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Idiom Proficiency of Indonesian EFL Learners: A Quantitative Study of English Department Students in Aceh

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A B S T R A C T

The research is designed to fill a gap by quantitatively measuring the level of English idiom proficiency into Indonesian equivalent. A descriptive quantitative approach was maginified in analyzing the data obtained from 20 native Acehnese English Department students purposively and voluntarily selected. The instrument employed was in form of a multiple-choice of idiom proficiency test and was analyzed statistically. The findings revealed that English Department students had a moderate level of idiom proficiency by 52.14%. The result indicates that significant number of students demonstrates inadequate comprehension, particularly when encountering idioms that are culturally specific or contextually unfamiliar. Despite their academic background in English and having learning experiences through coursework or translation practice which contribute to help them understand the idioms, challenges remain in dealing with complex cultural meanings, suggesting a gap in both cultural exposure and idiomatic knowledge. Therefore, it is suggested for local educators to develop more effective teaching strategies for figurative language, ultimately enhancing the students' translational and communicative competence.

Introduction

Language is not only a structure of syntactic rules and lexicon, but also a complex web of cultural nuances and shared meaning. Among these, idioms come up as one of the most interesting and challenging facets of achieving a well proficiency in a second language (L2). An idiom is a phrase with a figurative meaning that is not directly derived from the individual words it contains (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2010).

To comprehend an idiom, one must be able to translate them comprehensively since the words conjoin it has nothing to do with each other (Muliawati et al., 2019). Idioms which appear in all languages can be classified in several types, yet the most common and comprehensive classification for research is as proposed by Boatner and Gates (1975) as cited in (Raflis & Candra, 2019). They divide the idioms into 4 types elaborated as follow.

Firstly, lexical idioms are idioms that relate to word classes or parts of speech. These idioms appear as shorter phrases that indicate specific grammatical categories. Based on their forms, lexical idioms can be classified into the following types:

a. Verbal Idiom

Verbal idiom is a type of idiomatic phrase or phrasal idiom which is mostly nominated or combined by verb and other elements: particles, prepositions or objects, creating a unique and fixed meaning which cannot be figured out by interpreting them literally, such as "figure out" which means find answer to something through thinking, reasoning or investigation.

b. Nominal Idiom

Nominal idiom is defined as idiom that functions as a noun phrase that possess fixed meaning established by cultural convention and cannot be deduced from its literal definition, such as “white-collar worker” which means a professional office worker.

c. Adjectival Idiom

Adjectival idiom is referred to a fixed phrase that functions as an adjective to describe and modifies a noun or pronoun by giving descriptive information about its qualities, state and characteristics, such as “on cloud nine” which has idiomatic meaning as extremely happy.

Secondly, adverbial idiom constitutes an idiomatic expression used to modify a verb, an adjective, an adverb or an entire clause and to supply information about time, place, manner, degree and condition, such as “out of the blue” which can be comprehend idiomatically as suddenly and unexpectedly.

Phraseological idiom is another type of idiom which is longer or full phrase or clause that acts as a single unit which is mostly fixed, yet sometimes can be passivized or has some flexibility. For instance, the idiom “break the ice” which idiomatic meaning is to ease a social tension can be passivized as “the ice was broken” which has the same meaning as the previous one.

Further, frozen idiom is a specific type of phrase logical idiom which is fully fixed or has no flexibility, thus it cannot be changed or passivized. It means that the words, their order and grammatical structure are strongly locked in their place. For example, the idiom “see the light” which means “to finally understand something” cannot be passivized: “the light was seen” since it will lose its idiom.

The last type is proverb idiom conveying traditional wisdom, moral lessons, or general truths about life. These idioms often take the form of complete sentences and are commonly used in both spoken and written language to give advice, warning, or reflect on human behaviour. Unlike other idioms, proverb idioms are usually fixed in form and widely recognized within a culture. For instance, the proverb “he is biting off more than he can chew” which means he is taking on too much work.

To understand idioms well, EFL learners should study the context of their use and the figurative meanings they hold. (Kövecses, 2023) says “awareness of a context includes awareness of the physical context, social context, cultural context, but also awareness of the immediate communicative situation”. It means that contextual awareness is formed of multi dimensions of cognitive skills – linguistic context (every single word, sentence and paragraph surrounding the idiom), the setting where the communication occurs, the relationship among the speakers communicating, the shared culture of a speech community and the purpose of the interaction. All of those multi-layered cognitive skills are fundamental reasons of understanding why idiom proficiency is quite difficult.

