

Challenges Students Encounter When Translating Idiomatic Expression. A Case Study of Faculty of Education Students

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التحديات التي يواجهها الطلاب عند ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية: دراسة حالة على طلاب كلية التربية

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the challenges students face when translating idiomatic expressions. It also investigates what strategies students use to overcome these challenges. To collect the data, the study adopts a mixed-method research characterized by a questionnaire distributed to 20 students in Faculty of Education- Misurata University, and a semi-structured interview with two instructors teaching translation in English department in the faculty. The participants are 20 students study English in Faculty of Education and two instructors of translation courses. The finding aligns limited idiom recognition, reliance on literal translation, and lack of cultural awareness. This study concludes that effective idiom translation needs a good cultural background, adaptive strategies and contextual inference. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of training strategies like paraphrasing, finding equivalents, and cultural awareness. Incorporating these elements into syllabus can substantially reinforce students' translation proficiency and cultural communicative effectiveness.

Keywords: Challenges, idiomatic expressions, learners, translation.

الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف التحديات التي يواجهها الطلاب عند ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية، كما يحقق في الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها الطلاب للتغلب على هذه التحديات. ولجمع البيانات، اعتمدت الدراسة على منهج البحث المختلط من خلال استبيان وزّع على 20 طالبًا في كلية التربية بجامعة مصراتة، بالإضافة إلى مقابلة شبه منظمة مع اثنين من الأساتذة الذين يدرّسون الترجمة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بالكلية. شملت عينة الدراسة 20 طالبًا يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية التربية، إلى جانب اثنين من أساتذة مساقات الترجمة. أظهرت النتائج محدودية معرفة الطلاب بالتعابير الاصطلاحية، واعتمادهم على الترجمة الحرفية، ونقص الوعي الثقافي لديهم. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن الترجمة الفعالة للتعابير الاصطلاحية تحتاج إلى خلفية ثقافية جيدة، واستراتيجيات مرنة، وقدرة على الاستدلال السياقي. كما أبرزت الدراسة أهمية تدريب الطلاب على استراتيجيات مثل إعادة الصياغة، وإيجاد المكافئات المناسبة، وتنمية الوعي الثقافي. إن تضمين هذه العناصر ضمن المقررات الدراسية يمكن أن يعزز بشكل كبير كفاءة الطلاب في الترجمة وفعاليتهم في التواصل الثقافي.

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions are always considered to be challenging to language learners. It is often presents difficulty due to their figurative meaning. Idioms are essential component of language and communication. Learners of language often find idioms difficult because they are cultural-specific that languages obtain.

Despite the challenges, idiomatic expressions enrich language vocabulary that helps learners to master the language effectively. Based on Boers and Lindstormberg (2008), the context that idiomatic expressions embedded in determine the meaning and understanding of them. In addition, Learner' knowledge background facilitates idioms understanding and translating.

Learners of language tend to find translation challenging as they hard to pay careful attention to cultural aspects which they may lack. Idioms are considered to be obstacles to learn because they are not literal and they mean different what they say.

Translators have to be aware of idioms- related meaning to meet the real meaning They have to follow some strategies that help them to overcome problems and difficulty when translating idiomatic expressions. According to Abdalla (2023), in translating idioms from English into another language, a translator often meets some challenges that are not easy to overcome. However, one of the most difficulties for the translator may be the lack of equivalence in the target language. The other difficulty is that some idiomatic expressions are necessarily untranslatable. That is, that idiom is specific to that culture and refers to items and form is hard to find it in the target language.

. According to Langlotz (2006) idiomatic expressions have been seen as a conventional multi-word units that are semantically vague and structurally frozen.

Therefore, some researchers claim that there are some techniques/ strategies that can be used to learn idioms easily. According to Guduru (2012), there are several methods of idioms learning which facilitate learning idiomatic expressions. These methods are:

- A. Memorization
- b. The key word method.
- c. Using idiom Notebook.
- d. Learning idioms through conversations.
- e. Learning idioms through idioms.
- f. Display on notice boards.

These strategies or methods may be helpful to some learners but nor for others. That is, instructors can employ other strategies like teaching idioms through the four skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. Al Kadi (2015)

Literature Review.

Translation is considered to be as a complex cognitive and linguistic task, It requires from translators not only to substitute word-for-word between languages but also to understand what are beyond the literal meaning of the context. However, translation figurative idiomatic expressions need more attention than translating general speech.

