.

## **RESULTS**

### **Investigating the First Research Question**

The initial goal of the study was to investigate the difficulties Iranian EFL senior high school students encounter in understanding English idioms. To this end, 200 participants responded to a questionnaire (developed by Alhaysony, 2017, p. 77) consisting of eight statements. Their responses to the questionnaire statements were analyzed as illustrated in Table 1. For the sake of easy and informative comparison and contrast of the participants' perceptions, 'strongly agree' and 'agree' options have been considered a positive response and merged, replaced by the 'yes' option. Also, 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' options have been considered a negative response to the statement and merged into one option titled 'no'.

**Table 1.** Difficulties of L2 idiom comprehension

Statements	Number of responses	No		Neutral		Yes		Mean	SD
		F	%	f	%	f	%		
1 Understanding idioms is difficult due to the lack of cultural background behind them.	200	63	31.5	19	9.5	118	59	2.27	0.91
2 Understanding idioms is difficult due to the lack of experience dealing with them.	200	42	21	24	12	134	67	2.46	0.81
3 Understanding idioms is difficult because they are not included in the syllabi of the English courses.	200	40	20	28	14	132	66	2.46	0.80
4 Idioms are difficult to understand since they are not addressed or taught well in class.	200	25	12.5	30	15	145	72.5	2.60	0.70
5 Idioms are difficult to understand since there are not any efficient cultural courses to study.	200	53	26.5	33	16.5	114	57	2.30	0.86
6 Idioms are difficult because they have unfamiliar words.	200	84	42	35	17.5	81	40.5	1.98	0.91
7 Idioms are difficult because they have no analogue in Persian.	200	119	59.5	18	9	63	31.5	1.72	0.91
8 Idioms are difficult when they have no context.	200	50	25	29	14.5	121	60.5	2.35	0.85
Total	1600	476	29.7	216	13.5	908	56.7	2.63	0.84

Starting from the first item of the questionnaire, the results revealed that more than half of the students, that is 118 students (59%), had trouble understanding English idioms because they lacked the underlying cultural background knowledge. However, 63 students (31.5%) did not agree with this idea, and 19 students (9.5%) had no idea. The highest percentages of positive responses to the questionnaire items went, in order, to the fourth, second, and third items. Almost three-fourths of the students, that is 145

students (72.5%), believed that understanding idioms was challenging because they were not treated well in class. However, 25 students (12.5%) did not think so, and 30 students (15%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this claim. Furthermore, 134 students (67%) thought that understanding idioms was problematic because they did not have enough experience in dealing with them. 42 students (21%), however, disagreed with this idea, and 24 students (12%) had a neutral idea. 132 students (66%) also claimed that they had difficulty understanding English idioms since they were not incorporated into the syllabi of English courses at school. 40 students (20%) showed disagreement with this item, and 28 students (14%) were neutral.

The fifth item of the questionnaire deals with the idea that idioms are hard to understand due to the lack of efficient cultural courses. 114 participants (57%) agreed with this idea as a majority; yet, 53 participants (26.5%) disagreed, and 33 participants (16.5%) did not show any agreement or disagreement.

The lowest percentages of positive responses to the questionnaire items went to the seventh and sixth items, respectively. Much less than half of the students, 63 students (31.5%) in fact, believed that the difficulty of English idioms was due to the fact that they have no equivalent in their L1 (i.e., Persian). More than half of the students, 119 students (59.5%), that is, disagreed with this reason for justifying the difficulty of English idioms. 18 students (9%) also had a neutral opinion. Besides, 84 students (42%) did not agree that English idioms were difficult for them because of their unfamiliar constituent parts. However, 81 students (40.5%) agreed with this source of difficulty, and 35 students (17.5%) reported no agreement or disagreement with this claim.

The final problem in understanding English idioms, supported by 121 participants (60.5%), was related to the absence of context. However, one-fourth of the participants, with their number standing at 50 (25%), did not agree with this item, and 29 students (14.5%) had no idea.