Liu (2017) as cited in (Abu-Rabiah, 2025) points that understanding idioms requires more than just literal translation, yet it demands a deep understanding of cultural context the native speakers use in everyday communication. Additionally, greater exposure to the language, such as through reading, listening, and interacting with native speakers, can help learners recognize and use idioms accurately in daily communication.

According to (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008), conquering idioms is considered a very crucial facet of language learning because it can attract great attention from English language learning writers, especially assessing how well foreign language learners acquire and use idioms in communication. Thereby, for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, mastering these expressions is essential for attaining natural communication and in-depth cultural understanding because they are prevalent in both oral communication and written language.

(Asri & Rohmawati, 2017), however, claim that understanding idiomatic expressions is considered challenging for EFL learners as idioms often have meanings that differ from the individual words that compose them. For instance, the idiom "green table" in Indonesian does not have literal meaning as a table which is green, but it refers to the court. This illustrates how idioms are deeply rooted in cultural and contextual meanings, making them difficult to interpret. For language learners, mastering idioms requires not only linguistic proficiency but also an understanding of cultural references and contextual usage to ensure accurate comprehension and communication.

Due to the reason, Baker (2011) and (Wicaksono & Wahyuni, 2018) state that many errors are made by EFL learners in translating the idioms into their equivalent languages. Errors in the idiom interpretation usually occurs due to translating them literally, using them in the wrong context, changing the structure or form of the idiom and using the non-existence or not well-known forms of the idiom.

Idiom proficiency, further, is a part of linguistic phenomenon which is not solely a decorative language, but also a core feature of native-like ability presenting a sophisticated challenge for EFL learners since its meaning is non-compositional and frequently relies on culture-specific awareness or recognition. Therefore, EFL learners cannot translate them from one language into the target language through word-by-word translation process (Bedeker & Feinauer, 2006). Effective translation demands more than finding lexical equivalents; it requires a process of transcultural mediation – where the translator must elaborate and interpret the figurative meaning in the source language and then rebuild it using the natural expressions of the target language and culture (Liddicoat, 2016). This often includes choosing a literal explanation, finding a similar cultural equivalent, or employing a different figurative expression that embraces the same idea (Rohmawati et al., 2022).

For instance, the English idiom “it is raining cats and dogs” does not have a direct equivalent in Indonesian. Thus, the task of a translator, interpreter and learner is to move beyond a simple literal translation and supply a comprehensive analysis that conveys the linguistic and cultural nuances entailed, thus the most accurate and common equivalent meaning in Indonesian is “*hujan turun dengan sangat deras*”. This literal elaboration, reflecting a very heavy downpour, is the most natural and direct way to embrace the idiom's meaning to Indonesian speakers. Moreover, the absence of an animal-based idiomatic equivalent in Indonesian is not a linguistic limitation, otherwise it portrays a different cultural and metaphorical paradigm.

This challenge is definitely linked to Indonesian English Department students since they are trained to be translators, interpreters and English teachers. Their communicative competence might be noted though their capability to proceed the figurative landscape of English remarked as a direct reflection of it.

However, existing literature proves that EFL learners encounter significant obstacles in idiom comprehension, often leading to literal misinterpretations and communication breakdowns. Previous studies conducted in Indonesia by Fathma et al., (2020) and Anjarini and Hatmanto (2021) argue that Indonesian EFL learners still

experience many hurdles when encountering to idiom proficiency. Some of the barriers are insufficient knowledge towards the cultural and contextual equivalent meaning, leading them to fail in using them in communicative facets.

Aceh Province reflects a distinctive and captivating context for this investigation. Acehnese students often engage within a complex multilingual society: Acehnese as their mother tongue, Bahasa Indonesia as the national language and English as their foreign language. This trilingual linguistic phenomenon forms a three-layer process of translation; first, they decode literal meaning of the English idioms, then they subconsciously navigate cultural filter and equivalent check in Acehnese expression, next they produce it into Indonesian equivalent. an English idiom might be analyzed through the filter of their first language and then they proceed it again into their second language, before being constructed in the target language.

While many previous studies have examined and conducted on idiom proficiency among EFL learners globally and in major Indonesian cities, such as Riau, North Sumatera, East Java, Yogyakarta, Kendari and Lampung, there is a significant lack of research concentrating on students in distinct linguistic and cultural context of Aceh Province. The studies, in addition, have often devastated solely on understanding the meaning (receptive comprehension) rather than finding an appropriate equivalent in Indonesian (productive translation).

