

**THE USE OF GUESSING STRATEGIES IN
COMPREHENDING IDIOMS BY ESL LEARNERS**

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ABSTRACT

Second language learners often struggle to understand the messages conveyed when idioms are used in texts or conversations. Due to a huge number of English idioms, it is a challenge for them to understand all the meanings conveyed by these idioms. As a result of this obstacle, learners have to strategize their thoughts by using various guessing techniques to process the information in order to make the meaning of the phrases which sometimes have to be interpreted figuratively. The purpose of the study is to investigate the use of guessing strategies in comprehending idioms among 58 ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in SMK Tanjung Datuk, Johor. Their competency in comprehending idioms will be measured before looking at the guessing strategies used by them to assist their understanding. Two groups of proficiency; proficient and less proficient were the focus for this study to see if there were any differences in terms of their performance in understanding idioms and how they used guessing strategies during the process. The theoretical framework used for the study was the Global Elaboration Model (GEM) proposed by Levorato & Cacciari (1992) to explain the process of comprehending idioms. Forty multiple choice questions in a questionnaire cum test and interviews were used to gather data from the 58 respondents. The findings showed that 45 out of the 58 respondents had an average competency with an appropriate and comprehensive knowledge of idioms with a score between 50 to 79 percent. Only 5 of the respondents were able to demonstrate an exceptional understanding of comprehending the idioms with a score of above 80 percent. Another 7 respondents showed a basic knowledge of idioms with a score of between 40 to 49 percent. Only 1 respondent from this study showed an inadequate knowledge of idioms. "Guessing from context" was used mostly by the proficient respondents in comprehending idioms. 56% of the proficient respondents used "Guessing from context" (GC) when interpreting idioms in context followed by using their background knowledge (BK) as another guessing strategy which

was used by 21% of them. Among the less proficient respondents, their highest guessing strategy was also “Guessing from context”; however, with a smaller number in percentage that is only 36% compared to the proficient respondents followed by 32% using the wild guessing (WG) strategy where they merely chose the meaning of idioms without properly analyzing them. The proficient and less proficient respondents tended to employ guessing from context (GC) as their most preferable guessing strategy, but the main hindrance that stood between them was their lexical knowledge of English. In addition, the proficient and less proficient respondents shared the same lowest guessing strategy which was “referring to L1” strategy which had a 6% frequency usage. This was because the idioms used in the questionnaire were unlikely to have similarity with the respondents’ first language idioms and thus this guessing strategy was the least used strategy compared to the others.

ABSTRAK

Pelajar-pelajar di Malaysia sering mengalami masalah untuk memahami mesej yang disampaikan apabila peribahasa Bahasa Inggeris digunakan dalam teks atau perbualan. Adalah satu cabaran bagi mereka untuk memahami semua makna yang disampaikan oleh peribahasa ini memandangkan jumlahnya yang besar dan juga Bahasa Inggeris merupakan bahasa kedua di Malaysia selepas Bahasa Melayu. Hasil daripada halangan ini, para pelajar perlu menyusun strategi mereka dengan menggunakan pelbagai teknik meneka untuk memproses makna frasa yang kadang-kadang perlu ditafsirkan secara kiasan. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji penggunaan strategi meneka dalam memahami peribahasa dalam kalangan 58 pelajar ESL (Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua) di SMK Tanjung Datuk, Johor. Kompetensi mereka dalam memahami idiom akan diukur sebelum melihat apakah strategi meneka yang digunakan untuk membantu pemahaman mereka. Dua kumpulan kompetensi; Mahir dan kurang mahir telah menjadi tumpuan dalam kajian ini untuk melihat apakah terdapat perbezaan dari segi prestasi dalam memahami peribahasa dan bagaimana mereka menggunakan strategi meneka semasa memproses makna. Rangka teori yang digunakan untuk kajian ini adalah Global Elaboration Model (GEM) yang dicadangkan oleh Levorato & Cacciari (1992) untuk menjelaskan proses memahami idiom. Empat puluh soalan dalam bentuk aneka pilihan dalam soal selidik dan ujian wawancara digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data daripada 58 responden. Penemuan menunjukkan bahawa 45 daripada 58 responden mempunyai kecekapan purata dengan skor ujian antara 50 hingga 79 peratus. Hanya 5 responden dapat menunjukkan pemahaman peribahasa yang cemerlang dengan skor 80 peratus ke atas. 7 responden lagi menunjukkan pengetahuan asas peribahasa dengan skor antara 40 hingga 49 peratus. Hanya 1 responden dari kajian ini menunjukkan pengetahuan yang lemah tentang peribahasa. 'Meneka dari konteks' digunakan kebanyakannya oleh responden mahir dalam memahami idiom. 56% daripada responden mahir menggunakan

'Meneka dari konteks' (GC) ketika menafsirkan idiom dalam konteks diikuti dengan 21 % penggunaan pengetahuan latar belakang (BK) sebagai strategi meneka. Antara responden yang kurang mahir, strategi meneka tertinggi mereka juga 'Meneka daripada konteks'. Walau bagaimanapun, dengan bilangan yang lebih kecil dalam peratusan yang hanya 36% berbanding dengan responden mahir diikuti dengan 32% menggunakan strategi meneka bebas (WG) di mana mereka hanya memilih makna peribahasa tanpa menganalisisnya dengan betul. Responden yang mahir dan kurang mahir cenderung menggunakan meneka dari konteks (GC) sebagai strategi meneka yang paling disukai, tetapi halangan utama yang ada di antara mereka adalah pengetahuan leksikal mereka dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Di samping itu, responden mahir dan kurang mahir berkongsi strategi meneka yang sama iaitu dengan strategi 'merujuk kepada bahasa pertama' yang mempunyai penggunaan frekuensi 6%. Ini adalah kerana peribahasa yang digunakan dalam soal selidik mempunyai kesamaan yang rendah dengan peribahasa bahasa pertama responden dan oleh itu strategi meneka ini adalah strategi yang paling kurang digunakan berbanding strategi meneka yang lain.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BK	:	Background Knowledge
GC	:	Guessing In Context
GEM	:	Global Elaboration Model
L1	:	First Language
LM	:	Literal Meaning
MCQ	:	Multiple Choice Questionnaire

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

One sign of learners' proficiency in language is being able to master idioms and use them correctly in their written work and spoken discourse. The ability to use or comprehend idioms by second language (L2) learners accurately can be an indicator of native or near native mastery of the English language. Idioms are widely used in English and L2 learners have to master them in order to understand the language well. According to Cooper (2012), idioms are pervasively used in many forms of English discourses such as in conversations, lectures, books and newspapers. English movies and songs are no exception since they are frequently shown and aired in Malaysia.

It is undeniable that learners' comprehension of idioms increases as they age because of their language exposure. They become better analyzers and understand idioms beyond their literal meaning. Looking at Malaysian classrooms, second language learners have been exposed to English idioms since primary school either while learning reading comprehension texts or doing vocabulary exercises. The early exposure of idioms, enables learners to utilize these special multiword phrases and thus enhance their writing or improve their communication due to their figurative sense and special effects. Even after the learning of idioms has taken place, it has still caused difficulties to them as some idioms cannot be interpreted literally and the meanings are sometimes unpredictable. Being L2 learners adds further obstacles due to their limited language proficiency compared to the L1 learners. Second language learners face this challenge because idioms bring the cultural influence of the first language, which is English culture, together with

it. As Malaysian and English cultures differ, ESL learners' limited knowledge of English culture may affect their comprehension of certain idioms. When idioms are interpreted directly word-by-word, they totally lose their actual meaning because most idioms are specific to the culture of the language used by the people using it (*The Universal Dictionary of the English Language*, 1958 as cited in Maisa & Karunakaran, 2013). As a matter of fact, L1 learners are no exception in facing the same problem as L2 learners. The nature of idioms makes it difficult for both groups as the meanings of idioms are arbitrary. The meaning of idioms cannot always be derived from them compared to ordinary word phrases as the meaning is not direct and sometimes it is ambiguous.

There are many different views on how learners process idioms in order to come to their meanings. L2 learners are either consciously or subconsciously using guessing strategies when encountering idioms that they are not familiar with. Depending on their language proficiency, the strategies used vary from guessing using context to literal interpretation. For Malaysian ESL learners, their vocabulary serves as a pillar in helping them to understand idioms especially the unfamiliar ones compared to L1 learners who already have the vocabulary to start with. By having a good grasp of vocabulary, learners are able to understand idioms better. Even though the idioms are newly encountered by them, they can utilize appropriate guessing strategies to comprehend the meanings of them.

The problem arises when not every learner is able to process and comprehend idioms even after they have been exposed with an equal period of time learning English. Some of them do not know of the strategies that can be used to comprehend idioms. As different learners might develop different levels of competency when acquiring a second language,

comprehending figurative language such as idioms can cause a major obstacle. Comprehending idioms requires a deep semantic processing due to its meaning is always not literally related. Low proficient language learners may struggle to comprehend idioms if they rely solely on literal interpretation. With this awareness, they might make another step to analyse idioms using the context available and there is when their strength in vocabulary is needed to manipulate the context available. A few processes of analyzing will take place to reach the intended meaning and learners either proficient or lesser will have to go through them. It is interesting to look at the next possible processes or strategies employed once the literal meaning does not give any clues.

In this present study, the use of guessing strategies among ESL learners was the main purpose of investigation by looking at two groups whose level of proficiency was proficient and less proficient. It is worth investigating in order to see how these two groups when encountering idioms, apply guessing strategies that they can do within their own ability. Possible intervention was taken to help by identifying the problem that commonly happened during the interpretation process.

1.2 Background of the study

The study took place in one secondary school in the south-east of Johor located around 24 kilometres away from the nearby town of Bandar Penawar. The school is *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tanjung Datuk* which is situated at the coast of Pengerang and some of the students here come from a family background of fishermen. Some other students here have parents who are labourers who work at the oil and gas refineries that have recently been developed in this area. These developments have resulted in

demographic changes with huge numbers of foreigners coming in to work here. Most of the people here use Malay as their medium of communication. *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tanjung Datuk* has a population of 800 to 1000 students every year as it is the only secondary school in this area. 60 % of the students here are Malays while 37 % are Chinese and the remainder 3 % comprise other races. The current principal of the school is Mr. Farzeli bin Che Mat Mustafa and he has been the principal in this school for almost a year. The school marked its 50th anniversary last year as it was built in 1965.

In the Malaysian education system, English is taught as a subject as early as the primary school when students are 5 to 6 years of age and they continue learning the language until they are 17 years when they have to sit for their SPM (Malaysia Certificate of Education) examination. It is expected of them to have a good grasp of English at the end of their secondary school years but there are students/learners who are still struggling with English. There are many reasons which contribute to this matter such as attitude, aptitude, and family background. Apparently, the learners' proficiency in English in this school by far is low to intermediate and very few of them have a high proficiency level. This is due to the environments they are from and the need of English in daily life is not very crucial. Acknowledging learners' proficiency in this study is vital because their proficiency will affect their understanding of idioms and the strategies used in understanding idioms.


1.3 Statement of the problem

In the researcher's daily routine of teaching English in a Malaysian secondary school, the researcher always encounters learners who are struggling to comprehend idioms.

Even though the dictionary may enable them to figure out the meaning of English words, it is not always happening with idioms. The interpretation of idioms requires a relation with the context in a text rather than seeing it just as an individual word without a context. The researcher discovered that her learners sometimes were unable to identify idioms in a sentence and that is the reason why they tried to understand the individual words that form the phrases rather than associate the idioms with the whole context. Even after they were able to notice the presence of idioms in a sentence, they still found it difficult to understand the meaning of idioms as a whole. This is due to learners understanding the idioms literally rather than figuratively. During comprehension exercises given in the classroom, the researcher also found that the learners would resort to understand the literal meaning of the idioms only without relating to the context given. It worries the researcher because in the SPM (Malaysia Certificate of Education) public examination, for idioms, they will be given choices of answers (multiple choice questions with 4 choices of answers – A, B, C, or D) for them to choose from and in the choices, there are some answers that include the literal meaning interpretation and also some irrelevant interpretation distractors to distract the learners. The idioms tested are given in context to give learners the cues for the intended meaning. The problem occurs when they have to analyse from these choices. There will be uncertainty in them either to take the meaning at the literal level or beyond. Furthermore, the question will not mention as to whether the phrase has idioms or not and learners need to identify them for themselves. It is important to note that literal interpretation to a certain extent is needed to comprehend idioms and it is also considered as one of the guessing strategies in comprehending idioms. However, not all idioms are suitable to be interpreted using this strategy,

especially the opaque idioms. For opaque idioms, literal interpretation is used as part of the stages in idioms processing before incorporating another guessing strategies.

Figure 1.1 Sample SPM Question on Idiom



The phrase '*I'm not letting my bag out of my sight*' means that the man will

- lock the bag during the journey.
- hide the bag under the seat.
- keep the bag close to him.
- admire the bag from afar

i. SPM 2009

Figure 1.1 above shows an SPM sample exam question on idioms in the 2009 SPM English language examination paper. Based on the question above, learners were required to interpret the idiom, 'I'm not letting my bag out of my sight' according to the context given. Learners were given four choices of the answer that shows various interpretations such as the literal meaning or some based on the context. These choices gave clues on the possible meaning of the idioms. Within the choices given, there were literal and unrelated answers to distract learners' processing of idioms and made them confused. Learners had to think critically by examining the idioms using context and the available clues given.

Nonetheless, this does not happen to all the learners with all the idioms they encounter. Some idioms that they have learned and remembered will not cause any problems for

them to understand. Common idioms that they always hear either in the classroom, television or radio help them a lot in understanding as they can recall from their background knowledge. 'Keep in touch' for example, is one idiom that the learners find it easy to understand. They might have learned it before in an interesting manner or they can relate and use it easily in their daily conversation. However, not all idioms share the same retention effect. Certain idioms are not frequently heard or used by learners especially for those learners who just rely on classroom learning and do not engage with extra reading. There are thousands of English idioms and it is impossible for teachers to teach all of them. Thus, learners need to acquire strategies for guessing the meaning of idioms as these may help them interpret unknown idioms.

Cooper (1999) had done a study on L2 learners' comprehension strategies in understanding idioms and his findings showed that the strategies learners employed were guessing from the context, discussing and analysing idioms and using literal meaning. These strategies may also be employed by Malaysian learners and an in-depth study needs to be carried out in order to know how the learners process the idioms in order to decode the meaning. Based on the processing that takes place, their strategies of comprehending can be identified. Educators can then take further action to improve the strategies used if needed.

1.4 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the use of guessing strategies by learners in SMK Tanjung Datuk; specifically, a group of form four students where they will be categorized into two groups; proficient and less proficient, according to the results from an initial competency test run during this study. Further exploration will be conducted on how proficient and less proficient learners employ guessing strategies in understanding the idioms.

1.5 Research questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the Malaysian Form four learners' competency in comprehending idioms?
2. How do the proficient and less proficient learners use guessing strategies in comprehending idioms?

1.6 Significance of the study

The study is significant to the field of language learning and assessment as it can fill the gap of knowing the current guessing strategies used by Malaysian ESL learners in comprehending idioms as well as their current idiomatic competency. Through the present study, English teachers could further understand and have a better idea of the root of the difficulties that the second language learners are facing when interpreting idioms and hence come up with appropriate solutions to tackle the problems. The finding will enlighten language teachers on how their learners process idioms and the phases involved during interpretation that can cause difficulty to their learners. Furthermore, this study

can be an eye-opener to teachers to focus more on developing learners' guessing strategies as it can help learners to comprehend them regardless of their familiarity or transparency of the idioms.

1.7 Scope and limitations of the study

This study focuses only on 58 Form 4 Malay students, aged 16 years old, ranging from proficient to less proficient students from SMK Tanjung Datuk, Pengerang, Johor. This study only involves testing idioms found in selected local reference and exercise books for form 4 and form 5 students that are available in Malaysia.

1.8 Organization of the study

This study contains five chapters in which Chapter One as the introductory chapter explains the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance and scope of the study and definition of terms. It is followed by Chapter Two which discusses the related literature review concerning idioms, idioms comprehension, idioms processing as well as the strategies used when understanding idioms. The theoretical framework of idiom comprehension such as the Global Elaboration Model (GEM) is also explained in the second chapter. In Chapter Three, the research methodology and data analysis are further discussed. The data is discussed and analysed thoroughly in Chapter Four where the two research questions are answered. The final chapter five will summarise the whole study together with the findings, implications and future recommendations.

1.9 Definition of terms

1.9.1 Idioms

“Idiom is defined as a group of words that occur in a more or less fixed phrase whose overall meaning cannot be predicted by analyzing the meaning of its constituent parts.”

(Simpson & Mendis, 2003, p.423)

“An idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot always be readily derived from the usual meaning of its constituent elements.”

(Cooper, 1999, p. 233)

“Idioms is a phrase which is conventionally used with a meaning different from its constructed literal meaning (if it has one).”

(Davies,1982, p.68)

“Idioms is a sequence of morphemes whose composite meaning cannot be determined by a knowledge of the meaning of the individual items.”

(Callary, 1970, p. 303)

With reference to the above definitions of idioms, the meanings of idioms are commonly different from the meanings of the constructed constituents; thus, it takes more than a literal interpretation to reach its meaning. This current study hereby defines idioms as expressions whose meaning requires a depth analysis of its constituents in order to derive its conventional meaning.

1.9.2 Transparent idioms

Transparent idioms mean figurative and literal meaning are closely related. For example, the figurative meaning of ‘Paddle your own canoe’ is to be independent or self-reliant which is the extension of its literal meaning where someone has to paddle the canoe himself without relying on others.

(Nippold & Duthie, 2003, p. 789)

1.9.3 Opaque idioms

Opaque idioms mean figurative and literal meaning are not closely related. For example, ‘Paint the town red’ means to go out and celebrate which has no relation with the idiomatic phrase.

(Nippold & Duthie, 2003, p. 789)

1.9.4 Idioms comprehension

“Idiom comprehension is defined as the ability to go beyond the word-by-word comprehension strategy and to integrate the figurative meaning into the contextual information given.”

(Levorato, Nesi & Cacciari, 2004, p. 303)

1.9.5 Guessing strategies:

In comprehending idioms, participants might guess the meaning of idioms in context by using these strategies:

- a. Guessing from context

Definition: Guessing the meaning of the idiom from the context

b. Using Experience and Background Knowledge

Definition: Using background knowledge to figure out the meaning of the
idiom

c. Using literal meaning

Definition: Using the literal meaning of the idiom as a key to its figurative
meaning

d. Referring to L1 Idioms

Definition: Referring to an idiom in the L1 to understand the L2 idiom

e. Wild Guess

Definition: Guessing the meaning without using any strategy.

(Cooper, 1999, p. 243)

1.9.6 Context

Contextual clue is to assist in interpreting the meaning of the idioms. In this study, idioms were presented in context to give extra information about the idioms in helping participants to guess the meanings.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will review the existing literatures concerning the important elements of the study explored. It will initially focus on idioms in general which includes idioms transparency, types of idioms, theoretical framework and models of idioms processing. The next literature will explore the factors affecting idioms comprehension and the difficulties faced by ESL learners when comprehending idioms. Then the chapter will review literature on strategies in understanding idioms which is the core of this study. A few past studies on idioms comprehension and strategies in idioms comprehension will also be looked at to enhance the understanding about any matters arising in strategies of comprehending idioms which can be the guidelines for the present study.

2.2 What is an idiom?

Before going further into different literatures on idioms, it is worth to look in detail the definition of idioms. As mentioned in the definition of terms in Chapter 1, idiom is defined as the expression whose meaning requires a depth analysis of its constituents in order to derive its conventional meaning. This is supported by Cooper (1999, p. 233) who also stated that the meaning of an idiom cannot be derived directly from the constituents. If it is derived directly, the intended meaning will not come through and will result in a miscommunication of ideas. With relation to both definitions, it is clearly shown that the constituents comprised in the idiomatic expressions will tend to have an underlying meaning that cannot be derived through a literal interpretation. 'Joyce plans to *spill the beans* if her position is in danger' illustrates the use of the idiom 'spill the beans' in a

sentence. In order to understand the meaning of the sentence and the idiomatic phrase, one should look beyond its literal meaning. This is because the meaning of idioms mostly cannot be interpreted literally since the phrase is conventionally used with a meaning different from the constructed constituents (Davies, 1982, p. 68). If the learners take the meaning literally which is spilling the beans out, it is contradicted with the true meaning of the idiom which is “revealing a secret”. What poses as a challenge to language learners, especially ESL learners, when encountering idioms is that the literal and figurative meanings of idioms do not correlate with each other even though not all idioms will fall into this case. Depending on its transparency or composability, idioms are different from other ordinary phrases in English as they carry a figurative meaning together with them which ESL learners specifically should be aware of.

