A Study of Kasetsart University Students’ Comprehension of English Idioms Appearing in Editorial Columns in the Bangkok Post and the Nation

Supranee Puimom¹
Pataraporn Tapinta²

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed to (a) investigate the common linguistic types of English idioms used in the editorial columns in the Bangkok Post and the Nation, (b) examine the Thai readers’ abilities and perceptions in their comprehension of English idioms, and (c) examine whether idiomatic expressions are the hindering factors for these Thai readers in their comprehension of English editorial texts. The 43 participants in this study were English-major students and non-major students. The instruments used in this study were a questionnaire, three reading comprehension tests, and a semi-structured interview. The descriptive and interpretative methods of content analysis (Berg, 2004; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Strauss and Corbin, 1983) have been employed to explore and analyze the data.

The findings revealed that, first, semantically, literal idiom was the most common type found (43%) in the editorial columns in the two English newspapers. Grammatically, phrasal verb idiom was mostly common found (40%). Second, findings regarding the students’ abilities and perceptions indicated that students were able to comprehend texts the best with literal idioms, the type with the most apparent meaning. In addition, regardless of the linguistic features, idioms were better comprehended when contexts were provided, especially when the language of the contexts included simple vocabulary and topics related to their background knowledge. The students also revealed that their comprehension of idioms was not directly connected with their awareness of the linguistic features of the idiomatic expressions. To conclude, idioms did not appear to hinder the students’ comprehension of the English editorial texts.

¹ Graduate Student, English for Specific Purposes Program, Graduate School, Kasetsart University
² Assistant professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University
บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพนี้มีจุดประสงค์สามประการได้แก่ 1) ศึกษาประเภทและลักษณะทางภาษาศาสตร์ของส่วนภาษาอังกฤษ (idioms) ที่ปรากฏทั่วไปในบทบรรณาธิการของหนังสือพิมพ์ภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทยสองฉบับคือ บางกอกโพสต์และเนชั่น 2) ศึกษาความสามารถในการเข้าใจส่วนภาษาอังกฤษตั้งแต่คำหรือส่วนที่มีความเข้าใจพบที่มีส่วนภาษาอังกฤษปรากฏอยู่ 3) ศึกษาว่าส่วนภาษาอังกฤษตั้งแต่คำหรือส่วนที่มีความเข้าใจพบที่มีส่วนภาษาอังกฤษปรากฏอยู่ที่มีผู้เข้าร่วมในงานวิจัยครั้งนี้ไม่ได้แก่ นักเรียนนอกวิชาภาษาอังกฤษและนักเรียนจากสาขาวิชาเอกอื่นๆ เครื่องมือสำหรับการวิจัยครั้งนี้ได้แก่ แบบสอบถาม แบบทดสอบการอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจความจำความสัมพันธ์และภารกิจวิชาการและวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลของงานขั้นนี้เป็นเชิงพรรณนาและการตีความจากเนื้อหาของข้อมูลที่รวบรวมได้

ผลการศึกษาพบว่า 1) จากการแบ่งประเภทของส่วนภาษาอังกฤษ (idioms) ด้วยกรอบทฤษฎีทางความหมาย literal idiom ปรากฏมากที่สุดในบทบรรณาธิการของหนังสือพิมพ์ภาษาอังกฤษทั้งสองฉบับ (43%) และหากแบ่งประเภทของส่วนภาษาอังกฤษตามกรอบทฤษฎีเชิงโครงสร้างของส่วนภาษาอังกฤษพบว่ามี phrasal verb idiom ปรากฏมากที่สุด (40%) 2) เมื่อพิจารณาความสามารถในการเข้าใจส่วนภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิตและการรับรู้ของนิสิตในการเข้าใจบทความที่มีส่วนภาษาอังกฤษปรากฏอยู่ พบว่ามีสิ่งที่เข้าใจบทความที่มี literal idiom ปรากฏอยู่ได้ดีที่สุด เนื่องจากสามารถรู้ความหมายได้จากตัวของส่วนภาษาอังกฤษนั้นๆ เองได้ดี นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่า นิสิตเข้าใจส่วนภาษาอังกฤษได้ดีเมื่อมีบริบท โดยเฉพาะเมื่อบริบทนั้นเป็นที่นิสิตสามารถกำหนดรายละเอียดและเนื้อหาอีกที่มีความรู้ในหัวข้อนั้นๆ มาตนเองแล้ว ตามทัศนคติของนิสิต ความเข้าใจส่วนภาษาอังกฤษนั้นไม่ได้มาจากการพิจารณาลักษณะทางภาษาศาสตร์ของส่วนภาษาอังกฤษ ดังนั้น จึงสรุปเป็นคำตอบของคำถามวิจัยข้อที่สามได้ว่า ส่วนภาษาอังกฤษที่ปรากฏอยู่ในบทบรรณาธิการไม่ได้เป็นอุปสรรคต่อการทำความเข้าใจในบทความดังกล่าวเลย