### **Investigating the Second Research Question**

The next research question tried to investigate what LLSs successful intermediate EFL students frequently use to understand L2 idioms. To this end, 98 intermediate EFL students were chosen out of 200 students, who

participated in the previous section of the study, based on their scores on the placement test. The OQPT was administered to determine the participants' proficiency levels. The participants who scored between 35 and 47 were placed at the intermediate level of proficiency and included in this section. However, those who scored below 35 or above 47 were excluded from this section since they were placed at the elementary or advanced proficiency levels. The information about the participants' proficiency level is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Participants' proficiency level

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>OQPT Range</b>
Elementary	94	1-34
Intermediate	98	35-47
Advanced	8	48-57
Total	200	1-60

To discriminate successful and less successful students in understanding L2 idioms, the researcher gave an English idiom comprehension test to intermediate learners. Based on the results of the test, the students were divided into two groups. Students whose scores were between 0 to 15 were considered less successful students, and those who scored between 16 to 30 were considered more successful students in L2 idiom comprehension. Considering their results, 34 intermediate learners belonged to the less successful group, whereas 64 belonged to the successful group. Later, both groups took part in the SILL questionnaire to identify the frequency and type of LLSs they used. Oxford's (1990) key to interpreting mean scores on the SILL questionnaire was utilized to interpret the frequency use of LLSs. Its scale ranges from one to five: High use: 4.5 to 5.0 (always or almost always used) and 3.5 to 4.4 (usually used); medium use: 2.5 to 3.5 (sometimes used); and low use: 1.5 to 2.4 (usually not used) or 1.0 to 1.4 (never or almost never used). Table 3 reveals the frequency and type of LLSs employed by successful students in understanding L2 idioms.

**Table 3.** Frequency and type of LLSs used by successful students in L2 idiom comprehension

Strategy	Number of participants	Number of items	Mean	SD	Rank	Strategy use
Memory	64	9	3.02	5.00	5	Medium
Cognitive	64	14	3.60	7.94	2	High
Compensation	64	6	3.57	3.97	3	High
Metacognitive	64	9	3.88	6.56	1	High
Affective	64	6	2.84	3.08	6	Medium
Social	64	6	3.04	3.64	4	Medium

As Table 3 shows, among those 98 intermediate learners, 64 participants scored between 16 and 30 in the L2 idiom comprehension test, and they were considered as successful learners in L2 idiom comprehension. Table 3 also indicates that they used all six categories of LLSs in the high and medium levels. In fact, they reported high use of three strategy categories (i.e., metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies, respectively), and medium use of social, memory, and affective strategies, respectively. More specifically, they used metacognitive strategies the most ( $M = 3.88$ ), whereas they employed affective strategies the least ( $M = 2.84$ ). Table 4 illustrates the frequency and type of LLSs employed by less successful students in understanding L2 idioms.

**Table 4.** Frequency and type of LLSs used by less successful students in L2 idiom comprehension

Strategy	Number of participants	Number of items	Mean	SD	Rank	Strategy use
Memory	34	9	2.95	3.70	6	Medium
Cognitive	34	14	3.11	8.09	2	Medium
Compensation	34	6	3.07	3.08	3	Medium
Metacognitive	34	9	3.41	6.20	1	Medium
Affective	34	6	3.03	3.12	5	Medium
Social	34	6	3.05	3.23	4	Medium

As shown in Table 4, among those 98 intermediate learners, 34 participants could not get scores above 15 in the idiom comprehension test; as a result, they were selected as less successful students in idiom comprehension. Table 4 also indicates that they utilized all six categories of LLSs in the medium level. Of the six categories, the most frequently used category was

metacognitive strategies ( $M = 3.41$ ), and the least used one was memory strategies ( $M = 2.95$ ).