2.3 Properties of idioms

Not every learner automatically notices idioms and interpret it beyond their literal meaning. Thus, idioms properties can guide the readers on types of idioms that they are interpreting because by knowing the properties, it can give readers a head start on how to go about understanding the targeted idioms. According to Kovecses and Szabo (1996, p. 327), idioms can comprise metaphors (e.g. rock the boat), metonymies (e.g. throw up one’s hands), similes (e.g. as white as a sheet), saying (e.g. birds of a feather flock together), phrasal verbs (e.g. turn up) and grammatical idioms (e.g. let alone). This is also in line with other idioms by other researchers. According to Geoffrey, Ivan and Thomas (1994, pp. 492-493), idioms consists of the following properties:

- a. **Conventionality:** Idioms are conventionalised as their meanings cannot be or least predicted from its constituents. This is when the idioms are presented in isolation or independently without relying on the context. ‘Kick the bucket’, for instance,

when it is presented independently with no prior knowledge of its readers will cause them difficulty to understand.

- b. Inflexibility: Idiom usage is limited and is not simply used depending on the sentence construction unlike freely composed expressions. Idioms unlike other non-idiomatic expressions are only used to express certain situations or feelings figuratively and if used excessively will cause a complexity of ideas.
- c. Figuration: Idioms sometimes have elements of metaphors (e.g. take the bull by its horns), metonymies (e.g. count heads), hyperboles (e.g. not worth the paper it is printed on) and other figurations.
- d. Proverbiality: Idioms are sometimes used to describe recurrent social situations in relation to specific scenarios. *Time and tide wait for no man* is an example of a proverb that is continuously happening in the present and future in which it is related to time.
- e. Informality: Idioms are typically associated to be used in informal situations rather than in formal spoken or written language. They are also used as a colloquial register for certain cultural or popular speech. *Bring home the bacon* is not commonly used among Malaysians as bacon is not the staple food in Malaysia but it is common in the western world.
- f. Affect: Idioms are used to imply affective meaning to the readers as the phrases can send a vivid picture of their intended meaning. In an idiom such as '*to be in hot soup*' may imply someone to be in a dangerous situation, or a difficult situation where you are likely to be punished and the use of this idiom is to convey this meaning which will add on to the effect for the readers.

The properties listed above helps a person to identify the characteristics of idioms in a sentence even though not all those properties are applied to all idioms. It serves as general guidelines for readers in identifying idioms if not all. However not all learners are aware

of this if not through direct learning or further reading on properties of idioms. In classroom, learners are learning idioms on its usage and definition without looking in depth of its properties. Teachers may explain on the properties that are associated with the idioms taught when the learners start to face difficulty in comprehending idioms. When the learners understand its properties, they can interpret idioms according to its role and function in the sentence.

2.4 Idioms semantic transparency, opacity and compositionality

According to Cruse (1986, p. 37), idioms should be lexically complex which is should consist more than one constituent. For example, *killing the birds with one stone*, *a hot soup*, *cold feet*, *butterflies in my stomach* are idioms and they consist of more than one constituent. Furthermore, idioms should have a single, minimal constituent as explained by Cruse (1986) through this sentence 'This will cook Arthur's goose'. According to the test of recurrent semantic contrast, 'this', 'will' and 'Arthur' are regular semantic constituents whereby 'cook ___'s goose' constitute a minimal semantic constituent. A minimal semantic constituent refers to meaning that cannot be inferred from the meaning of the constituent of its parts (Dweik, 2013; p. 59. 'cook ___'s goose' carries a meaning of ruin and will also imply a meaning of help if it is taken literally.

Semantic transparency and opacity analyse the degree of the idioms that can be understood by the readers through inferring the constituents and their parts. In opaque idioms, like *green thumb* where the meaning is hardly transparent, it requires extended clues such as other phrases or sentences that are attached to the idioms. Palmer (1976, p. 98) defined opaque idioms as "Individual words from the idioms that are not connected

to the meaning. However, to a certain extent, it may be nearer to the meaning of the single word.” Cruze (1986, p. 39) stated that idioms are semantically opaque when they consist of expressions that are non-transparent. The transparency of idioms has a big role in interpreting idioms. However, it is important to note that transparency is the degree of opacity. Certain idioms may fall into fully transparent idioms, semi opaque or completely opaque depending on the semantic characters (Cruze, 1986). For fully transparent idioms, it requires less effort to infer the meaning as the literal and figurative meanings are closely connected. For semi opaque idioms, it should have at least one semantic indicator. This semantic indicator will help to indicate the degree of the opacity in idioms. For example, ‘cold hearted’ has two full indicators which are ‘cold’ and ‘heart’ in giving clues to the meaning compared to ‘red herring’. ‘Heart’ is associated with feeling and it is paired with the word ‘cold’, a condition that is not pleasant. ‘Cold’ and ‘heart’ are two indicators that contribute to derivation of its figurative meaning which is someone who is not sympathetic. Meanwhile for ‘red herring’, the two constituents hardly consist any indication of figurative meaning. The word ‘red’ is a type of colour whereby ‘herring’ is a small silvery fish and when these two meanings connect with each other, it will give an image of ‘red small silvery fish’. It is hard to guess the figurative meaning of red herring as the word ‘red’ and ‘herring’ do not imply other extended meaning rather than a type of fish. ‘Red herring’ figuratively brings a meaning of information that is intended to be misleading is hardly to derive from its forms. From the explanation above, it is shown that cold hearted is less opaque compared to red herring due to semantic indicator in the phrases.

Besides transparency, idioms can be identified on the basis of compositionality Glucksberg (2001, p. 73). Compositionality refers to the relationship between idiom

constituents and their meaning. Some idioms may have fully compositionality and others may be non-compositional. The constituents in the phrases that contribute to the meaning of idioms have a high compositionality. To illustrate, the idiom such as 'by and large' is a non-compositional idiom because one cannot infer its meaning from its constituents. According to Glucksberg (2001, p. 83), non-compositional idioms have less lexical flexibility and thus are unlikely to be comprehended easily. He also stated that compositional idioms whether opaque or transparent offer more flexibility. As for opaque idioms such as 'kick the bucket', even though the constituents do not contribute to their meaning but they can uncover the meaning from the background and origin of the idioms.

Another view on idioms identification is that, idioms can be categorized into three different types based on their composability which are 'normally decomposable, abnormally decomposable and non-decomposable' (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989). For idioms that are normally decomposable, the literal and figurative meaning has a close similarity. They are semantically similar and thus require a short analysis. 'Lend me a hand' can be considered normally decomposable as it literally carries the meaning 'give me your hand' and when it compares with the intended figurative meaning which is 'give me a help' is quite closely related. Bortfeld (2003) illustrated the example of normally decomposable idioms with 'lose your temper'. The literal and figurative meanings are almost similar and are easily interpreted by the learners.

It is important to note that idioms that are transparent do not mean they are decomposable. According to Cieslicka (2015, p. 213) some idioms can be transparent and non-decomposable such as 'jump the gun'. 'Jump the gun' is transparent because the

phrase is a metaphorical motivation where one will run when listening to the sound of the gun and can be analysed through a literal analysis. It is non-decomposable because its figurative meaning cannot be derived from its constituents. Idioms such as ‘pop the question’ can also be opaque and decomposable. It is an opaque idiom because it does not have a clear figurative meaning but at the same time it is decomposable because we can establish its literal meaning from its components with its figurative meaning to form an idiomatic phrase (pop=ask and question= proposal).

2.5 Factors affecting the comprehension of idioms among ESL learners

2.5.1 Influence of first language

When learning a second language, the process of acquisition can be challenging and tough to the learners. Having acquired the first language is an advantage of learning the second language as it can provide further assistance but it can also cause interference as well. In the case of understanding idioms, ESL learners will be influenced by their first language when interpreting idioms. Learners tend to translate the meaning of English idioms to their first language during comprehension. It might be helpful but has its limitations as idioms contain figurative meanings. Nonetheless, ESL learners can still understand idioms especially idioms that are imageable such as ‘till the cows come home’. The image of slow movement of the cow can help learners to infer the meaning of ‘for a very long time’ related to the poem.

The interference mentioned above is caused by language transfer. The concept of transfer according to Irujo (1986) is the effect of previous learning in the subsequent learning. In the case of this study, the effect of the first language, which is the Malay

language, has on a second language, which is English, in the field of the comprehension of idioms. It can cause a positive transfer when the two languages are identical and share common characteristics. If the two languages are different, and the learners try to find the equivalence form or pattern using their native language, it will cause a negative transfer in which the errors are identified as interference errors. In the case of Malay and English language, not all idioms share similarity in meaning; thus, reduce the interference during understanding. Irujo (1986) once investigated whether second language learners used their first language to comprehend and produce idioms in a second language. 50 idioms were used in a questionnaire and it consisted of idioms from 3 groups; identical, similar and different. The finding was positive as the learners mostly used their first language to comprehend idioms, especially the identical idioms, with their first language. Learners were referring to their first language for idioms that were similar with their first language and interference was seen to happen more, compared to difficult idioms, because difficult idioms were less common and hardly understood by merely referring to L1.

Parasitic hypothesis by Hall (2002) emphasized L1 learners as the main referent to L2 vocabulary as the new vocabulary learned from L2 will be connected closely with the L1 words. A new learned vocabulary of L2 has no separate representation but relies on the conceptual structure of L1 (Cieslicka, 2015, p. 214). Eventually the L1 representation will be replaced with an L2 representation once learners are able to establish the L2 conceptual representation and develop a connection between the L2 word forms and their corresponding L2 concepts. In relation to this hypothesis with idiom comprehension among ESL learners, they tend to resort to any linguistic means that is available in order to interpret the meaning when they encounter with L2 idioms (Cieslicka, 2015, p.214). It is a common step to translate it literally and find the equivalence between their native

language idioms and the L2. One illustration by Cieslicka (2015) is about a Polish learner who encountered one idiom, 'play with fire'. The learner firstly activated the literal meaning of the idiom's constituents and later retrieved the translation of its meaning from his L1 and analysed the components by investigating how each word is related to one another. Simultaneously, he will also search from his mental lexicon whether he had a corresponding L1 idiom with the L2 idiom he encountered. Since 'play with fire' did correspond with a Polish L1 idiom and the process that will happen next was the learner will borrow the L1 meaning to serve the L2 idiom's representation. Through repeated exposure with this type of idiom, the L1 based conceptual representation will gradually modify and restructure in order to be compatible with the L2 meaning of the idiom.

2.5.2 Linguistic context

Context plays an important role in assisting learners to understand idioms. According to Levorato and Cacciari (1995), context that is presented in a supportive narrative is easier to understand than context that is presented in isolation. Idioms that are presented with contexts will assist learners to comprehend idioms as they can give clues to them in interpreting the meanings of the idioms. Context provides semantic information from which learners can infer and extract from the expressions (Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2005, p. 67). Different scenarios in the text can support understanding literal and figurative meaning of the idioms (Cain & Towse, 2008, p.1538). Thus, the skill to interpret meaning in context is essential for the development of idioms understanding. According to Norbury (2004), populations that have poor understanding and processing language in context, often have poor idioms' understanding. This happens because the learners are looking only at the constituents rather than connecting it to extensive clues and beyond the idiomatic expression. This is also supported by Cacciari and Levorato

(1989) in one of their experiments to test their model comprehension of idioms in which the comprehension is dependent on the ability of the learners to interpret meaning within the linguistic context. The hypothesis for the experiment is the learner's comprehension is enhanced when they make use of contextual information to figure out the idiomatic expressions meaning. The learners were presented with two conditions: (a) idioms were embedded in a linguistic context consisting of short narratives, and (b) idioms were presented alone and out of context. The learners' comprehension was evaluated using multiple choice test (MCT). Eight common idioms that consists of literal and figurative meaning such as 'break the ice' were selected. Below is the example of the story and MCT presented along with it.

A little boy named Paul moved to another town. It was winter so he had to change school. His mother suggested he should try and get to know his new schoolmates. Once at school he lent him crayons and that helped to break the ice.

What did Paul when he broke the ices?

- a) he made friends with his schoolmates
- b) he broke a piece of ice
- c) he told his mummy everything

Based on the sample of question above, the idiomatic answer is a) he made friends with his schoolmates and the literal answer is b) he broke a piece of ice. For c) he told his mummy everything, is a sentence that is different from choice a) and b) but plausible. From the experiment, the result showed that more idiomatic answers were chosen when the idioms were presented in context because the content in the story facilitates the comprehension of the idiomatic expression. Literal answers were rarely chosen when the idioms were presented in a story context. However for idioms that were not presented in context, the literal meaning was chosen more frequently. It is important to note that not all literal answers are incorrect because certain idioms do have literal meaning. According to Cacciari and Levorato (1989), the story used in the context had it effect in showing that

literal interpretation was incongruent with the intended meaning of the idiomatic expression used. The story provides learners with ample information and clues for them to interpret the meaning. In order for the learners to interpret the idiomatic phrases, they need to understand beyond word level and the context provided plays its role in giving semantic background for learners to interpret idioms correctly. The result in this study thus shows that linguistic context facilitates idioms comprehension among learners and its presence alongside idioms is important to assist comprehension.

Each learner, whether a native or a non-native, may face difficulty in understanding idioms depending on the features of the idioms. If idioms are culturally related, learners who lack the background knowledge may struggle to comprehend them as they lack the cultural background of the idioms. Culturally related idioms need learners to learn through a further explanation of the idioms and exposure of their usage. Only then are learners able to understand the cultural types of idioms. Thus, to overcome this difficulty, the presence of context will be able to aid understanding by providing clues to the learners.

In one study conducted by Fatemeh (2013) on the impact of context on learning idioms in EFL classes has shown that context has a positive effect on learning idioms. The findings show that learners who were given context in comprehending idioms during instructional sessions performed better than learners who were taught through merely definition and illustration. There were three groups involved in this study. The first group received idioms instruction using extended context. The second group they learned idioms through sentences and had no opportunity to learn idioms in extended context.

The third group did not learn idioms through any context, neither extended nor limited and only learned by definitions. The study was comparing which group performed better in understanding idioms. The result showed that the learners who were taught using contextual clues were able to perform better in the test given compared to the learners who did not have a similar exposure. It also showed that the learners who were exposed to idiom in stories performed better in understanding idioms compared to learners who were exposed in sentences and without context. Comparing the context presented in stories and sentences, the context in stories provide more clues and help for learners to understand the idioms. Furthermore, idioms in sentences has limited clues and provide insufficient information to activate the schemata related to the idioms and its meaning. Lontas (2003) as cited in Fatemeh (2013) emphasises on the importance of the role of context in assisting idiom comprehension. The absence of context may impede and affect the learning and understanding of idioms. This is because learners comprehend idioms better with the presence of context than none.

Another similar study which was slightly different was conducted by Gholamreza, Saeed and Mansoor (2012) on effect of context on idiom retention. They used written and video graphic context as medium of instruction and later investigated the effect of both medium in idioms retention. The finding revealed that learners short term retention was the same for both mediums. However for long term retention, learners that were exposed with video graphic context had better and longer retention compared to written. This finding suggests that viewing videos help understanding the concepts that are hardly to be explained in words especially idioms. The association of verbal and mental imagery as proposed by dual coding theory by Paivio (1986), is able to enhance the remembering of the information. In relation to the presence study, even though the video is not included

as form of context, but contextual clues are available to assist participants in decoding the meaning. The research has shown that the more contexts available for the learners either verbal or visual, it might increase and support learners understanding of idioms.

Based on the explanation above, what makes a context sufficient is when it enables learners to use the information available to interpret meaning of idioms. The information should be useful and is connected to the idioms. The length of the context only matters if it provides more useful clues. Thus context presented in stories to a certain extent is better than context in a sentence with condition the stories contain useful clues. Otherwise it is only as limited as context presented in one or two sentences. For the least proficient learners, a longer and useful information in a context helps them in understanding the idioms better. This is because they have more choices of clues in longer context to relate to the idioms. Furthermore, with their lack of vocabulary, if one clue cannot be understood, the other clue might be a source of help. The learners will resort to wild guessing when all the contexts available or the vocabulary used hampered their understanding of idioms. They could not make any relation neither connection of the context given. This study acknowledges the importance of context and is studied under one of the strategies employed by the learners when interpreting idioms. the context presented in this study varied from long context to limited contextual clues depending from the source of the reference books it was taken from. No modification of structure is done from the resource taken.

2.5.3 Reading comprehension ability

Learners' ability to comprehend English text do influence their ability of comprehending idioms as it involves understanding figurative meaning which is challenging. Mostly learners with good proficiency are able to comprehend English texts well and this reading skill helps them in understanding idioms. Skilled comprehenders who are commonly from the proficient group are performing better in understanding idioms compared to less skilled comprehenders when the idioms are presented in context. According to Cain, Oakhill and Lemmon, (2005), poor and good comprehenders do not differ so much when interpreting transparent idioms presented in context; however, for poor comprehenders, they performed significantly worse when they have to interpret opaque idioms using the context given.

In one study conducted by Cain and Towse (2008) found that poor comprehenders of English text were unable to use available context in helping them to understand opaque and difficult idioms even though the presence of context is helpful in assisting their idioms understanding. Poor comprehenders face difficulties in understanding idioms because during the processing they have to apply necessary skill such as inferencing and to use context as clues to the meaning. Furthermore, if the comprehenders are lack in vocabulary, it might add to the obstacle. However, the poor comprehenders in this study were focused on their ability to use context in deriving the meaning or appropriate interpretation rather than their ability to analyse the idiomatic expressions. From the finding, it is shown that they were less able to detect cues from context and use it to help them in deriving the meaning. Good comprehenders on the other hand were able to demonstrate the ability to use contextual cues and do inferencing better. The used of multiple choice task in this study shares the common characteristic with the presence

study. Multiple choice task may not tap meaning of the generation process because the learners will incline to check the answer options that are closed with the intended meaning rather than firstly deriving it from the phrase. Nonetheless the task is sufficient to investigate the guessing strategies used among the learners.

2.6 Past studies on idioms comprehension and strategies

In one recent study conducted by Leung (2011) on the effect of linguistic context and transparency on the comprehension of idioms among Cantonese speaking children, the results showed that the children used the contextual strategy widely compared to literal interpretation. The children relied even more on context when they were dealing with opaque and literal meaning idioms. With the presence of context alongside the idioms, it helped to shorten the processing of meaning as readers can make a connection between the literal meaning and the context given. Regardless of their age, with the availability of context, readers will use it to interpret idioms even though the literal interpretation may help them. According to Levorato and Cacciari (1989), a shorter processing time and less errors were reported with the presence of context. Clues given by the context help learners to analyse the meaning by activating their vocabulary or background knowledge,

In another study conducted by Glu, Schallert, Reynolds and Antos (1978) as cited in Leung (2011), they presented their participants with figurative and idiomatic expressions under two conditions which were in short text (limited context) and in a long text (full context). The results from this study showed that learners took a longer time to comprehend meaning in a shorter text compared to a longer text. This was because a shorter text provided limited context to the learners to process the meaning and make a

connection with one another. Nevertheless, it was reported that in a longer text condition, learners spent almost the same duration as both provided clues and a wider context for them to comprehend the expressions. This study shows to us that context does assist learners to comprehend figurative expressions easily and it can be one of the ways to help learners who are struggling with figurative expressions such as idioms by providing them sufficient context. Leung (2011) also discussed linguistic context and related it to one experimental study done by Levorato and Cacciari (1989). They conducted a study among a group of elementary and middle students where the participants were presented with a list of idioms under three conditions which were with idiomatic contexts, literal meaning and no context at all. The participants answered the test of multiple choice questions that contained these three conditions and the results indicated that the participants answered the idioms with context better when compared to the idioms given by literal meaning and those with no context at all. With this result, it is shown that context helps to facilitate learners' idiom comprehension most of the time.