Introduction

English language and English language education has undergone an exponential raise in demand owing to economic globalization. As Thailand has become actively involved in the international market, English has become more and more important in the Thai circumstance (Prawat, 2002). As a consequence, it has influenced the daily life of Thai people. More specifically, reading skill in English has become important and necessary for success in profession, academic studies, and personal development (Alderson, 1989).
In these days of globalization, Thai readers including college students seek more opportunities to read English texts in different platforms of media including newspapers. However, due to unsuccessful instruction of English reading in Thailand, reading skills of Thai learners including college students need to be improved (Na Pan, 1979; Philondee, 2005; Prungwanitpong, 2008; Wongsothorn, 1988). Especially, because of the globalized world, readers need to utilize their reading skills to consume information from various sources of information. As aforementioned, one prominent source is the newspaper. Also, every newspaper has an editorial, an important column in which the publisher’s views are conveyed to the public. The newspaper language, however, has its stereotypes. Its language is precise and concise because of the space limitation (Hodgson, 1993; Keeble, 1994). There are several techniques to make news, or features interesting and attract readers. Among these linguistic techniques, idioms are commonly employed.

An idiom is an expression whose meaning is not immediately derivable from the individual words of which it is constituted (Perce, 2007: 87). The most important feature of an idiom is its unique meaning. However, some of them cause a difficulty for the learners of English or non-native speakers because many idioms have cultural or historical backgrounds without connection with the original meaning of individual words. However, students should master idiomatic English because, as Prodromou (2003) stated, they will not achieve idiomatic fluency when they have not been exposed to the texts in authentically communicative contexts.

In Thailand, Thai students have studied English for several years, but they have paid more attention on grammatical structures. Unfortunately, they seem to have low comprehension of reading texts especially when idiomatic expressions are presented (Palikupt, 1977). Therefore, in order to gain better understanding of how English idioms play roles in Thai readers’ English reading comprehension, especially those that appear in the two prominent English newspapers available in Thailand, this study aimed to examine 1) the common linguistic types of English idioms used in the editorial columns 2) Thai readers’ abilities and perceptions in their comprehension of English idioms and 3) whether idiomatic expressions are the hindering factors for Thai readers in their comprehension of English editorial texts.
The findings from this investigation should help provide useful suggestions to 1) the teachers of English to realize how English idioms have influenced on Thai college students’ reading comprehension and 2) the columnists to be aware of important aspects of idioms as part of the text when they write articles.

**Literature Review**

To address the research questions regarding types of idioms, the investigation of this study was mainly based on two theoretical frameworks (Fernando, 1996; Makkai, 1972). Regarding the investigation on comprehension of the readers, the schema theory in connection to the reading comprehension (Anderson, 2004; Carrel, 1988; Cooter, 1996) was reviewed.

1. **Types of idioms based on semantic framework: degree of non-literalness (Fernando’s 1996)**

   Fernando classifies idioms into three types: pure idiom, semi-idiom, and literal idiom. First, pure idiom is the idiom whose meaning and word form are not associated (e.g., “wet behind the ear” means “no experiences”). Second, semi-idiom consists of non-literal word and literal word (e.g., “save face” means “to save your good reputation, popularity, or dignity when something has happened or may happen to hurt you.” The meaning of “save” is considered literal while “face” does not mean one of the body part, thus, it is considered non-literal). Last, literal idiom refers to the idiom whose meaning can be interpreted from its word part (e.g., “speed up” means “to go faster”).