To be exact, some of them focus on strategies used in translating idiom, such as studies by Anjarini & Hatmanto (2021), Ariyani et al., (2021), Nurosida (2022), Sari et al., (2022) and Tauhid and Rohmah (2024). Additionally, Natasha (2025) and (Rafly & Nurcholis, 2025) conducted their studies on idioms used in literary works. Further, (Ekorini, 2022), (Fathma et al., 2020) and (Melina Ayu Pratiwi et al., 2024) investigated about idioms comprehension in language skill, such a reading and writing. Finally, (Napitupulu et al., 2023) explored the errors made in idiom translation using google translation tool.

There are some relevant studies done to investigate the proficiency level of Indonesian EFL learners towards the English idiom comprehension into Indonesian equivalent are as follow. (Seran, 2020) undertake a study among the sixth-semester English Department students in Nusa Cendana University, East Nusa Tenggara. Using a set of test and questionnaire as the instruments, the result of the study – after examining the quantitative data – reveals that the students' level of idiom proficiency falls in the fair category. Inadequate cultural background knowledge of the target language and lack of vocabulary are the primary factors of the moderate result of deciphering idioms into Indonesian natural expressions.

(Hamid, 2022) commenced his study among the EFL third-year students of Language Department of MAN 1 (Islamic Senior High School) Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi. Test and interview were administered to collect data from the sample. The result shows that the students could not show sufficient ability in translating English idioms into the closest natural meaning in Indonesian.

Next, the most relevant study is by (Idami et al., 2022), analyzing the difficulties in translating idiomatic expressions among English Department students in IAIN Langsa. The total participants are 10 students in the sixth semester. The instruments employed are test and interview. Result of the qualitative content analysis reflects that the majority of the students confront several obstacles in idiom comprehension, including lexical knowledge and stylistic barrier. Moreover, there are some factors contributing to this phenomenon, involving cultural differences between the source and target language and insufficient idiomatic knowledge.

However, there are some distinctions between this study and the previous study done by (Idami et al., 2022). One of them is remarked on the number of the participants participated in the study; this study poses larger number of participants - 20 students from two universities in Aceh, whereas the previous one has small sample size - 10 students altogether from one university in Aceh Province. Another dissimilarity is visible in their aim of the study; the present study attempts to explore the level of idiom proficiency proficiency by measuring the quantitative data, while the previous study aims at finding out kinds of idiom comprehension strategies and factors from the qualitative data.

In conclusion, while previous study (Idami et al., 2022) supplies valuable qualitative recognition of the strategies applied by Acehnese students in understanding the Indonesian equivalences from English idioms and factors influenced the achievement, its finding are limited due to a small number of participants taking part in the research and cannot ensure the overall proficiency level of the population. This present study aims to fill this gap by utilizing the quantitative design with a larger sample size. Therefore, it can be noted that there is a research gap in the existence of the quantitative measurable data for measuring the level of idiom proficiency among Acehnese English Department students and providing a comprehensive, actual proficiency of idiom comprehension among them.

There are some novelties offered by this research. Firstly, it is notable in its scale which uses larger sample size. Measurement, later, serves as another novelty in which it statistically measures the level of proficiency. Additionally, the study offers data type by classifying the types of idioms and then quantifying the mean score to find out the most difficult types of idioms to be comprehended. Finally, it provides contribution in forms of diagnostic and practical research result based on the quantitative measurement of proficiency which can be used to improve teaching and learning process of figurative language for local language pedagogy, including educators, practitioners and curriculum developers in the future. This study, then, was conducted with the primary aim of two keys research question:

1. What is the most difficult type of English idiom to be comprehended into Indonesian equivalent by English Department students in Aceh?
2. To what extent do they comprehend English idioms into Indonesian equivalent?

By concentrating on these major questions, the study attempts to investigate the most difficult type of English idiom to be comprehended into Indonesian equivalent by English Department students in Aceh and to find out the level of idiom proficiency among the students. The findings of this research are intended to furnish valuable insights for local educators to expand more effective teaching strategies for figurative language, eventually empowering the students' ability in translational and communicative skills.

Research Method

Research Design

Descriptive quantitative approach was magnified within this study; a method with a purpose to leak out the reflection or description towards an issue or phenomenon being studied objectively by using some statistical formula to measure or assess data collection and interpretation (Creswell, 2013).