Several research has investigated the challenges students face when translating idiomatic expression. For example, Adelnia & Dastjerdi (2011); Ali and Al Rashiadi (2017) & Hajiyeva (2024). Ali & Al Rahaidi (2017) have investigated the challenges undergraduate

Omani students when translating idiomatic and culturally-bound expression- from English into Arabic. Furthermore, they study what strategies they use to overcome these challenges and to help them handle such challenges and to develop their skills of translation. They conclude that the context is essential for interpreting the meaning of idiomatic expression. Teachers have to raise students' awareness that idioms are culture-specific, but also students can rely on paraphrasing to translate idiomatic

Hajiyeva (2024) has studied what challenges students face in understanding idiomatic expressions. He asserts that idioms serve as a bridge between linguistic knowledge and cultural understanding. In addition, idioms are characterized as a unique part of each language found in large number of languages. Hajiyeva (2024) provides a several key factors of intrinsic complexity of idiomatic expressions:

- **Culture lack of semantic transparency:** Most idioms are culture-specific. This means that learners can not understand what they mean literally. Therefore, Learners have to rely on contextual clues to understand them.
- **Cultural and Historical Contexts:** These kinds of idioms are deeply rooted in cultural and historical narratives. Learners have to understand what is the history beyond this idiomatic expression to understand interpret what it means.
- **Structural variability,** Syntactic structure of idiomatic expressions are considered to be various, this causes complicating in their understanding. For instance, 'break a leg' can be understood as idiomatic meaning "wish someone a good luck" or "break your leg? gives the literal meaning of the words as they it is changed syntactically-

In a work cited by Adelnia & Dastjerdi (2011), Baker (1992) provides idioms translation strategies that can be used when translating idiomatic expression. These four strategies present as follows:

- **Using an idiom of similar meaning and form:** Some idioms are universal to all languages Translators and learners may give a similar- idiom in their native language. in form and meaning.
- **Using an Idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form:** Here, the idiom has similar meaning in the two languages but with different form.
- **Translation by paraphrasing:** This strategy can be used when learners or translators can not find any equivalent for the source idiom. Omitting the whole idiomatic expressions when translating, is not acceptable. Translators should elaborate more on the source idiom to transfer the meaning.
- **Translation by omission** This could be done by translators when there is no match between the two languages. Idiomatic expressions can be difficult to understand when it causes misinterpretation. This may arise when the idiomatic expression is specific to one culture not to another.

According to Hajiyeva (2025). given the complexity and cultural background of idiomatic expression and slang, translators have to employ a various strategy to provide both the meaning and communication effect.

Questions of the Study

The basic questions of this study are:

1. What are the most common challenges Students in Faculty of Education encounter When translating idiomatic expressions?
2. What strategies students do to overcome these challenges?

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the specific challenges students encounter when translating idiomatic expressions
2. To provide what are the appropriate to overcome the challenges when they translate idioms?

Statement of the Problem

Idiomatic expressions are essential to learners to obtain effective language communication, but they still cause obstacles to most learners who learn English as a second language. These obstacles stem from the cultural specificity and vague semantic meaning. That is why most learners often resort to literal translation and hinder the real meaningful communication.

Students have to translate such idiomatic expression effectively by handling adaptive strategies. In addition, it is necessary to include idiomatic expressions in syllabuses by adaptive translation methods which facilitate students' translation recognition. This research investigates these challenges that students face when translating idioms. Furthermore, it seeks what are the effective strategies students have to use to overcome these problems.

Significance of the Study.

Idiomatic expressions are essential in learning a language. They are deeply rooted in culture and specific to understand how language is used in several contexts. By identifying what challenges students face to understand idioms, this could help educators and decision makers shed light on the solutions and how learners can understand idiomatic idioms in a simple way. As idiomatic expressions are often culturally bound, this study gives insight on significance of cultural competence in translation, encouraging learners to deeply understand the cultural and contextual contexts.

Research Methodology

It is very useful to determine the methodology of the research whether it is qualitative or quantitative or using both of them "triangulation". Each has advantages and disadvantages but to enhance confidence and ensure findings, using both methods in one research can enhance validity and reliability of the findings. However, this research paper has used two instruments to collect data to discover why idioms are difficult. In addition, it aims to investigate the difficulties encounter by university students in translating idiomatic expressions from English language into Arabic language. ,

Research Instruments

The following instruments have been used to collect data of research:

Questionnaire

According to Creswell (2013), a questionnaire is a type of research tool used for data collection in surveys. It is given to participants as a form that is completed and returned to the researcher. However, the questionnaire used in this study consists of 10 statements, and two open-ended questions. The students are asked to tick one of two options (agree, disagree). All items are restricted to show why idiomatic expressions are difficult to understand and what strategies students can use to overcome these challenges.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Five questions have been asked to two teachers who teach Translation I & Translation II. One of the teachers has taught translation for many semesters, whereas the other teacher experience teaching translation only for two semesters. These questions aim to gain information about the most common problems students face, and how they struggle to find solutions to challenges they encounter.

The Sample and Setting

To answer the questions of the study, a questionnaire of 12 items (10 Likert two scale & 2 open questions) has been distributed to 20 students who have been studying translation 2 in the English Department- Faculty of Education, Misurata University. The sample has been randomly chosen. They are 17 females and 3 males who have passed translation I course and now they are studying translation II course. The sample also includes two instructors who teach these courses in the department.

Data Collection

This research uses a mixed method approach (see the Appendix A) to collect the data. The questionnaire is given to 20 students studying English in English Department- Faculty of Education.