Furthermore, in another study by Leung (2011) also showed that children at grade 6 (11 to 15 years old) were ready to use literal and contextual interpretation than children at grade 2 (7 to 8 years old) and 4 (9 to 10 years old) with high transparent idioms. In highly transparent idioms, the children use literal interpretation than relying on contextual clues. According to Gibbs (1987), children did not realise the need to use contextual interpretation when they encountered highly transparent idioms as literal interpretation had served the purpose. Nevertheless, in Leung's (2011) study, it showed that older children still use both literal and contextual interpretation to interpret highly transparent idioms. This showed that older children are able to analyse expressions beyond their literal meaning. Different scenarios occurred when children encountered transparent

idioms. This is due to their decomposability which is lesser than highly transparent idioms. According to Leung (2011), the presence of metaphorical interpretation in the idioms required children to use context as reference to link with the idioms. Literal interpretation will lead to distortion of meaning in which older children will even likely notice it and thus suppress the literal meaning. In the case of opaque idioms, all the children in this study resorted to using context more often than just literal interpretation. Opaque idioms do not provide any clues from its constituents and are semantically non-decomposable (Gibbs, 1989). According to Leung (2011), children avoided using literal meaning because they found it difficult to access the meaning of the idioms by combining all the literal meanings which do not make any sense at the end. This situation is supported by Gibbs (1987) as he explained that children needed to infer the figurative meaning in order to understand opaque idioms. The children made use of the linguistic context given and related with the idioms to reach the pragmatic meaning. Thus, in this situation, we can see that the children had opted for a figurative meaning rather than the literal meaning in interpreting the meanings of idioms when they encountered idioms that were non-decomposable and non-analysable.

Taki (2013) conducted a research on the role of L1 in L2 idiom comprehension among Iranian EFL learners. Altogether there were 45 Iranian EFL learners, aged between 18-35 participated in the study. The level of proficiency of the participants was intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. Participants selected for this study were from different level of proficiency as they were among high school students until MA holders. The idioms chosen had portrayed similarity with L1 idioms and it were grouped into three groups which were identical, similar and different. In this study, the participants were required to verbalize their thought as they read the targeted idioms using think-aloud protocol (TAP) and the researcher would identify the strategies that they used to comprehend the idioms. The strategies noted during the TAP were as followed: D=

consult dictionary, ME= Metaphor search, IS= incorrect schema search, PA= paraphrase, MA= search for an exact or similar match, IT=Incorrect Translation, TA= translation attempt. The finding showed that most of them resorted to translation when understanding idioms. They were translating to Persian language as it was their first language to understand English idioms which was their second language. By doing the translation strategy, they were looking at the equivalence of English idioms in their first language. However, they will decode the meaning of idiom using other strategy when they found the idioms had less similarity. The study is also shown that learners of different levels used different strategies to understand and analyse the three groups of idioms in the same way. They will use translation strategy to understand identical idioms whereas for idioms that were different from their L1 or had less similarity, they had to use their metaphorical knowledge. As they encountered idioms that were different from their L1, they will employ more strategies in order to decode the meaning. The advantage of decoding different idioms from L1 was on advanced learners as they possessed good proficiency to apply their metaphorical knowledge effectively. Nevertheless, in this study, only a few idioms were able to be decoded by advanced learners and it shows the challenges of understanding idioms not only for less proficiency but for advanced level as well. All learners might use translation as strategy but advanced learners used translation strategy effectively and will not give up if the translation did not help and switch to other strategy immediately once they noticed the translation brought them nowhere closer to the meaning. In comparison to the present study, the strategy that the participants used the most regardless of their proficiency was guessing from context. Translation to L1 was the less used strategy among participants as the meaning translated to their native language was not helpful in comprehending the meaning. They could not make any connection with the figurative meaning and thus guessing in context was the most opted strategy. The result is also as such because in the presence study, the idioms were not categorized

as identical, similar and different. This is because of the fewer number of idioms that are similar to L2 of the participants. Whereby in Taki's study, the idioms that were similar were purposely selected to identify the strategy such as translation was either used robustly or not.

Xie (2017) explored Chinese EFL learners in comprehending idioms in her study and the finding showed that learners understood high transparent and high familiarity idioms better. In her initial part of the study, she tested on learners' familiarity on 20 idioms and most of the idioms used were not familiar to the learners due to lack of exposure. It later affected the result of idiom comprehension tasks that were carried out. For the idiom comprehension task, learners had to identify meaning of idioms in two conditions; isolation and in context. The poor performance in identifying meaning of idioms in isolation was much predicted as they had shown low familiarity of the idioms of previous task. The result of comprehension improved when idioms were presented in context which gave learners clue to guess the meaning. The idioms that were correctly understood were mostly transparent and familiar to the learners such as 'a piece of cake' and 'Get in one ear and get out the other'. Both of these idioms showed high familiarity and high transparency among the learners and thus had the most correct responses. Idioms with low transparency such as 'turn the other cheek' and 'talk through one's hat' had a low familiarity among the learners. Both idioms can be categorized as opaque as its meaning cannot be inferred from the literal meaning of its component. Compared when it is presented in isolation, learners improved in understanding when both idioms were presented in context. This study enables to highlight that learners' comprehension of idioms can be increased with the aid of context as the result showed from the 0.30 mean score increased to 1.94 with the presence of context. Idioms familiarity differs among learners depending on their exposure and background knowledge and due to its large

number, it is impossible for learners to encounter all. Therefore, to assist them in idiom comprehension, stimulus like context may help them to decode the meaning better.

A study conducted by Al-Kadi (2015) on Yemeni EFL undergraduates showed a high scoring in the idiom test. Two groups of high and low achievers participated in this study and had shown that high achievers averagely scored 61% while low achievers scored averagely 39% respectively on the idioms test. The study also explored the strategies used among the participants in comprehending idioms. 100% of the high achievers used context as a source of understanding while for the low achievers, 53.30% used the same method. For low achievers, the common strategy they preferred to use was wild guessing and this strategy was among the least favoured strategy by high achievers. Ranong (2014) explored idiom comprehension among Thai learners in his study. The high proficient learners had shown a high correct response of the idioms (80.2 %) and for the low proficient learners, they scored the most incorrect responses (69.6%). The finding shows the common guessing strategies the learners used to comprehend idioms was guessing from context (58.22%), referring to L1 idioms (4.06%) and using background knowledge (3.61%). Both of these studies were focusing on performance of idiom comprehension among high and low proficient learners. The finding showed that high proficient learners comprehended idioms better than low proficient learners because of many factors such as their level of vocabulary knowledge and the strategies that they had employed. In Al-Kadi 's (2015) study, the low proficient participants opted for the wild guessing strategy in which they did not do enough analysing compared to high proficient learners who did not favour wild guessing. Both studies shared the same finding of the common use of the guessing strategy among participants who were using context to decode the meaning of the idioms.

2.7 Acquisition and processing of idioms among ESL learners

It is an undeniable challenge for second language learners to acquire competency in understanding idioms as they are not merely a string of words that can be derived through direct translation. As the learners have already acquired their first language which is usually their mother tongue, understanding English and English idioms may pose an extra challenge to them. According to Gass and Selinker (2008, as cited in Banjar, 2014), interference will happen between L1 and L2 during the acquisition of L2. Indeed, during the interference, L1 gives an effect to the L2 performance and it involves two types of transfer. A positive transfer happens when both languages share almost similar features. The learners are able to produce the second language by using features in their first language. A negative transfer; however, happens when there is interference between the two languages. The errors are cross linguistic as they involve the effect of the first language to the second language (Banjar, 2014). Thus, it is a common struggle among ESL learners who have their own first language and now face a second language which functions differently from their own language. It tends further to interfere with their comprehension of idioms when they encounter idioms from a second language that does not share the same properties as their first language idioms.

When it comes to the processing of idioms, it involves activating word meaning and integrating it with the context of the sentence which is similar to the process that happens in any language processing. According to Rommers, Dijkstra and Bastiaansen (2013), most neurocognitive models of sentence comprehension involve two main operations which are (i) incoming words whose meanings are accessed (ii) these meanings are unified with the preceding context that determines and builds up the meaning of the sentence.

According to one model which is lexical representation hypothesis, the idioms are stored and retrieved from the lexicon in the same manner as any other literal words and that idioms are unified during the access, retrieval and representation of the lexicon (Gibbs, 1994, p. 93). Idioms are believed to be comprehended faster than the literal phrases. This is because the simultaneous processing of the idiom's literal and figurative meanings result in a horse race that facilitates learners' responses to idioms over the time required to process the literal phrases (Gibbs, 1994, p. 93). However, under the circumstances where learners take less time to process idiomatic expressions than literal phrases, it does not indicate that learners analysed literal phrases at the time the figurative meaning is being processed. Learners' familiarity of the idioms may affect their recognition of idiomatic expressions either faster or slower.

The idiom list hypothesis (or literal first hypothesis) meanwhile, believes that idioms are stored as lexical items separately from other lexicon and therefore the literal word meaning should not be activated as they belong to a different category (Bobrow & Bell 1973, as cited in Rommers, Dijkstra and Bastiaansen, 2013). Idioms according to this hypothesis, are represented in a special list in the lexicon (Cacciari & Tabossi, 2014). If the literal meanings are not interpretable in context, only then the idioms word list will be activated and retrieved. Once found, the listed idiom meaning will be taken as the intended meaning. There is the three-step comprehension model according to this hypothesis. The listener initially processes the literal meaning before rejecting the literal interpretation followed by checking the idiom lexicon before coming to a correct interpretation (Vega-Moreno, 2001, p. 75).

In the direct access hypothesis proposed by Gibbs (1980), the meaning of literal words are only activated if the figurative meaning cannot be reached or does not fit into the context. The meaning of idioms are directly retrieved from the mental lexicon once the string of idioms is heard. This model takes into account that idioms are lexicalized constructions and therefore should be allowed a direct meaning retrieval (Langlotz, 2006, p. 20). In other words, idioms are regarded as long words. Gibbs opposed Switney & Cutler's (1979) hypothesis that literal activation takes place initially before retrieving the figurative meaning. He posed a stand that literal activation did not have to happen prior to the figurative meaning activation but can happen simultaneously or be by-passed (Vega-Moreno, 2001, p. 76). However, this hypothesis has its shortcoming because it is against the notion that language comprehension is non-optional (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991, p. 219). It is considered as non-optional because understanding is a process that is uncontrollable where it occurs automatically without conscious control (Miller & Johnson Laird, 1976, p. 68). Thus, it depends on the learners' familiarization of the meaning of the words because when words have more than one meaning, such as 'kick the bucket' either the meaning is someone has passed away or booting the pail, the most frequent meaning of the words will be activated.

One model worth reviewing is called the configuration model that states that idiom processing depends on learners being able to recognize the key part of the idioms and accessing the figurative meaning of the expression (Gibbs, 1994, p. 288). If the key part or the key words of the idioms occur earlier in the phrase, the figurative meaning may be processed earlier before the literal meaning is composed. However, if the key words happened later in the phrase, the literal meaning will be processed earlier than the

figurative meaning. This is shown that the key words in the idiomatic phrase plays an important role in determining the figurative meaning. In most cases, the configuration model still holds to the principle that language is processed in a literal manner until the presence of key words triggers a figurative processing. The important note behind this model is that learners will eventually comprehend idioms by analysing the phrases' in individual parts.

As idioms are made up of a few words or constituents, it is important to acknowledge their role when processing their idiomatic meaning. This is because the word constituents and the meaning of idioms are not always arbitrary. 'Butterflies in the stomach' which means *somebody is nervous* does not go in line with the word constituents in the phrase. According to Vega-Moreno (2001), an individual constituent is not sufficient enough to contribute to the idiomatic meaning rather one should be able to extend and explain how this individual constituent affects the understanding of idioms. Cacciari and Tabossi (1988) in their study have discovered important findings on the activation of the literal meaning during the comprehension of idioms. Learners were able to recognize the idiomatic expressions when they finished listening to the last string of idiomatic expressions such as 'He was in seventh heaven'. Before the string was finished, it can have a literal meaning such as 'He was in the seventh place' but the word 'heaven' was triggered literally first before the learners were able to relate it to the concept of happiness afterwards. They also discovered that when the idiomatic phrases were presented with a context, the literal and figurative meaning of the phrases were activated immediately. Nonetheless, the meaning that is dominant and contextually appropriate will be activated first compared to the meaning that is dominant but not contextually appropriate. The fundamental of these findings are the meaning of the words that are accessed may play

important roles in the use and comprehension of the idiomatic expression (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991). For each word in the idioms has a strong effect when learners interpret idioms. It will also determine the process that learners will choose to take in order to comprehend its meaning. Thus, in the present study, the role of words in idiomatic phrases in determining learners guessing strategies will be looked closely for it has a big role in idiom comprehension.

2.8 Theoretical framework of study

2.8.1 Global Elaboration Model (GEM)

In the last several decades, many researchers had studied how idioms had been interpreted and many hypotheses and theories have emerged since then. Levorato and Cacciari (1992) had proposed the Global Elaboration Model (GEM) in which the ground of this model is that the comprehension of idioms is developed parallel with the general cognitive and linguistic development. The basic tenet of GEM is on the basis that context facilitates the comprehension of idioms and the exploitation of context is a major factor that contributes to figurative language competence. When acquiring idioms, children will explore the meaning of the components of the words in order to make sense of it (Vega Moreno, 2007). As early as eight years old, children start to find cues in understanding figurative language. They start to be aware that idioms cannot be relied solely on their literal form. The literal meaning does not help them to understand idioms and thus they are searching for clues in a given context. According to Vega Moreno (2007, p.167) at the initial stage of this model, children will understand idioms according to the sequence of the words and once they grow older, they will start to combine chunks of discourse until they are able to take the global meaning for the wider text. However, exception has to be made to opaque idioms. Opaque idioms whose meaning does not match with the

image it conjures requires rote learning (Fruste' Herrmann, 2008). Table 2.1 shows that there are five phases according to the GEM model and for each phase, a different age will show a different stage of capability in analysing and interpreting idioms.

Table 2.1: GEM Developmental Phases of Figurative Competence by Levorato and Cacciari (1995)

Phase	Age	Description
1	0-7	Language processing is based on word-by-word strategy that leads children to comprehend all language in a literal way.
2	8-9	Children start searching for the clues that could lead to a non-literal interpretation of the linguistic input. In this phase of suspended literalness, children are able to perceive the incongruity of the literal interpretation of an idiom string when the contextual information instead supports the idiomatic interpretation.
3	10-12	Characterized by the child's awareness that a communicative intention can be realized by means of different linguistic formats (e.g. literally, idiomatically, ironically). A gap between the almost reached ability to comprehend idioms and a still incomplete ability to produce them is evident in this phase.
4	13-15	The ability to use the conventional repertoire of figurative expressions is almost achieved and the developmental gap between idiom comprehension and production is reduced.
5	above16	An adult-like figurative competence is achieved that includes the ability to use figurative language creatively and with a full-fledged metalinguistic awareness.

In phase one – 0- 7 years, children have difficulty in comprehending idioms. They will interpret idioms word by word as they interpret other non-idiomatic words. It is in line with Levorato and Cacciari (1995) who suggested that poorer performance among children was due to the children's tendency to interpret language literally, word by word processing and a delay in pragmatic language skills. These children indeed have not yet been able to differentiate between what was read or spoken and the intended meaning. They perceive the meaning of words on the surface basis without making a connection with its underlying meaning. However, the ability of children to understand idioms has improved over time even though the best age to effectively understand idioms is 10 and above as shown in phase 3. Difficulty in understanding idioms can happen among adults too. According to Titone and Connine (1999), adult comprehension depends on the transparency of the idioms. Idioms that are lowly transparent will be very difficult to decipher their meanings. Nevertheless, adults and children will be able to understand idioms that are easy and have a close relation with their literal and figurative sense (Nippold & Taylor, 2002). Therefore, learners will comprehend idioms better as they age because their linguistic repertoire is also developed. Exception however is given to opaque idioms where they are learned mostly through rote learning due to their low level of transparency.

According to GEM, idiom comprehension is explained through a semantic analysis or inference from context (Levorato & Cacciari, 1992, as cited in Frustee-Herrmann, 2008). Semantic analysis is accomplished only when idioms' constituents are understood individually to create a local coherence and it is normally applicable for transparent idioms. When local coherence is achieved, it helps learners to connect the ideas which

later generate to a global coherence. These processes are taking place because idiom comprehension required interpretation of literal and figurative meanings. Learners need to form a logical semantic representation from the constituents and exploit the context that idioms are presented before integrating and comparing with the writers' intention of idiomatic expressions. Global coherence can be achieved when learners are able to correspond the meaning of constituents with their figurative meaning or use the context available to interpret the figurative meaning, especially for unknown idioms and opaque idioms. Figure 1 below adapted from Fruste-Herrmann (2008), illustrates how GEM works.

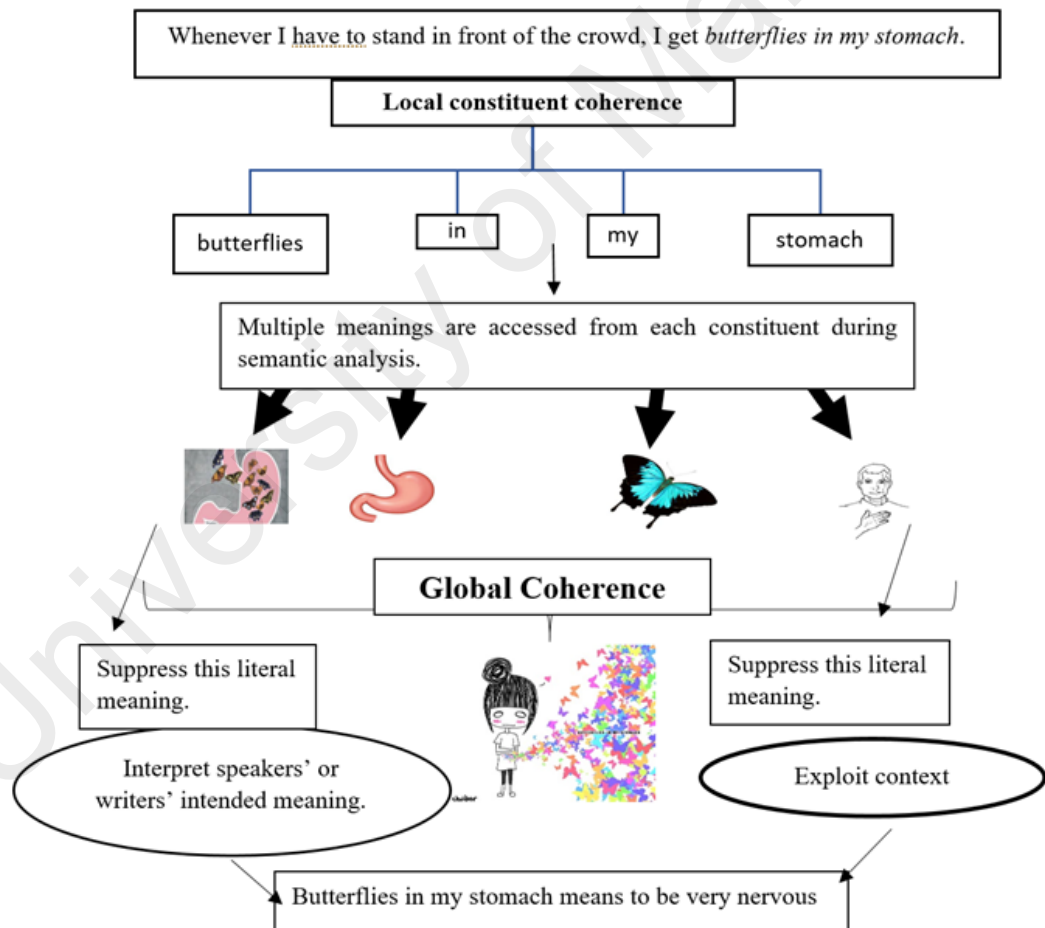


Figure 2.1. Local and Global Coherence of an Idiomatic Expression

2.8.2 Justification for using GEM

The current study used the general GEM (as shown in Figure 2.1) as a theoretical framework in order to assess the ability of comprehending idioms in context among 16-year old ESL learners who are proficient and less proficient. It will give insight on whether ESL learners' English proficiency affects their comprehension of idioms. Besides, the model is a guide to explore how ESL learners understand idioms by integrating context and possible guessing strategies. By using this model, it will enable the researcher to find out how ESL learners performance will be where comprehension of idioms in context is concerned.