The difference between successful and less successful students' frequency use of LLSs in L2 idiom comprehension is represented in Figure 1. As it can be seen, successful students used a wider range of strategies in comparison to their less successful peers. While the former used metacognitive, cognitive, compensation, and memory strategies more than the latter, the latter tended to use affective and social strategies more than the former. Furthermore, the successful students were high metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategy users, whereas less successful ones were medium users of the strategies.

**Figure 1.** Frequency of LLSs used by successful and less successful students in L2 idiom comprehension

### Investigating the Third Research Question

To determine whether there were any significant differences between successful and less successful learners' use of the strategies, the researcher used a one-sample t-test. The results are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** One-sample test for differences in strategy use between successful and less successful learners

Strategy	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
				Lower	Upper
Memory	85.286	.007	2.98500	2.5403	3.4297
Cognitive	13.694	.046	3.35500	.2420	6.4680
Compensation	13.280	.048	3.32000	.1434	6.4966
Metacognitive	15.511	.041	3.64500	.6590	6.6310
Affective	30.895	.021	2.93500	1.7279	4.1421
Social	609.000	.001	3.04500	2.9815	3.1085

Table 5 indicates that there were statistically significant differences in the use of all types of strategies between successful and less successful learners in L2 idiom comprehension (Sig. < 0.05).

## DISCUSSION

Analyzing students' responses to the questionnaire dealing with the challenges of L2 idiom learning suggested that L2 idioms were difficult to understand mainly because they were not treated well in classes and syllabi. The students also stated that idioms were problematic because they did not have enough experience coping with them. The findings support Alhaysony's (2017), indicating that English idioms are troublesome since their teaching has not been included in the course syllabus. They also provide further confirmation of the findings of Liontas (2002), and Saleh and Zakaria (2013), showing that the majority of students complained that L2 idioms are problems in language learning because they are simply neglected or poorly taught in class. The findings also corroborate those of Saleh and Zakaria (2013) and Alhaysony (2017) who found that the lack of experience dealing with idioms is one of the biggest challenges in learning idioms.

In fact, in Iranian high school programs, not only is there no course or part of course particularly designed for teaching idiomatic expressions, the figurative dimension of the English language and target culture are also ignored, avoided or taken for granted, or at best marginalized, in English textbooks and course syllabi. Learning idiomatic expressions plays a role in learner's communicative competence but since some of these expressions are culturally specific and the students are deprived of opportunities to get some information about target culture and culture-related expressions in these syllabi and textbooks, they will face serious challenges while they come up with the expressions in real life communication. They have little knowledge and experience to be able to overcome the challenges, and they treat the expressions like other phrases and expressions, so their comprehension will be problematic. Teachers simply neglect them and teach and work on those areas considered more important by the textbooks and syllabi. They do not spend enough energy and time teaching such expressions and making the students aware of target culture since they simply know that idioms are given very less weight in tests. In theory, some teachers probably believe that they should teach idiomatic language to their students and not overlook such a vital issue because becoming more native-like in English is by learning idioms, understanding their meanings, and using them frequently parallel to English language native speakers. However, taking a quick look at the



students' responses reveals that, in practice, idioms did not receive adequate attention from teachers and decision makers.

Decision makers continue to perceive language as a dichotomy of 'grammar rules' and 'lists of individual words', proposed by Boers, Demecheleer and Eyckmans (2004, p. 375). Less importance to MWUs such as idioms and more emphasis on that dichotomy in textbooks and exams demotivates teachers as well as learners to some extent to go beyond such dichotomy. It is necessary that the expressions be included in syllabi and presented in textbooks appropriately. Teachers should also be trained how to treat them in class. The results also seem to accord with those of Alshiraida (2014), who demands that idiomatic expressions be incorporated into English textbooks and EFL teachers help learners deal with them.

