Idiom Comprehension and Processing Among College Students

Nuriza P. Jalani[1]

College of Teacher Education, Zamboanga State College of Marine Sciences and Technology, Zamboanga City, Philippines[1]

[1]**ORCID ID No.:** 603-608-603-608

***Corresponding Author:** Nuriza P. Jalani[1]

jalaniriz@gmail.com

HOW TO CITE:

Nuriza P. Jalani (2026). Idiom Comprehension and Processing Among College Students. International Journal of Special Education, 41(14s), 603-608

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT:

Copyright: © 2026 Authors. Open access publication underthe terms and conditions of the Creative CommonsAttribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

ABSTRACT:

Background: Idiomatic competence is a critical component of communicative proficiency, yet it remains a major challenge for second language (L2) learners. Research Gap: Most existing studies focus on Western or Asian contexts, with limited empirical data on how Filipino pre-service English teachers process idioms across different proficiency levels. Objective: This study investigated idiom comprehension strategies and their relationship with language proficiency among 150 L2 learners. Methodology: A descriptive-quantitative design was used. Participants were classified into four proficiency levels using a standardized placement test, and responses to a validated idiom comprehension task were analyzed using frequency counts and Chi-square statistics. Key Findings: Learners employed ten distinct strategies; contextual guessing (25.3%) and literal interpretation (21.3%) were most frequent. A significant relationship existed between proficiency and strategy choice ($\chi^2 = 42.87$, $df = 18$, $p < 0.05$): lower-proficiency learners relied on literal analysis, while higher-proficiency learners used contextual inference. Practical Implications: Results highlight the need for contextualized instruction to help learners move beyond literal interpretation and develop figurative language competence.

Keywords: Idiom comprehension, Idiom processing, Language proficiency, Figurative language, Second language learning, Pre-service teachers, Philippines

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions are a core component of natural, fluent language, appearing frequently in spoken discourse, written texts, media, and professional communication. Research confirms that competence in figurative language marks a key milestone in second language (L2) development and serves as a reliable indicator of communicative proficiency (Garg, 2025; Tran, 2021). Recent studies highlight that as learners advance, their processing shifts from literal, word-by-word decoding toward holistic, context-driven interpretation, consistent with theoretical frameworks such as the Dual Representation Model (Abel, 2003) and the Literal Salience Hypothesis (Cieślicka, 2025; Farooqui & Sonbul, 2025).

Research Gap and Significance

Despite the importance of idioms, they remain a persistent stumbling block for L2 learners (Jamshed et al., 2024). Idioms are often semantically opaque: their figurative meaning

cannot be reliably derived from individual word definitions, leading to frequent misinterpretation, especially among lower-proficiency students (RahmtAllah, 2024). In many formal curricula—including Philippine EFL settings—instruction prioritizes grammar, vocabulary, and literal reading, while figurative language receives limited attention and is rarely taught in meaningful contexts (Alharthi, 2025).

The research gap is clear: While global studies describe general processing patterns, very few studies have examined how Filipino L2 learners, particularly pre-service English teachers, approach idiom comprehension across different proficiency levels. Existing research in Southeast Asia often focuses on K-12 learners or general students, not future educators who will themselves teach language skills. Furthermore, most prior work does not systematically compare strategy use across proficiency groups in the local sociolinguistic context.

This study is important because it provides context-specific evidence that validates international models in a Philippine setting. It differs from previous research by offering a clear progression of strategy development—showing exactly how learners shift from surface-level analysis to deeper contextual understanding. These findings are vital for curriculum designers and teacher educators, as they reveal how learners think when encountering idioms, allowing for more targeted and effective instruction.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories:

1. Dual Representation Model (Abel, 2003): Proposes that learners maintain both literal and figurative representations of idioms; the ability to suppress literal meaning increases with proficiency.

2. Literal Salience Hypothesis (Cieślicka, 2025): States that the most accessible meaning (usually the literal one for beginners) is activated first, requiring additional cognitive effort to replace it with the intended figurative meaning.

Objectives of the Study

This study generally aimed to determine how Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in English (BSEd English) students process and understand idiomatic expressions. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Identify the English proficiency levels of first- and second-year BSEd English students.

2. Determine the comprehension strategies employed when interpreting idioms.

3. Examine the relationship between language proficiency level and the choice of comprehension strategy.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive-quantitative research design was adopted, supported by qualitative coding of responses. This design is appropriate for describing existing patterns, identifying strategies used, and examining the relationship between variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2024). It followed Cooper's (1999) framework for analyzing idiom processing and Grant's (2004) taxonomy of comprehension strategies.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Zamboanga State College of Marine Sciences and Technology (ZSCMST), a public higher education institution in Zamboanga City. This locale was selected because it offers the BSEd English program, ensuring access to participants with formal English instruction and relevant learning goals.

