



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

**LINGUISTIC ACQUISITION AND COMPETENCE: A CASE STUDY OF
NATIVE SPEAKERS' IDIOMATIC COMPETENCE**

Sharmeen Ismail

Lecturer, Department of Sciences and Humanities,
FAST-NUCES, Karachi Campus

Email: sharmeen.ismail@nu.edu.pk

Abstract

Since idiomatic language improves speakers' communicative ability and thinking skills, this qualitative case study investigates the idiomatic competence of young Urdu NSs. For the data collection, eighty Urdu speakers filled in a Discourse-Completion Task followed by a detailed interview of ten key-informants, chosen based on their performance in the task. The findings reveal that Pakistani youth is inclined to learn English and the elderly people have stopped using Urdu idioms in their discourse; therefore, the youth is unable to comprehend and use idioms appropriately. Hence, they are not growing cognitively and have become semilinguals. The results suggest that at the acquisition stage; children should be provided with complete knowledge of the native language to build their figurative competence. Further, the older generation must transmit these expressions to the younger generation not only for the improvement of their communicative competence but also for the maintenance of the language and its culture.

Keywords: *Cultural linguistics, communicative competence, figurative language, idiomatic competence, BICS*

Introduction

Idioms and proverbs are fixed expressions in a language, which are acquired and used without any changes (Akbarian, 2012) because of their standard forms and meanings (Bonin et al., 2013). Particularly focusing on idioms, they are defined as a collection of words whose meanings cannot be deduced by their individual units as their literal meanings are different. According to Luu (2020), idioms are intense expressions that are not literally true, but Khan (2014) stated that idioms play a key role in keeping "the native and cultural colour" of any language alive (p. 67). Therefore, these expressions not only maintain a specific language but also preserve a particular culture associated with it. Recently, I have observed that idioms are used both orally and in writing in a considerable amount. They can easily be found in different kinds of discourse, for example,



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

political shows, print media, and fictional writing. Following are a few lines taken from the local newspapers showing how idioms are used:

“ham agar apne andar xud ka jaaeza le~ to yahi baat saamne aaye gi ke hamaare andar bhi intiqami jazbaat kuut kuut kar bhare hue he’~” [implied meaning: If we examine the truth within ourselves, it will be revealed that we are also full of vengeful feelings] (roznaama jasarat, 2024)

“log xe’raat, amdaad ya xuraak se’laab zadgaan ko is liye nahi~ dena chaahte ke voh apne vaare niyaare na kar le~” [implied meaning: people do not want to help, do charity or provide food to the flood affectees so that they will not earn great profit from it] (Naheed, 2022)

Idioms are expressions that can be used readily whenever users interact with others; they need not construct the language every time, and because of their ordinariness in naturally occurring conversations of native speakers (NSs), the inability to understand and use these expressions is unimaginable. However, listening to the Urdu discourse of young native speakers, I have realized that idioms have lost their place as the young generation does not use these expressions. Jamai (2018) also affirmed, *“Urdu ki kahaavate~ aur mahaavre apne andar jo hikayaat, alaamate~ aur naam liye hue he’~ inki haqiqat aur pase-manzar se hamaari aaj ki nasal na vaaqif he’ ”* [our today’s generation is unaware of the background and reality Urdu proverbs and idioms carry in terms of facts, signs, and fame]. Now the young generation is more interested in learning other languages and using social media depriving them of any opportunity to interact in their mother tongue.

Nevertheless, the understanding and usage of idioms in a native language can be affected because of limited exposure resulting in linguistic deficiency since there is a connection “between the acquisition of figurative language and general linguistic development” (Levorato, 1993, p. 103), which shows that the acquisition of figurative language is directly proportional to the linguistic development.

It can also influence one’s communicative competence in their native language as both Bachman (1990) and Celce-Murcia (2007) mentioned that the ability to comprehend and use figurative language is essential to attain communicative competence. Celce-Murcia (2007) named it ‘formulaic competence’ which “refers to those fixed and prefabricated chunks of a language that speakers use heavily in everyday interactions” (p. 48). She has also talked about its significance, which is increasing and how it has become a necessity to be a fluent speaker. Rafatbakhsh and Ahmadi (2019) also mentioned that “the formulaic language should be taught to increase the naturalness of learners’ language” as it promotes communicative competence and makes learners familiar with the culture of a language (p.4). It simply refers to Cummins’s (1979) notion of Basic



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

Interpersonal Communicative Skills which is the communicative proficiency one has in a language, where the use of idioms is inevitable. According to Levorato (1993), only a competent speaker can fully acquire this competence. In other words, difficulty in idiom comprehension shows one's linguistic deficiency, making them cognitively and culturally deficient too.

Focusing on the above-stated issue, this research is conducted to assess the young adult Urdu native speakers' idiomatic competence, where the model of communicative competence (Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia, 2007) and BICS (Cummins, 1979) are taken as the basis for the study. Dixon (1994) also believes that the knowledge of idioms is required to communicate effectively in different contexts. Hence, this research aims to investigate the comprehension and use of Urdu idioms by undergraduate students. It studies this perspective concerning both genders: male and female. It answers the following questions:

1. How far are students able to understand and use Urdu idioms?
2. What are the reasons behind the low idiomatic competence of the Urdu native speakers, if any?
3. What differences are there between the idiomatic competence of male and female participants?

Literature Review

Research shows that even a five-year-old can comprehend an idiom if it is transparent (Caillies & Le Sourn-Bissaoui, 2008). One of the significant studies on the development of idiomatic meaning shows similar results, where Prinz (1983) examined the children's ability to comprehend idioms. To collect the data, sixty participants, aged 6-34 years, were provided with a list of idiomatic sentences along with pictures representing both literal and idiomatic meanings and were asked to choose the picture which more accurately illustrated the meaning of each sentence. The research concluded that the capability to understand idioms in L1 increases after the age of nine. Nevertheless, one cannot generalize these findings as they chiefly depend on personal aptitude, cognitive growth, and exposure. Nippold (1991) also stated, "There seems to be no clear point in human development when it can be said that idioms have been mastered" (p. 101).