However, much less than half of the students believed that idioms are difficult because they have no analogue in their L1 or contain unfamiliar words. One reason why a few students (i.e., 31.5%) believed that L2 idioms are problematic because they have no analogue in their L1 is that despite minor differences, the majority of frequently used English idioms often have equivalents in Persian to some extent (e.g., an equivalent for the English expression "*a piece of cake*" can be "*like drinking water*" in Persian). The problem does not arise here, but it arises when the students cannot find a link between one particular English idiom and that of another in Persian. However, this finding contradicts Alhaysony's (2017), reporting that many of the participants seemed to have difficulty understanding idioms because they have no analogue in their L1. A reason for this contradiction may be referred to the difference in the participants' first languages. While the subjects' first language was Persian in the current study, the subjects' first language was Arabic in Alhaysony's.

Besides, the explanation why less than half of the students (i.e., 40.5%) believed that idioms are difficult because they contain unfamiliar words is that they may know that the difficulty arises from finding the hidden and non-literal meanings of the words of idioms whether they are familiar or unfamiliar words. For example, an average Iranian high school student is expected to know every word of the following idioms: "*A piece of cake*" and "*count to ten*"; however, it is possible not to know the figurative meanings of these expressions, so they often define them literally. This finding is different from Saleh and Zakaria's (2013), which revealed that many students

had trouble learning English idioms because they did not know the meaning of the individual words of idiomatic expressions. They claimed that the difficulty of idioms was mainly due to their unknown constituent parts.

Another concern of the study was to identify categories of LLSs frequently used by successful students to understand English idioms. Analyzing intermediate EFL learners' responses to the SILL questionnaire and their scores on the idiom comprehension test showed that those learners who performed better in the comprehension test frequently used metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies, respectively. They also used affective strategies the least. In general, the findings are in line with those of Qingquan, Chatupote and Teo (2008), reporting that successful students used cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently than unsuccessful students. They also support Gerami and Baighlou's (2011) findings, showing that successful Iranian students used metacognitive and compensation strategies the most, whereas they utilized affective strategies the least. Moreover, the findings are in agreement with Meshkat and Saeb's (2012) findings, reporting that Iranian high school students used metacognitive strategies the most but affective strategies the least. This result corroborates Rezaei and Almasian's (2007), which revealed that compensation strategies were successful language learners' favorite strategy category. Furthermore, the finding is compatible with that of Nikoopour and Amini Farasani (2010), who reported metacognitive strategies as the most frequently used strategies by the learners. The finding also lend credence to Oxford's (1990) research, suggesting that cognitive strategies were employed frequently by language learners. The study, moreover, provides further support for those studies that suggest affective strategies were one of the least favored strategies among learners (e.g., Gerami & Baighlou, 2011; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Rezaei & Almasian, 2007; Zarei & Shahidipour, 2013).

In particular, the findings confirm Cooper's (1999), and Zarei and Shahidipour's (2013), indicating that cognitive strategies were among the most frequent and effective strategies used in understanding idioms. They also provide additional confirmation of Mäntylä's study (2004), which showed that EFL learners frequently employed three major strategies, namely looking for an L1 equivalent, finding relationships between literal and figurative meanings, and guessing from the context, to understand

English idioms. While the first and second strategies belong to the category of cognitive strategies, the third strategy is a compensation strategy. Further support for these findings comes from those researchers who advocated the use of the keyword technique as an effective strategy for understanding new words and idioms (e.g., Hulstjin, 1997; Mäntylä, 2004). The keyword technique is a kind of cognitive strategy which refers to finding a relationship between the unfamiliar word and some familiar ones and storing them in and retrieving them from memory with the help of this connection (Hulstjin, 1997). The keyword technique is effective for concrete words that create a visual image. Idioms often refer to some concrete events which can be visualized. Regarding the participants' frequent use of compensation strategies, including guessing from the context, this finding is consistent with those studies (e.g., Bulut & Celik-Yazici, 2004) showing a high tendency for L2 learners in using context to guess the meanings of idioms.