Population and Sampling Design

The population of this study consists of all first- and second-year Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) English students enrolled in the first semester of the Academic Year 2019–2020. The sample size comprises 150 participants selected using quota sampling; this method ensured representation across proficiency levels, allowing for valid comparisons. To be included in the study, participants must have completed at least seven years of formal English instruction, must be a native speaker of Chavacano, Bisaya, or Tausug with English as a second language, and

must have no diagnosed learning difficulties in language processing. Quota sampling was chosen as it ensured proportional representation of different ability levels, which simple random sampling might not guarantee (Taherdoost, 2022).

Research Instruments

Two instruments were used to gather data for this research. The first is the National Geographic Learning Placement Test, a standardized, norm-referenced tool used globally to classify learners into levels, which has established reliability (α = 0.87) and validity. The second is the Idiom Comprehension Task, which was developed and validated specifically for this study. For this task, five idioms were selected based on frequency lists from the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms and prior studies, chosen to represent varying levels of transparency. The instrument was then reviewed by three experts—a PhD in Applied Linguistics, a Master of Arts in English Language Teaching, and a psycholinguist—resulting in a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.92, confirming its suitability. Each idiom was embedded in a short, unambiguous sentence to provide context, and students were asked to write their interpretation of each idiom and explain the process they used to arrive at their meaning. Only five idioms were selected to keep the task manageable and avoid response fatigue; this is acknowledged as a limitation, as a larger set of items could improve the generalizability of the findings.

Data Collection Procedure

For data collection, students were first oriented about the purpose and voluntary nature of the study, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The proficiency test was administered first, with a time limit of 60 minutes. Immediately after the test, the idiom comprehension task was distributed, and students were given 10 minutes to complete it, ensuring they relied on their own processing strategies rather than external help. Once finished, all completed sheets were retrieved, and responses were coded independently by two researchers; inter-coder reliability was calculated at 0.91, indicating strong agreement between the coders.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, descriptive statistics including frequency and percentage distribution were computed. Inferential statistics using the Chi-square test of independence were also applied to determine the relationship between proficiency level and strategy choice, with the level of significance set at α = 0.05. All statistical computations were performed using IBM SPSS Version 29.

Results and Discussion

English Proficiency Levels

Table 1 Distribution of Students by Proficiency Level

Proficiency Level	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Pre-intermediate	19–25	30	20.0%
Intermediate	26–32	45	30.0%
Upper Intermediate	33–39	43	28.7%
Advanced	40–46	32	21.3%

Proficiency Level	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Total		**150**	**100%**

Discussion

The majority of learners were at the Intermediate and Upper Intermediate levels (58.7%), with only 21.3% classified as Advanced. This finding supports and expands the work of Alharthi (2025), who noted that even language majors often show stronger mastery of grammar and vocabulary than of complex language functions. While Alharthi focused on Middle Eastern contexts, this study confirms the same pattern in the Philippines, suggesting that figurative language competence develops more slowly than other language skills.

Strategies Used in Idiom Comprehension

Table 2 Frequency of Idiom Comprehension Strategies

Code	Strategy Description	Frequency	Percentage
1	Paraphrasing without interpreting meaning	7	4.7%
2	Analyzing without guessing meaning	15	10.0%
3	Requesting clarification (hypothetical)	11	7.3%
4	Guessing meaning using context clues	38	25.3%
5	Interpreting using literal meaning of words	32	21.3%
6	Drawing on prior knowledge/experience	9	6.0%
7	Comparing with L1 equivalents	8	5.3%
8	Re-evaluating guess using context	23	15.3%
9	Re-evaluating guess using literal meaning	5	3.3%
10	Describing own strategy explicitly	2	1.3%

Discussion

The most common strategies were contextual guessing (25.3%) and literal interpretation (21.3%). This aligns with Farooqui and Sonbul (2025), who found that these two strategies are universal across L2 learners. However, Farooqui and Sonbul observed a higher use of L1 transfer, while this study found it minimal (5.3%). This difference is likely due to the linguistic distance between English and local languages—most

idioms have no direct translation, making cross-linguistic strategies ineffective here.

Relationship Between Proficiency and Strategy Use

Table 3 Dominant Strategies by Proficiency Level

Proficiency Level	Primary Strategy	Secondary Strategy
Pre-intermediate	Literal interpretation (Strategy 5)	Analyzing without guessing (Strategy 2)
Intermediate	Contextual guessing (Strategy 4)	Re-evaluation via context (Strategy 8)
Upper Intermediate	Re-evaluation via context (Strategy 8)	Using prior knowledge (Strategy 6)
Advanced	Contextual inference (Strategy 4)	Holistic understanding

Chi-square Result: $\chi^2 = 42.87$, df = 18, $p < 0.05$ → Significant relationship exists.