2.8.3 Past studies using GEM

Fuste-Herrmann (2008) investigated the relationship between linguistic comprehension and idiom comprehension among Latino adolescents using GEM as the conceptual framework. GEM states that idiom comprehension is developed together with linguistic development which requires the inferencing ability. Thus, learners' performance in comprehending idioms can be predicted from their reading comprehension ability. The finding from this study supported the psychological aspect of GEM in predicting learners' ability in comprehending idioms. There was a strong correlation that existed between idiom comprehension and reading comprehension. Learners who performed well in reading comprehension also performed well in comprehending idioms because their lexical knowledge is strong. They were able to do a semantic analysis and achieved global coherence in understanding idioms. Learners whose lexical knowledge was weak had problems to recognize and integrate the word meaning to reach the meaning of idioms.

2.9 Guessing strategies in comprehending idioms

ESL learners in particular may not have full exposure with a vast collection of English idioms. Idioms that they learn in school or while reading will not cover thousands of idioms and thus it is important for them to apply guessing strategies when they encounter idioms that are not familiar with or they have forgotten. Guessing strategies enable a learner to process idioms and later to comprehend idioms accurately. Even so, without the presence of context, learners may have a limited source of applying the guessing strategies. In relation to real life situation, it is a relief that idioms are often embedded in context either verbally or in written form.

A famous view on idiom comprehension strategies was by Cooper (1999) and the present study is adopting Cooper's guessing strategies as part of the instrument. Idiom comprehension strategies have two categories which are preparatory and guessing strategies (Cooper, 1999). Preparatory strategies allow learners to consolidate and clarify the expression before going into the meaning. In preparatory strategies, learners are having time before uttering the guess, rehearsing the answer and viewing a new linguistic information that is related. They are able to ask and gather necessary information that can help them to understand the meaning of idioms. Repeating and paraphrasing without interpreting the idioms is one of the preparatory guessing strategies. As the learners do not delve into the meaning; yet, discussing and analyzing idioms is also considered preparatory. It can be seen when comprehending idioms, preparatory strategies help learners to prepare their mind before they involve in deep processing of interpretation the meaning and apply suitable guessing strategies.

Cooper (1999) conducted a study to investigate what kinds of strategies did the non-native speakers employ to comprehend idioms. In this study, guessing strategies that were the main focus include five guessing strategies which are using background knowledge (BK), guessing from context (GC), using literal meaning (LM), referring to L1 (L1) and wild guessing. Based on the results, the most frequent strategies used by the non-native learners is guessing from context (28%) followed by discussing and analyzing the idioms (24%) and using the literal meaning (19 %). Seven per cent used background knowledge as their strategy and 5% resorted to referring to L1 idioms. In guessing in context strategy, learners discussed the embedded meaning and make reference of situation available to infer the meaning. Since Cooper (1999) used the think-aloud protocol, he was able to identify that learners used words such as 'so' or 'because' to infer the meaning from the context. In one example when the learners had to explain the meaning of *green thumb* based on the context where the lady is able to keep the plant alive. The participants referred *thumb as a finger* and used 'so' to relate with *the lady's ability to plant well* and came to the conclusion that *green thumb* means *someone who is good with plants*.

The following strategy that was frequently used was a preparatory strategy which was discussing and analyzing the idioms. In this study, the participants were found to talk about idioms and the context before doing further interpretation. This strategy enables the participants time to clarify their thoughts which is helpful for them to give better idiom interpretation. The next strategy that was popularly opted by the participants was using the literal meaning of the idioms. For this particular strategy, the participants were reported as being aware of the metaphorical aspects of the idioms and they used the literal meaning to figure out the figurative meaning. Using background knowledge was another guessing strategy employed by 7 % of the participants. This strategy might not be the best strategy as not all the idioms had been heard and learned by them. This strategy will give extra advantage to participants or learners that have vast exposure on idioms. At the

bottom of the list in the guessing strategies used in Cooper's study was referring to L1 idioms which was only used by 5 % of the participants. The idioms that were identical to the participants' first language will trigger them to make a comparison in terms of meaning. 'To see eye to eye' was equal to 'Olho no olho (eye to eye)' in the Portuguese language and thus it has similarity with the English idiom and this encouraged the participants to choose this strategy. As for this strategy, it will work best with idioms that are identical or similar with the learner's first language and this depends on the learners' first language itself. If their first language does not share common characteristics, then this strategy will be not be practical for them to use.

2.9.1 Past studies on guessing and processing of idioms in comprehending idioms

Bulut (2004) in his study used Cooper's (1999) guessing strategies to investigate idioms processing in L2 among English turkish teachers. 18 Turkish teachers took part in this study and were divided into two groups according to the scores from a proficiency test. Group A was for advanced participants whereby Group B was assigned to low advanced participants. The instrument used for this study was the *Idioms Recognition Test (IRT)* that consists of 20 idioms that were selected from Cooper (1999) and various online sites. The idioms were categorized into *three* categories where eight idioms were under *standard English (more formal)* category, eight idioms under *informal or colloquial (conversational)* category and four idioms were allocated for *slang category*. Using the *Thinking Aloud Protocol (TAP)*, the researcher gathered the necessary responses from the participants. The findings were based on the hypotheses formulated for this study. The first hypothesis was that participants will *make use of context first* and will resort to apply other strategies such as *referring to background knowledge* if the context was unable to assist their understanding. The finding supported this hypothesis as participants

did a lot of guessing from context. For other strategies like *using L1 and using background knowledge*, it showed equal frequency of usage. This finding also proved that in order to interpret idioms, learners should apply guessing strategies that are suitable according to the problem of the idioms they are interpreting. ‘One shoe does not fit all’ will be the best saying to explain ways to comprehend idioms among learners.

The second hypothesis looked at the effect of types of idioms (formal, conversational, slang) towards learners’ comprehension of idioms. The hypothesis on formal idioms would be comprehended more frequently than other types of idioms was rejected as the conversational idioms score was higher than formal idioms. The reason that the researcher had concluded from this result was that when learners encounter unfamiliar idioms, their thinking process will get slower and more deliberate regardless of their level of proficiency. The researcher discovered information from *TA method* on the process that took place when non-native speakers encountered unfamiliar idioms. They will evaluate the possible answers through *trial and errors process*. This is called the ‘heuristic method’ according to Cooper, 1999, p. 255) where “Learners are encouraged to learn, discover, understand, or solve problems on their own by interpreting, and by evaluating possible answers or solutions, or through trial and error”. This is shown that when learners applied the *heuristic method*, they did not solely depend on one strategy but also considered other strategies that may contribute to the comprehension. The last hypothesis for this study was *idioms that were identical to the Turkish language will be easier comprehended*. Three English idioms in the study were *identical with Turkish language* and out of three idioms, two were easily comprehended and only one idiom was not well interpreted. According to Bulut (2004) this situation happened probably because participants may have known that certain idioms may share the same properties as their

L1 but they may not carry the same meaning. Thus participants will tend to *rely on context* to provide them clues rather than the similarity between Turkish and English idioms.

A study done by Gholamreza, Saeed and Mansoor (2012) on the effect of context on the processing strategies of idioms revealed that *context* played an important impact on the strategies applied in processing unfamiliar idioms. During the study, 5 participants were divided into 2 groups each which was *animation and text group*. In the animation group, the participants will be exposed with *animated cartoon* after listening to a short explanation about the story. They had to share the processes that were taking place in their *cognitive reasoning* when defining each of the paused idioms when watching the animated cartoon. The second group only read the transcript of the cartoon animation without being shown the animated cartoon and had to *report their thought processes* when trying to define the same idioms as the other group. There were 11 strategies that were ruled out from the study that had been used by the learners when comprehending idioms. The strategies were categorized into 5 major categories. The first category was **idioms based** and the strategies involved were *focusing on the literal meaning, focusing on the key word in the idiom, reference to the origin of idioms and paraphrasing and elaboration of the idioms*. The second category was **respondent based** which consisted of *drawing on background knowledge, visualization and requesting information about the idiom in general or unfamiliar words*. The third category is **L1 based** which was *translating the idiom into first language*. The next category is **context based** where *drawing on the accompanying animated picture and drawing on the written context* were part of the strategies and lastly was *resorting to wild guesses*. The result of the strategies used was used to improvise for the next data collection that involved a larger sample of 60 students. Three (3) strategies were omitted due to its low frequency which was *referring to the*

origin of the idioms, wild guessing and requesting for information. Based on the results in the text group, it showed that *focusing on the keywords* strategy was the highest strategy employed among students followed by *reference to back ground knowledge* and *reference to context*. *Translation* surprisingly was among the strategy that had low frequency of usage among the participants. Meanwhile for the animation group, the high frequency of strategy that was used was *focusing on the animated picture* followed by *focusing on keywords and reference to context*. These findings showed that participants will opt for strategies that can give them the most cues. Even *context* can give them enough clues but if they find keywords that can enable to help them to understand the idioms, they will prefer the latter. For other learners, *translation to L1* might help them to comprehend the idioms but to this group *translation* was the least use strategy to aid in the understanding of idioms. Different learners based on their background knowledge might have preferable strategies in understanding idioms and thus the current study would like to have better insight on what learners in Malaysia will opt for when understanding idioms.

In another study, Noura Winis and Mohammed (2013) had conducted an investigation on the strategies used when processing idioms by Libyan university students. In the initial part of the study, the researchers also investigated on the difficulties faced by Libyan learners when comprehending idioms. The majority of the learners stated that the *lack of cultural background* behind the idioms was the major cause of the difficulty followed by *the idioms were not taught in class* and thus they did not have sufficient prior knowledge. The lack of background knowledge may be due to the participants having less interaction with native speakers and had less exposure on the native speaker's culture. Whereas for the idioms that were not taught in class probably were due to the academic background of the participants that did not require them to use idioms in their study or

their reading texts had less usage of idioms. Besides, the difficulty in understanding idioms also depended on the meaning of the individual words in the idioms. They were unable to understand the constituents that made up the idioms which later hindered their understanding. Words in the idioms should serve as cues to the learners in predicting their meanings. It is the first stage in the processing of idioms and if this stage was not successfully tackled by learners, it will stop them from moving on to the next stage in the processing of the meaning of the idioms. The cause of this problem can be due to their *lack of vocabulary knowledge*. If the learners have a strong vocabulary knowledge, they can overcome this problem and only have to deal with figurative meaning. In terms of the guessing strategy used in this study, the majority of the participants agreed that *context* played a vital role in predicting the meaning of the idioms. They also used the *guessing from the context* strategy frequently to comprehend the idioms in this study. Most of them indicated that *context* helped them to understand the meaning of the idioms better. It was supported by Qualls, O'Brien, Blood and Hammer (2003) as cited in Noura and Mohammed (2013) that put high emphasis on *the importance of contextual clues* in assisting in the comprehension of idioms especially if the idioms are more opaque or unfamiliar to the learners. Learners can apply this strategy by manipulating the context available and make a connection between the idioms and their intended meaning.

2.10 Conclusion

Over the years, a lot of studies on the comprehension of idioms, processing of idioms and strategies used to comprehend idioms have been conducted (Orthony, Schallert, Reynolds and Antos, 1978; Cooper, 1999; Bulut, 2004; Fuste-Herrmann, 2008; Leung, 2011; Gholamreza, Saeed and Mansoor, 2012; Noura Winis and Mohammed, 2013; Taki, 2013; Al-Kadi, 2015; Xie, 2017). Nevertheless, less studies were conducted among ESL

learners and more focusing on EFL learners in idioms comprehension and guessing strategies. ESL is defined by Gass and Selinker (2001) as ‘the learning of non-native language in the environment in which the language is spoken’ and for Malaysian context, English is considered as second language because it is widely used and spoken by many. For the term EFL, it is defined as ‘the learning of non-native language in the environment of one’s native language.’ (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Either EFL or ESL, both are second language learners who inevitably will encounter language that is not their mother tongue and thus pose challenge in understanding especially the figurative language. Therefore, the present study was conducted to investigate the guessing strategies employed by learners in a Malaysian secondary school by using GEM as the theoretical framework and other idioms processing models to describe the findings of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will review the methods used to carry out the research from background of school, selection of participants, instruments, inter-raters, research procedures to data analysis. The methodologies chosen for this study will be further explained and justified in this chapter.

3.2 Research Design

This present study used a mixed method design where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected for the study. Mixed method allows the researcher to triangulate the data by looking at the findings from quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data for this study data was gathered from questionnaires responded by the participants. Questionnaires in the form of multiple choice questions that consisted of 40 questions were administered to all the 58 participants. The quantitative data gathered is important to answer research question one which is on Malaysian form four learners' competency in comprehending idioms. According to Babbie (2010) quantitative research focused on gathering numerical data and generalizing it to a particular situation. In relation to this study, numerical data was collected to investigate the comprehension of English idioms by ESL learners in a Malaysian Secondary School. It also consists of qualitative data where the study elicited responses on the strategies used by the participants through interview prompts that will address research question two on how do proficient and less proficient learners used guessing strategies in comprehending idioms. Apart from quantitative data that shows on the frequency chosen by the participants, the supporting qualitative data explaining the choice made by the participants is needed. The qualitative

data thus provides further explanation from participants on why they comprehended idioms in certain way.

3.3 Background of the school

The participants were selected from among form four students who are studying in one of the secondary schools in Johor. The school involved is Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tanjung Datuk, Pengerang, Johor. The school is situated at the southern part of Johor in which a majority of the community work as fisherman, labourers and businessmen. It is a newly developed area and is made up of a few villages. Nevertheless, with the rapid development of the oil refinery that has taken place recently has not only opened more job opportunities to the people in that area but also has changed the physical scenario of the place and the school environment. People transferred to another placement to give way to the new developments. More outsiders and foreign workers came in and have become part of the society. The school is led by the principal, Mr Farzeli Che Mat Mustafa, with the help of 83 teachers and 10 supporting staff. The school consists of 850 students of which 147 are Form Four students. After 50 years of giving education to the people there, the school is now celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

The school has 6 classes for the upper forms which include Form Four and Form 5 students whose ages range between 16 to 17 years old. The first two classes are science stream students who are taking Biology, Physics, Chemistry alongside other main subjects which are the Malay language, English, Mathematics, Additional Mathematics, History and Islamic Studies. Most of these students have an intermediate level of English language in order for them to join the science stream classes as these classes learn science subjects bilingually which is in English and Malay. Their English proficiency is determined from their formal PT3 assessment that they had sat when they were in Form

Three. Most of the students who are selected for the science stream classes get between A to C as their results and C is the minimal requirement for them to enter the science stream for this school. Whereas for other classes, they are taking different electives such as basic economics, arts and servicing motorcycles.

The majority of the students in this school are Malay students with Malay language as their mother tongue. The students prefer to use the Malay language rather than the English language as their medium of communication. English is mainly learned as a subject rather than as a medium of communication among these students. It can be seen that there is a very minimal application of English lessons outside the classroom despite the importance of its usage in today's age. The exposure of English environment is low and can be assessed during the English lesson or while watching and listening to English sources from the media. In terms of the reading habit of English materials, most students only read English articles given by their teachers without doing any extra extensive reading by themselves. The main cause of their limited English exposure is nonetheless than lack of motivation to learn a second language and poor performance of this subject in the examination. Furthermore, the environment where the students' live in is not encouraging for them to learn English.

3.4 Background of participants

The participants for this study were taken from this school - *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Tanjung Datuk, Pengerang, Johor* and involved 58 Form four students ranging from proficient to less proficient. They were selected based on their first assessment which was carried out in the early part of this year. From the marks ranging

from 100 to 40, 58 students were shortlisted for the study. 36 participants from the upper quartile were chosen to be in the proficient group. Their marks for the early year assessment were 70 and above. 22 participants from the lower quartile were from the less proficient group where their marks were between 40 to 49. The participants who were successfully selected were 58 Malay students. Equal number of participants for both proficiency couldn't be achieved as it relied on their marks on the early assessment. The comparison between the two group is still valid as their proficiency is based on their true performance in the assessment.

Table 3.1: Participants' level of English proficiency

Participants	Level of Proficiency	
	Proficient	Less Proficient
58	36	22

3.5 Research Instruments

3.5.1 Survey Questionnaire

The study used a survey questionnaire that consisted of 40 multiple choice question (MCQ) as its main instrument. The purposes of disseminating the survey questionnaire were to examine the participants' competency in comprehending idioms in general and to identify the guessing strategies they used while comprehending idioms in context among the proficient and less proficient participants. In order to maintain the validity and relevancy of the study, the idioms were taken from their trial exam SPM paper and English reference books for Form 4 and Form 5 that are used by Malaysian students to do their extra exercises either in school or at home. Due to a huge number of idioms collection, using local references might narrow the scope of the common idioms learned among Malaysian students. It is important to acknowledge that these idioms are not the

only idioms learned in the Malaysian classroom. There are more to the list if the students and teachers go beyond the reference books and have access to external resources like novels and movies.

Here were the lists of the reference books, real and trial SPM papers used in this study.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Twitter 2012 Bahasa Inggeris, Form 5 KBSM, Info-didik 2. Gajet SPM Bahasa Inggeris, Form 4, Info-didik 3. Gajet SPM Bahasa Inggeris, Form 5, Info-didik 4. Top Gain KBSM English Form 5, Pelangi. 5. Kertas Soalan Sebenar Peperiksaan Sebenar SPM. 6. Menguasai SPM Form 5. Sasbadi. 7. Top Gear English Form 4, Pelangi. 8. Top Gear English Form 5, Pelangi. 9. Score in SPM English Model Test Paper. Oxford Fajar. 10. Top Up English Form 5, Pelangi. 11. Skor A+ Kertas Ramalan, Pelangi 	
<p>List of trial English SPM Examination Papers</p> <p>http://banksoalanspm.com/download.php</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sekolah Berasrama Penuh 2014 2. Kedah, 2014 3. Pulau Pinang, 2014 4. Terengganu 2013 5. Kota Damansara 2013 6. Kelantan 2013 	

Figure 3.1: List of Reference Books

Exercises on idioms from eleven reference books and six trial papers were used for this study. There were quite a number of reference books used because questions on idioms are limited. This is because of various types of figurative language such as similes and metaphors. The common questions on figurative language that were asked in the examination will be idioms and metaphors. Since the comprehension of graphic stimuli only has 8 questions in the English Paper 2 of SPM, the frequency question on idioms is

lowered. Nevertheless, the comprehension of idioms still remains important for second language learners to increase their proficiency level.

As illustrated in Figure 3.2 below, the instrument consists of only one section of 40 multiple choice questions. Each question included one idiom used in context and the question required participants to analyse the idiom before choosing the best interpretation from the list of answers provided. Next to each question, were a list of guessing strategies and the participants had to choose one or a few strategies they used to interpret the meaning of idioms.

Life has a way of handling us **ups and downs** when we least...

Which of the following best explains the line?