Respondents

The respondents of the research are English Department students who were selected by using volunteer-based purposive sampling through the determination of some criteria prior to the study to meet the research need, namely they must be English

Department students; they must be at least in the fifth semester; they have passed the course of Linguistics and Translation and they are native Acehnese. Hence, there are 20 participants altogether in this study who come from two universities in Banda Aceh regency; Universitas Iskandar Muda and Universitas Syiah Kuala.

Instruments

The instrument used to collect data from participants within the study are a set of idiom questions, involving seven types of English idiom questions; verbal, nominal, adjectival, adverbial, phraseological, frozen and proverb idioms. Each type has three questions, thus there are 21 questions altogether. The type of test carried out is a multiple-choice test, which of four answer choices, namely A, B, C, and D.

Procedures

The data were collected through several steps which can be elaborated as follows. As mentioned previously, the sampling technique applied into this study is volunteer-based purposive sampling, so there are some steps of the workflow which the researchers combine within the study. Firstly, the researchers set some specific requirements for selecting the participants (purposive). Later, they share the information and invitation or call for participants to the population who meets the criteria which had been determined (voluntary). From the population who meets the requirements, then, the researchers selected some of them who would like to join voluntarily in this study (voluntary and purposive). Finally, one of the researchers met them in person at different places and the research instrument was distributed to each of them as a way to collect the data.

Data Analysis

To measure the quantitative data, the researchers measured the participants' scores based on the result of the test. The idiom test consists of 21 questions; the score for each correct answer is 4.76, rounded to 5, and 0 for the wrong answer. Therefore, the highest score is 99.96 rounded to 100. Additionally, all of the patterns or formulas as taken from (Arikunto, 2013). The formula of mean score is shown below.

$$M = \frac{FX}{N}$$

Where:
M = mean score
FX = total number of the score
N = total number of the participants

The next step is measuring the percentage of idiom proficiency difficulty in the test as an attempt to figure out the level of proficiency in each English idiom type in the test by applying the formula:

$$S = \frac{R}{N} X\ 100$$

Where:
S = incorrect percentage
R = incorrect answer
N = total number of participants

Lastly, the interpretation table was magnified to map the students' score into five levels of proficiency as shown below.

Table 1. The Level of Idiom Proficiency

Range	Interpretation
81-100	Very Good
61-80	Good
41-60	Fair
21-40	Bad
0-20	Very Bad

Result and Discussion

The Most Difficult Types of Idioms Confronted by English Department Students in Aceh

This study applies a descriptive quantitative method to measure the proficiency level of the comprehension of English idioms into Indonesian equivalents. The first result devotes to the mean score derived from the overall participants' score of the idiom comprehension test. The total participants participated in the research is 20 students and there are 21 idiom questions in the test. The highest score is 100 and the lowest one is 0.

The highest score achieved by the participants in the test is 95, whereas the lowest one is 10. The distribution of each score is as follow: none of the participant obtained the perfect score (100), yet only one of them got 95, 2 of them achieved 90, the scores of 67 and 62 were achieved by two participants, 3 of them got 57, the score 48 was obtained by 6 participants which makes it to be the mode (the score that appears most frequently in the set of data), and the scores of 43, 38, 29, 24, 14 and 10 were scored by 1 participant. Additionally, the test consists of 7 types of idiom questions; verbal, nominal, adjectival, adverbial, phraseological, frozen and proverb idioms in which 3 questions addressed to each type. Hence, there are 21 questions in total for the test. the following table shows the distribution of mean score for each type of idiom questions.

Table 2. The Mean Score of Each Types of Idiom Proficiency

No	Types of Idioms	Total Question	Participant	Total Score of True Answer	Mean Score
1.	Verbal Idiom	3		38	1.90
2.	Nominal Idiom	3		38	1.90
3.	Adjectival idiom	3		25	1.25
4.	Adverbial Idiom	3	20	28	1.40
5.	Phraseological idiom	3		31	1.55
6.	Frozen Idiom	3		30	1.50
7.	Proverb Idiom	3		26	1.30
	Total	21	20	214	1.70

Based on the table above, there are 21 questions about 7 types of idioms, the total participants are 20, the total score for the true answers that the participants could answer correctly is 214 and the total mean score for all types of idioms is 1.70.