In addition to this, Schweigert's experimental research focuses on idiom comprehension based on the familiarity factor, where forty-eight undergraduates were made to read the text containing both familiar and unfamiliar idioms. The participants' reading time revealed that the comprehension of familiar idioms is easy and reading them in a text takes less time, but encountering unfamiliar idioms in a text increases the reading time. According to Nippold (1991), insufficient exposure or



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

the inability to benefit adequately from the provided exposure are the two key reasons for idiom comprehension difficulty. It means that both figurative language and literal language are acquired in like manner, i.e., through language exposure in different contexts.

Nippold's (2003) correlational study investigated children's and adults' understanding of idioms and the role of mental imagery. The data were gathered from 40 children and 40 adults utilizing two tasks: an idiom comprehension task and a mental imagery task; for which twenty idiomatic expressions, ten transparent and ten opaque, were selected. In mental imagery tasks, the participants had to explain the associated images they had in their minds with each expression while in the other one, they read twenty four-sentence-stories, each ending with an idiom and then selected the correct interpretation of those idioms from the given options. Centering on idiom comprehension, the results showed that the transparent idioms are easy to comprehend but the comprehension of opaque idioms is challenging as the children and some adults could not understand the given idioms. Looking at it critically, the study has examined idiomatic competence, but it has not mentioned it once.

In an American context, Conner et al. (2011) examined the younger and older adults' ability to produce idioms. For this correlational research, they collected the data from eighty English native monolinguals, where forty of them were between the ages 18 and 30 while the other forty were between 60 and 85. After selecting 40 familiar idioms through pre-piloting, they designed a story-completion task. Later, the participants listened to the scenarios and read simultaneously, and completed the task. The results unveiled that the younger adults faced less difficulty in recalling and producing idioms as compared to the older ones. However, for the situations where they could not produce the desired idioms, some cues were offered, and it showed that the elderly were able to benefit more from it. Overall, the research exhibits that some adults have low idiomatic competence as they had difficulty in retrieving idioms, but the research does not remark upon it.

Moreover, Cacciari et al. (2018) conducted exploratory research on Italian NSs, where the personality and cognitive differences in individuals affecting spoken idiom comprehension were examined quantitatively. The data gathered from 64 university students using a cross-modal lexical decision test, reveal that individual differences influence idiom comprehension. Nonetheless, the critical review of these research studies shows that they have not explored the dark side where the native speakers' incapability to process idioms irrespective of any factor reports their linguistic deficiency mirroring their low communicative competence although this phenomenon has been studied widely in an L2 context (Al-Kadi, 2015; Littlemore & Low, 2006). Research on idiom comprehension in L2 context has also drawn a connection between both the types of competence: idiomatic and communicative (Tran, 2013).



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

Katsarou's (2012) mixed-method exploratory research assesses Greek learners' ability to identify idioms in L2 as they learn English as a foreign language. The results disclose that idiom identification is an essential aspect failing which can affect the comprehension of idioms along with the understanding of the text. In an Iranian context, Shakouri and Nafissi (2019) conducted a quantitative study on the idiom acquisition of Farsi native speakers. To examine the age of acquiring idioms, the data were gathered from 60 participants belonging to three age groups: six-year-olds, ten-year-olds, and adults. They were asked to define forty preselected Farsi idioms. The findings display that adults, as well as older children, can comprehend idioms in their native language as both of them were able to explain the meanings of given idioms, but adults are more capable of explaining idioms because of their exposure to the language. The results of the study reveal that the adult's rate of idiomatic knowledge was 91.05% while children's rate was 45.8% disclosing that children are still acquiring these expressions. However, as the research only focuses on the comprehension of idioms, where the participants were asked to explain the given idioms, it does not ensure their ability to use these idiomatic expressions in their discourse.

In the same year, Shajrawi and Smadi (2019) also conducted quantitative research studying the idiomatic competence of Jordanian students, who were EFL undergraduates. The study compared their ability to comprehend and use idioms in both L1, i.e. Arabic and L2, English. For the data collection, 125 EFL learners were selected through random sampling and asked to complete a discourse-completion task, which had items in both languages. The findings displayed their inability to comprehend idioms in both Arabic and English as they could not understand the given situations and use appropriate idioms. Focusing on L1, the findings reveal that the students had low idiomatic competence in their mother tongue, which questions their ability to communicate effectively in a language. Although the study has not explicitly stated, it has revealed native speakers' low communicative competence, which can be one of the reasons behind their insufficient knowledge of English idiomaticity since their limited L1 CALP may have influenced their L2 CALP.

Ngoge and Abas (2021) studied the age of idiom acquisition in an L2 context and concluded that the ability to understand idioms develops by the age of 12, which then continues to expand. Another study in an L2 context was conducted in Unguja by Ngoge (2023). Although the research examined the Zanzibari students' ability to comprehend English idioms, the findings are significant as they revealed their below average performance. Reviewing it critically, one of the reasons behind this performance could be their low idiomatic competence in their native language, which needs to be explored making these findings a ground.



