Figurative Idiomatic Competence:
An Analysis of Jordanian Graduate Students of English

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Abstract

This study investigates the figurative idiomatic competence of Jordanian graduate students of English. It mainly focuses on students' strategies and errors when translating English idiomatic expressions into Arabic. The study analyzes the performance of two groups of graduate students in a translation task. The first group includes 18 M.A. students, whereas the second includes 18 Ph.D. students. The findings of the study indicate that Ph.D. students have slightly higher idiomatic competence than M.A. students, though the two groups perform poorly in the translation task. The findings also suggest that graduate students of English often rely on the context, metaphor, and knowledge of L1 to approach the meaning of English fixed figurative expressions. Furthermore, the findings show that paraphrasing and giving an Arabic equivalent are the most common translation strategies applied by graduate students.

Keywords: Error analysis, Translation strategies, Figurative expressions, Idiomatic expressions, Second language acquisition, Jordanian graduate students of English.

1. Introduction

The use of figurative expressions is very much pervasive in English. The English dictionary contains more than 10,000 idiomatic and metaphorical expressions which are used in different life aspects as daily conversations, academic discourses, magazine articles, political discourses, and TV programs (Lems, 2018; McPherron & Randolph, 2014). Figurative expressions exist in different language forms including slang, colloquial, and formal speech (Alkarazoun, 2015; Irujo, 1986). Therefore, it is important for EFL learners to have what is called idiomatic or figurative competence which refers to the ability to produce and understand idiomatic and metaphorical expressions (Buckingham, 2006). Nonetheless, it has been found that acquiring this competence constitutes a challenge for EFL learners (Andreous & Galantomos, 2008; Lems, 2018; Littlemore & Low, 2006). This can be attributed to the special characteristics of figurative expressions: First, they are metaphorical rather than literal. In other words, these expressions mean something more than or something different from the combined meanings of its individual units. For example, birds

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of a feather means "people of the same sort" (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2002, and Littlemore & Law, 2006). Second, they are invariable or fixed in form. We cannot delete or replace a word in an idiomatic expression, nor can we change the order of its words (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2002). Third, they are culture-specific. Cultures vary in the range and the way they use these idiomatic and metaphorical expressions (Barker, 1992; Lems, 2018).

Because figurative expressions are problematic and difficult to learn, the goal of this research paper is to investigate the figurative competence of students who have achieved a high level of foreign language development. The study mainly attempts to answer the following questions:

1) Are there differences in the figurative competence between Ph.D. and M.A. students?
2) Do all figurative expressions have the same level of difficulty? if yes, why?
3) What kind of errors do graduate students make when translating these expressions into L1?
4) What are the strategies used to give the Arabic meanings of stereotyped figurative expressions?

2. Problem in Terminology

This study is concerned with stereotyped figurative expressions which are part of the English dictionary and whose meaning is rarely predicted from their components like, kick the bucket which means "to die". Such expressions are usually named and observed as "idioms" or "metaphors". However, reviewing the related literature, we find that the two terms inadequately describe these expressions. This is because these notions are too broad: Idioms encompass expressions whose meaning is not figurative as out of control and expressions whose meaning can be guessed from their individual parts as stay away from (Barker & Hengeveld, 2012; and Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973). Metaphors, on the other hand, include novel metaphors which are not part of the English dictionary and whose meaning is usually predictable as the novel metaphor life is a journey.

Grant and Buaer (2004) observe this problematic issue with multi-word vocabulary items and classify idioms into categories based on two criteria: figurativeness and compositionality. According to their approach, fixed expressions can be compositional (literal) as gather dust, figurative good as gold, ONCE (one element is non-compositional) as a devil of job, and core idiom (learned as a multi-word lexemes) as shoot the breeze.

In this research paper, we ignore this ambiguity in terminology and accept the two terms since stereotyped figurative expressions are studied within the scope of the two phenomena: idioms and metaphors.