To be exact, in the section of verbal idiom questions, the total score of true answer afforded by the participants is 38 and it is the same score achieved in the section of nominal idiom questions which means that it is the highest score the participants could achieve in the test. Later, in the section of adjectival idiom questions, the participants could only achieve 25 in total. In the part of adverbial questions, the participants, then, obtained a slightly higher score compared to the adjectival idiom questions, namely 28. In addition, the total score of true answer got in the part of the phraseological idiom questions is 31. In the section of frozen idiom, furthermore, the participants got the score

30 and it is lower than the previous one question. Lastly, in the section of proverb idiom, the total score of true answer the participants could make is 26. In conclusion, the highest score obtained by them is 38 in the section of verbal and nominal idiom questions, whereas the lowest score lies on the section of adjectival idiom questions with the total score 25.

The idiom test consists of 21 questions, involving 3 verbal idiom questions (number 1, 2, 3), 3 nominal idiom questions (number 4, 5, 6), 3 questions for adjectival idiom (number 7, 8, 9), 3 questions for adverbial idiom (number 10, 11, 12), 3 phraseological questions (number 13, 14, 15), 3 frozen idiom questions (number 16, 17, 18) and 3 proverb idiom questions (number 19, 20 and 21). The table below shows the idiom questions in the test.

Table 3. The Percentage of Each Type of Idiom Question

No	Idiom Questions	Percentage	Kinds of Idioms
1.	Bite the bullet	70%	Verbal Idiom
2.	Hit the sack	75%	
3.	Pull someone's leg	65%	
4.	A blessing in disguise	45%	Nominal Idiom
5.	A heart of gold	75%	
6.	Couch potato	60%	
7.	Green with envy	40%	Adjectival Idiom
8.	A big fish in a small pond	45%	
9.	As cool as a cucumber	40%	
10.	Dead of night	40%	Adverbial Idiom
11.	Deep down	55%	
12.	Until next time	45%	
13.	Dead to the world	50%	Phraseological Idiom
14.	There we go	45%	
15.	Stay out late	60%	
16.	Kick the bucket	50%	Frozen Idiom
17.	Spill the beans	50%	
18.	Come what may	55%	
19.	Action speaks louder than words	40%	Proverb Idiom
20.	Make hay while the sun shines	25%	
21.	All roads lead to Rome	65%	

It is evident that students' understanding towards the idiom proficiency into Indonesian equivalent varies across the questions. Some items show high comprehension rates, such as question numbers 2 and 5 with 75% and question number 1 with 70%. However, there are also items with lower comprehension levels, such as question number 20 with 25%, and several others below 45%, including numbers 7, 9, 10, and 19.

The researchers, moreover, measured the percentage value for each type of idiom as an attempt to figure out the most difficult type of the idiom comprehension to be comprehended into natural Indonesian expression in the test. It can be illustrated in table below.

Table 4. The Most Difficult Type of Idiom Confronted by Acehnese English Department Students

No	Types of Idiom Questions	Percentage	Interpretation
1.	Verbal Idioms	70%	Good
2.	Nominal Idioms	60%	Fair
3.	Adjectival Idioms	41,6%	Fair
4.	Adverbial Idioms	46,6%	Fair
5.	Phraseological Idiom	51,6%	Fair
6.	Frozen Idiom	51,6%	Fair
7.	Proverb Idiom	43,3%	Fair

It is obviously shown in the table that the interpretation category ranges in good and fair level of proficiency. The verbal idiom is the only kind of idiom which is mapped into the good category, while other types of idioms are in the level of fair proficiency.

The verbal idiom questions achieved the highest percentage at 70% compared other types of idiom questions afforded by the Acehnese English Department students in English idiom proficiency into Indonesian equivalent which is in good category. It means that the level of proficiency in idiom comprehension into Indonesian equivalent is good. They are able to find out the natural expression in Indonesian from the English idioms asked in the test. It, further, indicates that the idioms used in these items were either more familiar to the students or easier to deduce from context. For example, in the question number 1 "bite a bullet" and question number 2 "hit a sack" could be answered correctly by the majority of the students by finding out the Indonesian natural expression as *"bertahan dalam situasi yang sulit"* and *"pergi tidur"* respectively. This could be due to prior exposure or familiarity from EFL classrooms, textbooks or other media they have encountered, creating a long-termed memorization.