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

In the local context, the research on figurative language has focused more on loyalty and linguistic sexism in the proverbs of some indigenous languages of Pakistan (Bartlotti, 2000; Khan et al., 2017; Sanauddin, 2015). Even though these researches have contributed to the field of research on figurative language, they do not discuss native speakers' use of figurative language. Khan (2014) conducted mixed-method research examining the translation strategies used by the translators, where she focused on both idioms and proverbs of English and Urdu and did a comparative analysis. The research also explores cultural equivalence for the idioms and proverbs having animal connotations. The analysis uncovers that translation of some idioms poses problems as idioms are culturally specific and finding their equivalent in other languages is difficult. Nevertheless, translating proverbs is easy as their equivalents are available. The results reveal that the translators use different semantic and communicative approaches while translating these expressions. Moreover, Umar and Rasul (2017) analyzed some speeches of a politician to study the ideologies and myths associated with the use of metaphorical language. For the analysis, five speeches of a famous Pakistani politician were assessed revealing certain ideologies linked with the metaphorical language. The research does not focus on idioms, but it has shown that politicians also use metaphorical language.

As the literature review shows that the processing of idiomatic expressions in children, adults, or patients for both L1 and L2 has been reviewed extensively (Conner et al., 2011; Hewitt, 2017), it displays the important place idioms hold in a language. Even though the earlier studies have distinctively contributed to the field of linguistics, they do not shed light on the dark side where if someone cannot understand the idiomatic expressions unveil a lack of knowledge making them linguistically incompetent.

In the local context, primarily the studies focus on proverbs of different languages and there are fewer studies on Urdu idioms, which show that Urdu native speakers' idiomatic competence has never been investigated. Earlier research emphasized non-conceptual phenomena rather than focusing on cognitive conceptualization; therefore, they do not directly relate to cognitive linguistics (Sharifian, 2017). They have not even drawn a link between little idiomatic competence and lack of communicative competence, which affects the Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills and cognitive skills. Hence, to fill the highlighted research gap, this study examines the Urdu native speakers' capability to comprehend and use idioms.

Methodology

This qualitative research follows an instrumental case study design, which is an investigation of a specific case to understand it in detail (Cohen et al., 2007, p.255). This research design was



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

specifically chosen since the research focuses on a specific phenomenon, the idiomatic competence of young Urdu NSs, aged 18-24. The data was collected using a Discourse-completion task, which is defined as “a production questionnaire in which the participant responds to a given prompt” (Sweeney & Hua, 2016, p. 212). Since it provides adequate input, earlier studies have used it extensively as an idiom recall and production test (Conner et al., 2011; Irujo, 1986). For the task, forty idioms were randomly selected from the dialogues some Pakistani dramas, and Urdu books taught at the tertiary level of education (see Appendix A).

The discourse-completion task was divided into two sections, where the first one had five different dialogic discourses with some spaces that had to be filled with an idiom provided in a list while the second section had three situations based on the dialogues where a part of the idiom was given as a hint. As participants, eighty undergraduate students, forty males and forty females, were chosen from two general public universities: the Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences, and Technology (FUUAST) and the University of Karachi (UoK) as these universities provide an idiomatic exposure to the students in an academic context by offering Urdu as a compulsory subject. For the DCT, the participants were chosen through purposive and snowball sampling, and for the interview, ten key informants, who could not perform well in the task, were purposively handpicked to study the reasons behind their low idiomatic competence. The details of the participants are represented in Table (1).

Table (1): Details of the research participants

| | Gender | No. of participants |
|--------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| University of Karachi | Female | 19 |
| | Male | 21 |
| Federal Urdu University | Female | 21 |
| | Male | 19 |
| Total Participants | | 80 |

Following the ethical guidelines, consent was taken from the participants, and their original names were replaced with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity throughout the research.



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

Data Analysis

The section presents the detailed analysis of the discourse-completion task filled in by the research participants revealing their idiomatic knowledge. It gives reliable and valid data since the task directly assessed their idiomatic knowledge instead of asking them to rate it using some rating scale. Based on the research questions, the emerging themes underlining the reasons behind their limited idiomatic competence are also presented here. Once the participants signed the consent form, they were asked to fill out the discourse-completion task based on two parts, where the time for filling out each part differed. Completion of the first task took an average of forty-five minutes while the second one took approximately fifteen minutes. The following table (2) illustrates the numerical analysis of the DCT representing the percentages of idioms appropriately filled out in each part.

Table (2): Number of appropriately used idioms in the DCT

| | Total number of idioms | Number of correctly filled idioms | Percentage |
|----------------|-------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| Part I | 2000 | 1235 | 61.75% |
| Part II | 1200 | 342 | 28.5% |
| Total | 3200 | 1577 | 49% |

As the table shows, only 49% of the idiomatic expressions were properly used in the DCT whereas 51% of the blanks either had wrong idioms or were empty. Upon dividing the participants into three groups based on their performance in the task, a significant difference in their ability to understand and utilize idioms was disclosed. Out of 80 research participants, 22 performed exemplary as they had an above average score revealing their high idiomatic competence, 27 of them performed satisfactorily scoring average whereas the performance of the remaining 31 was subpar. These below-average scorers could not even fill 45% of the idioms appropriately, which shows their insufficient knowledge of Urdu idiomaticity. It unveils their limited knowledge of their mother tongue as idiomatic expressions are a part of the lexicon of a language.

The separate analysis of both sections displayed that 61.75 % of the idioms were appropriately filled in by the participants in section 1. In fact, three participants correctly used all the idioms in the first section as the list of the idioms was already provided and then the context served as a supplement. On the contrary, in the other section, only 28.5% of responses were correct where not



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

a single participant could complete the given situations with appropriate idioms. The analysis disclosed that even the participants who scored above 80% in the first part hardly performed average in the second part. Comparing their performance in both parts, the data showed that only twenty research participants performed below par in the first section but in the other section there were sixty-seven below-average scorers. Indeed, the second part of the task, which required them to complete the given idiom, actually tested their ability to recall and use a particular idiom giving them no option of guessing. However, the provided context and the part of an idiom did not help them.