The first item shows that most students (95%) claim that idiomatic expressions are difficult because they do not have direct translation in Arabic. Cultural-idiomatic expressions show the most difficult regarding understanding the meaning. As shown in the figure, very few students (5%) think that they do not find difficulty when translating idioms in Arabic.

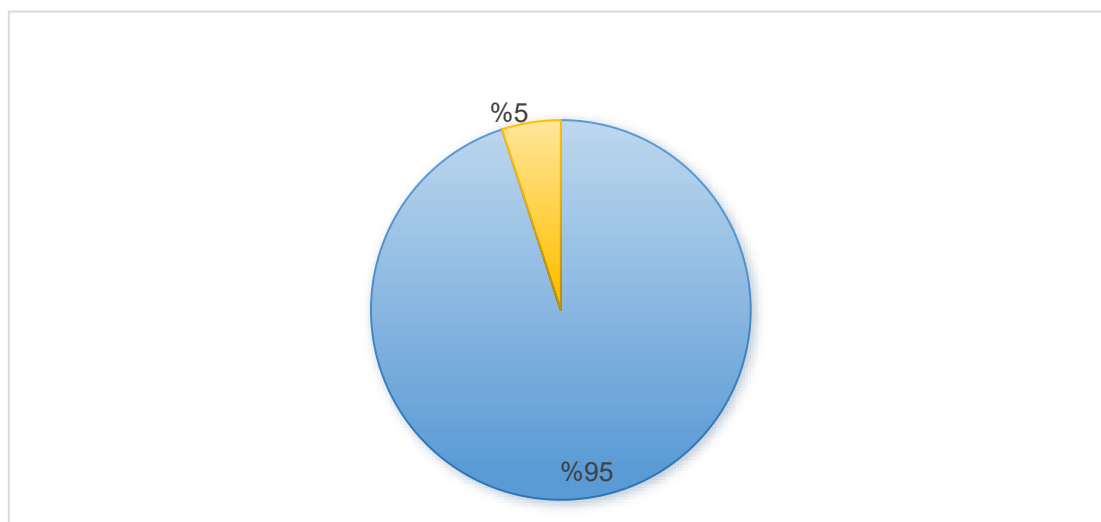


Figure (1) I find difficulty when idioms do not have direct translation in Arabic

This figure shows whether students find a lack of equivalent in their language when translating idioms. As shown, a significant number of participants (70%) find idiomatic translation difficult because of lack of equivalents in understanding. Whereas only (30%) of participants reply the opposite.

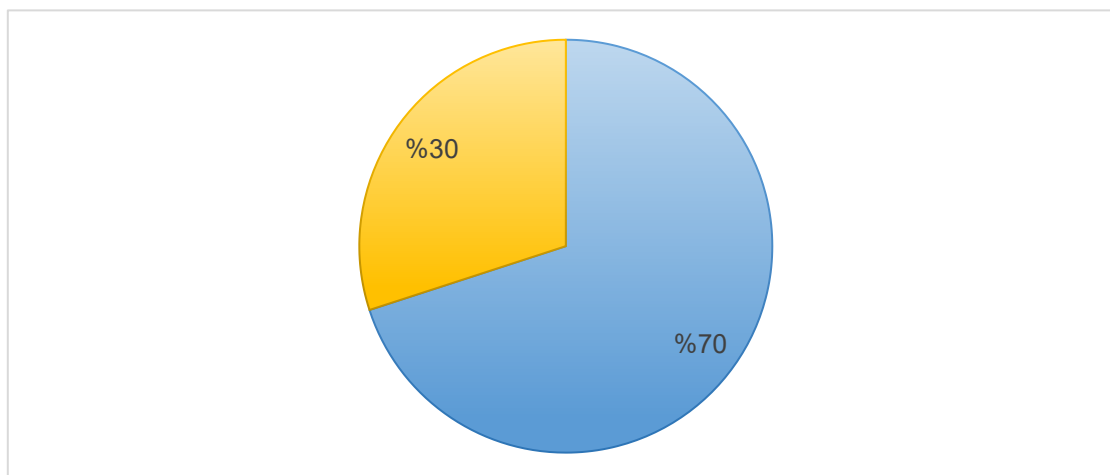


Figure (2) When I translate idioms, I find a lack of equivalents in my language.

The third item in the questionnaire note that the majority of the participants assert that they often find idiomatic expressions do not make sense when translated word for a word. Idiomatic expressions' constituents often do not give any hint about the meaning. The literal meaning of the words does not help translators or students to interpret them.