2. **Type of idioms based on the framework of grammatical construction (Makkai’s 1972)**

   Makkai (1972) has classified idioms into the aspects of grammatical construction including phrasal verb idiom, tournure idiom, irreversible binomial idiom, phrasal compound idiom, and incorporating verb idiom. First, phrasal verb idiom is the combination of verb and adverb which occurring as a preposition (e.g., call for, stave off, and stand up with). Second, tournure idiom is composed of at least three constituents (e.g., weather the storm, be a case in point, and show the door). Third, irreversible binomial idiom consists of two
constituents which are linked by connectors (e.g., in and out, make or break, and part and parcel). Fourth, phrasal compound idiom is formed by various grammatical structures such as noun-noun, adjective-noun, and adjective-verb (e.g., bloodbath, red tape, and small fry). Fifth, incorporating verb idiom is composed of two constituents and functions as a verb (e.g., whitewash, mastermind).

3. Reading Comprehension: role of text and context

One dominant aspect in reading comprehension which plays a great role in readers’ understanding is called “schema.” Schema can be defined as “cognitive structures or networks constructed in the brain to organize and add new information to what a person already knows” (Cooter, 1996). It helps retrieve information or recall their past experiences. People have a different schema depending on their culture i.e., age, sex, race, religion, nationality, and occupation.

Schema theory proposes that when humans acquire new information, they will comprehend better if they have already known its content. The more they know, the better they can understand the new information. In reading, they would recall more of the text with familiar background knowledge than the unknown text.

In connection with the role of context, Carrel (1988) explains about the influence of readers’ background knowledge in two main aspects: content schema and formal schema. Content schema refers to background knowledge related to the topic of the text. Formal schema is the knowledge about the structure of the text such as genre, language, and organization of the texts.

Anderson (2004) briefly explains the role of schema affecting both learning and remembering in six aspects. First, a schema helps retrieve the proper information which fits the reader’s schema. Second, a schema helps the reader pay attention to the important part of a text. Third, a schema enables the reader to make inference beyond the text. Fourth, a schema allows the reader to search the information orderly. Fifth, a schema enables the reader to summarize the important information and omit unnecessary data. Finally, a schema helps the reader recall the missing information.
In connection with the inquiries on this present study, a number of previous studies were also reviewed.

Cain, Oakhill, and Lemmon (2004) investigated the ability of 9 and 10 year-old children to interpret idioms in relation to their reading comprehension level. There were 56 idioms used in this study namely, 14 for each type namely “real-transparent”, “real-opaque”, “novel-transparent”, and “novel-opaque”. The participants were 28 Caucasian children from urban schools, and the majority of them were from lower middle-class families. The children were tested individually. The findings revealed that children were slightly more likely to recognize “real-transparent” idioms than “real-opaque” idioms. In context, the real idioms were more likely to be interpreted more correctly than the novel expressions.

Levorato, Nelsi, and Cacciari (2004) investigated the relationship between text comprehension and idiom comprehension in Italian elementary school-age children. The participants were 101 Italian second-graders and 98 Italian fourth-graders in an elementary school in the north of Italy. The researchers conducted Experiment 1 and Experiment 2. The results of both experiments showed that the ability to understand a text indicated the children’s understanding of idioms in context. For verification, possible improvements in children’s comprehension skills that might produce an increase in figurative language understanding, experiment 3 was carried out. A group of poor comprehenders who participated in Experiments 1 and 2 were tested eight months later. The results of Experiment 3 showed that children’s general comprehension skills improved their performance on an idiom comprehension test.