There are several possible reasons why metacognitive, compensation, and cognitive strategies were preferred, but affective ones were not used by the participants. The explanation for the most frequent use of metacognitive strategies by successful students in understanding idioms is that they could control their own learning process through metacognitive strategies even outside the classroom. Part of L2 idiom learning occurs outside the classroom through exposure to the natural use of language. For instance, by using the following metacognitive strategies, mentioned in the SILL questionnaire: "*I pay attention when someone is speaking English.*", and "*I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.*", successful participants could have more exposure to English input, including figurative language, and develop their comprehension.

Moreover, the rationale for the high use of cognitive strategies is that those cognitive strategies of using the keyword technique, looking for an L1 equivalent, and finding relationships between literal and idiomatic meanings can be effective for understanding L2 idioms. In other words, using cognitive strategies enables learners to understand idioms by making a connection between new and old information, analyze and elaborate idioms to arrive at the right meaning, analyze idioms contrastively across languages, and find similarities and differences between L1 and L2; therefore, they can find appropriate equivalents of L2 idioms in L1, and finally resort to translating or transferring from L1 to L2 to get the figurative meaning of idioms.

Learners can also take advantage of memory-enhancing strategies, such as the keyword technique, in order to store and retrieve new vocabulary, including idioms, better (Oxford, 1990). For example, more successful participants manifested more preference for strategies like: *"I try not to translate word-for-word."*; *"I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English."*; *"I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English."*, and *"I try to talk like native English speakers."* These strategies could help them improve their L2 idiom comprehension in some ways. In fact, they tried not to translate the expressions word for word; instead, they tried to go beyond the literal interpretations of every constituent to find their hidden and figurative meanings. They attempted to look for links between literal and figurative interpretations. They also tried to find words and expressions in their L1 which are more or less similar to new words and expressions in the target language; as a result, they could find better L1 equivalents of L2 idioms. Furthermore, learners who often watched TV shows or movies in English had more exposure to real life language, and they were more likely to come up with everyday idiomatic expressions. They could experience dealing with idioms more than learners who received their input only from the textbooks. Finally, learners who tried to speak like native speakers focused more on a natural use of language, and the natural use of language includes many of these expressions.

In addition, the possible justification for the frequent use of compensation strategies by successful students to understand L2 idioms is that their limited knowledge of the idiomatic expressions in the target language urged them to resort to employing some compensation strategies such as using contextual clues to guess the intended meanings of idioms, which could usually lead to correct interpretations. A quick look at the findings of previous studies (see, for example, Rohani et al., 2012) can support the idea that context plays a facilitating role in understanding idioms.

On the other hand, the reason why affective strategies were the least favored group is that they do not help learners directly improve their comprehension of idioms, but rather they help avoid them. Affective strategies enable learners to lower anxiety. Learning idioms is not an easy task. Many learners are afraid of making mistakes, so they avoid doing whatever seems face-threatening. By using these strategies, learners do not

take risks with learning the expressions which are more cognitively demanding than learning ordinary words or expressions. They never try to get the meaning of L2 idioms, and they simply skip them unless they are asked or forced.