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3. Literature Review

In the past few years, there has been a growing interest of the figurative competence of foreign language learners in different linguistic domains. For example, research on cognitive linguistics as Radić-Bojanić (2012) tackles this issue and suggests that FL learners understand fixed figurative expressions by categorizing them into conceptual domains of metaphor. In psycholinguistics, on the other hand, it has been proposed that understanding figurative expressions involves psychological processes of noticing, activation of source domain knowledge, associative fluency, analogical reasoning, and image formation (Littlemore & Low, 2006). Translation studies as Aldahesh (2008) pinpoint on the difficulties of translating L2 idiomatic and metaphorical expressions into LI. Pedagogical research as McPherron and Randolph (2014) stresses on teaching idiomatic expressions and explains how they are usually ignored by the teachers and how FL teaching materials avoid them. Nevertheless, our next discussion includes a review of a number of studies that examine the figurative competence of EFL students in terms of difficulties and strategies.

One of the earliest and most influential studies on the figurative competence of EL learners is Irujo (1986). The study is conducted on twelve Venezuelan advanced learners to investigate how knowledge of L1 affects the production and comprehension of 45 English idiomatic expressions. The study asks participants to complete a multiple-choice and a definition task to test their comprehension. The study also gives them a discourse completion task to measure their encoding abilities. The results show that English idioms are easily acquired when they have a Spanish equivalent in form or meaning, whereas idioms with no Spanish equivalent are very difficult to learn. The study indicates that interference usually occurs with similar idioms but not with different ones. For instance, the expression spread the news is frequently produced as spread the voice because of L1 interference.

The idiomatic competence of Jordanian students has been also investigated by a number of researchers. For instance, Bataineh and Bataineh (2002) conduct a study on EFL Jordanian translation students to investigate the difficulties and strategies of translating idioms. The study asks 45 M.A. graduate students of translation to translate 45 idiomatic expressions. The results reveal that idiomatic sentences are problematic to students. They usually misunderstand the idioms, provide some shades of meanings, or give Arabic idioms that have different meanings. The study also states that students usually use strategies of paraphrasing, using a target language idiom of the same form and the same meaning, using a target language idiom of different form but the same meaning, and omitting the idiom.

Alkarazoun (2015) distributes a multiple-choice task covering various kinds of idioms to 60 undergraduate Jordanian students of English. By doing this, the study aims at analyzing their errors in understanding English idiomatic expressions. The results suggest low figurative competence of

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EL learners. Moreover, they show variation in the participants' correct responses according to the type of the idiomatic expression. For example, the participants seem to understand idioms with noun phrases better than these with pairs of adjectives. They also acquire idioms in special categories like food better than these in the domain of animal or body part.

Smadi and Alrishan (2015) examine the strategies used by Jordanian graduate translation students to translate idioms. To collect the data, the researchers ask 90 participants who are all M.A. translation students to translate 16 English idiomatic expressions into Arabic. The study concludes that graduate students usually have difficulties in translating idioms and are unaware of the strategies applied in their translation. It also indicates that paraphrasing and literal translation are the most used strategies.

AlKhawaldeh, Jaradat, Al-Momani and Bani-Khair (2016) observe the idiomatic competence of 150 Jordanian B.A. English students at the Hashemite University. During data collection, the researchers utilize a test to investigate students' perception and knowledge of English idioms and a questionnaire to examine their learning strategies, difficulties, and suggested solutions. The findings of the study reveal that B.A. English learners face serious difficulty in acquiring idiomatic expressions, though fourth and third year university students perform better than first and second year students in the test. The results also suggest that positive transfer, the frequency of the idiom, and the context facilitate the process of learning English idioms. Nonetheless, lack of experience in dealing with idioms and neglecting idioms in language teaching are the main reasons behind having difficulties in acquiring the idiomatic expressions.