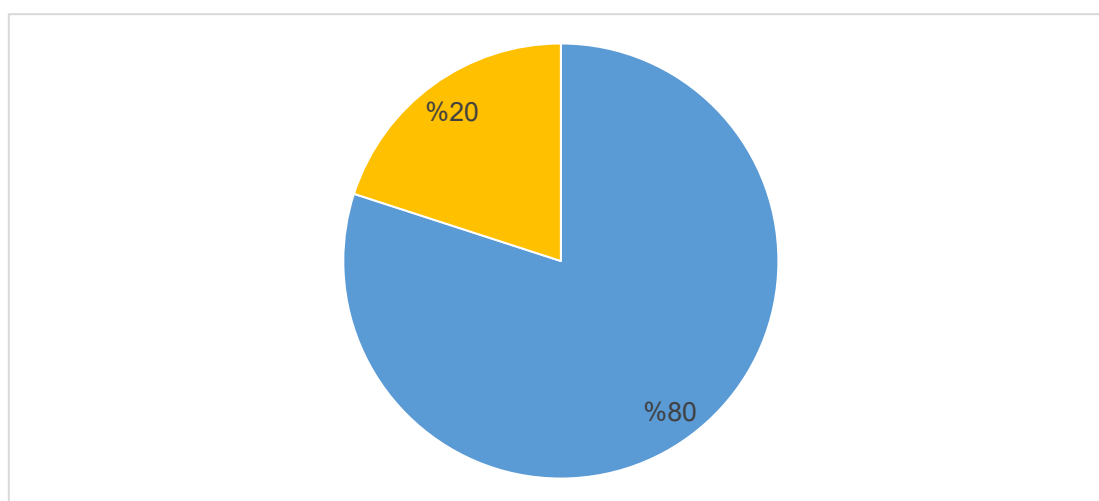


Figure (3) I often find idioms do not make sense when translated word for a word.

According to the below figure (4), a significant number of the participants (65%) show that idioms are difficult because they are not familiar in the syllabus. This means that there is a lack of figurative expressions mentioned in the curriculum and students do not study idioms in a good command. Only (35%) of the participants reveal that idioms are not difficult because if the syllabus but because of other reasons.

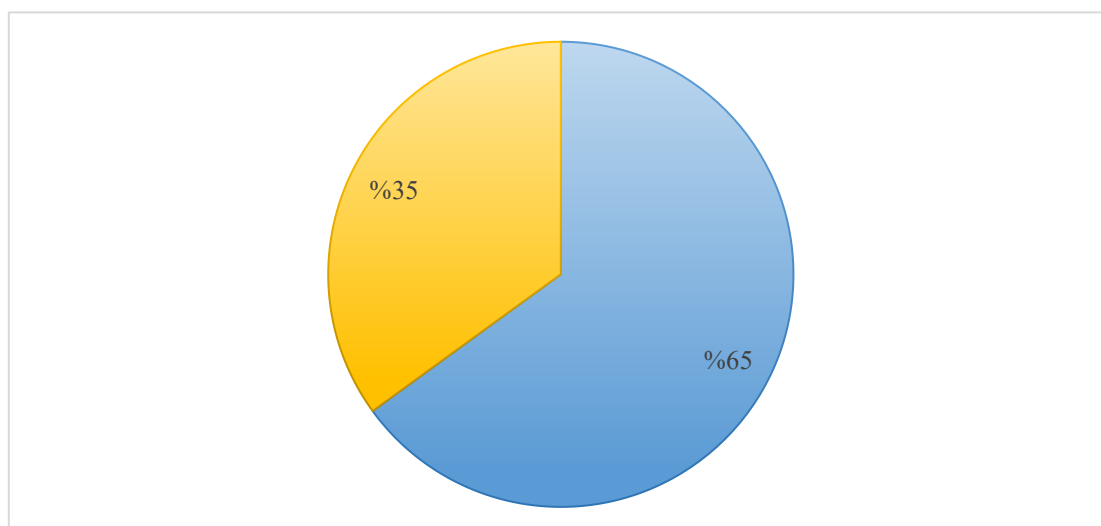


Figure (4) Idioms are difficult because they are not familiar in the syllabus.