The participants' incapability to understand and use idioms in a context unveils their pragmatic impairments as idiom comprehension is a pragmatic task (Hewitt, 2017). Furthermore, many of the idioms for the study were selected from their academic books, so it also shows their inability to store and recall information over time, questioning their ability to communicate effectively since idiomatic knowledge is required for successful communication (Dixon, 1994). It also casts doubt on the teaching and testing methods used at the educational institutes, which are unable to make them use these expressions. During the interview, when the key informants were prompted for insight, it was told that their generation does not use such expressions and they are unable to recall any idiom they were taught. They stated that their school and college teachers had always asked them to cram these expressions, which is the major reason behind their underdeveloped cognition in their mother tongue. It shows that they are not growing cognitively as cognitive skills are the prerequisite for idiom acquisition (Levorato, 1993).

Besides this, it has been found that English is the key reason behind their negligence and shift from their mother tongue. The participants believed that English has always been the medium of instruction, and the Pakistani Education system not only supports English but also degrades the use of Urdu or other indigenous languages. As a result, their parents always pressurized them to learn and speak English as Muzammil, who scored nearly 10% in the task stated: "*pata he* 'I have always heard this English English thing from my parents like we should learn it to progress in studies err to get good marks or progress in our life...and my Urdu ultimately suffered very badly'. Consequently, they could not achieve the competence in any of the languages as Hammad reported: "*is English ke chakkar me~ abhi ham na Urdu paRh pa rahe he~ na English aur hame~ dono~ me~ se koi bhi language thiik se nahi~ ati*" [Because of this English now we can neither study Urdu nor English. Also, we don't know any of the languages properly]. The interview analysis also revealed that the usage of Urdu has been restricted to a few informal domains. Therefore, English is accountable not only for native speakers' inability to understand and use Urdu idioms but also for the language decline. It reflects that the imbalance in our education system reinforces subtractive bilingualism, where learning an L2 detracts from the development of L1.



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

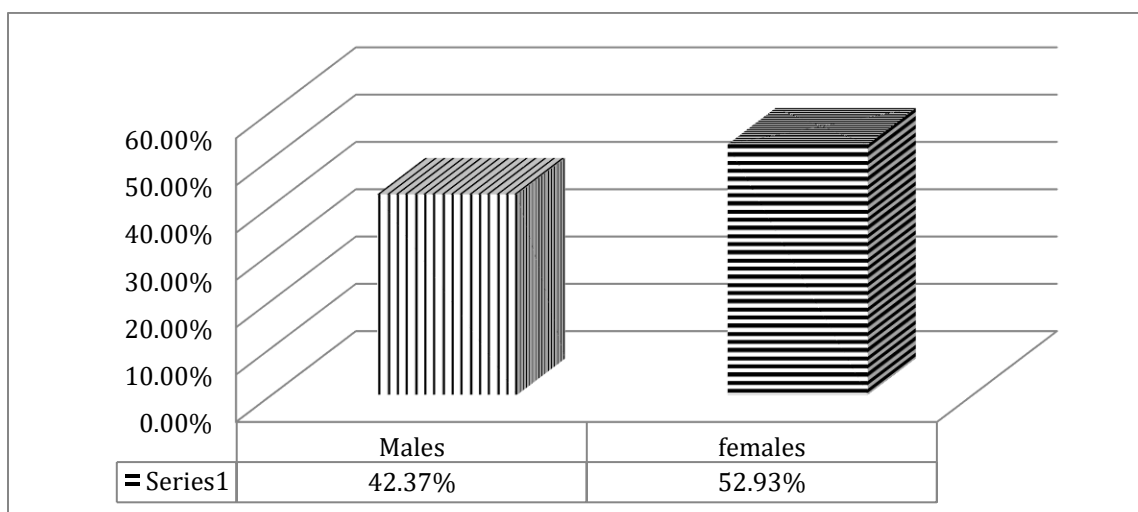
Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

Apart from this, when the key informants were summoned to shed light on their performance in the task, two of them displayed their incapability to notice idioms in the discourse. For example, Insia said, “To tell you the truth I don’t understand the difference between an idiom and a straight line... I mean when I read, I don’t even realize that there were idioms until someone points it out” However, identifying idiomatic expressions is crucial for understanding them (Katsarou, 2012). The interview further unveils that they are not interested in learning and using these expressions and if an incomprehensible idiom is encountered, it is overlooked, quoting it in Hania’s own words: “You see... I simply don’t understand idioms and I skip them... like I completely ignore such things”. It discloses that sometimes a few components of L1 are treated lightly and because a native language is acquired in a natural setting, for which no conscious effort is required, this deliberate effort of neglecting the lexicon of the language will only make them linguistically deficient.

Comparing the results of the participants of both the research sites, the data uncovers a noteworthy difference in their idiomatic knowledge as two participants from UoK filled in 82.5% of the idioms correctly whereas nobody from the Federal Urdu University scored more than 75% in the DCT. It may illustrate that their figurative competence is under development as research also shows that the mastery of idiomatic expressions is not connected with any specific age (Nippold, 1991). Rather, it keeps progressing depending on different factors. Considering the competence level of both genders, the data revealed that females have an improved idiomatic competence; it is also represented in the following graph:

Graph (1): Overall participants’ performance in the task





ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

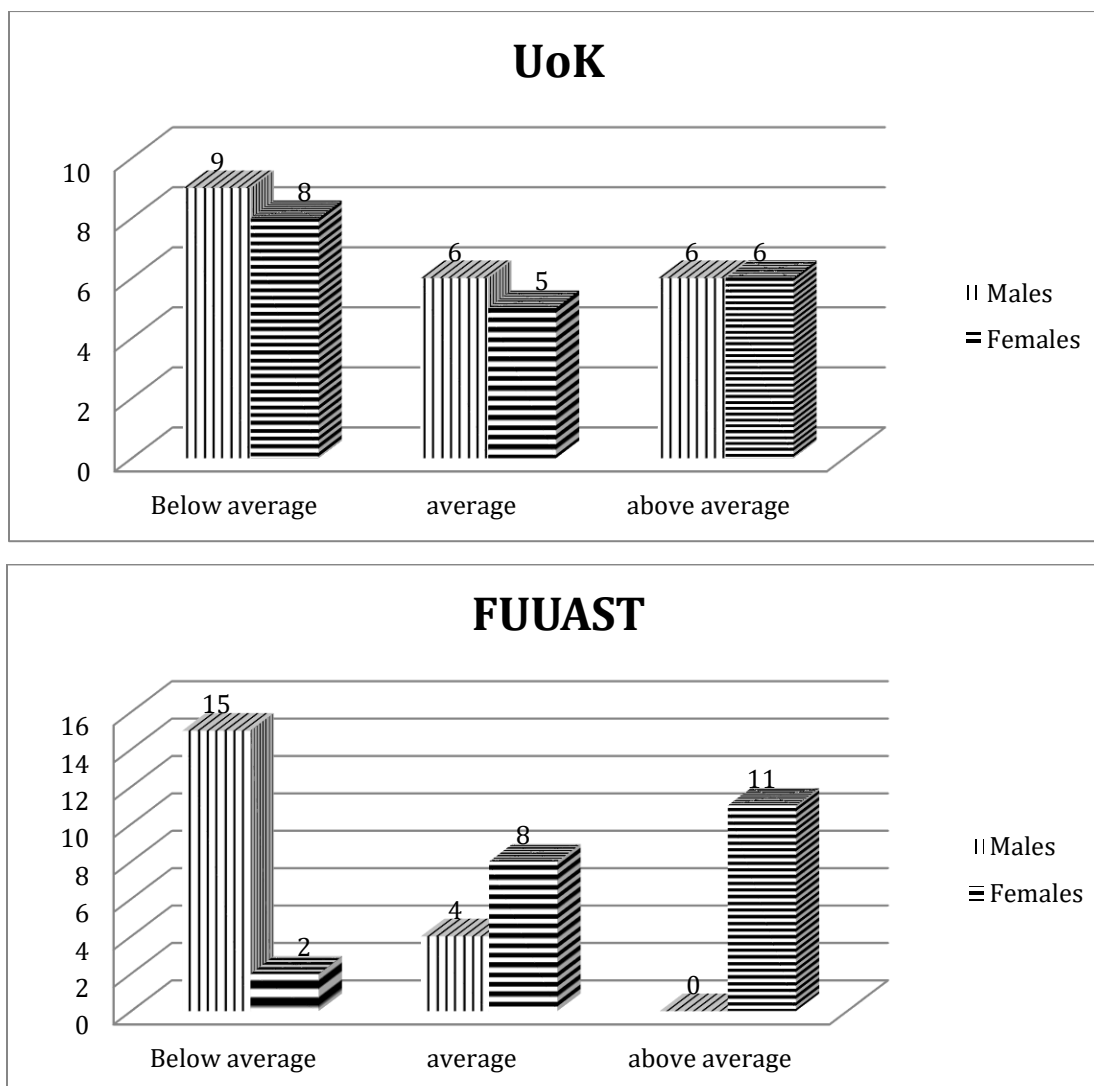
Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

The analysis disclosing male participants' inability to comprehend and use idiomatic expressions in the task showed their low idiomatic competence making them linguistically handicapped. The participants also had awareness about it as Shaan from Federal University stated: "*mahaavre to duur ki baat he'... jab ham log Urdu hi sahi se nahi~ bol sakte to ye kahaa~ se istimaal karne aae~ ge*" [Idioms are a different matter. When we cannot speak Urdu properly, how can we learn to use these expressions]. Levorato's (1993) also highlighted that general language development and figurative language development are linked together.

Graph (2 and 3): Ratio of male and female participants based on their scores





ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

It was found that the male and female participants from both universities had different competence levels in terms of idiomatic expressions. On one hand, the analysis of the task completed by the participants from UoK did not reveal significant gender differences in terms of their idiomatic competence. The percentage of male and female participants getting an average and above average score is almost the same, i.e. nearly 50% in both cases. The ones scoring below average are seventeen in total, out of which nine are males and eight are females, which is not worth mentioning. On the other hand, the analysis of the data collected from FUUAST disclosed that the females have more capacity to comprehend and use the idiomatic expressions in the DCT as compared to their male counterparts since none of them performed above average in the task. Moreover, out of the twelve average scorers, 67% were females while the other 33% were males. In addition to this, only 12% of the female participants from FUUAST were categorized as below average while the percentage of the male participants who scored below 45 was 88%.

Overall, this analysis revealed that, unlike FUUAST, the male participants from the University of Karachi have an understanding of idiomatic expressions and they can use them too. Further, the data displayed that the idiomatic competence of the female participants of FUUAST is much higher as compared to the male participants as well as the female participants from UoK. When the male participants were invited to elucidate the reasons behind their unsatisfactory performance, it was uncovered that they had less idiomatic exposure, which affected their ability to understand and use these expressions. They reported that their busyness in their educational and professional lives provides them fewer chances to interact with their parents, and when they do, their parents do not use idioms as Muzammil said “The major cause is that we don’t talk to each other regularly... our studies are so tough and then I’m doing a job too... err... so and then even when we talk *ammi baba* don’t use idioms... or maybe they rarely use I don’t remember. Earlier research has also confirmed that the older generation has limited their use of figurative language, and they communicate in a non-idiomatic language with the children (Lodge & Leach, 1975). It looks like the older generation is deliberately controlling the transmission of the mother tongue by not exposing the young generation to all the components of their language, and unconsciously they are playing a part in making our new generation linguistically deficient.