Shajrawi and Smadi (2019) examine the English and Arabic idiomatic competence of Jordanian EFL undergraduate students. The researchers distribute a Completion-Discourse Test to 125 students in the English Department of the University of Jordan. All the idiomatic expressions included in the test are taken from a required course material. The study analysis points that EFL undergraduate students have a low-intermediate competence in understanding the idioms in both languages and in using the Arabic idioms, while they have a low competence in using the English idioms. The study finds that transparency, equivalence, high exposure to English, frequency of the idiom and contextualization facilitate the participants' comprehension of the idiom. The study indicates that including the idioms in textbooks doesn't improve EFL students' idiomatic competence. Moreover, interference of L1 and lack of semantic knowledge are the main factors negatively affecting the students' idiomatic competence.

In conclusion, several researchers have studied EFL learners' acquisition of idioms. However, there is little research analyzing the figurative competence of two groups of advanced English learners. The majority of the conducted studies on Jordanian students focus on undergraduate students of English or M. A. translation students. To the best of my knowledge,

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there is no study examining the figurative competence of M.A. and Ph.D. students of English literature or linguistics. Moreover, this study is different in that it analyzes only idiomatic expressions which have a non-literal meaning.

4. Method
4.1 Sample of the Study
The sample of the study consists of 36 graduate students of English Literature and Linguistics enrolled at the University of Jordan and the Hashemite University. The students are divided into two groups based on their academic level: The first group consists of 18 M.A. students, while the second consists of 18 Ph.D. students. The two groups have reached a high level in English, but the second group is in a higher academic level and has taken more English language courses.

4.2 Data Collection
To investigate the figurative competence of graduate students of English, a translation task consisting of 15 English sentences is administered to the participants. Each one of the 15 sentences includes a stereotyped figurative expression that has a non-literal meaning. These expressions are chosen carefully from an idiomatic English dictionary, titled The Key to English: Figurative Expression (English Language Services, 1966). This book is chosen because it contains idiomatic and figurative expressions whose meanings are not easily inferred and require a very good figurative competence. After translating all the figurative expressions, the task asks the participants to reveal whether they are familiar or unfamiliar with each of the tested expressions in order to understand how they gave their answers.

Concerning data analysis, each figurative expression is examined individually, and percentages of the correct answers are calculated. Following Aldahesh (2008), the correct answers are divided into very good answers and satisfactory answers. Very good answers refer to participants' responses which give perfect translation of the figurative items, while Satisfactory answers refer to responses which are partially correct and lack some sense of the meaning. Table 1 has some examples of very good and satisfactory answers:

Table 1. A sample of the participants' correct responses

The figurative expression	Satisfactory answer	Very good
Down-in-the mouth	اتعكر مزاجو Itʕakkar mazaaju "to ruin one's mood"	مكتئب Muktaʔib "depressed"
Put a bug in my ear	وشوشتني waʃwaʃatni "to say something in a low voice"	لمحت lammaħat "to make a hint"

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After calculating very good and satisfactory answers of all the figurative expressions in the test, the study provides a careful analysis of the three best and the three worst translated idiomatic expressions.

5. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents and discusses the figurative competence of Jordanian graduate students of English. It also examines their strategies and errors when rendering English idiomatic expressions into Arabic.

Table 2 displays the percentage of the correct answers of each group:

Table 2. The percentage of the correct answers of each group in the study

	M.A. students	Ph.D. students
Correct answer	43%	45%

As Table 2 shows, the percentage of the correct answers of Ph.D. students (45%) is higher than that of M.A. students (43%). Nevertheless, the two groups do not perform very well in the task. This poor performance indicates that idiomatic and metaphorical expressions constitute a challenge even to students who have achieved a high level of language development. It also suggests that their English vocabulary is relatively poor in terms of figurative expressions. This finding is in agreement with previous studies as Bataineh and Bataineh (2002) and Smadi and Alrishan (2015) who suggest that EFL Jordanian graduate students have a poor idiomatic competence.