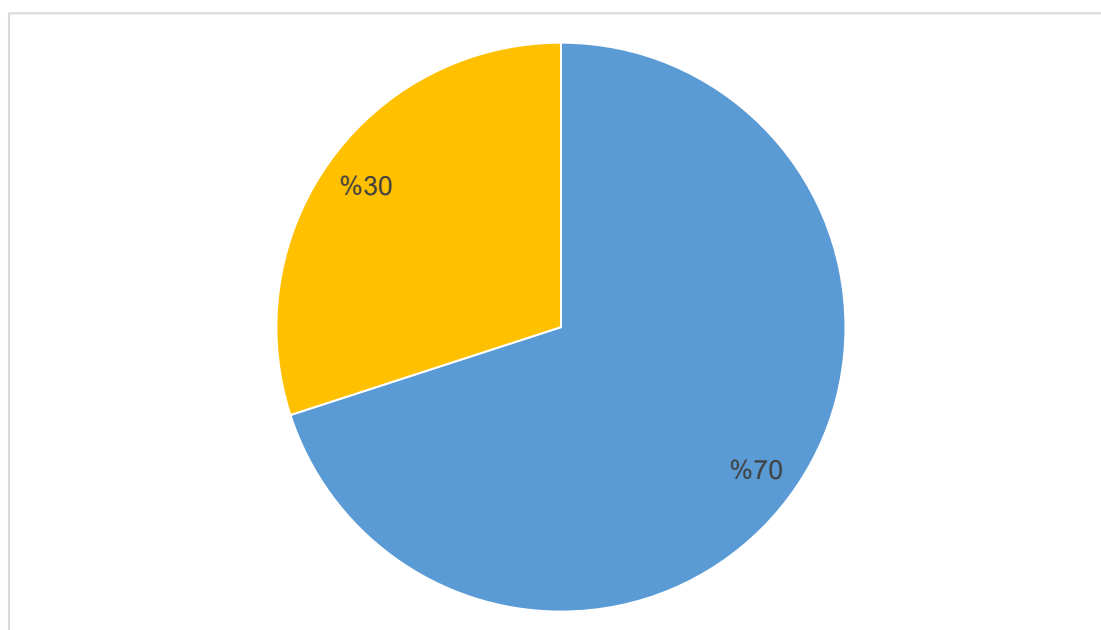


Figure (5) The lack of contextrtual information makes idioms translation more challenging.

Figure (5) shows whether participants find the lack of contextual information makes idioms translation more challenging. As shown, A considerable percentage of participants reveal that idioms are more difficult when they are not in contexts. In contrast, (30%) of respondents show the opposite.

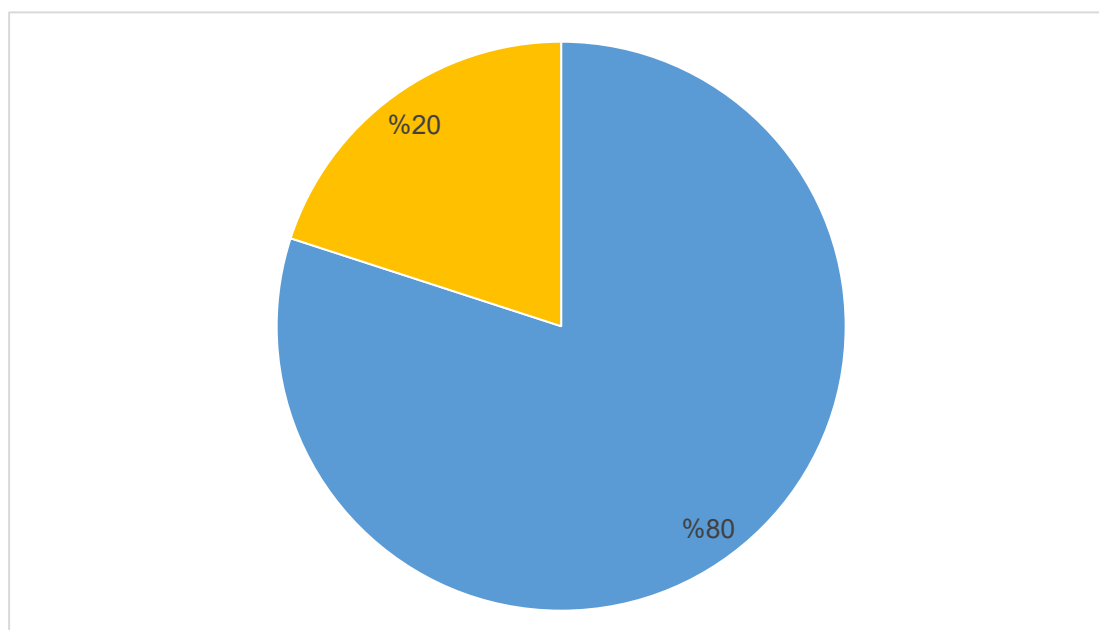


Figure (6) I feel frustrated when I come across idioms in texts or conversation.

According to the data presented in Figure (6), a notable portion of participants (80%) indicate that they feel frustrated when they come across idioms in texts or conversation. On the other hand, (20%) of the participants reveal that they do not feel frustrated when they find idioms in texts or conversations.

The following figures show what strategies students do to overcome the challenges when translating idioms.