- Life is unpredictable
- We can plan our life to suit our goal
- Life consists of pleasant and unpleasant experiences
- Bad experiences will make us appreciate the good ones

Guessing Strategies

- Experience/background knowledge ()
- Guessing from context ()
- Using literal meaning ()
- Referring to L1 idioms ()
- Wild guess ()

Figure 3.2: Example of Survey Questionnaire

The structure of the question is based on previous study from Cacciari and Levorato (1989) on how children understand idiom. The use of multiple choice question is to ease the process of eliciting information because children have difficulty in explaining

meaning of idioms (Cacciari & Levorato, 1989, p. 392). In the study, ESL learners may also face difficulty in explaining the meaning of idiom due to language barrier and thus multiple-choice questionnaire is one of the methods chosen. The strategies is adapted from Cooper (1999) and is presented for participants to choose the accompanying strategy. It would be easier for the participants to state the strategies they used by choosing from the list. The questions for the questionnaire were taken from the reference book of form 4 and 5 and thus the level of difficulty of comprehension of the idioms is targeted for the students of form 4 and above, which is the expected proficiency of the participants. Each idiom tested had accompanying context to assist comprehension however the amount of context varied from one idiom to another idiom as it was taken from the reference book and not formulated by the researcher.

3.5.2 Interview

Besides the MCQ survey questionnaire, the study also held 6 interview prompts to add validity to the findings. The interviews were conducted on one to one with the 6 participants in a room with the researcher. The participants were given a set of interview questions for them to refer to (See Appendix C) as they had to explain the strategies that they had used during the interpretation of the meaning of the idioms in detail. The researcher asked questions according to the list of interview questions (see Appendix B) and wrote the responses of the 6 selected participants and the same procedure was carried out with all the 6 selected participants.

Through the interview prompts, the researcher was able to elicit responses on the strategies used by the participants in detail. The participants' responses to the interview questions were recorded and analyzed in order to compare how students with high marks differ from those with low marks in terms of the strategies that they had used during the

interpretation of the meaning of the idioms. Six participants attended the interview sessions after 3 days interval from the MCQ test. It took 3 days to process the data from the survey and the scores were needed for the selection of the 6 participants for the interview. *Three participants who had scored the highest and the lowest marks were selected to be part of the interview sessions.* Questions from the interview were based on 10 questions on the idioms taken from the survey questionnaire. The idioms were chosen based on the percentage of understanding, ranging from high to inadequate understanding.

Table 3.2: Level of Idioms Comprehension and Percentages

Level of Comprehension	Percentages
High	100-90
	80-89
Average	79-70
	69-60
	59-50
Basic	49-40
Inadequate	39-30
	29-20

Table 3.2 shows the level of idiom comprehension with percentages and the scale of comprehension for knowledge and understanding is adapted from Bloxham and Boyd (2007, p.91). There are four levels of comprehension and for the interview purposes, two idioms were chosen from each level except four were from the inadequate level in order to assess more information about the strategies that participants employed when dealing with difficult idioms. Below is the sample of the question format for the interview.

Gina : Annie, I get negative thoughts all the time, I'm worry so much
about this and that-my friends think I'm crazy.

Annie: Come on, Gina. Chill out! It's **all in the mind**.

1. In the phrases '**It's all in the mind**', Annie is telling Gina that she is

- going crazy.
- being very cold.
- imagining too much.
- becoming too irritating.

Guessing Strategies

Experience /background knowledge ()

Guessing from context ()

Using literal meaning ()

Referring to L1 idioms ()

Wild Guess ()

Interview questions

- Which guessing strategies that you used to interpret this idiom?
- How these guessing strategies help you to interpret the idioms?
- How does the context explain the meaning of the idiom?
- Is there a similar expression in your native language?
- Does the literal meaning(maksud tersurat) of the idiom relate to its figurative meaning(maksud tersirat)?
- Does a certain word give away the meaning of the idiom?
- Does the idiom remind you of something that you heard someone say before?
- Do you think your English proficiency affect your idioms understanding?

Figure 3.3: Sample of Interview Question

Figure 3. shows a sample of the interview questions used for the 10 selected idioms. The researcher went through all the eight questions for each of the 10 idioms. This step is important because different idioms pose different problems to the participants. The questions asked during the interview were mainly focusing on the guessing strategies used by participants when comprehending idioms. The questions helped the researcher to explore how participants employed the guessing strategies in which this information hardly can be retrieved merely from the survey questionnaire administered in this study. Since there were 40 idioms tested, it would be difficult for the researcher to collect verbal responses for every idiom. Hence, the researcher decided to choose the idioms according to the level of idioms comprehension. The idioms were selected from each level to give a general insight on how participants employed the guessing strategies for different types

of idioms in terms of difficulty. The list of ten idioms used for the interview were as follows:

Table 3.3: List of Idioms Chosen for the Interview

Idioms	Level of comprehension
1. All in the mind	High
2. Busy as bee	High
3. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth	Average
4. Hands are full	Average
5. Butterflies in my stomach	Basic
6. Rub salt into the wounds	Basic
7. Tighten our belts	Inadequate
8. As fit as a fiddle	Inadequate
9. Ups and downs	Inadequate
10. Make hay while the sun shines	Inadequate

Table 3.3 shows the list of idioms used for the interview were categorized according to the level of comprehension. Each level of comprehension may affect the participants' choice of strategies when comprehending idioms. Thus, the selection of idioms for the interview should be based on the data gathered in order to have various points of views and to see whether the idioms share the same employment of guessing strategies among the participants.

3.5.3 Pilot study

Prior to distributing the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted on 30 Form 4 students to measure the reliability of the questionnaire. The results were processed using the reliability calculator created by Del Siegle (2013). As a result, good reliability was indicated by the split-half method (coefficient of reliability: 0.82, obtained using Spearman-Brown correction formula). The questionnaire also indicates good internal consistency (Cronbach alpha, 0.81).

A pilot study was conducted to develop and test the adequacy of the research instruments (Van & Hundley, 2002, p. 2). 30 students had participated in the pilot test and the results showed average performance among the students. Out of the 40 questions on idioms, 3 students scored above thirty. The majority which was 17 students scored between 20 to 30. Meanwhile 8 students, scored between 11 to 19. Only 2 students scored below 10.

Table 3.4 below shows the list of idioms tested in context and the number of participants who were able to interpret correctly.

Table 3.4: Total Correctness on the Comprehension of Idioms

Idioms	Total correctness
1. Gold mines	16
2. Jump out into your hands	10
3. All in the mind	12
4. Ups and downs	21
5. Not a baby	11
6. Jack and Jill	22
7. Hen scratching	7
8. Grown man	25
9. Out of my sight	26
10. Pull up your socks	16
11. Busy as bee	27
12. Two-way street	18
13. Worst is over	28
14. Raining cats and dogs	13
15. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder	26
16. Till the cows come home	15
17. Child's play	19
18. Skin deep	16
19. Bookworm	25

Table 3.4 continued

20. Make hay while the sun shines	24
21. Fair weather	13
22. Eating someone up	22
23. butterflies in my stomach	5
24. Tighten our belts	12
25. Over the hill	21
26. one man's meat is another man's poison	19
27. Eat your pocket	17
28. a bit out of hand	20
29. as fit as a fiddle	13
30. a stone's throw away	27
31. busy as a bee	16
32. A let down	5
33. An apple a day keeps the doctor away	4
34. The early bird catches the worm	27
35. Hands are full	22
36. Don't see eye to eye	13
37. Under the microscope	6
38. Don't blow it	22
39. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth	11
40. Burn a hole in your pocket	19

Based on the results from the pilot study, a few idioms from the instrument had been replaced with another idiom taken from the same resources as the context presented was clearer to the participants. A clear context provides sufficient information to the participants to guess the meaning of the idioms correctly compared to the non-clear one where the context accompanying the idioms give limited information for the participants to guess the meaning of the idioms. A clear context can be achieved through useful information that act like a clue to the readers. It can be illustrated as following example of idiom that is selected in the questionnaire.:

Nurul : Janet and I are volunteers for the recycling campaign. Would you like to join us?
Zakiah : I would love to, but my **hands are full**. I've just started a fashion business online.
Lately, business is flourishing.
Nurul : That's wonderful

In this example, *hands are full* is presented in a context with few information to help readers to guess on the meaning. The useful clues can be found in the phrases ‘just started a fashion business online’ and ‘the business is flourishing lately’. The readers can connect the idiom ‘hands are full’ with the rejection of the invitation for volunteering in recycling campaign due to a flourishing business online that one of the speakers has just started. It shows that with the presence of linguistic context, it can help learner to identify meaning of idioms.

Idioms with unclear context will give limited information and clues thus the meaning will be difficult to derive. Readers will face difficulty to make an association with available clues because the context presented do not give choice or variety to readers to map their idea in interpreting the meaning. The following example exhibits unclear context where it has only 16 correct responses in this study out of 58 responses

Ramli : The Malaysian football team will be firmly **put under the microscope** during the selection of players for the Asean games.

Ahmad : Hope they do well

The idiom in used is ‘put under the microscope’ which implies the meaning of something or someone is being observed closely. The context available to help readers to infer the meaning is limited where the clues lie only in the phrase ‘Malaysian football team’ and ‘the selection of players for Asean games’. The readers have to make a connection between those phrases with the idiom ‘put under microscope’. Furthermore, the word ‘microscope’ might distract learners during interpreting as it is one of scientific tools and it is hardly connected with sport vocabulary list such as football and players. An addition of information in context can support the interpretation of the readers. The context can be expanded as suggested below:

Ramli : The Malaysian football team will be firmly **put under the microscope** during the selection of players for the Asean games. *The coach will look closely at their performance during training as well as their past record.*

Ahmad : Hope they do well.

The additional phrase of ‘look closely at their performance’ will give idea and clue to the readers to make an association between ‘Malaysian football team’ where they will be put under ‘microscope’ for the selection of Asean games. They can relate the word ‘microscope’ with the observation of the players. Hence it can be seen that without the presence of additional information related to the idioms, readers may lack of reference to relate with that is the limitation of unclear context.

However, there are other factors that can hinder the comprehension even with the presence of context which is their language proficiency and strategies used to interpret idioms. Thus in this study will look at either the strategies employed affect comprehension and either learners’ language proficiency matters.

The idioms that had been finalised and used in the study were as follows:

Table 3.5: List of Idioms Used in the Study

1. All in the mind
2. Ups and downs
3. Every Jack has his Jill
4. Get out of my sight
5. Pull socks up
6. Be as busy as a bee
7. Two-way street
8. Till the cows come home
9. Child’s play
10. Skin deep
11. Make hay while the sun shines
12. Fair weather friend

Table 3.5 continued

13. Butterflies in your stomach
14. Tighten one's belt
15. Over the hill
16. One man's meat is another man's poison
17. Burn a hole in your pocket
18. Out of hand
19. Fit as a fiddle
20. A stone's throw away
21. Call it a day
22. Let someone down
23. An apple a day keeps the doctor away
24. Early bird catches the worm
25. Have one's hands full
26. See eye to eye
27. Look a gift horse in the mouth
28. Put under the microscope
29. Take its toll
30. Take a break
31. Green fingers
32. Tie up loose ends
33. Flying colours
34. Raining cats and dogs
35. Rub salt in a wound
36. Break someone's heart
37. At one's fingertips
38. In hot water
39. Make someone's flesh creep
40. Fall on deaf ears

Besides selecting suitable idioms in context for the study, guessing strategies were also investigated in the study. This study adapted Cooper's 1999 guessing strategies because the strategies were valid and they have been used in many studies. The strategies were well elaborated and were easy to comprehend. Below is the list of guessing strategies used proposed by Cooper (1999):

1. Experience/ background knowledge (BK)
2. Guessing from context (GC)
3. Using literal meaning (LM)
4. Referring to L1 idioms (L1)
5. Wild Guess

(Cooper, 1999)

Table 3.6: List of Guessing Strategies and their Definitions

Strategy	Example
Experience/background knowledge (BK)	“This test is a <i>piece of cake</i> ”. I learned the expression from previous learning experience or through hearing it all the time and realise the meaning: It is so easy
Guessing from context (GC)	“This test is a <i>piece of cake</i> ”. I don’t know the meaning of the expression at all so I have to guess from the first or the next clause. “This test is a <i>piece of cake</i> . No wonder everyone score full mark.” The next clause gives a clue that everyone scores for the test which imply the characteristic of the test which is easy.
Using Literal Meaning (LM)	“When I make an image of expression, <i>to roll up his sleeves</i> , I imagine someone is getting ready to put his effort on doing something, and so I think that’s what it means.”
Referring to L1 Idioms (L1)	“ <i>Like father, like son</i> ” I understand the expression because it has almost the same meaning in Malay, my first language, in which it means children will act like their parents behaviour.
Wild Guess	“She passed with <i>flying colours</i> ”. I don’t understand the expression of flying colours and resort to guess the meaning without analysing expression in details.

(Cooper, 1999)

All of these guessing strategies except for the *wild guess* were adapted from a study done by Cooper (1999) on the processing of idioms by L2 learners. Based on the study, 28 % of the participants used *guessing from context* to comprehend the idioms and the percentage was the highest compared to the other guessing methods. 19% participants

used *guessing by using literal meaning* and a minimal percentage of 5 % of the participants *referred to L1 idioms*. 7% of the participants resorted to *using background knowledge*. In the current study, the researcher added on *wild guess* as one of the options of the guessing strategies for participants who do not apply any of the other guessing strategies while comprehending the idioms.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

This study had obtained permission from the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM) under the Division of Planning and Education Policy Research (EPRD) (see Appendix D) before conducting the research. Once the ministry has granted the permission to conduct the research, the researcher sought approval from the Johor State Department of Education (JPNJ). The researcher then proceeded to the respective school where the study was going to be conducted and sought the principal's permission and support. The *permission letters* meant for the study are presented in the Appendix section. The principal of SMK Tanjung Datuk welcomed the researcher to do the study in the school and hoped it will give good exposure to the students.

The data was collected in 2 sessions and the participants were divided into two groups. Each group comprised 30 and 28 participants respectively. Before each session, the participants were briefed on the purpose of answering the questionnaire and further explained what was required of them in order to accomplish the task. The briefing was done by the researcher herself with the assistance from one English teacher. By the end of the briefing, the participants were able to understand that they would be tested on their comprehension of idioms in context. Besides collecting data on their comprehension of

idioms, they were also able to give information on guessing strategies used while they interpreted the meaning of the idioms. During the briefing, the participants were given a sample of questions to familiarise them with the task. There were two tasks for each question that they had to complete before moving on to the next question. The clarity of the briefing and understanding of the task were crucial at the initial stage of collecting the data. This is to avoid any misunderstanding or incompleteness of task by the participants once the questionnaire was disseminated. The participants were given time to complete the task and both sessions took place for almost an hour. No specific time was allocated for the participants to answer the questionnaire as speed was not the variable for this study. Allocating time will also impose pressure to the participants and would result to merely answering without deeper analysing. Throughout both sessions, the researcher and her assistants were around to guide the participants.

The collection of data was continued with interview sessions on how participants interpret idioms in context. The six participants were selected from the scores from their previous MCQ scores. They were required to verbalize their thoughts for the researcher to get the data on idioms processing using the guessing strategies suggested. Thus, 6 participants from this study contributed their active thoughts of the process that took place while comprehending idioms. In order to see if there was any effect of proficiency in using the guessing strategies, three participants from two groups of proficiency who were proficient and less proficient were selected. There were 10 idioms used in the interview and there were selected based on the score from the questionnaire. The idioms represented four levels of idioms comprehension which are high, average, basic and inadequate. Two idioms were chosen for each level except four for inadequate level for the purpose to gain more insights about this level. In terms of its transparency, 4 were transparent and six

were opaque idioms. During the interview the participants were asked 8 questions pertaining to the strategies chosen by them.

- a. Which guessing strategies do you use to interpret this idiom?
- b. How do these guessing strategies help you to interpret the idioms?
- c. How does the context explain the meaning of the idiom?
- d. Is there a similar expression in your native language?
- e. Does the literal meaning (*maksud tersurat*) of the idiom relate to its figurative meaning (*maksud tersirat*)?
- f. Does a certain word give away the meaning of the idiom?
- g. Does the idiom remind you of something that you heard someone say before?
- h. Do you think your English proficiency affects your understanding of idioms?

Their responses were noted, analysed and compared in order to see the differences between two levels of proficiency in using guessing strategies when interpreting idioms of different difficulty level and transparency. The interview responses were analysed and discussed in the findings as supporting details to the quantitative data found in the study.

3.7 Inter- Raters

There were two inter-raters assisting the researcher in analyzing the data. The inter-raters were appointed based on their expertise in teaching English. Both were female teachers having more than six years of experience in teaching English. Both inter-raters helped to verify the scoring by the researcher for the Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) test. There were 40 questions and strategies for each question to be processed by the researcher. The inter-raters helped to check on the scoring on whether it was correctly annotated and calculated to increase the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.8 Data analysis procedure

The scores from the MCQ from the survey questionnaire were collected from the 58 participants to be scored by the researcher. The researcher did the scoring on the comprehension of the idioms and the guessing strategies chosen by the participants. The scoring was then cross-checked and verified by the two inter-raters. Next, the inter-raters wrote their comments on the scoring sheets on their findings and noted if there was any miscalculation. After that, the researcher shortlisted 6 participants for the interviews according to the scores. The first three from the highest and the lowest marks were chosen to be participants for the interview. With the scoring data gathered from the questionnaire, the researcher did the analysis to answer the two research questions. The first research question required quantitative analysis in order to know the competency of the Malaysian Form Four ESL learners in comprehending idioms.

The data percentage was calculated and the participants' competency was measured based on the scale adapted from Bloxham & Boyd's (2007) generic marking scheme for an essay. For the purpose of this study, only the scheme for knowledge and understanding was adapted because the purpose of the test was to measure the competency and the understanding of idioms among ESL learners. The percentage scores of the participants will determine their competency in general.

Table 3.7: Performance Based on the Comprehension of Idioms

Percentage	Knowledge & Understanding
80-100% AA	Demonstrates exceptional comprehension of idioms
70-79% A	Shows thorough knowledge and understanding of idioms, with evidence of reading beyond the key texts
60-69% B	Shows evidence of relevant and sound knowledge and understanding of idioms
50-59% C	Shows relevant knowledge of idioms
40-49% D	Shows basic knowledge of idioms
35-39% Fail	Signs of emerging knowledge of the idioms but insufficient for progression to level 2

The participants' correct responses and percentage of scores for each idiom in the questionnaire were also calculated and analysed. This data is important to relate with the theoretical framework and the theory of idioms processing mentioned in Chapter 2.

In answering the second research question which required the data on how the proficient and less proficient ESL learners use the guessing strategies in comprehending idioms, the researcher further analysed the guessing strategies used by these two groups of proficiency and the comparison was made. There were 5 guessing strategies that the participants could choose from and they were allowed to choose more than one if they applied more than one strategy. The participants' choices of guessing strategies were coded to see the frequency of its usage. The choice and the frequency usage of certain strategies are important for this study as it can show the common strategies used by learners and if their proficiency matters in choosing the strategies. The strategies used by proficient and less proficient were compared and analysed. It was later supported by the

interview session where six participants from 2 level of proficiency shared their thought on guessing strategies used.

3.9 Conclusion

Considering the importance of validity and reliability of the findings, the researcher has taken the required steps such as conducting a pilot study to improve the research instruments so that they will be able to measure the required data that was supposed to be measured. The appointing of inter-raters to cross-examine the scores and the participants' responses was another essential step to increase the validity of the data. Based on the methodologies used for this study, the necessary data was successfully collected and processed accordingly to answer the two research questions for this study.

University of Malaysia

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the results of the data analysis are presented. The purpose of the data analysis was to answer the two research questions for this study. Fifty-eight participants from a Form Four secondary school had participated to answer the survey questions. All of them managed to answer all the questions in the questionnaires given to them. Interview sessions were later held among six selected participants to represent the two groups of proficiency: proficient and less proficient. Once the data was successfully collected, it was then analysed by the researcher. The first step taken was the calculation of the total marks for each participant's score on their comprehension of the idioms and the guessing strategies chosen by them. For each correct interpretation, one mark was awarded. The final score was later converted into a percentage and the competency band was matched according to the score obtained by each participant.

For the questionnaire, different idioms were presented in context which were used to test the participants' comprehension of them. As the participants had different background knowledge and competency in comprehending idioms, it had affected their understanding of idioms and thus affected their choice of answers. Thus, the next step was analysing the scores gathered from the MCQ test to see how the participants responded to each idiom presented in context. The study was also to discover the strategies used by the participants to interpret the idioms in context. The results of their choices were also analysed to find out the most frequent strategy used. The study also involved investigating how proficient and less proficient participants employed the

guessing strategies and to investigate whether the low proficiency participants would always resort to *wild guesses*. All these were discovered through a thorough analysis from the data gathered from the 58 participants of this study.