Regarding the role of context, Machida (2001) investigated the role of kanji in second language learners’ reading comprehension of Japanese text to understand how two subgroups of Japanese learners, with Chinese background and non-Chinese background, approach text. The participants were 14 Chinese background learners, and 14 non-Chinese background learners. The results revealed that the learners with Chinese background performed better in kanji comprehension both with and without context, while the learners with non-Chinese background scored better in pronouncing kanji words. It can be assumed that both Chinese background and non-Chinese background learners more relied on Chinese scripts.
Tarchi’s study (2010) explored the relationship between prior knowledge and reading comprehension of informative texts. The participants were 131 students in grade 7 in 5 secondary schools in Florence, Italy. They were assessed on different components of reading comprehension with a main focus on prior knowledge. They were asked to read two passages, science and history, and answer 14 opened-ended and multiple choices questions. The results showed that the reader’s prior knowledge had an impact on the reader’s comprehension directly and indirectly.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a method of content analysis (Berg, 2004; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Strauss and Corbin, 1983). Based on the theoretical framework regarding types of idioms (Fernando, 1996; Makkai, 1972), the first part aimed to investigate the common linguistic types of English idioms used in the editorial columns. 250 pieces of the editorial columns (each of with was approximately 500-600 words) were gained from both two major English newspapers. Idioms from these editorial columns of these English newspapers were identified based on the major types classified by the two frameworks of idioms employed in this study: the semantic framework (Fernando, 1996) and the framework of grammatical construction (Makkai, 1972).

The second part of the study aimed to examine the students’ abilities and perceptions about English idioms. The instruments used in this part were a questionnaire, three reading comprehension tests, and a semi-structured interview. A questionnaire was first administered to the students to gain their personal information. Next, Reading Comprehension Test 1 (testing items at sentence level without context), Reading Comprehension Test 2 (testing items as the excerpts from editorial columns), and Reading Comprehension Test 3 (Testing items of the texts with contexts of simple language created by a researcher) were given to the students. The 20 idioms included in these testing items were purposively selected to cover all classified types. Students were allowed to complete the questionnaire and the three reading comprehension tests on their own without time limit. However, they were instructed not to look up the meaning of the idiomatic expressions in a dictionary. After
completing this task, 20 students were selected as representatives to gain their self-reports on how they mastered the testing idioms and their difficulty when doing the three reading comprehension tests. The reports from the questionnaire, the three reading comprehension test scores, and their reports from the interviews about their perceptions on their reading comprehension abilities were triangulated to address this enquiry.

Lastly, the findings for the research questions 1 and 2 led to explanations in response to the research question 3 “Are idiomatic expressions hindering factors for these Thai readers in their comprehension of English editorial texts?”

Discussion of Findings

This part presents the findings to address the three research questions of this study. The results of this study were divided into two parts: the first part addresses the first research question “What are the common linguistic types of English idioms used in the editorial columns?” in connection with part of research question 2 regarding the students’ abilities in understanding idioms. The second part presents findings for the research questions 2 “What are Thai readers’ abilities and perceptions in their comprehension of the English idioms appearing in the editorials in the English newspapers?” in connection with the research question 3 “Are the idiomatic expressions hindering factors for these Thai readers in their comprehension of English editorial texts?”

Under this study, there were five types of topics appearing in the editorial columns. These topics included discussions on general issues, domestic political situations, domestic economic situations, foreign affairs, and legal issues. Idioms appearing in the editorial columns were both function words and content words. According to the students’ reports, they normally comprehended most of the content words from the contexts.

Regarding the types of idioms, the two theoretical frameworks (Fernando, 1996; Makkai, 1972) were employed. The findings revealed that most of the idioms found in this study in any type of topic are literal idioms (43% e.g., first of all, day off, in mind, and no matter what), followed by semi-idioms (33% e.g., on the surface, save face, common ground, and face to face) and pure idioms (24% e.g., lion’s share, paper tiger, red tape, and flying
high) respectively. Among the three types of idioms, it can be seen that all students (100% in both Reading Comprehension Tests 2 and 3) could master the literal idioms better than the other two types (All of them passed a passing point at 55%). This seems to indicate that the apparent meanings of original words enhanced their understanding of the meanings of the testing idioms as suggested by Fernando (1996). In addition, considering the difficult types of idioms, it appeared that fewer students (72% in Reading Comprehension Test 2) could master the pure idioms. Interestingly, it should be noted that when these types of idioms appeared in the contexts in which the language was less difficult (i.e., in Reading Comprehension Test 3), they could be comprehended better (100% of students).