The results in Table 3, on the other hand, provide more details about the participants' performance with each idiomatic expression. It also states the degree of accuracy when rendering these expressions into L1.

Table 3. The percentage of the correct responses for each figurative expression

NO.	The figurative expression	M.A. students Correct answers		Ph.D. Students Correct answers		The two groups
		Very good	Satisfactory answer	Very good	Satisfactory answer	
1.	as I live and breathe (to my great surprise)	0%	0%	6%	0%	3%

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NO.	The figurative expression	M.A. students Correct answers		Ph.D. Students Correct answers		The two groups
		Very good	Satisfactory answer	Very good	Satisfactory answer	
2.	babe in the woods (inexperienced, naïve, unsophisticated)	25%	6%	50%	6%	43.5%
3.	I cool my heels (be kept waiting)	31%	31%	13%	25%	50%
4.	down-in-the-mouth (depressed)	31%	6%	31%	18%	43%
5.	fat chance (very little chance)	19%	6%	6%	6%	18.5%
6.	give me a bad turn (freighted)	6%	75%	0%	88%	84.5%
7.	the grim reaper (death)	50%	0%	63%	0%	56.5%
8.	in the nick of time (in the last moment)	75%	0%	88%	0%	81.5%
9.	in the pink (in good health physically or mentally)	56%	0%	31%	13%	50%
10.	make a monkey out of someone (make someone looks fool)	63%	6%	60%	19%	74%
11.	nip and tuck (very close, in contest)	13%	13%	13%	13%	26%
12.	You don't say so! (what you say is amazing)	63%	6%	63%	6%	69%

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NO.	The figurative expression	M.A. students Correct answers		Ph.D. Students Correct answers		The two groups
		Very good	Satisfactory answer	Very good	Satisfactory answer	
13.	second sight (the ability to see the future, supernatural objects, etc.)	56%	0%	50%	6%	56%
14.	put a bug in my ear (give a hint)	0%	7%	6%	6%	9.5%
15.	tie the knot (get married)	13%	13%	56%	0%	41%

Based on Table 3, Ph.D. students are not always better than M.A. students when rendering the figurative expressions into Arabic. In some cases, M.A. students show a higher percentage of correct answers. For example, with the idiom cool my heels, M.A. students give more correct answers (62%) than Ph.D. students (38%). Except for a few idiomatic expressions, graduate students provide very good answers more than satisfactory ones. Furthermore, Table 3 demonstrates that the students' performance is not always consistent which may suggest that some idiomatic expressions are easily learned and understood than others. Therefore, the following discussion analyzes the three best translated items and the three worst translated items in the task as an attempt to know the reasons behind this and to examine students' translation errors and strategies.

5.1 The Three Best Translated Figurative Expressions

The figurative expression which gets the highest percentage (84.5%) is the idiom *give someone a bad turn*. However, the majority of the participants' responses are satisfactory ones in which they only approach its exact meaning 'frightened'. About 70% of the participants provide the near-equivalent Arabic metaphorical expression انتابني شعور سيء /ʔintaabani ʃuʕuur sajiʔ/ "to get a bad feeling" which looks similar in form to this English expression. The majority of the participants (about 65%) point that they are unfamiliar with this figurative expression. This suggests that graduate students use their knowledge of the context and L1 to predict the meaning of the English idiom.

Concerning the translation strategies followed by the students, we observe two strategies that lead to both correct and incorrect answers. These strategies are paraphrasing as اكتئبت /ʔiktaʔabt/ "depressed", and خفت /xift/ "scared"; and giving an idiomatic expression from L1 as انتابني شعور سيء /ʔintaabani ʃuʕuur sayiʔ/ "to get a bad feeling", وقف شعر راسي /waqaf ʃaʕar raasi/ "to make hair

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stand on end", and اتعكر مزاجي / Itʕakkar mazaaju/ "to ruin one's mood".