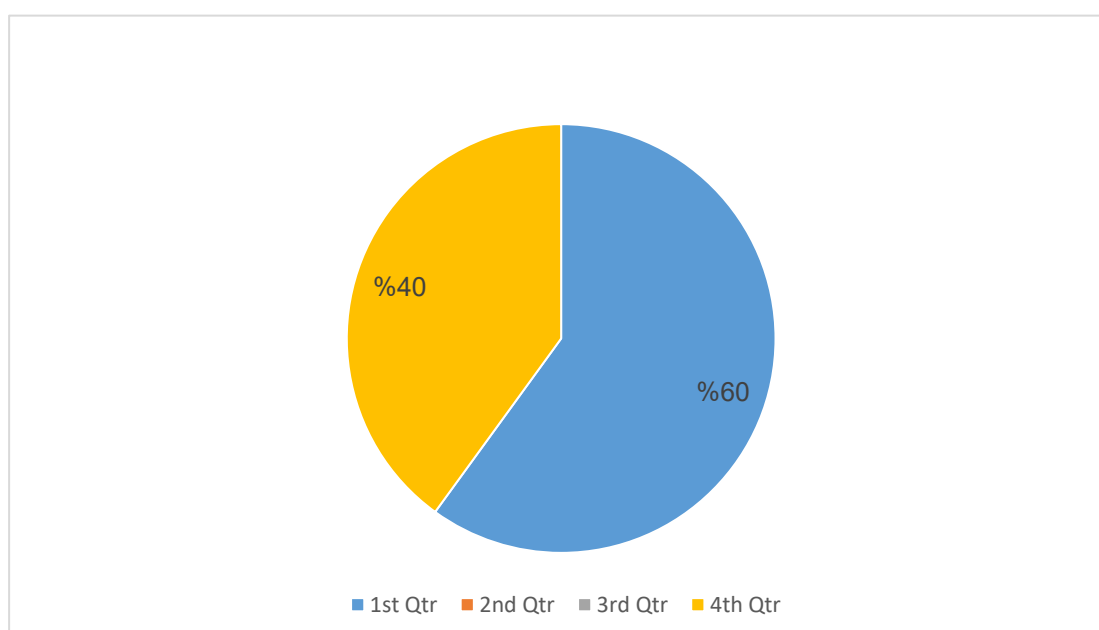


Figure (7) Using google translate is the most helpful task for students to improve translation skills.

Students sometimes use strategies when translating to help them understand idiomatic expressions. As shown in figure (7), most participants (60%) indicate that they use google translate to interpret idioms. This strategy helps them understand the meaning of idiomatic expressions. Whereas only (40%) of the participants say this strategy does not help them in their translation.

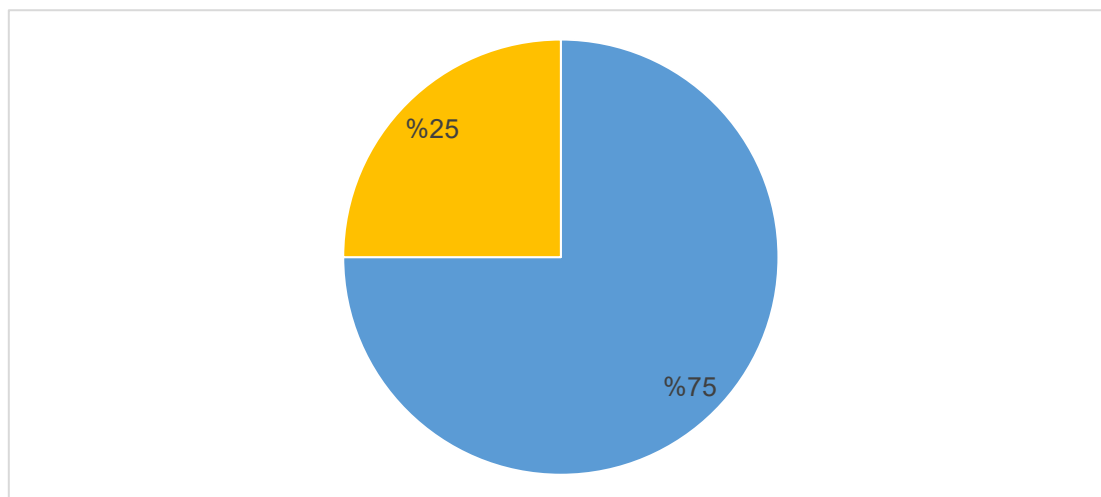


Figure (8) I consult bilingual dictionaries for idioms equivalents to understand idiomatic expressions.

A significant number of the participants (75%) demonstrate that they consult bilingual dictionaries when they translate idioms. In contrast, only (25%) of the participants argue they do not use dictionaries to understand idioms meaning.