4.2 Findings and analysis of the Form Four Malaysian ESL Learners' competency in comprehending idioms

Table 4.1 below shows the performance of the 58 participants in comprehending idioms based on the MCQ-test from the survey questionnaire.

Table 4.1 Performance of the Participants in Comprehending Idioms

Total number of correct answers	Number of Participants
40-35	0
34	1
33	2
32	2
31	6
30	7
29	6
27	5
25	5
24	2
23	4
22	4
21	4
20	2
19	2
18	2
17	2
16	1
11	1
10-0	0

The participants were given 40 questions on idioms inside their questionnaire. From Table 4.1 above, out of the 40 questions, no participants scored 35 and above. The highest score was 34 which was achieved by only one of the participants. The participant interpreted 6 idioms wrongly based on the choices given. The highest number of participants had scored 30 out of 40 questions with 10 mistakes committed. It was followed by 6 participants who scored 31 and 29 respectively. Eight participants had scored below 20 which meant that half of the idioms were interpreted wrongly by them. Based on the score, 50 participants scored 20 correct answers and only eight participants scored 19 and below. The participants may not score excellently for the test but they were able to demonstrate a beyond average performance.

Table 4.2 Performance of the Participants by Percentage

Percentage	Number of participants
80-100	5
70-79	19
60-69	12
50-59	14
40-48	7
39-0	1

Table 4.2 above shows the scores of the participants in percentages. Based on Table 4.2 above, most of the participants scored between 70% to 79%. There were 19 of them who scored within this range followed by 14 of them who scored between 50% to 59%. Twelve participants scored between 60% to 69% and 7 participants scored between the range of 40% to 48%. Only one participant scored below 40%. For the high percentages between 80% to 90%, only 5 participants were able to achieve these scores. Thus, it shows that very few participants can understand idioms excellently. Difficulty in understanding

idioms affected their performance in the test where most participants scored between 50 to 79 percent.

Table 4.3 The Mean Value, Population Standard Deviation, Population Variance, Sample Standard Deviation And Sample Variance

Mean (average) value	25.5
Population Standard Deviation	5.2
Population Variance	26.6
Sample standard deviation (s)	5.2
Sample variance (s)	27.0

Using the standard deviation calculator, the mean, population standard deviation, population variance, sample standard deviation and sample variance were calculated. From the results as shown in Table 4.3 above, the average value of the score among the participants was 25.5 and the population variance was 26.6. The standard deviation across the score was 5.2. This shows that the participants scored averagely in the test. Most got their correct answers 25 and above out of 40 questions. Thus, if compared to Table 4.4 below, the overall performance of the participants fell into B grade where the participants averagely showed thorough knowledge and understanding of idioms.

Table 4.4 Performance of the Participants According to Grades in the Comprehension of Idioms in Context

Percentage/grade	Knowledge & Understanding	Number of participants
80-100% (AA)	Demonstrates exceptional comprehension of idioms	5
70-79% (A)	Shows thorough knowledge and understanding of idioms, with evidence of reading beyond the key texts	19
60-69% (B)	Shows evidence of relevant and sound knowledge and understanding of idioms	12
50-59% (C)	Shows relevant knowledge of idioms	14
40-49% (D)	Shows basic knowledge of idioms	7
35-39% (Fail)	Signs of emerging knowledge of the idioms but insufficient for progression to level 2	0
Under 35% (Fail)	Shows inadequate knowledge of idioms to meet learning outcomes	1

(Adapted from Bloxham & Boyd (2007, p. 91).

The participants' scores were compared to idiom comprehension performance to see their grade of performance. Table 4.4 above further showed description of participants' performance based on the taxonomy adapted from Bloxham & Boyd (2007, p. 91). Out of the 58 participants, only 5 participants demonstrated an exceptional comprehension of idioms and obtained a grade AA. The majority of the participants comprising 19 of them, had shown thorough knowledge and understanding of idioms and obtained a grade A. Another 12 participants had shown sound knowledge and understanding of idioms and obtained a grade B. A slightly higher on the other band was 14 of them who showed relevant knowledge of idioms and obtained a grade C. A small number of 7 participants had shown basic knowledge of idioms and obtained a grade D. Meanwhile, only one showed an inadequate knowledge of idioms and failed the test.

Table 4.5 Number of Correct Responses and Percentage of Scores for Each Idiom Used in Context

Idioms used in context	Number of correct responses	Percentage of scores - %	Level of comprehension	
1. All in the mind	58	100	High	
2. Be as busy as a bee	55	95		
3. Green fingers	54	93		
4. Out of hand	53	91		
5. Break someone's heart	53	91		
6. Child's play	52	90		
7. Every Jack has his Jill	51	88		
8. Pull socks up	50	86		
9. In hot water	49	84		
10. Get out of my sight	48	83		
11. A stone's throw away	48	83		
12. Early bird catches the worm	47	81		Average
13. Look a gift horse in the mouth	46	79		
14. Take its toll	45	78		
15. Take a break	45	78		
16. Flying colours	45	78		
17. At one's fingertips	43	74		
18. Have one's hands full	42	72		
19. Let someone down	40	69		
20. Raining cats and dogs	40	69		
21. One man's meat is another man's poison	39	67		
22. An apple a day keeps the doctor away	38	66		
23. Burn a hole in your pocket	36	62		
24. Two-way street	35	60		
25. Till the cows come home	35	60		
26. Fall on deaf ears	34	59		
27. Make someone's flesh creep	33	57		
28. Over the hill	32	55		
29. See eye to eye	31	53		
30. Tie up loose ends	29	50	Basic	
31. Rub salt in a wound	28	48		
32. Skin deep	27	47		
33. Butterflies in your stomach	25	43		

Table 4.5 continued

34. Make hay while the sun shines	21	36	
35. Call it a day	21	36	Inadequate
36. Ups and downs	20	34	
37. Put under the microscope	16	28	
38. Fit as a fiddle	15	26	
39. Tighten one's belt	14	24	
40. Fair weather friend	2	3	

40 idioms were used in context in the questionnaire. Table 4.5 above shows the number of correct responses and the percentages of scores for the 40 idioms that were used in context by the participants. For each idiom, there was a different score and different participants interpreted the meanings of the idioms differently. The only idiom that was understood by all the participants was *'all in the mind'*. It was followed by *'be busy as a bee'* which was understood by 95% of the participants and only 3 out of 58 could not get the meaning correct. 53 participants scored the correct interpretation for the idioms *'break someone's heart'* and *'out of hand'*. Meanwhile, 54 participants scored it right for the idioms *'green fingers'* and *'out of hand'*. Another common idiom that was highly understood by the participants was *'child's play'* where 52 participants chose the correct interpretation. 51 participants which make 88 % out of the total participants were correct in interpreting *'every Jack has his Jill'*. It was followed by 50 participants who were correct in choosing the meaning for *'pull up your socks'*.

Closer to the previous score, 49 participants were able to figure out the meaning of the idiom *'in hot water'* and 48 of them were able to comprehend *'a stone's throw away'* and *'get out of sight'*. *'Flying colours'* on the other hand had lesser correct responses

compared to *'early bird catches the worm'* and *'look a gift horse in the mouth'* which had 45 correct responses compared to 48 and 47 correct responses from the two idioms. For an idiom that is expected to be difficult for participants like *'make someone's flesh creep'*, the number of correct responses was 33 which is 57% from the total participants. Idioms such as *'fit as a fiddle'* had only 15 correct responses even though the idiom is found to be quite common among school children. *'Fair weather friend'* had the least score with only 2 correct responses which indicates that the meaning could not be interpreted through the context that was made available.

Table 4.6 Level of Understanding for the List of Idioms

Level of understanding	Percentage in comprehending idioms	List of Idioms	Idioms Transparency
High	100-90	All in the mind	Transparent
		Busy as a bee	Transparent
		Child's play	Transparent
		Break someone's heart	Transparent
		Green fingers	Opaque
		Out of hand	Transparent
	80-90	Every Jack has his Jill	Transparent
		Get out of my sight	Transparent
		Pull up your socks	Opaque
		A stone's throw away	Opaque
		Early bird catches the worm	Opaque
		In hot water	Transparent
Average	79-70	Have one's hands full	Transparent
		Look a gift horse in the mouth	Opaque
		Put under the microscope	Transparent
		Take its toll	Opaque
		Take a break	Transparent
		Flying colours	Opaque
		At one fingertips	Transparent

Table 4.6 continued

	69-60	One man's meat is another man's poison	Opaque
		Burn a hole in your pocket	Opaque
		Let someone down	Transparent
		An apple a day keeps the doctor away	Transparent
		Raining cats and dogs	Opaque
	59-50	Two-way street	Transparent
		Till the cows come home	Transparent
		Skin deep	Transparent
		Over the hill	Opaque
		See eye to eye	Transparent
		Tie up loose end	Transparent
Basic	49-40	Butterflies in your stomach	Opaque
		Rub salt in a wound	Opaque
Inadequate	39-30	Ups and downs	Transparent
		Make hay while the sun shines	Opaque
		Call it a day	Opaque
	29-20	Tighten one belt	Opaque
		Fit as a fiddle	Opaque

Table 4.6 above shows the categorization of idioms from them being highly understood to inadequate understanding among the 58 participants for the study based on percentage scores for each idiom. Idioms listed were also categorized according to transparency as defined in Chapter 1 under definition of terms for opaque and transparency idioms. Out of the 40 idioms tested, 12 idioms were highly understood by most of the participants. *'A stone's throw away'*, *'in hot water'* and *'early bird catches the worm'* are among idioms that were easily understood by the participants. It can also be seen that 18 idioms fell into the average category of understanding. The participants had shown an average understanding when encountering these idioms. Among the idioms were *'take its toll'*, *'flying colours'* and *'raining cats and dogs'*. Most of the idioms tested

fell into the average category and it shows that the idioms used in the questionnaire were average to highly comprehensible. Only 7 idioms were hardly understood by the participants. A few idioms that were hardly understood by most of the participants were *'fit as a fiddle'*, *'tighten one's belt'*, and *'ups and downs'* despite the words comprised in the idioms could help in understanding the meaning as it can be interpreted literally. Idioms such as *'make hay while the sun shines'*, *'call it a day'*, *'tighten one's belt'* and *'fit as a fiddle'* were among the idioms that had the lowest score of correct responses and were the least understood by the participants.

The participants' understanding of idioms above has a relation to the transparency of the idioms. Opaque idioms for instance, will pose difficulty to the participants to comprehend. As defined in Chapter 1, opaque idioms refer to idioms where the figurative and literal meanings are not connected (Nippold & Duthie, 2003, p. 789). Based on the list on inadequate idioms in Table 4.6, a majority of the idioms are opaque idioms based on the definition. *'Call it a day'*, *'tighten one belt'* and *'fit as a fiddle'* are opaque idioms as the literal and figurative meanings are not related. Since the participants' first language is the Malay language, their literal interpretation might not give a clue to the figurative meaning. For instance, *'Call it a day'* if translated literally in Malay language would be *'Memanggil ia hari'*. The participants could not make any connection with the figurative meaning but had only to rely on the context given.

Boss	: My goodness! It's already 9.00 p.m. we have worked on this project for hours! Let's call it a day .
Worker	: You're right. I'm feeling tired too
1.	From the dialogue, the phrase ' call it a day ' means
	a. Have a nap
	b. Stop working
	c. Take a short break
	d. Continue working

Figure 4.1: Questionnaire No. 21

Figure 4.1 above shows the question on the idiom '*call it a day*' in the questionnaire answered by the participants. Relying on the context was the next option for the participants to decode the meaning of the idioms. The context had given cues on how the time had passed where the boss and worker had worked on their project and their conversation indicated that they should have a break. Most participants thought that '*call it a day*' means *take a short break* rather than its true meaning which means *stop working*. As the context stopped at the worker complaining of him being tired and no further indication of going home, participants inferred the meaning of this idiom either *taking a short break or having a nap*. It is shown here for the opaque idiom where the meaning is unknown to the learners, they will rely fully on the context given. The longer the context given, the more accurate an understanding on the meaning of the idiom.

The opaque idioms can be seen present in other categories of understanding too. In the high understanding idioms category, idioms such as '*green fingers*' and '*pull up your socks*' can be considered opaque based on the definition of opaque idioms in this study. In the average understanding category, '*Look a gift horse in the mouth*', '*take its toll*', '*flying colours*' and '*raining cats and dogs*' are examples of opaque idioms for this

category. *'Butterflies in my stomach'* which is in the basic understanding category is also considered as opaque. This shows that participants can still understand opaque idioms and not all opaque idioms are hard to comprehend but it must be presented with context for the learners to guess the meaning. Comparing *'pull up your socks'* and *'flying colours'*, the latter idiom was more common in usage in the English classroom.

Linda : I'm sorry mum. I know that I didn't study hard enough.
Mum: You'd better **pull up your socks**, Linda. The examination is just a month away.

Figure 4.2: Questionnaire No. 5

However, the finding from the questionnaire showed that *'pull up your socks'* was understood better. The phrase '**pull up your socks**' means Linda...

- a. Has to get a new pair of socks
- b. Must wait for the next examination
- c. Has to start working harder
- d. Must stop being active in game

Dear Raihan,

It was lovely to hear from you after such a long time. If you want to be successful, you must set goals. Moreover, you must be prepared before each lesson. This will help you achieve your goals. In addition, you must pay attention in class. Focus on what the teacher is teaching.

Well that's all for now. Hope you will pass the examination with **flying colours**.

Bye, Sam.

Figure 4.3: Questionnaire No. 33

According to the letter, the phrase 'flying colours' means

- a. Pass the exam excellently
- b. Pass the exam with mix grades
- c. Did not fail all the subjects
- d. Colourful result

Figure 4.2 and 4.3 shows '*pull up your socks*' and '*flying colours*' presented in the questionnaire. Comparing both questions, '*pull up your socks*' was presented in a clear and comprehended context. The conversation was clear where the mother reminded the daughter to start working hard for her studies. There were no ambiguous choices for the answer and the participants could guess the meaning easily. For '*flying colours*', even though the context presented was in a longer text than the previous idioms, the context however does not expand the idea of '*flying colours*'. The answer choices given were ambiguous, especially to the participants, who had no prior knowledge regarding this idiom. Thus, the participants were tricked to choose a wrong interpretation for this idiom. An important finding rose from this situation where the context plays an important role in assisting learners' comprehension of idioms. The relation between idioms and the context should be strongly connected for the learners to interpret accurately. Even for opaque and unfamiliar idioms, the learners would be able to comprehend provided they have sufficient supporting details. Besides, the choice of distractors also played an important role in influencing the ESL learners' choice of answers in the MCQ test. If the choices listed were closely linked to one another, it would cause confusion to the participants. This is happening especially to participants or learners who do not have any background knowledge of the idioms and solely depend on the context to understand the meaning. If they had previous knowledge about the idioms, the choices of answers will help them to refresh their memory or confirm their interpretation.

Table 4.7 : Participants Performance According to their Proficiency

Level of proficiency	Number of participants according to first assessment result	Number of participants according to Idioms score percentage							Total
		80-100	70-79	60-69	50-59	40-49	35-39	Below 35	
		Show exceptional comprehension of idioms	Show thorough knowledge of idioms	Relevant and sound knowledge of idioms	Show relevant knowledge of idioms	Show basic knowledge of idioms	Show sign of emerging knowledge	Show inadequate knowledge	
Proficient	36	5	19	12	0	0	0	0	36
Less Proficient	22				14	7	0	1	22

Table 4.7 above shows the performance of the 58 participants according to their proficiency. Out of the 36 proficient participants, only 5 showed an exceptional comprehension of idioms and scored between 80 to 100. 19 out of 26 proficient participants showed thorough knowledge of idioms in which the majority of them was under this band. The average score for the majority of the proficient participants was between 70-79. The remaining of 12 proficient participants showed relevant and sound knowledge of idioms and no proficient participants went beyond that band. The last score for proficient participants was between 60 to 69. Meanwhile, for the less proficient participants, 14 out of 22 participants were able to show relevant to basic knowledge of idioms. Their scores were starting from 50 to 59. Another 7 of them showed signs of emerging knowledge of idioms with the score between 35 to 39. Only one showed inadequate knowledge of idioms by scoring below 35. Based on the above finding, it is clearly shown that proficient ESL learners comprehended idioms better than the less proficient ESL learners. None from the less proficient participants scored between 100 to 60 marks where the band indicates relevant and sound knowledge of idioms in terms

of the performance. Less proficient participants were able to perform just relevant to basic understanding idioms. This proves that the performance of comprehending idioms between the two groups are different where the group with a good proficiency was at an advantage and performed better. It is also shown that learners' proficiency affect their performance when comprehending idioms.

4.3 Findings and Analysis of Malaysian Form Four ESL Learners' Guessing Strategies in Comprehending Idioms

This study also investigated the 58 Malaysian Form Four ESL learners' usage of guessing strategies in comprehending idioms between proficient and less proficient learners. The guessing strategies used for this study are *guessing from the context, relying on background knowledge or experience, using literal meaning, referring to L1 idioms and wild guessing*. The participants were asked to choose the guessing strategies that they used to interpret the idioms. The participants were allowed to choose more than one strategy if they found it necessary. The reason for this allowance is because certain idioms are being interpreted using more than one strategy depending on the participants' competency. The participants may use a combination of guessing strategies from the context and experience that they had known before to interpret the meaning of the idioms.

Table 4.8 below shows the mean and standard deviation from the analysis.

Table 4.8 Mean and Standard Deviation for Guessing Strategies

Guessing Strategies	Total	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
GC	19.38	10.781
LM	6.53	7.330
BK	6.64	6.288
L1	2.40	3.889
W	8.83	9.183

*58 participants

KEY

GC – Guessing from the context

LM - Literal meaning strategy

BK – Relying on Background Knowledge

L1 - Using L1 (first language)

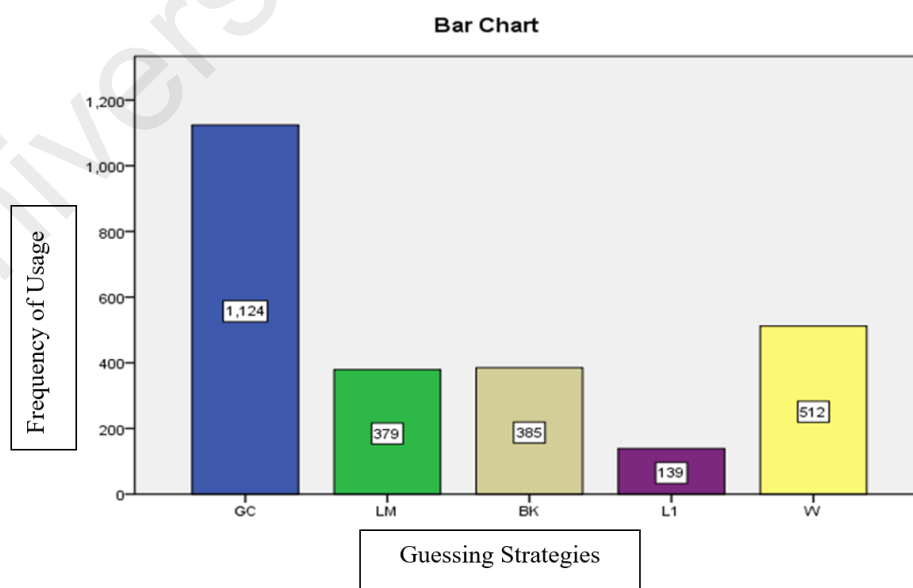
W - Wild guess

*Total GS used on all questions = 2539

Table 4.8 above displays the results of the guessing strategies used by the 58 participants. The participants used different strategies when they comprehended idioms in context. The total guessing strategies used on all questions were **2539**. If the 58 participants chose only one guessing strategy for each question, the total guessing strategies used would be 2320. With 2539 chosen guessing strategies in this study, it shows that another 219 guessing strategies were chosen by the participants to interpret the meaning of the idioms. It also shows that the participants *used more than one strategy during the process of interpreting the idioms*.