The other reason found behind males’ incapability to understand idioms was their less exposure to the Urdu language as they find Urdu a difficult language and therefore, avoid reading anything in it. Rao Khalid reported, “*is ka reason ek to ham logo~ ne paRha English medium school se he’ to Urdu to ve’s hi piichhe chali jaati he’ aur phir itna hard likha hua hota he’ Urdu ke andar ke vo ek normal bande ko samajh bhi nahi~ aata... ya to aap easy Urdu likho ke sab ko samajh aae and paRhe~ bhi ham phir* [one of the reasons is that we have studied from English medium schools, which leaves Urdu behind, and then they use pure Urdu, which is difficult to comprehend for a



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

normal person. Therefore, things should be written using Urdu that everyone can understand and we read it then]. Nippold (1991) has also identified that insufficient exposure creates challenges for idiom comprehension. Nevertheless, these native speakers lacking L1 communicative competence can never be regarded as models for foreign language learners.

Other than this, idiom familiarity is also revealed in the analysis based on the usage of each correct idiomatic expression in the task. It was found that some idioms are generally used while many of them are unfamiliar among the youngsters as only a handful of the participants employed them correctly. However, the idioms were selected from their academic books and everyday conversations, indicating that these expressions are presently utilized by Urdu native speakers. It again shows their ignorance as this is a digital era and our youth spend more time on TikTok, Instagram, or Facebook instead of having real-life interactions with their elders or communicating with each other. One of the female key informants, Jasia, affirmed it as a primary cause of low idiomatic competence and linguistic deficiency. In her words: “You see *vo jo* family time *ya* reading time *hota tha hamaare paas hamaare* childhood *me~* that used to give us exposure... umm ... that time has now filled with the use of cellphones and *aaj ham har vaqt* social media *par* active *rehte he~* else we play games *vaGhera*” [you see that family time or reading time we had in our childhood that used to give us exposure that time has now filled with the use of cellphones and today we are all the time active on social media. Else we play games etc.].

In addition to this, the analysis also disclosed that some of the idioms are wrongly used or spoken. For instance, an idiomatic expression, ‘*DeRh ii~T ki masjid banaana*’, which means ‘to deviate from the prevailing trend and forge one’s own direction is usually mispronounced as ‘*DeRh inch ki masjid banaana*’. Likewise, in section two, there was an idiom, ‘*aqal ke chiraaGh gul hona*’, which means the brain ceases to function effectively, and the participants had to fill out the blank by writing ‘*chiraaGh*’. Since the dictionary meaning of the word is a lamp, the participants wrote alternative words, such as ‘bulb’, *batti*’ or ‘*diye*’. When the participants were informed about the correct idiom, they said that they had known the meanings, but they were unable to recall the correct word and ended up writing these words. It shows that the originality of Urdu idioms has been lost. However, according to Bonin et al. (2013) and Sprenger et al. (2006), these expressions are fixed and need to be used almost the same way.

Findings

The data reports on the idiomatic competence of the participants, who are Urdu native speakers. It shows that they have little knowledge of idioms which has also influenced their linguistic competence. As the participants were unable to use the provided idioms in the discourse-



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

completion task, it displays their unfamiliarity with some commonly used idioms unveiling the negligence of Urdu. The findings disclose that the participants' low idiomatic competence is the result of less exposure to the language. Although they claimed to use Urdu idiomatic expressions in their conversation, the data portrays a different picture since a majority of the participants filled in the task employing wrong idioms whereas only a handful of participants performed extraordinarily. These findings corroborate with the literature revealing native speakers' incapability to use idioms appropriately (Shajrawi & Smadi, 2019). It was discovered that they are not maintaining their L1 including its figurative style as Urdu is not used in their educational and professional domains. Instead, it was found that their progress is being hindered because of their native language, and they use L2 more frequently. Their inability to understand and employ idioms reveals an absence of figurative competence because figurative competence is a prerequisite for understanding such expressions (Levorato & Cacciari, 1992). It further unveils the partial acquisition of L1 because idiomatic expressions are a part of the lexicon. The literature also indicates that there is a connection between figurative language development and general linguistic development (Le Sourn-Bissaoui et al., 2012).

While revealing different reasons behind native speakers' inability to understand and use idiomatic expressions, the findings uncover the participants' undue interest in English. It was found that Urdu NSs are unable to acquire their mother tongue properly because of their inclination towards the English language. This finding is consistent with Schmid's (2011) research, which reports that the acquisition of a native language can be affected by a dominant language. Other than this, their excessive gaming and habit of leaning towards social media prevent them from any opportunities to develop their idiomatic competence. Comparing the idiomatic competence of both genders, the data show that the male participants had restricted knowledge of idioms since they spend less time at home and their interactions with elderly people are limited and in those limited conversations, their parents and grandparents do not use idiomatic expressions, which has affected their idiomatic competence. These findings match with the literature which discloses the impact of adults' limited utilization of idioms in conversations with young generation (Lodge & Leach, 1975)

Conclusion

The research provides insight into the figurative competence of young Urdu NSs displaying their acquisition status and linguistic knowledge. The study has major implications since these younger adults have not acquired the lexicon of their mother tongue yet, and they will soon be starting their professional lives. Further, as cognitive skills are the pre-requisite of idiom acquisition (Levorato, 1993), their incapability to comprehend idiomatic language questions their cognitive growth. Since the study unveils native speakers' linguistic and cognitive deficiencies, it provides grounds for



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

future investigations. The research also underlines that because of globalization; English has magnificently made its way into our society. As a result, teaching and learning of English are encouraged in educational institutes and no attention is given to developing L1 CALP, which has made the young generation perilingual as they do not have complete knowledge of any language.