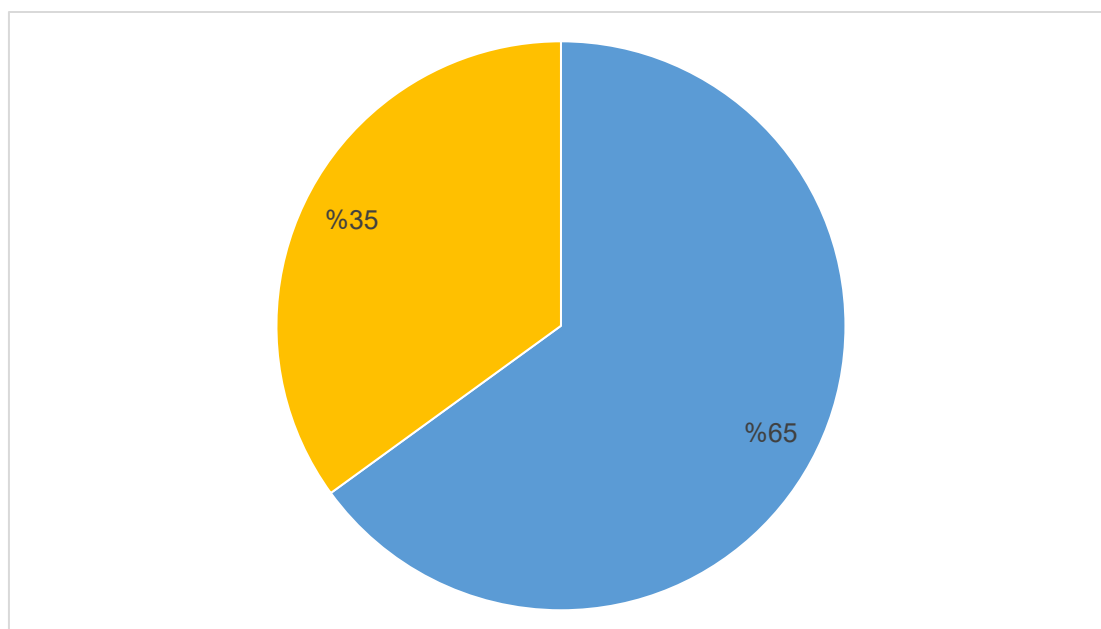


Figure (9) I paraphrase the idiom to maintain the intended meaning.

This figure shows that a high percentage of students (90%) claim that they paraphrase idioms to maintain the intended meaning. On the other hand, only (10%) of the participants claim the that they do not paraphrase idioms and try to find idioms in Arabic.

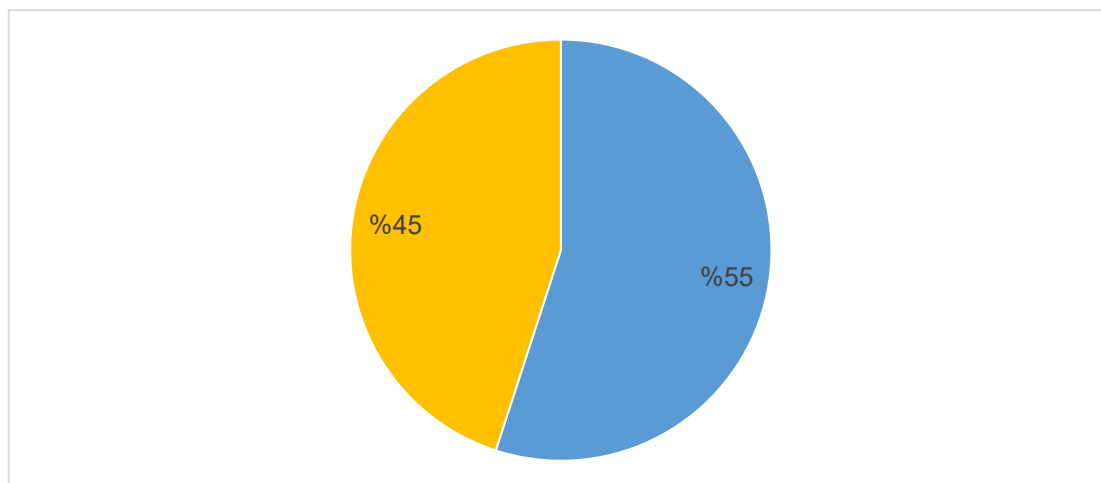


Figure (10) I omit idioms if no suitable translation is available.

Almost half of the participants in this study (55%) indicate that they omit the idiom when they do not know the equivalent idiom in their language. They use this strategy indicates that omission may be appropriate when idioms are cultural- specific. While (45%) of the respondents claim that they do not omit the idioms.

Analysis of Open-ended Questions

In this study, the researcher adds two open-ended questions to questionnaire items to give the participants a chance to think about the challenges they encounter when translating idioms and to answer them according to their experience. For the first question 'what specific challenges do you face when translating idioms?'. Most of the participants indicate that the most difficulties they face that they cannot understand the exact meaning of the idiom. This usually happens because of the different cultures, and different grammatical structures of the two languages. Different cultures between the two languages and misunderstanding in the meaning is considered common to all students participated in this study.

The second question is 'does literal translation make you understand the meaning of the idiomatic expressions? Most of the participants reveal that literal translation of idioms does not make them understand the meaning.

Analysis of Interview Responses

The interview has been done with two teachers teaching translation in Faculty of Education. The questions focus on what challenges students face when they translate idioms and what strategies need to be developed to overcome these challenges. following table shows the questions with the answers revealed by the two teachers.

Table 1 the questions with the answers revealed by the two teachers.

Theme	Code
1. What are the main challenges that learners face when idioms do not have direct translation in their native language?	<p>A. Students often cannot differentiate between idioms and other utterances as general language.</p> <p>B. Students find idioms difficult because their level is low and idioms need a high level of proficiency. Moreover, syllabus has to include idioms to force students to master them.</p>
2. How can teachers help students recognize idioms in the text?	<p>A. Teachers have to use meaningful contexts to help students understand idiomatic expressions.</p> <p>B. Based on my own experience, students have to be encouraged to understand idioms in their native language to be able to understand idioms in the target language. Students sometimes find idioms difficult because they do not have much experience about their native languages idioms.</p>
3. How do different sentence structure of the two languages affect students ability to translate?	<p>A. It is important for the student to be proficient in both languages, in order to understand whether it is an idiom or not. Proficient students can recognize if there is an idiomatic expression in the text or not.</p> <p>B. Idioms have special forms whose meaning can not be deduced from individual words. That is why they are usually known as idiomatic expressions. In contrast some idioms are recognized only from the text when the meaning of the literal translation provide strange understanding.</p>
3. How do learners deal with idioms in English that do not have direct equivalents in their native languages?	<p>A. The aim of translation to preserve the meaning, guess the meaning from context or add a word that gives the meaning. equivalent in both languages.</p> <p>B. Based on my experience, students have to deal with the meaning not with word-for-word. There are some English idioms which do not have similar one in Arabic, so students have to give only the meaning.</p>
5. What is the importance of the context understanding when translating idioms?	<p>A. It is very important. The surrounding situational and linguistic context play a significant role in translation idioms correctly.</p> <p>B. Contexts may help learners to recognize whether the meaning is comedic, professional, formal etc. Without contexts, translation will be completely difficult.</p>