Based on Table 4.8 above, **guessing from context strategy (GC)** is the most used strategy among the 58 participants when they interpret the meaning of the idioms from the context. It has the highest mean which is 19.38 which created a huge gap between the other strategies that follow such as relying on **background knowledge (BK)**. The next guessing strategy that the participants opted for after guessing in context is **wild guessing (WG)**. Wild guessing can be seen from Table 4.8 as the second highest strategy employed by the participants. The mean difference between *guessing in context* strategy and *wild guessing* is wide which is 10.55. The third favoured guessing strategy is *using background knowledge* with 6.64 as its mean. Following closely is using the *literal meaning strategy* (LM) with an average mean of 6.53. The least chosen guessing strategy is *using L1 to interpret the meaning of idioms in context*. The average mean is only 2.40. Compared with *guessing in context*, it has created a wide mean gap which is 16.98.

Figure 4.4: Frequency of guessing strategies used by the participants



KEY

GC – Guessing from the context

LM - Literal meaning strategy

- BK** – Relying on Background Knowledge
- L1** - Using L1 (first language)
- W** - Wild guess

Figure 4.4 continued

Figure 4.4 shows the frequency of guessing strategies used by the participants in this study. Among the five strategies, *guessing in context* was the highest strategy with 1124 frequency of usage that had been employed by the participants when comprehending idioms in the questionnaire and this was followed by the *wild guessing strategy* with 512 times and *referring to background knowledge strategy* with 385 times.

Referring to *background knowledge* and *referring to literal meaning strategies* had a slightly difference in frequency between the two strategies which was differed by 6 points. The least use strategy to comprehend idioms in this study was *referring to L1* strategy and this had been used by participants for 139 times.

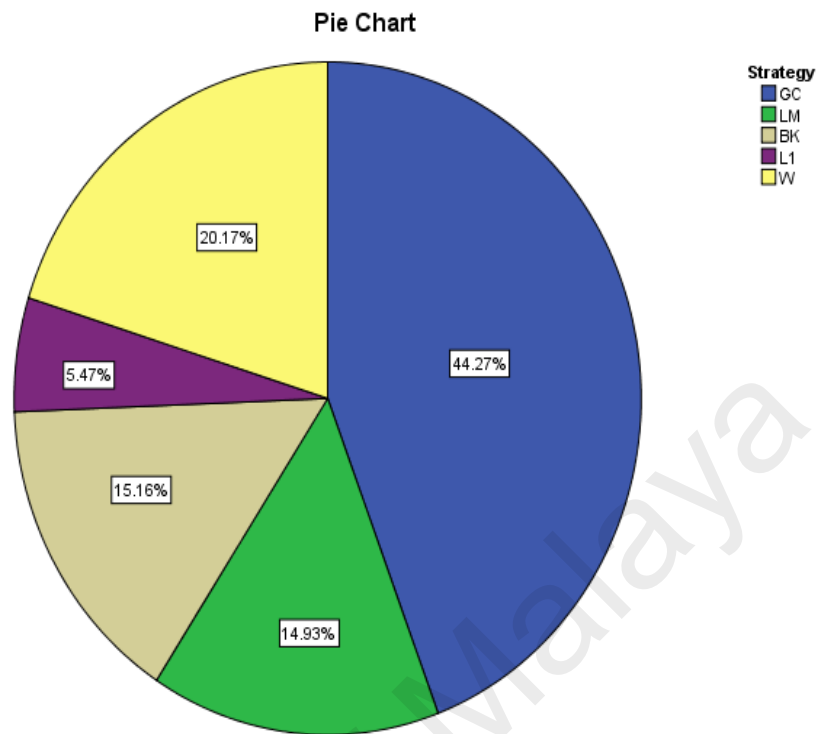


Figure 4.5 Guessing strategies used by the participants in percentages

Figure 4.5 shows the frequency in percentages used by the participants for each guessing strategy chosen by the 58 participants. *Guessing from context* was chosen 1124 times which was the **highest frequency** of strategy chosen in this study and contributed to 44.27 % from the overall guessing strategies. This strategy had been used most of the times and almost half of the guessing strategies used in this study was from *guessing in context*. Another half percent is shared by other strategies like *wild guessing* (20.17 %), using *background knowledge* (15.16%), *literal meaning* (14.93%) and *using L1* (5.47 %).

Table 4.9 Guessing Strategies According to Proficiency

Guessing Strategies	Proficient	Less proficient
Guessing from context (GC)	56%	36%
Literal Meaning (LM)	12%	23%
Background Knowledge (BK)	21%	18%
Using L1 (L1)	6 %	6%
Wild guess (W)	15%	32%

36 proficient participants and 22 less proficient participants participated in this study. According to Table 4.9, proficient participants used *guessing from context strategies* (56%) higher than less proficient participants (36%). Their good grasp of English language allows them to understand the context and relate with the idioms compared to the less proficient participants. This is supported by Cain and Towse (2008) who found that poor comprehenders of English text which was also among less proficient learners, were unable to use the available context in helping them to understand opaque and difficult idioms even though the presence of context is helpful in assisting their idioms understanding. Poor comprehenders faced difficulties in understanding idioms because during the processing they had to apply necessary skills such as inferencing and to use context as clues to the meaning and also due to their lack of vocabulary. Even though both groups of proficiency choose *guessing from context* as the most used strategy, but in terms of percentage, the percentage used by the proficient learners is higher. This is because they can use this strategy for almost all types of idioms which are either transparent or opaque. For the less proficient group, this strategy may have a limit due to the opacity and lack of vocabulary knowledge among them.

Proficient participants used their *background knowledge* (21%) to interpret the meanings of the idioms in context which is slightly higher (18%) than the less proficient

participants. *Using literal meaning and L1* were not common guessing strategies among the proficient participants which was only 12 % and 6 % respectively. This probably happened when the context provided is enough to help them to interpret the meaning of the idiom in context. Less proficient participants used *wild guessing* when interpreting idioms (32%) compared to proficient participants who used it only (15 %). They resorted to this strategy as they had no clue to comprehend the idioms and merely chose the answer from the choices given. This shows the limit faced by less proficient participants as *they did not have an adequate vocabulary* to further understand the idioms and interpret them correctly as mentioned in the previous discussion.

4.4 Findings and analysis of the six interviews

The interview was conducted on 6 participants representing the two groups of proficiency; proficient and less proficient. 3 participants were selected from each group based on their scores from the questionnaires. During the interviews, the participants were asked the following questions based on the 10 selected idioms:

- i. Which guessing strategies do you use to interpret this idiom?
- j. How do these guessing strategies help you to interpret the idioms?
- k. How does the context explain the meaning of the idiom?
- l. Is there a similar expression in your native language?
- m. Does the literal meaning (*maksud tersurat*) of the idiom relate to its figurative meaning (*maksud tersirat*)?
- n. Does a certain word give away the meaning of the idiom?
- o. Does the idiom remind you of something that you heard someone say before?
- p. Do you think your English proficiency affects your understanding of idioms?

Table 4.10: List of Idioms Chosen for the Interview

Idioms	Level of Comprehension	Level of Transparency
1. All in the mind	High	Transparent
2. Busy as a bee	High	Transparent
3. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth	Average	Opaque
4. Hands are full	Average	Transparent
5. Butterflies in my stomach	Basic	Opaque
6. Rub salt into the wound	Basic	Opaque
7. Tighten our belts	Inadequate	Opaque
8. As fit as a fiddle	Inadequate	Opaque
9. Ups and downs	Inadequate	Transparent
10. Make hay while the sun shines	Inadequate	Opaque

Table 4.10 was the list of idioms chosen as the instrument for the interviews. From the 10 idioms, 4 were transparent and another 6 were opaque idioms.

Figure 4.6 Sample of Interview Note Sheet

Idiom: All in the mind (high)/ (Transparent)				
Participant(P)		a.Which guessing strategies do you use to interpret this idiom?	b.How do these guessing strategies help you to interpret the idioms?	c.How does the context explain the meaning of the idiom?
Proficient (P)	P1	Guessing from context	Give me ideas to answer the question	The context tells me what the story is about.
	P2	Guessing from context	I refer to the dialogue. They said don't worry and everything is in your head	The characters' conversation in the context tells me the clues on the idiom from the question.
	P3	Guessing from context/ referring to background knowledge	I heard this idiom before but I'm not sure. I looked at the dialogue and study what	The context confirms my answer about the idiom

			the story was about.	
Less Proficient (LP)	P1	Guessing from context	Give me clue to answer the question	The context helps my understanding of the text.
	P2	Wild guessing	I am not sure about the strategy. I just chose what I felt was right.	I have some ideas about the dialogue
	P3	Guessing from context	Give me situation to guess the meaning.	The dialogue helped to answer the question.
Participant (P)		d. Is there a similar expression in your native language?	e. Does the literal meaning (<i>maksud tersurat</i>) of the idiom relate to its figurative meaning (<i>maksud tersirat</i>)?	f. Does a certain word give away the meaning of the idiom?
Proficient (P)	P1	Yes. <i>Semuanya di dalam minda kamu</i>	Yes.	All the words in the idioms
	P2	I think so. <i>Semua dalam fikiran</i>	Yes	All and mind
	P3	Yes. <i>Semua dalam fikiran</i>	Yes	mind
Less Proficient	P1	Yes. <i>Semua dalam akal fikiran</i>	Yes	mind
	P2	Not sure	I don't know	I think so. mind
	P3	Not sure	I'm not sure	All words.

Figure 4.6 continued

Participant (P)	g. Does the idiom remind you of something that you heard someone say before?	h. Do you think your English proficiency affect your idioms understanding?	
Proficient (P)	1	No. my friends and I don't really use idiom.	Yes. If I'm not good in English, I can't understand English text.
	2	Yes. But not very often	Yes. I can understand what the questions want if my English is good.
	3	No. My teacher doesn't teach this idiom.	Yes. I will not score if my English is weak.
Less Proficient (LP)	1	I don't know.	Yes but my English is not good so I can understand idiom a little bit.
	2	I can't remember. Probably no	I can understand English but not everything. It is important to be good in English.
	3	No. I don't read or listen to idiom a lot.	I think so. If I'm good in English, I can answer all idioms correct.

The interviews were conducted with the selected 6 participants and the information was noted in the interview note sheet as shown in Figure 4.6. The researcher probed the interviewees with questions designated for this study and gave some moments for the participants to think and respond to the questions. Below are the findings from the data gathered.

Interview Question 1: Which guessing strategies did you use to interpret this idiom?

Interview Question 2: How do these guessing strategies help you to interpret the idioms?

Based on the interviews conducted, most of the participants whether proficient or less proficient were using *guessing in context* when interpreting the ten idioms as listed in Table 4.10. The participants also used *literal translation* when they wanted to understand the context. One participant from the less proficient group told that if he could not understand the literal meaning of the text, he could not understand the context and was thus unable to understand the meaning of the idioms. This was supported by a proficient participant that he could process the meaning of the context because he can understand the literal meaning of the idiom. This shows that vocabulary plays a significant role in helping the ESL learners to understand context which relates to understanding the idiom.

In the second interview question, they were asked how *guessing from context* helped them to understand the idioms. One participant from the proficient group responded that the context or text presented with the idioms helped her to guess the meaning of the idioms. This is illustrated in the sample question shown in Figure 4.7 below.

Shamsiah : How do you keep yourself so slim, Siti?
Siti : I exercise regularly. Why don't you join me?
Shamsiah : I'd love too but I'm **busy as a bee** with family and work.

Figure 4.7 Interview Idiom 2

According to the information in the dialogue,

- a. Siti rarely exercises.
- b. Shamsiah is jealous of Siti.
- c. Shamsiah has a busy lifestyle.
- d. Siti enjoys working with Shamsiah

The participant told that ‘*busy as a bee with family and work*’ gave her the clue that the person was busy handling both responsibilities. The first part of the conversation did not give enough hints before the part when the ‘family and work’ is mentioned.

Although Saran was very well prepared for the public speaking competition, he did not speak with confidence. When asked the reason for his poor performance, Saran said that when his name was called out, he became nervous. “There were **butterflies in my stomach** and I began to stammer and stutter,” he...

Figure 4.8 Interview Idiom 3

In Figure 4.8, the context of competition, confidence level and sign of anxiety such as ‘stammer’ and ‘stutter’ helped most of the participants to guess the meaning of the idiom. However, one participant from the less proficient group said that the word ‘stammer’ and ‘stutter’ interrupted his interpretation as he could not understand their meaning but by relying on other clues in the beginning of the text such as ‘did not speak with confidence’ and ‘he became nervous’, he was able to guess the meaning of the idiom. This shows that the contextual clues should be made available throughout the text to assist ESL learners’ understanding of idioms.

This is a good day to finish our job. We will never know the weather for tomorrow. **Let’s make hay while the sun shines.**

Figure 4.9 Interview Idiom 9

The saying advises us to

- a. seek shelter from the sunshine
- b. finish our work in the daytime
- c. make good use of opportunities
- d. use solar power as often as possible

For the idiom ‘*Make hay while the sun shines*’ as shown in Figure 4.9, none of the participants from the less proficient group were able to interpret the meaning of the idiom correctly and only 1 from the proficient group answered it right. Most of them used the *wild guessing strategy* alongside to *referring to literal meaning*. This is because the word ‘hay’ is not in their common use of vocabulary and thus they cannot understand the complete literal meaning of the idiom. Even with the brief context, it should be sufficient for the participants to guess the meaning of the idioms correctly. However, the participants reported that the answer choices of ‘B’ and ‘C’ gave them a hard time to choose which one was the most accurate meaning. The researcher asked whether they had a previous background knowledge on this idiom. Only 2 of them had encountered the idiom before and needed a hint to recall the meaning which they were able to retrieve from the context.

Interview Question 3: How does the context explain the meaning of the idiom?

Interview Question 6: Do certain words/ phrases give away the meaning of the idiom?

All the participants agreed that context helped them to understand the meaning of idioms by giving them ideas of the meaning of the idioms. The context gave them clues to understand the idioms. One of them responded that context helps to confirm the meaning of idioms that was recalled by background knowledge. The difference between the proficient and less proficient participants with regards of how context helped them was context enabled them to explain the meaning to the proficient ESL learners better than the less proficient ESL learners. This is due to the limitation of their vocabulary knowledge. Contextual clues are made of phrases that require the learners’ understanding.

It helps to expand the ideas of what the text is about or in this case is the idiom. Even the context can assist learners' comprehension of idioms, and limitation of vocabulary knowledge may hinder learners from using this strategy.

Referring to interview question 6, all the participants responded that certain words give away the meaning of the idioms. These words or phrases function like clues especially to less proficient learners in a situation where they cannot fully understand all the words in the questions.

Elisa	: Mum, I'm already 16 years old, aren't I?
Mother	: Yes, why do you need to confirm that? The calendar cannot be wrong and you just celebrated your birthday.
Elisa	: Look what Uncle John bought for me from his trip to London- a Kitty doll! It is more suitable for a six-year old, not a 16-years-old teenager!
Mother	: In his eyes, you'll always be a small girl. Anyway, accept and keep it with a good grace. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. It was given with good loving thought.
Elisa	: Mum you're right. It would be disrespectful of me to reject it.

Figure 4.10 Interview Idiom 10

In Figure 4.10, all the participants from the proficient group found the phrases '*given with good loving thought*' and '*disrespectful of me*' were the give-away phrases that helped them to comprehend the idioms. Two of them even added that '*accept and keep it*' were also the keywords. For the less proficient group only 1 participant was able to

notice the keywords and another two participants could not identify the keywords in the text. Out of the 6 participants, only 2 participants from the less proficient group were unable to get the meaning correctly. The give-away phrase or keywords are similar to the context where it gives clues and ideas of what the idiom is about. When the learners were unable to identify the keywords in the text, they were missing out one strategy of guessing the meaning of the idioms. Keywords in the text can also reaffirm their interpretation by functioning as evidence.

Interview Question 4: Is there a similar expression in your native language?

Interview Question 5: Does the literal meaning (*maksud tersurat*) of the idiom relate to its figurative meaning (*maksud tersirat*)?

Based on Interview question 4, all the participants stated that the idioms were not similar to their native language. Thus, they did not use this strategy as their guessing strategy and explained the reason behind the lowest score for this type of guessing strategy used in the MCQ test among all the participants.

Whereby for question 5, there were positive responses on the relation between the literal meaning and the figurative meaning of the idioms by 3 participants. '*All in the mind*' and '*ups and downs*' were literally and figuratively related compared to other idioms such as '*as fit as a fiddle*', '*rub salt in the wounds*' and '*butterflies in the stomach*'. The participants agreed that these types of idioms are easily understood compared to the ones that have no relation of their literal and figurative meanings. This explains that transparent idioms are easier and more comprehensible compared to opaque idioms.

Interview Question 7: Does the idiom remind you of something that you heard someone say before?

Interview Question 8: Do you think your English proficiency affects your understanding of idioms?

Referring to interview question 7, different participants had different idioms that they had heard before. Comparing both groups, the proficient group participants had heard on average 5 out of the 10 idioms compared to 3 among the less proficient group from the interview. The common idioms heard by both groups were '*butterflies in my stomach*', '*busy as a bee*' and '*as fit as a fiddle*'. They had heard about these idioms either in their class or while reading an English text.

For question 8, all the participants strongly agreed that their English proficiency affected their understanding of idioms because the idioms were in English which is not their native language. For the proficient participants, being proficient helped them to understand idioms and the context presented. They could identify where an idiom is in a sentence and were able to understand it literally. As the question on idioms have choices of answers, they can omit any illogical answer and focus on the real meaning. For the less proficient participants, they wished to have a better English proficiency because they admitted it was a struggle to complete the exercise. By having a good proficiency in English, it enables them to fully understand the whole text and not only the idioms. One of the participants said that he was not aware that the phrase is an idiom and thus understand it literally. This finding shows that proficiency affects the understanding of idioms among ESL learners or any learner who does not share the common language of the idioms. In relation to this study, being proficient in English plays a vital role to ESL

learners to improve their comprehension of idioms. It poses a great challenge for the less proficient ESL learners to comprehend idioms because of their figurative meaning.

In conclusion, the interview sessions were able to highlight a few important points on the comprehension of idioms and the guessing strategies. Firstly, *guessing from context* is a useful strategy for both the groups regardless of their proficiency to comprehend idioms. This is because *context* gives clues and cues of the idioms. It is supported by a study by Levorato and Cacciari (1989) that found participants answered the idioms with context better when compared to the idioms given by literal meaning and those with no context at all. It proves that context helps to facilitate learners' idiom comprehension most of the time.

Secondly, context helps to give cues and provide keywords to the learners. It must be sufficient to help them to reach the intended meaning. It is true that a longer text provides more information. This is supported by Leung's (2011) study that found that learners spend a longer time on idioms presented in a shorter context because of the limited information compared to a longer text. As long as the context presented is sufficient for the learners to comprehend the idioms, the length of the text will cause a huge difference.

Finally, the level of English proficiency affects ESL learners' ability to comprehend idioms. The less proficient learners realised the importance of having sufficient vocabulary in English will help them to comprehend idioms better. This is supported by a study by Cain, Oakhill and Lemmon, (2005), that poor and good comprehenders do not

differ so much when interpreting transparent idioms presented in context; however, for poor comprehenders, they performed significantly worse when they have to interpret opaque idioms using the context given. For transparent idioms such as *'busy as bee'*, *'all in the minds'* and *'in hot water'*, learners can use literal meaning to guess the meaning of the idioms. However for opaque idioms where the literal and figurative meaning is not related, learners may have difficulty to understand the meaning of the idioms. They have to use their vocabulary knowledge to relate the literal meaning with the context and the writer's intended meaning. For less proficient learners, their vocabulary knowledge is not sufficient enough to assist them throughout the comprehension process of the idioms.