On the whole, there can be at least three plausible reasons for a preference toward direct strategies (i.e., compensation and cognitive strategies) and a disinclination to use indirect strategies (i.e., social and affective strategies). The first reason relates to the participants of the study who were Iranian high school students. Iranian students often have a tendency to employ more familiar strategies and avoid trying less familiar ones. Direct strategies are more familiar and practical for them, whereas indirect strategies are less known and taught at school. Furthermore, they are not taught to control their emotions using affective strategies and have group work activities using social strategies. The next reason relates to the teachers. As students, many teachers, especially Iranian high school teachers, were trained to take advantage of direct strategies at the expense of indirect ones. As a result, when they become teachers, they still believe that these direct strategies are worth teaching to students in class. The last reason may be attributed to the Iranian educational system. In this system, classes are often teacher-fronted and product-oriented. In a teacher-fronted class, there is not enough interaction neither between the teacher and students nor among the students and their classmates. Students' affective and social factors are simply neglected, and direct strategies like translating, memorizing, analyzing, or reasoning are more emphasized. For example, when students face an unknown English idiom, the teacher often provides them with an equivalent in their L1. This technique urges them to translate, analyze, transfer, and finally memorize the new idiom. Moreover, in a product-oriented class, grades and examinations are important for students. As Zare (2010) argues, it is highly crucial for Iranian students and their parents to get good grades on their examinations. They are judged mainly on exam results. Failure to get a good grade will have serious consequences for continuing their studies. In this context, they prefer to use more direct, familiar, practical, and less demanding strategies like planning, highlighting essential information, taking notes, and memorizing, which can influence the learning product rather than the learning process.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The present study investigated Iranian senior high school students' perception and practice of English idioms. It found that they faced difficulties in understanding them because they were not emphasized well by their textbooks or their teachers in their classrooms. As Liu (2003) asserts, idioms seem to be too complex for foreign language users, so the learning goal is limited to just expressing ideas and thoughts in plain English. Not only material developers, but also teachers tend to avoid idioms. However, students' perceptions challenged this stereotype of idiom learning. Many of them preferred to have them in their textbooks and deal with them in class because through reading books, magazines or newspapers, watching TV shows, series or films, or listening to songs or lectures, they have realized that idioms are frequently used by native English speakers every day. They know that neglecting them adds fuel to the fire when they come up with naturally occurring language. Knowing the expressions helps them understand the everyday language better and develop their communicative skills. Paying more attention to the students' preferences, needs, and wants can create a more motivating and enjoyable learning environment.

The study also found that metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies were used the most by successful students in L2 idiom comprehension. Participants who made more use of direct strategies, like reasoning, analyzing, translating, transferring, guessing intelligently, and overcoming limitations in language skills, in addition to metacognitive strategies, like evaluating the learning, had better performance on the idiom comprehension test.

On the whole, the findings can provide several pedagogical implications for EFL learners, teachers, material developers, and syllabus designers. Since the participants had difficulty learning L2 idioms and were not satisfied with the way they were addressed in classes and materials, syllabus designers and material developers are suggested not to ignore them, but rather, pay more attention to them and include them in their syllabi and materials. They are also suggested to present them in a way that learners can use various effective strategies. Learners and teachers should also be provided with an opportunity in class to talk about the challenges of idiom learning and the LLSs they employ to deal with these challenges. Teachers

are advised to share their own experiences about effective LLSs, and ask successful students to elaborate which LLSs they employ and how they employ them to make their L2 idiom learning more efficient. Then, less successful students can raise their awareness of the effective LLSs and use them to learn idioms better. Since metacognitive, cognitive, and compensations strategies were found to be the most frequently employed strategies by successful students in understanding idioms in the present study, they should receive more attention in syllabi, materials, and classes to help less successful learners improve their idiom comprehension.

Like any similar research, the current study faced inevitable limitations. The main shortcomings were its number of participants, their variation, and data collection methods. The study was restricted to 200 Iranian EFL learners and one section of the study was limited to 98 intermediate EFL learners; thus, much care is necessary not to overgeneralize the results. Furthermore, they were both male and female learners while the difficulty and strategy use may somehow differ between different genders. They were also all senior high school students between the ages of 14 and 18 years old. The results may change if the subjects of different grades and ages are involved. The study also used questionnaires and tests to collect the relevant data. The results may vary in case different methods are used for data collection like think-aloud techniques, observations, and interviews.

For further research, researchers may take individual differences such as age, gender, personality type, background knowledge, etc. into consideration. More studies are also recommended to use different data collection techniques such as interviews or observations to investigate students' as well as teachers' perception and practice of L2 idiomatic expressions, and the role and place of such expressions in materials.

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