The figurative expression which has the second highest score is ***in the nick of time***, with a total average equals (81.5%). However, about 95% of the participants say that they are unfamiliar with this idiomatic expression. Our explanation is that students utilize the context to know the answer. In addition, this figurative expression is ONCE in which only one word that is non-literal (nick) while the word (time) is literal. The majority of the answers given for this item range between paraphrasing as في اخر لحظة /fi ʔaaxir laḥẓah/ "in the last moment"; or giving a near idiomatic equivalent as في الوقت الحاسم /fi ʔalwaqt ʔalḥaasim/ "in critical time"

The third best translated expression is ***make a monkey out of someone***, with a total percentage equals (74%). About 98% of the participants state that this metaphorical expression is not familiar, suggesting that students use contextual clues as well as the metaphorical image "to make someone a monkey" to predict its meaning. Furthermore, knowledge of L1 may have helped them. This is because the majority of participants give the Arabic idiom يجعل منه اضحوكة /jadʒʕal minhu ʔuḍḥuukah/ "to make a fool of him" which looks similar in form to this English expression. As for the strategies followed by the students, we observe successful strategies such as paraphrasing يهزمه "to defeat", and giving an equivalent idiomatic expression يجعل منه اضحوكة /jadʒʕal minhu ʔuḍḥuukah/ "to make a fool of him". We also notice some reduction (unsuccessful) strategy as literal translation يجعل منه قرد /jadʒʕal minhu qird/ "to make him a monkey", and avoidance of the question.

The analysis of the three best translated expressions reveals that graduate students can approach the meaning of some English idiomatic expressions even if they are unfamiliar. This happens when there is an Arabic equivalent or a near equivalent, contextual clues, and/or an element that is literal in the idiom. This finding is consistent with previous research as AlKhawaldeh et al. (2016) and Shajrawi and Smadi (2019) who suggest that the context, transparency, and equivalence facilitate the acquisition of the idiom. The analysis also uncovers some successful translation strategies as paraphrasing and giving an Arabic equivalent, which are also found in earlier research, including Bataineh and Bataineh (2002) and Smadi and Alrishan (2015).

5.2 The Three Worst Translated Figurative Expressions

The first worst translated expression (3%) is as ***I live and breathe***. Very few students give the correct answer اني متفاجئ /ʔini mutafaaʒʔ/ "to be surprised". Most students provide the incorrect Arabic idioms بشحمه ولحمة /biʃaḥmihi wa laḥmihi/ "in the flesh", and حي يرزق /ḥajun jurzaq/ "alive and well". These Arabic idiomatic expressions reflect negative interference of L1 because they have some similarities in form to the idiom as ***I live and breathe*** but differ in their meaning. Moreover, this English idiom is difficult to learn because it is a core idiom in which all its

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individual parts are non-compositional. Students display different unsuccessful strategies in translating this unfamiliar English idiom, including: literal translation طول ما انا عايش وبتنفس /ṭuul ma ʔana ʕaajiʃ wa batnaffas/ "as long as I am alive and breathing", giving an incorrect Arabic idiom بشحمه ولحمه/biʃaḥmihi wa laḥmihi/ "in the flesh", and avoiding the translation.

The students' second worst performance (9.5%) is with the figurative expression *put a bug in my ear*. The majority of the students' responses give the incorrect Arabic idiom خرمت طبلة ذاني /xaramit ṭablit ðaani/ (to pierce my eardrum) meaning "to nag or irritate" or paraphrases the metaphorical expression into expressions with negative meanings as وجعت راسي/waʒʒaʕit raasi/"to give me a headache", and أزعجتني /ʔazʕaʒatni/ "to annoy". In our explanation, the negative interference of L1 and the negative metaphorical image that is created in the mind (the image of a bug in someone's ear) are the reasons behind these wrong answers.