When considering idioms in terms of their grammatical constructions, the result showed that phrasal verb idiom was found the most (40% e.g., buy out, follow through, live up to, and scare away), followed by phrasal compound idiom (19% e.g., olive branch, clear-cut, open fire, at edge, and name of the game), tournure idiom (7% e.g., shoot from the hip, turn the tide, drag one’s feet, and slug it out), and irreversible binomial idiom (3% e.g., far and wide, give and take, in and out, and make or break) respectively. Another 30% found were idioms which do not belong to any classification (e.g., light at the end of the tunnel, moral high ground, if worst comes to the worst, and here today gone tomorrow).

However, findings from this study revealed that when students made attempts to understand meanings of the testing idioms, they did not pay any attention to the structure of these expressions. This seems to suggest that the grammatical construction of idioms does not play an important role in the comprehension process of these expressions. Therefore, the discussions on theoretical concepts of the comprehension of idiomatic expressions will be mainly based on the semantic framework in relation to the role of context.

As aforementioned, the findings regarding the students’ abilities and perceptions of their comprehension of English idioms were gained from the three instruments namely, a questionnaire, three reading comprehension tests, and a semi-structured interview. Regardless of types, the findings from Reading Comprehension Test 1 indicated that students did not have enough knowledge of English idioms when idioms appeared in isolation. On the contrary, when idioms appeared in contexts of both Reading Comprehension Tests
2 and 3, the students could master them well, and they could master idioms in Reading Comprehension Test 3 better than Reading Comprehension Test 2 because the level of language was less difficult.

According to the students’ interviews, it appeared that contexts play more important role than the linguistic features of idioms. 85% of students who were interviewed (selected as representatives of those who earned high score (17-20 points), medium score (14-16 points), and low score (11-13 points)) stated that they understood the tested meanings of idioms by employing the contexts to guess the meanings of the testing idioms. Additionally, they reported that they could understand the meanings of the testing idioms in contexts (especially in Reading Comprehension Test 3) better than in isolation. In addition, no one was aware of the linguistic features of idioms to gain the answers to the questions. This indicates the significant role of contexts and simple language in enhancing greatly on the students’ comprehension of the texts. As a consequence, to address the research question 3, idioms do not seem to hinder the students’ comprehension when reading English editorial texts.

In addition, when considering the students’ scores, it can be seen that English-major students could master the testing idioms better than non-major students due to the fact that English-major students had more chances to be familiar with English language than non-major students. In addition, students whose scores were high revealed that because of their reading habits both Thai and English books, including doing activities involving English language such as watching English movies or listening to English songs, helped them master English. Interestingly, two students whose scores were high reported that although they preferred to read Thai books, they could relate these experiences in English as well.

In sum, in reading English texts, a reader’s schema (Anderson, 2004) such as exposure to the language and reader’s background knowledge of the text can enhance overall reading comprehension and thus reduce difficulties in understanding problematic parts of the texts such as idiomatic expressions. That is to say, a reader’s schema seems to play a greater role in comprehension than the specific linguistic features of certain idioms (both semantically and grammatically).
Conclusion

As the discussion of findings in addressing the three research questions have been presented, theoretically, it can be summarized that the linguistic features that are embedded in idioms of any type are not the elements that substantially affect the reader’s ability in understanding their meanings, and as a consequence, the texts in which they appear. Instead, when the adequate context is provided to suit the reader’s schema, the role of context is greater in promoting the reader’s comprehension of those idiomatic expressions and the texts as a whole.

Implication

This study provides useful suggestions for both educators and columnists. First, for the educators, the findings of this study could motivate the teachers in order to promote knowledge in this area among students. Idioms can be presented in the texts with enough contexts provided. Therefore, teachers should support students with adequate contexts when they face with difficult idiomatic expressions. Second, for the columnists, they should be aware that when they write articles in any topic, they should provide enough contextual knowledge for the readers to grasp the meaning.

Recommendation for Further Study

Following on the findings of this present study, further studies should be carried out to cover formal investigations regarding the role of idioms in the texts. The present findings reveal that contexts play a great role in the reader’s comprehension of idioms. However, the scope of this present study does not cover how the context influences comprehension of each type of idiom. Therefore, further investigation regarding the connection between the role of context and the semantic feature of idioms should be conducted to gain more insight into this area of comprehension.
References


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