Furthermore, this study has drawn a link between NSs' incapability to understand and use idioms and their inability to communicate effectively in different contexts as figurative competence is a prerequisite for communicative competence in any language (Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia, 2007). It means one's Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills can be affected due to the lack of figurative competence since this incompetency can hinder one's ability to comprehend language in general. As shown, Urdu, despite being the national-official language of Pakistan, is degraded because it does not provide any educational and professional benefits at the national or international level, which, in turn, has affected the transmission of the language to the young generation. However, a language not only helps people communicate with each other but also reflects their identity and culture; hence, forwarding it to the young generation helps preserve the culture and identity along with the maintenance of the language.

Thus, the research has implications for the older generation to transfer complete knowledge of native language to the L1 users irrespective of their needs since it improves their BICS and communicative competence. They should frequently use idioms in their discourse to keep the native and cultural color of Urdu alive. Besides this, when the elderly communicate with the young generation in a native language, it enhances their cognitive growth since social interaction is a prerequisite for cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, the findings can be advantageous for educators and teachers in the field to spread complete language awareness, including cultural and pragmatic awareness, to language learners. It will help them maintain the figurative style of the languages learned. Since meaningful exposure is required to understand figurative language, children and adults should be encouraged to read various texts in their native language. Other than this, literature for children and youngsters should be written with a special focus on figurative language to increase their idiom familiarity.

Further research can be conducted on this specific phenomenon by comparing the idiomatic competence of the older and younger generations. The findings of this study can be compared with the figurative competence of NSs of regional languages as their idiomatic competence may vary. Research can also be undertaken to examine native speakers' capability to understand and use other figures of speech, like proverbs, similes, or metaphors.



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

References

- Akbarian, I. (2012). A grey area in translating proverbial expressions: The case of English and Persian. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 47, 704-710.
- Al-Kadi, A. (2015). Towards idiomatic competence of Yemeni EFL undergraduates. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6 (3), 513-523.
- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford University Press.
- Bartlotti, L. N. (2000). *Negotiating Pakhto: Proverbs, Islam and the construction of identity among Pashtuns*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from British Library. <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.418525>
- Bonin, P., Méot, A., & Bugaiska, A. (2013). Norms and comprehension times for 305 French idiomatic expressions. *Behavior Research Methods*, 45, 1259-1271.
- Cacciari, C., Corradini, P., & Ferlazzo, F. (2018). Cognitive and personality components underlying spoken idiom comprehension in context. An exploratory study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9(659), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00659>
- Caillies, S., & Le Sourn-Bissaoui, S. (2008). Children's understanding of idioms and theory of mind development. *Developmental Science*, 11(5), 703-711.
- Celce-Murcia, M. (2007). Rethinking the role of communicative competence in language teaching. In E. A. Soler & M. P. Jordà (Eds.), *Intercultural language use and language learning* (pp. 41-57). Springer.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education*. (6th ed.). Routledge.
- Conner, P. S., Hyun, J., O'Connor Wells, B., Anema, I., Goral, M., Monéreau-Merry, M.-M., Rubino, D., Kuckuk, R., & Obler, L. K. (2011). Age-related differences in idiom production in adulthood. *Clinical Linguistics & Phonetics*, 25, 899 – 912.
- Cummins, J. (1979). Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and some other matters. *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, 19, 121-129.
- Dixon, R. (1994). *Essential idioms in English*. Prentice Hall Regents.
- Hewitt, A. (2017). *The development of a British assessment of inferential and idiom comprehension for 5:00 to 9:11 year-old typically-developing children*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from British Library. <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.719359>
- Irujo, S. (1986). Don't put your leg in your mouth: Transfer in the acquisition of idioms in a second language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20(2), 287-304.



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

- Jamai, U. (2018, January 22). Zero metre kahaavate~ aur mahaavre. *DAWN News*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawnnews.tv/news/1072001>
- Katsarou, E. C. (2012). Idiom identification in L2 reading by Greek learners of English. *US-China Foreign Language*, 10(7), 1330-1348.
- Khan, L. A. (2014). Translation and culture: A comparative analysis of English idioms and proverbs with their Urdu translations. *Pakistan Journal of Languages and Translation Studies*, 1, 58-83.
- Khan, L. A., Mustafa, R., & Ali, G. (2017). Punjabi proverbs and gender: Construction of multiple identities. *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry*, 15(1), 67-90.
- Le Sourn-Bissaoui, S., Caillies, S., Bernard, S., Deleau, M., & Brulé, L. (2012). Children's understanding of ambiguous idioms and conversational perspective-taking. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 112, 437-451. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2012.02.003>
- Levorato, M. C. (1993). The acquisition of idioms and the development of figurative competence. In C. Cacciari & P. Tabossi (Eds.), *Idioms: Processing, structure, and interpretation* (pp. 101-128). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Levorato, M. C., & Cacciari, C. (1992). Children's comprehension and production of idioms: The role of context and familiarity. *Journal of Child Language*, 13, 415-433.
- Littlemore, J., & Low, G. (2006). Metaphoric competence, second language learning and communicative language ability. *Applied Linguistics* 27(2), 268-294.
- Lodge, D., & Leach, E. (1975). Children's acquisition of idioms in the English language. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, 18, 521-529.
- Luu, C. (2020, June 3). The linguistic case for sh*t hitting the fan. *JSTOR Daily*. Retrieved from <https://daily.jstor.org/the-linguistic-case-for-sh-t-hitting-the-fan/>
- Naheed, K. (2022, October, 27). puure saal me~ do din sachchaai. [Editorial]. *Jang Karachi*, p.6.
- Nippold, M. A. (1991). Evaluating and enhancing idiom comprehension in language-disordered students. *Language Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*, 22(3), 100-106. <https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461.2203.100>
- Nippold, M. A. (2003). Mental imagery and idiom comprehension: A comparison of school-age children and adults. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 46, 788-799.
- Ngoge, Amos. (2023). Assessing Comprehension of English Idioms: A Case of University Students in Unguja. *Journal of Linguistics, Literary and Communication Studies*, 2(2), 11-25. <https://doi.org/10.58721/jllcs.v2i2.354>
- Ngoge, A.T., & Abas, I. H. (2021). An investigation on the comprehension of English idioms among Moi Primary School children in Nairobi. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 12(4), 1-8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.12n.4.p.1>