The third lowest percentage (18.5%) is given to the figurative expression *fat chance* which means "little possibility". This poor performance can be related to the fact that the word *fat* denotes the opposite meaning. If something is fat, then it is large not small. That's why most of the participants provide incorrect paraphrasing as فرصة قوية /furṣah qawijah/ "strong chance", فرصة عظيمة/furṣah ʕaẓiimah/ "great chance", and فرصة رائعة /furṣah raaʔiʕah/ "excellent chance".

The analysis of the worst translated expressions suggests that graduate students face great difficulty with idiomatic expressions that do not have an Arabic equivalent. They also have a problem in acquiring expressions which have a similar form in Arabic but differ in their meaning. Furthermore, graduate students struggle in learning core idiomatic expressions and figurative expressions with unpredictable meanings. The analysis also detects some unsuccessful translation strategies such as literal translation, giving an Arabic idiomatic expression with a different meaning, and avoiding the translation. Such analysis is in agreement with previous studies, viz., Bataineh and Bataineh (2002), Irujo (1986), AlKhawaldeh et al. (2016), and Smadi and Alrishan (2015).

6. Conclusion

Despite of their good knowledge of English, both M.A. and Ph.D. students of English do not have good figurative competence. The findings of the study display that they are unfamiliar with the majority of the figurative expressions included in the test. The findings also suggest that advanced English learners use their knowledge of L1, the metaphorical image that these expressions create, and the context to approach the meaning of the figurative expression. The study exhibits cases of positive transfer when the English idiom has a match in L1. However, negative interference of L1 happens when there is an Arabic idiom that looks similar to the target figurative expression but differs in its meaning. Moreover, English idioms which do not have an equivalent in L1 or whose meanings exist in a different idiomatic form constitute a great challenge. The

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findings indicate that the participants are usually influenced by the metaphorical image when predicting the meaning of an idiom. In addition, the participants usually do well when translating ONCEs, but they perform poorly with core idioms. Concerning the translation strategies observed in this study, the participants usually paraphrase the idiomatic expression or provide an Arabic equivalent. However, there are a few instances of literal translation and message avoidance.

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Appendix
Appendix 1

Student's educational level:　　M.A. student □　　Ph. D. student □

Please translate the words in bold font into Arabic:

1) I thought Ali was out of town, but there he is, as I live and breathe.

As I live and breathe:

2) Salma is only babe in the woods, when she tries to negotiate with those customers.

Babe in the woods:

3) I cooled my heels outside the professor's office for an hour.

Cool my heels:

4) He is not really mad. He's just a little down-in-the-mouth.

Down-in-the-mouth:

5) We've never been so busy in the office. You've got a fat chance for a vacation now.

A fat chance:

6) I'm glad to hear that you're all right. It gave me a bad turn when I heard about the accident.

Give me a bad turn:

7) Sooner or later, the grim reaper pays his visit to every man.

The grim reaper:

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8) We arrived in the nick of time. A moment later the train left.

In the nick of time:

9) All I needed was a good night's sleep. I'm feeling in the pink this morning.

In the pink:

10) Ahmad is a fine driver. This boy is just a beginner; Ahmad will make a monkey out of him.

Make a monkey out of him:

11) It was nip and tuck right up to the end. First one would be a head and then the other.

Nip and tuck:

12) Laila is working in a school now? You don't say so!

You don't say so!

13) From the way he pretends wisdom, you'd think he is gifted with second sight.

Second sight:

14) She couldn't say much, because it would seem disloyal, but she put a bug in my ear.

Put a bug in my ear:

15) Congratulations, Ali. I just heard the good news. When are you going to tie the knot?.

Tie the knot:

Appendix 2

Please indicate whether you are familiar with the following expressions or not:

	Familiar	Unfamiliar
as I live and breathe		
babe in the woods		
I cool my heels		
down-in-the-mouth		
fat chance		
give someone a bad turn		
the grim reaper (death)		
in the nick of time		
in the pink		
make a monkey out of him		

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nip and tuck		
You don't say so!		
second sight		
put a bug in my ear		

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