(Xie, 2017) claim that development of figurative language relies on the amount of meaningful exposure one has to a non-literal expression. Idioms will be much easier to grasp or interpret when they are frequently introduced, familiarized and exposed in a context. Creating the appropriate contextual information for idiomatic comprehension is quite helpful in constructing idiomatic meanings for EFL learners (Asl, 2013); (Alhaysony, 2017). It could be done through the teaching and learning process in the classroom where those students might be exposed, introduced and taught the idioms through receptive and productive skills. Therefore, the insertion of idiom into language learning curricula is pivotal to be integrated since it is quite prevalent both in oral and written communication (Tauhid & Rohmah, 2024).

Another satisfying percentage result showing a good proficiency in finding out the Indonesian equivalent also comes up in the question number 5 which belongs to nominal idiom, identifying the natural expression in Indonesian towards the idiom "a heart of gold" or it can be naturally said in Indonesian as "berhati mulia". The idiom is shared the same figurative form and concept in English as the source language of the idiom, Indonesian as the target language for translation and Acehnese as the students' first language, taking in charge as a cultural and linguistic filter.

To be more exact, the concept of "gold" is widely known and used in the three-language idioms and is culturally and naturally associated to something valuable, pure, excellent and noble to describe a human being's behaviour. Since the core concept is identical and this shared conceptual basis is well translated in the various cultures, most of the students were obviously being able to decipher idiom involving "gold". In this sense, it can be said that Acehnese language potentially serves as a support system in providing the in depth-cultural foundation for understanding the concept.

It is in line with the notion proposed by (Soto-Sierra & Ferreira, 2024), opining that idioms in foreign language which posse the same literal wording (figurative form) and similar underlying meaning (figurative concept) in L1 tends to be easier to comprehend, compared to those which are lack of equivalent linguistic form or functional equivalent – an expression that conveys the same meaning and pragmatic force. In fact, English, Indonesian and Acehnese share similar figurative concept of "gold" in their culture which makes it easier to understand its underlying meaning of the idiom.

Conversely, the lowest percentage is visible in the types of adjectival idiom questions. It could only reach by 41,6% which is categorized in the fair level of proficiency. A fair result shows a meaning that the English Department students in Aceh as the participants in this study reveals partial understanding towards the adjectival idiom. They are capable in identifying some adjectival idioms correctly, yet they still encounter some challenges in interpreting others. For instance, a common error was caught in the idiom "green with envy" with the correct answer rate at 40%. A significant number of participants were unable to identify the Indonesian equivalent of both idioms.

There are some reasons why this type becomes the most difficult idiom to be comprehended. Firstly, it is cultural specificity in which the word "green" in the idiom "green with envy" is a strongly related to jealousy in Western colour symbolism (Creo, 2018) and it does not have any direct or word-for-word equivalents in Indonesian and Acehnese culture. Since some idioms are cultural specificities deeply rooted in a certain culture, thus it cannot be overwhelmingly interpreted or understood without a prior knowledge of the culture's value and history (Hassan & Tabassum, 2014).

Conversely, in Acehnese culture, profoundly influenced by Islamic culture, the colour of green copes positive meaning to symbolize is wealth, fertility, paradise, prosperity and welfare (Rusli, 2018). In Indonesian culture, generally, it is a metaphorical expression to refer to immaturity or insufficient life experience, thus it is very distinct from the idiom's western cultural metaphorical perception where "green" is linked to negative trait.

The Level of Idiom Proficiency among English Department Students in Aceh

The final mean score, further, was analyzed and interpreted to localized the level of proficiency of English idiom proficiency into Indonesian equivalent. The result reveals that the final mean score afforded by them is at rate 52,1%, obviously falls in the fair category. Indeed, this moderate level of proficiency indicates that English Department students in Aceh are still struggling with some kinds of English idioms, primarily in the aspect of cultural specificity. In this case, the students are lack of necessary cultural cognition or expertise to decipher idiomatic expressions which do not exist in their mother tongue (Acehnese) and national language (Indonesian) which then become a big difficulty and obstacle, leading to literal translation errors.

It is in line with the studies by (Hamid, 2022), stating that English Department students confronting the idiom comprehension are struggling with its meaning. There are some factors influencing the issue, such as inadequate teaching and learning materials of idiom translation and the absence of handbooks covering up the idiom materials used by the students. Inadequate exposure towards the proper use of idioms, rarely using them in the authentical exercises of language skills and cultural background distinction are other great challenges for EFL learners in idiom comprehension mastery (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021); (Idami et al., 2022); (Sari et al., 2022).