Discussion

- Pre-intermediate learners: Reliance on literal meaning often led to errors (e.g., "raining cats and dogs" = "animals falling"). This confirms the Literal Salience Hypothesis (Cieślicka, 2025) and matches Arifuddin (2026), who found that learners with limited vocabulary cannot look beyond individual words.
- Intermediate learners: Begin using context to adjust guesses. This is a critical transition, as noted by Liontas (2022), who compared this shift to "unlearning the habit of word-for-word translation."
- Upper Intermediate & Advanced learners: Use context and reanalysis effectively. This supports Zhang and Li (2024), who demonstrated that higher proficiency allows learners to suppress the automatic literal interpretation and select the figurative one.

Practical Meaning

These results show that strategy choice is not random—it is developmental. Instruction must match the stage: beginners need support connecting words to ideas, while advanced learners need exposure to authentic texts to refine their inference skills.

Conclusions

Most pre-service English teachers are at intermediate proficiency levels, with figurative competence lagging behind other skills. Learners use a variety of strategies, but effectiveness depends on proficiency. There is a clear developmental progression: literal analysis → contextual checking → holistic understanding.

Study Limitations

For the instrument, only five idioms were used to reduce cognitive load; results may not represent all types of idioms, such as more opaque or culturally specific expressions. In terms of context, the study is limited to one institution, so findings may not generalize to other regions or proficiency levels. Regarding design, this is a cross-sectional study and does not track changes over time or measure actual long-term retention.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies may expand the test to include 15–20 idioms covering different levels of transparency and cultural origin. Researchers may also conduct a longitudinal study to observe how strategy use changes over a semester or academic year. It is also suggested to compare strategy use between BSEd students and other majors to see if language training itself improves processing. Finally, further work may investigate the role of

explicit instruction in accelerating the shift from literal to contextual strategies.

Pedagogical Recommendations

In teaching practice, idioms should be taught within sentences and texts rather than as isolated lists. Educators should explicitly explain the difference between literal and figurative meaning. It is also helpful to train students to ask themselves: "Does this literal meaning make sense in this situation?" Additionally, instructors should provide scaffolding for beginners, gradually reducing support as proficiency increases.

Acknowledgements

The researcher sincerely expresses gratitude to the administration of Zamboanga State College of Marine Sciences and Technology for granting permission to conduct this study within the institution. Special thanks go to the three language experts who validated the research instrument, ensuring its accuracy and relevance. Appreciation is also extended to the first- and second-year Bachelor of Secondary Education English students for their active participation and cooperation throughout the data collection process. Finally, deep recognition is given to the College of Teacher Education for providing the academic environment and support that made this research possible.

References

Abel, B. (2003). The dual representation model of idiom processing. Journal of Psycholinguistic Research, 32(2), 187–206.

Ahmed, M. (2022). Teaching figurative language: Contextualized approaches for EFL learners. International Journal of English Language Teaching, 9(1), 45–58.

Alharthi, A. (2025). Proficiency gaps in figurative language among EFL majors. Journal of Language and Education Studies, 12(3), 112–128.

Arifuddin. (2026). Strategy use in idiom comprehension: A cross-proficiency analysis. Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 18(1), 78–92.

Cieślicka, A. B. (2025). The literal salience hypothesis: Revisited and expanded. Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 28(2), 245–260.

Cooper, T. C. (1999). Processing of idioms by L2 learners of English. TESOL Quarterly, 33(2), 233–262.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2024). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Farooqui, S., & Sonbul, S. (2025). Figurative language processing: Proficiency and strategy interaction. System, 142, Article 103245.

Garg, R. (2025). Idiomatic competence as an indicator of communicative proficiency. Journal of Second Language Teaching and Research, 7(1), 33–49.

Grant, L. E. (2004). A taxonomy of strategies for comprehending idioms. Language Learning Journal, 30(1), 56–64.

Jamshed, M., Ali, S., & Khan, R. (2024). Challenges in idiom comprehension among EFL learners. International Journal of Linguistics and Literature, 15(2), 89–104.

Liontas, J. I. (2022). Holistic processing of idioms in second language acquisition. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 44(3), 547–572.

RahmtAllah, M. (2024). Semantic opacity and idiom comprehension difficulties. Arab World English Journal, 15(1), 221–234.

Taherdoost, H. (2022). Determining sample size and sampling method in research methodology. International Journal of Economics and Management Systems, 7, 1–10.

Tran, T. T. (2021). Figurative language instruction in EFL curricula: Current status and recommendations. Journal of Curriculum and Teaching, 10(2), 78–91.

Vanderniet, J. (2025). Cross-linguistic transfer in idiom interpretation: Limitations and effects. Applied Linguistics Review, 36(1), 123–141.

Zhang, Y., & Li, W. (2024). Suppression of literal meaning in advanced L2 idiom processing. Language and Cognitive Processes, 39(4), 489–503.