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

- Prinz, P. M. (1983). The development of idiomatic meaning in children. *Language and Speech*, 26(3), 263-272.
- Rafatbakhsh, E., & Ahmadi, A. (2019). A thematic corpus-based study of idioms in the corpus of contemporary American English. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 4(11). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-019-0076-4>
- Khan, J. A. (2024, January 25). hamaare intiqaaami ravayye. [Editorial]. *roznaama jasaarat*, p. 3.
- Sanauddin, N. (2015). *Proverbs and patriarchy: Analysis of linguistic sexism and gender relations among the Pashtuns of Pakistan*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from British Library. <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.643118>
- Schmid, M. (2011). *Language attrition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schweigert, W. A. (1986). The comprehension of familiar and less familiar idioms. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 15(1), 33-45.
- Shajrawi, F. A., & Samadi, O. M. (2019). The idiomatic competence of Jordanian EFL undergraduate students: A contrastive pedagogical study. *IUG Journal of Educational and Psychological Sciences*, 27(4), 1-19.
- Shakouri, M. & Nafissi, Z. (2019). A developmental study of L1 idiom comprehension in Farsi language. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 19, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.17239/L1ESLL-2019.19.01.03>
- Sharifian, F. (2017). Cultural linguistics. *Ethnolinguistics*, 28, 33-61.
- Sprenger, S. A., Levelt, W. J., & Kempen, G. (2006). Lexical access during the production of idiomatic phrases. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 54(2), 161-184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jml.2005.11.001>
- Sweeney, E., & Hua, Z. (2016). Discourse completion tasks. In Z. Hua (Ed.), *Research methods in intercultural communication: A practical guide* (pp. 212-222). West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119166283.ch14>
- Tran, H. Q. (2013). Figurative idiomatic competence: An analysis of EFL learners in Vietnam. *Language Education in Asia*, 4(1), 23-38.
- Umar, L., & Rasul, S. (2017). Critical metaphor analysis: Nawaz Sharif and the myth of a golden time. *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry*, 15(2), 78-102.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological process*. Harvard University Press.



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

APPENDIX 'A'

List of the selected Urdu idioms used in this study with their implied meanings in English

| Implied Meanings | Selected Idiomatic Expressions in Roman |
|---|---|
| To bother someone | <i>naak me~ dam karna</i> |
| To sit idle | <i>haath par haath dhar kar be'thna</i> |
| To establish one's superiority | <i>dhaak biThaana</i> |
| (To answer) one after another | <i>turki ba turki</i> |
| To give up; to surrender | <i>hathyaar Daal dena</i> |
| To give someone a hard time | <i>naako~ chane chabwaana</i> |
| To take to task | <i>aaRe haatho~ lena</i> |
| To curse or jeer someone | <i>laanat malaamat karna</i> |
| To be terrified | <i>kaleja muu~ ko aana</i> |
| To answer flatly | <i>Taka saa javaab dena</i> |
| To be careless | <i>Ghaflat ki niind sona</i> |
| To argue | <i>saat paa~ch karna</i> |
| To be disregarded; to go unheard | <i>kaan par juu~ na rii~gna</i> |
| To make a great ado | <i>qayaamat barpa hona</i> |
| To be very high (from its actual worth) | <i>aasmaan se baate~ karna</i> |
| To raise false hopes | <i>sabz baaGh dikhaana</i> |
| To make mere promises | <i>zabaani jama xarch karna</i> |
| To speak sweetly | <i>muu~ se phuul jhaRna</i> |
| To go over the limit because of the given undue importance | <i>sar par chaRh kar naachna</i> |
| To make a painful situation even worse; to trouble the troubled | <i>zaxmo~ par namak chhiRakna</i> |
| To be distressed; to be in extreme pain | <i>xuun ke aa~su rona</i> |
| Heal; recover | <i>a~guur bandhna</i> |



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS

Vol. 8 No. 1 (March) 2025

Pages: 66-85

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

| | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| To undertake risks or face problems deliberately | <i>okhli me~ sar dena</i> |
| To improve one's memory | <i>zehn ka dariicha Khulna</i> |
| To be meek or innocent | <i>bhiigi billi banna</i> |
| To traipse around; to move wearily | <i>jutiyaan chaTxaana</i> |
| To act selfishly | <i>apni guu~ gaa~Than</i> |
| (someone or something) unusual or precious | <i>surxaab ke par</i> |
| To make something worthless worthy | <i>zarre' se aaftaab banaana</i> |
| The brain stops working; the end of wisdom | <i>aqal ke chiraaGh gul hona</i> |
| Feeling of a sudden fear | <i>haath paau~ ThanDe hona</i> |
| To ignore the collective trend and go one's own way | <i>DeRh ii~T ki masjid banana</i> |
| To be anxious | <i>dil be'Thna</i> |
| To lose courage and feel bad | <i>man kachcha karna</i> |
| To succeed | <i>beRa paar hona</i> |
| Untidy; disheveled | <i>sar jhaaR muu~ phaaR</i> |
| To copy blindly | <i>makhi par makhi maarna</i> |
| An arrant fool | <i>kaaTh ka ullu</i> |
| To ask someone to act sensibly and stop being foolish | <i>hosh ki dawa karna</i> |
| To be extremely thirsty | <i>zabaan me~ kaa~Te' paRna</i> |