In a linear fashion, (Soto-Sierra & Ferreira, 2024) claim that the more source and target language hold the identical cross-cultural similarities within their idioms, the easier

it can be interpreted. The result of this study, then, strongly supports the notion that the degree of cross-cultural overlaps between L1 and L2 directly results in the ease of idiom interpretation. When a cultural concept is aligned, such as the high value personality in idiom "a heart of gold", the participants were able to find the correct Indonesian equivalent correctly. In contrast, the data also shows the significant difficulty in cultural difference which is considered as the primary factor of the idiom translation difficulty, such as in the idiom "green with envy". This idiom is remarked as one of the most difficult and challenging idioms to handle as it is formed of past cultural practice and belief without any shared concepts both Indonesian and Acehnese culture.

Accordingly, (Pulatbaevna, 2025) postulates that since idioms are manifestation of cultural and historical values of a bygone era, so it requires the advanced cultural understanding and strategic competencies to reach a full mastery of them. Likewise, (Rohmawati et al., 2022) contends that idiomatic expressions depending on culturally-specific metaphors bring the greatest obstacle for foreign learners since they are strongly tied to long history, cultures, beliefs and customs, formed by social establishments long time ago. EFL learners, thereby, must equip themselves with a well prior knowledge over the value, norm, trait, community history of a certain cultures of the source idiom as an attempt to figure out prior interpreting them correctly (Lakshmi & Hamoud A. Al-Fauzanb, 2019).

(Kovács, 2016) also argues that even a well experienced translator cannot fully understand and decide when a native speaker decides an idiom is suitable or not to be embedded within utterances. She, then, elaborates that willingness, creativity, perseverance and skill are the key to success in searching the appropriate equivalents of idioms in source language to target language. Moreover, the good level of idiom proficiency will significantly and directly influence the language skill mastery (Ekorini, 2022); (Pratiwi et al., 2024). It can be achieved by the significant familiarity and transparency of idioms which play as the primary factors in understanding idiom (Aljabri, 2013).

(Fathma et al., 2020), moreover, suggests that being aware of idiomatic expressions in foreign language is a helpful endeavour to reach an effective communication as native speakers tend to insert them in their speaking in which they perceive them as parts of their cultural heritage. Enhancing large amount of vocabulary is another helpful way to be able to interpret idiom successfully since good translation proficiency depends greatly on the vocabulary size in which the vocabulary itself is widely perceived as the fundamental element in foreign language learning (Arono & Nadrah, 2019). (Asri & Rochmawati, 2017) also suggest some genuine teaching strategies to teach English idioms to enhance students' proficiency in it in which these linguistic phenomena must be inserted directly in the four language skills.

Conclusion

Cultural difference is the primary predictor of English idiom translation and comprehension. The difficulty and challenge are derived from a mismatch in cultural conceptualization which has no direct equivalent from the idiom of source language into the target language. On the other hand, some of idioms share the same figurative forms and concepts are likely easier to comprehend.

Therefore, this study concludes that idiom proficiency strongly depends on cross-cultural competence, rather than pure linguistic knowledge. An EFL learner's capability in correctly interpreting idioms is primarily contingent on their awareness of the cultural concepts entailed on the source language.

Moreover, repeated exposure and practice are meaningful endeavour to understand idioms. EFL learners can identify idioms in foreign language effortlessly, automatically and quickly through a frequent familiarization towards them, thus it is unconsciously fossilized in their cognitive process.

Therefore, based on the finding of this research, which reflects a fair level of idiom proficiency, it is proposed to educators in the Acehnese EFL context to insert the learning of idioms implicitly in a thematic and categorized topic of learning, such as organizing idioms based on theme and then prioritizing the frequent exposure and practice of it during the learning activities. Integrating cultural instruction in some courses directly corresponding to idioms, such as in course of Linguistics and Translation, will also help students navigate the metaphorical language meaning. For instance, creating exercise activities which force students to repeatedly use the idioms.

All of those recommendations are supposed to assist students with idiom cognitive acknowledgment, thereby the students' proficiency in idioms will improve significantly in the future, especially those who are learning in English Department as they are expected to be English teacher as well as interpreter or translator.

This study also holds some limitation drawn as follows. The first one is the small number of participants participated in this study. Secondly, another limitation lays on the instrument applied to collect data from the participants; the researchers only used a test. It is suggested for further research to add another kind of research instrument, such as interview, to gather a more in-depth data analysis and result.

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