Discussion

Translating idiomatic expressions are considered to be challenging whether to translators or students. As revealed in the responses of the questionnaire or to the open-ended questions, over (95%) of the students participated in this paper reveal that challenging of idiom translation due to lack of finding equivalent idiom. While (80%) of the participants claim that they feel frustrated when they do not understand idioms in the texts. However, (70%) of the respondents indicate that literal translation does not make sense when it is used with idioms.

The common strategies students often tend to use are paraphrasing idioms when the equivalent idioms in Arabic language is not found. Moreover, (75%) of the students see that bilingual dictionaries are facilitating and helpful strategy to translate idiomatic expressions. In addition, (65%) of the respondents claim that google translate is one of the strategies that they tend to use when translating idioms. Moreover (55%) of the participants indicate they omit the idiom when they do not find equivalent in their mother tongue.

According to the open- ended questions, students find idioms difficult because of the different cultures between Arabic and English. Idioms often express the culture of the people speaking that language. That means that idioms are culture rooted highlighting the culture behind that language rather than the literal meaning students understand. In addition, the idioms structure indicates ambiguity of the meaning and this causes challenging to the students.

The qualitative research method in this study (the interview) reveals that students struggle to interpret idioms because they tend to translate them literally. Students low level may be one of the reasons that causes students' misunderstanding of idioms. However, according to the teachers participated in this study, idioms are known as cultural specific which discourage students to understand them easily.

Conclusion

Translation idioms is one of the challenging tasks students often encounter. These difficulties are manifested in the cultural and linguistic differences between the two languages, resulting in literal translations that may not accurately convey the intended meaning. To overcome these challenges, learners are advised to deepen their understand of the cultural and linguistic contexts of both English and Arabic, and to use appropriate translation strategies such as finding equivalent in both languages. By developing these skills, more accurate and effective translations can be achieved, which contributes to enhancing cross cultural understanding and communication.

This study underscores the significant of high level of proficiency, and contextual understanding and cultural awareness in enhancing learners' translation skills. One of the key findings of this study that it highlights the significance of structured practice strategies learners have to grasp. Teachers have to include explicit teaching of idiomatic expressions and cultural nuances. The research also emphasizes the syllabus limitations of including idiomatic expressions and using contextual examples and cultural explanations to teach idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, providing learners with cultural aspects of language through comparative analysis will help learners to master idiomatic expressions and handling effective translation.

Recommendation

This study recommends:

- **Integrating idiomatic expressions in syllabus:** Idioms have to be included in syllabus to show the linguistic and cultural variety of languages. They should not only be embedded in translation course but also in other linguistic courses.
- **Encouraging students to improve their linguistic level:** Students have to develop their level by understanding cultural background of the target language. Idioms enrich the linguistic proficiency of learners.
- **Using adaptive translation strategies.** Instructors have to encourage students to train translation strategies effectively. They can teach paraphrasing, finding equivalent expressions, and contextual guessing rather than relying solely on dictionaries or literal translations.
- **Integrating culturally responsive teaching methods.** Comparing idioms between languages provides understanding of both cultural background.

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Appendix A

Statement	Agree	Disagree
1. I find difficulty when idioms do not have direct translation in Arabic		
2. When I translate idioms, I find a lack of equivalents in my language.		
3. I often find idioms do not make sense when translated word for a word		
4. Idioms are difficult because they are not familiar in the syllabus		
5. The lack of contextual information makes idioms translation more challenging		
6. I feel frustrated when I come across idioms in texts or conversation		
7. Using google translate is the most helpful task for students to improve translation skills.		
8. I consult bilingual dictionaries for idioms equivalents to understand idiomatic expressions.		
9. I paraphrase the idiom to maintain the intended meaning.		
10. I omit idioms if no suitable translation is available.		
11. what specific challenges do you face when translating idioms?		
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12. Does literal translation make you understand the meaning of the idiomatic expressions?		
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Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What are the main challenges that learners face when idioms do not have direct translation in their native language?
2. How can teachers help students recognize idioms in the text?
3. How do different sentence structure of the two languages affect students ability to translate?
4. How do learners deal with idioms in English that do not have direct equivalents in their native languages?
5. What is the importance of the context understanding when translating idioms?