4.5 Discussion

4.5.1 RESEARCH QUESTION 1: What is the Malaysian Form Four ESL learners' competency in comprehending idioms?

Based on the findings from the MCQ-test of survey questionnaire, Malaysian form four learners according to this study are able to show evidence of relevant and sound knowledge and understanding of idioms. Based on the results, only 5 participants were able to perform excellently with a score of above 80 percent whereby 45 participants performed between 50 to 79 percent which was more than half from the overall participants. There are many factors contributing to this average performance. Firstly, being an ESL learner already poses a challenge as English is not the native language of the participants. They had to dwell with two obstacles; language barrier and figurative language. When ESL learners process comprehension other than their native language, factors such as interference might happen. This is in line with what had been mentioned by Gass and Selinker (2008, as cited in Banjar, 2014), that interference will occur between L1 and L2 during the acquisition of L2 where L1 gives an effect to the L2 performance. In this case, the ESL learners' first language, which is Malay, affects their English

performance; specifically, in the comprehension of idioms. They will literally comprehend the task in their first language before deciding on the next step. When they cannot comprehend the task in their first language, it affects the process of their understanding. Another problem will occur if their interpretation in the first language is wrong. It is in line with Levorato and Cacciari (1995) who suggested that poorer performance among children was due to children's tendency to interpret language literally, word- by- word processing and a delay in pragmatic language skills. They are not able to differentiate between what was read or spoken and the intended meaning and in perceiving the meanings of words on the surface basis without making a connection with their underlying meaning.

The compositionality of the idioms which refers to the relationship between idiom constituents and their meaning does affect participants' understanding of idiom in this study. It can be seen from the finding, that the participants encountered the difficulty when interpreting meaning of idioms due to its compositionality. From the finding, 'fair weather friend' has the most incorrect responses compared to 'All in the mind' where all participants guessed the idiom correctly. 'Fair weather friend' is considered non compositional idiom because one cannot infer from the constituents. 'Fair weather' that indicates moderate temperature whereby 'friend' is someone we rely to. The participants unable to connect the meaning of the constituents and result to incorrect interpretation. On the other hand, the constituents in 'all in the mind' gave the participants clue that everything is in their head as the word 'mind' is related to thinking which is 'brain' or head'. Another idiom that showed non-compositional in the study is 'tighten one's belt' as it got the second lowest of correct response in the study. It is non-compositional to the participants as they could not relate tightening one's belt with its figurative meaning. Based on the finding, the compositionality of the idioms affects learners understanding

of idioms as it involves processing the constituents of the idioms in deriving the intended meaning.

The average performance of ESL learners can also be explained using the GEM Theoretical framework. According to this framework, figurative competence is developed according to phases. In phase one which is from zero to seven years old, children have difficulty in comprehending idioms and they will interpret idioms word-by-word as they interpret other non-idiomatic words. Meanwhile in phase two that involves children between eight and nine years old, children start searching for the clues that could lead to a non-literal interpretation of the linguistic input. Children could perceive the incongruity of the literal interpretation of an idiom string when the contextual information supports the idiomatic interpretation (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995). Since this framework is suitable for development of figurative competence among native speakers, the age factor may not be applicable to ESL development of figurative competence in their second language because their exposure to English is varied and the children have officially started to learn English at six years old in pre-school. Exception however can be made to children who are brought up in a background of English speaking families but it is not on a big scale; especially, to the selected participants for this study. In this study, the participants mostly underwent phase one and two interchangeably. There were times when they interpreted the idioms word-by-word or used cues in the idioms or in context to help them with the interpretation. For proficient participants, they may not use word-by-word interpreting strategy as frequently as the less proficient participants. They referred to the cues often as they know that idioms are always being understood beyond their literal interpretation. This is proven based on their results where the proficient group scored better than the less proficient group. If proficient participants only rely too much

on word-by-word or the literal meaning strategy without considering the cues from the context, they may not get a good score.

The less proficient participants performed weaker than the proficient group probably due to the technique described in phase one; interpret idioms in a literal way. Nevertheless, the problem sometimes existed even when they had moved beyond the literal interpretation and started to find the cues. Their next obstacle is to connect the cues with the context given with a limited language ability which can also cause misinterpretation of the meaning of the idioms given.

Hence, learners' comprehension of idioms in this study can be explained through a semantic analysis or inference from context as proposed by the GEM model (Levorato & Cacciari (1992) as cited in Frustee-Herrmann (2008). A semantic analysis is accomplished only when the constituents in the idioms are understood individually to create a local coherence and it is normally applicable for transparent idioms. When local coherence is achieved, learners would be able to connect the ideas to generate global coherence. They need to form a logical semantic representation from the constituents and exploit the context where idioms are presented before integrating and comparing with the writers' intention of idiomatic expressions. Global coherence is achieved when learners could correspond the meaning of constituents with their figurative meaning or use the context available to interpret the figurative meaning especially for unknown idioms and opaque idioms. Thus, it can be concluded that for idioms that were not accurately interpreted, learners were unable to achieve a global coherence where they were unable to correspond the meaning of the constituents and their figurative meaning. Their

semantic analysis was interrupted either by the meaning of the constituents or from the context available to comprehend idioms.

The semantic analysis using GEM can be illustrated using this question from questionnaire MCQ – Test.

Dear Raihan,

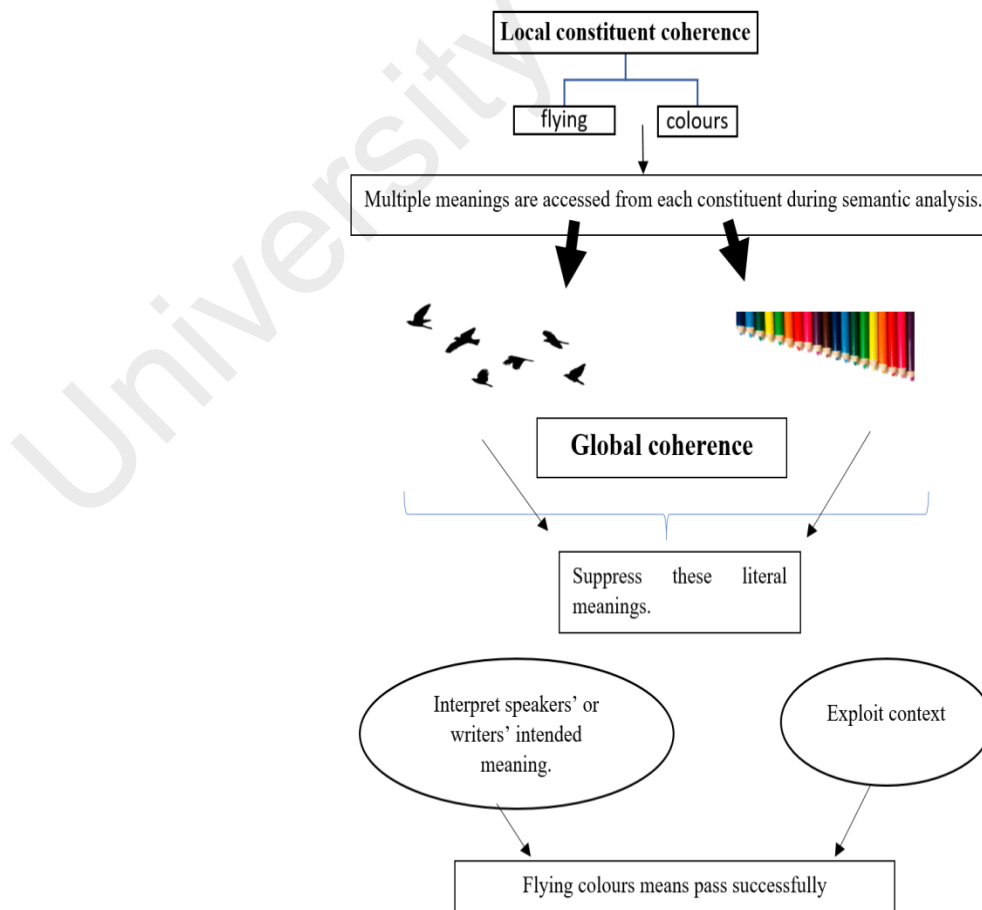
It was lovely to hear from you after such a long time. If you want to be successful, you must set goals. Moreover, you must be prepared before each lesson. This will help you achieve your goals. In addition, you must pay attention in class. Focus on what the teacher is teaching.

Well that’s all for now. Hope you will pass the examination with **flying colours**.

Bye,

Sam.

Figure 4.11 GEM Illustration from Sample Questionnaire



Learners who were able to interpret the meanings of idioms were able to achieve a global coherence as they were able to suppress the literal meaning in the constituents. They interpreted according to the writer's intended meaning and exploiting the available context to reach the final meaning. For learners who were unable to interpret this idiom correctly, their stages of semantic analysis must be interrupted either because they did not suppress the literal meaning or did not correspond with the writer's intended meaning and context.

In conclusion, ESL learners' competency is averagely competent and can be improved by being aware of the process that takes place during idiom processing.

4.5.2 RESEARCH QUESTION 2: How do the proficient and less proficient learners use guessing strategies in comprehending idioms?

Based on the findings from this study, proficient and less proficient ESL learners used the *guessing from context strategy* the most compared to the other guessing strategies. This is similar to Cooper's (1999) study investigating what kinds of strategies the non-native speakers employed to comprehend idioms. The results showed that non-native speakers used the *guessing from the context strategy* the most. Participants in this study who were also non-native speakers highly preferred to use *guessing from context* because idioms have to be understood figuratively to reach their intended meaning. The *context available* helps learners to guess the meaning by providing semantic information from which learners can infer and extract from the expressions (Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2005, p. 67). Furthermore, it is also proven through this study. As stated by Cacciari and

Levorato (1989), context provides key to the appropriate meaning and give awareness to the readers that relationship between meaning and the surface form is different from literal interpretation. Thus it can be seen from the study that questions with sufficient context helps learners to comprehend idioms better and this is supported by a study by Gholamreza, Saeed and Mansoor (2012) on the effect of context in idioms processing strategies where it revealed that *context* played an important impact on the strategies applied in processing the unfamiliar idioms. Learners tend to opt for a strategy that can give them more cues or keywords and hence *guessing from context strategy* is the best strategy that fits into this characteristic. Proficient and less proficient ESL learners in this study used the cues in the text to help them to decode the meaning. The percentage of using the *guessing from context strategy* by the proficient ESL learners is higher than the less proficient ESL learners due to their limitation of vocabulary knowledge or the ability to complete a semantic analysis as described in the explanation in RQ 1. Less proficient ESL learners probably had difficulty in suppressing the literal meaning or failed to notice the intended meaning of the text and that hinders them to use this strategy successfully. For proficient ESL learners, they were able to use their *background knowledge strategy* to support their *guessing from context strategy*. As their proficiency is developed through a lot of exposure on English texts, the possibility of encountering idioms during their reading is also high. The *background knowledge* of idioms helped the ESL learners to recall and confirm their interpretation of idioms. However for the less proficient ESL learners, they did not have enough prior knowledge to help them with idiom interpretation and that is the reason they preferred to use *guessing from context strategy* to understand the idioms. The second preferable strategy among the less proficient is *wild guessing* where they choose the answer without analysing the context. This is the option when the learners had difficulty to analyse the cues or keywords in the context. They were unable to complete the semantic analysis or achieve global coherence

as stated in the GEM. From the discussion above, it demonstrates that the presence of context helps all levels of learners. As suggested by Fatemeh (2013), the context in story is better compared to context in the sentence because more information can be activated in the schemata. Nonetheless, the length of the context must contribute to the comprehension of the idioms or else the length will lose its function. The vocabulary used in the context affects the least proficient learners. It can be demonstrated in this sample, “...There were butterflies in my stomach and I began to stammer and stutter”. During the interview, the least proficient participant responded that the word ‘stammer and stutter’ interrupted his understanding as he could not understand the meaning of those words. Thus, it shows that even context helps in assisting comprehension, it should also be presented in a manner that can be easily understood by the learners in which it has to rely on their level of proficiency. The word choice should be taken into consideration when forming context for idiom comprehension. Furthermore, it also comes back to the purpose of exercise or when testing the learners. The vocabulary used in the context can be a distractor to learner’s comprehension in determining the difficulty of question. In this study, the context is presented in a dialogue or story to give participants more clues to guess from. The vocabulary used in the context is suited with their age level as it was taken from reference books meant for their level. However, it is understandable that some participants may not have acquired the targeted level of proficiency and thus it is worth to investigate how they go about when comprehending idioms with limited vocabulary in hand.

4.6 Conclusion

Based on the findings and analysis discussed above, Malaysian ESL learners were able to demonstrate an average performance in the comprehending of idioms and few had made an exceptional progress. Throughout the process of comprehending, they had used guessing strategies that could help them to interpret the meaning of the idioms. They were able to use the context in the text and the literal meaning to support their answers. By using the right strategies such as *guessing from the context*, *referring to background knowledge* and *using literal meaning* can help them to understand the intended meanings of the idioms. However, if they resorted to **wild guessing** where they choose an answer without applying any analytical strategies, their interpretations will most probably be incorrect. This was shown when the *wild guessing strategy* was used highly among the less proficient ESL learners compared to the more proficient ESL learners. Therefore, learners' ability to use guessing strategies does affect their idiom comprehension performance and should not be taken lightly.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the findings of the study were presented, analysed and discussed. This final chapter summarises the main findings and provides a discussion of the main findings of the study for the two research questions. Therefore, the outline of this section will be as follows. The first section presents a summary of the findings. The next section discusses the implications based on the findings of the present study. This is subsequently followed by recommendations for future research.

5.2 Summary of the findings

There were two research questions investigated in this study. The data was collected using a MCQ-test survey questionnaire and interviews. 58 participants aged 16 years old underwent the MCQ-test survey questionnaire. 36 of them were proficient and another 22 were less proficient in their English and they were chosen according to their first assessment which was done in the early part of the year. They were categorized as proficient and less proficient ESL learners because this study investigated how both groups used guessing strategies in comprehending idioms as well as to compare whether their English language performance affects their idiom comprehension test. Six of them were also chosen from the MCQ-test scores for the interview sessions.

5.2.1 Research Question 1: What is the Malaysian Form four learners' competency in comprehending idioms?

Findings from the research had shown that Malaysian ESL learners according to this study were averagely competent in comprehending idioms. They showed evidence of relevant and sound knowledge and understanding of idioms based on the taxonomy adapted from Bloxham & Boyd (2007, p. 91) for their performance in answering the MCQ-test questionnaire on idioms. They had shown their understanding of idioms by choosing the best interpretation of idioms in the MCQ test provided. Out of the 58 participants, 45 participants scored between 50 to 79 percent. Only 5 participants demonstrated an exceptional comprehension of idioms with a score of 80 and above. 7 participants showed a basic understanding and they were from the less proficient group. Nevertheless, only one showed an inadequate knowledge of idioms. It is important to note that the 58 participants were from two groups of proficiency; proficient and less proficient. As predicted, the proficient learners which comprised 36 of them scored higher than the less proficient participants in the MCQ test. They performed better due to their English language proficiency that helped them to apply the necessary guessing strategies to comprehend the idioms.

Meanwhile according to the GEM Developmental Phases of Figurative Competence by Levorato and Cacciari (1995) the participants in this study should be in phase 4 according to their age where their conventional repertoire of figurative expressions is almost achieved and the developmental gap between idiom comprehension and

production is reduced. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, the participants in this study are non-native speakers and their phase cannot be determined according to their age. Based on the score by the participants, their competency was between phase 1 and 3. In phase 1 the processing of idioms is based on word-by-word strategy that leads them to comprehend in a literal way and in phase 2 they start searching for the clues that could lead to a non-literal interpretation of the linguistic input. These two phases were frequently experienced by the less proficient participants as well as by the few proficient learners. In phase 3, a gap between the almost reached ability to comprehend idioms and a still incomplete ability to produce them is evident in this phase. Phase 2 and 3 is more compatible to describe the proficient participants in this study. It can be seen from the performance of the proficient learners where 5 of them showed an exceptional comprehension of idioms and another 19 of them showed a thorough knowledge of them.

The process of interpreting idioms among learners was described using a semantic analysis by the GEM framework where learners must achieve a global coherence in order to reach the correct meaning of idioms. After they understood the words in the constituents.

5.2.2 Research Question 2: How do the proficient and less proficient learners use guessing strategies in comprehending idioms?

The investigation of guessing strategies used in this study were adapted from Cooper (1999). There were five guessing strategies adapted which were *guessing from the context* (GC), *referring to background knowledge* (BK), *using literal meaning* (LM), *referring to L1* and *wild guessing* (w). Based on the findings from this study, the proficient and less proficient ESL learners used the *guessing from context strategy* the most compared to the other strategies. The context available helps learners to guess the meaning by providing

semantic information from which learners can infer and extract from the expressions (Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2005, p. 67). The learners used context by looking for keywords and cues to comprehend the idioms. Responses from the interviews also highlighted how the keywords helped them to relate the idioms with the possible meanings. They used the available cues and keywords to help them guess the meaning of the idioms. This finding is similar to Gholamreza, Saeed and Mansoor's (2012) study on the effect of context in the processing strategies of idioms where it revealed that context had an important impact on the strategies applied in the processing of unfamiliar idioms. The ESL Learners opted for guessing strategies that can give them more cues or keywords and hence *guessing from context strategy* is the best strategy. Proficient and less proficient ESL learners in this study used the cues in the text to help them to decode the meaning. The percentage of using *guessing from context* is higher than the less proficient ESL learners due to their limitation of vocabulary knowledge or the ability to complete a semantic analysis.

The process of interpreting idioms among learners was described using a semantic analysis by the GEM framework and it is related to how learners used guessing strategies when comprehending idioms. Through this framework, there are few strategies that were combined in order to achieve the intended meaning of the idioms. Firstly, learners have to understand the local constituents comprised in the idioms. This is when the first guessing strategy took place which is *using the literal meaning*. The literal meaning can give them cues on the meaning of idioms depending on its opacity. For transparent idioms, the literal meaning might give away a lot of cues, whereby if it is an opaque idiom, there are limited cues available and thus the learners had to move on to the next stage of analysis which is to suppress the literal meaning of the constituents and start to

look at the context and the writer's intended meaning. This is the stage where the learners used another guessing strategy which was *guessing from the context*. The learners were able to achieve the global coherence once they were able to come to the right meaning of the idioms. What differed between the proficient and less proficient ESL learners is that the less proficient ESL learners probably had difficulty to suppress the literal meaning or failed to notice the intended meaning of the text and that hindered them to use this strategy successfully. According to the interview responses, the participants admitted that they could not understand a few key words in the context available and thus this interrupted the process of their interpretation of the idioms given.

Furthermore, for proficient learners, they were able to *use their background knowledge* strategy to support their *guessing from context* strategy. They had an advantage of their prior knowledge of idioms due to a lot of exposure on English texts. The background knowledge of idioms helped the ESL learners to recall and confirm their interpretation of idioms. However, for the less proficient learners, they did not have enough prior knowledge to help them with idiom interpretation and that can be the reason they preferred to use *guessing from the context strategy* to understand idioms. The second preferable strategy among the less proficient is *wild guessing* where they choose the answer without analysing the context. This probably happened because they did not have any background knowledge on the idioms asked and their limited vocabulary hindered them from further understanding the idioms. Leaving no option left, they chose to wild guess the meaning. They would be able to understand the idioms by providing context that used vocabulary within their level of proficiency. As idioms itself are difficult to be interpreted, the context accompanying it should not be a burdensome to the learners. They should focus in making meaning of idioms by relating it to the context given. If they

unable to make the connection, that is when they will fail to comprehend correctly or opt for Wild guessing strategy. *Referring to LI* was the least used guessing strategy among the participants and most of the idioms chosen do not share any similarities with their Malay language idioms.

To sum up, the competency of the ESL learners in this study was related to how the guessing strategies were executed. Any strategy except for the *wild guessing* strategy can be used and incorporated to comprehend the meaning of idioms. Hence, it is important to look at the processing of idioms because that is where the problems of misinterpretation of meaning normally occur. Learners will understand the context given when the lexical used is in their vocabulary list. Using word or cues that are comprehensible to them indeed can assist their understanding of the context presented. In examination, context is always presence in giving extra information for the learners to comprehend figurative language. The context given is none other to help assisting learners regardless of their proficiency in answering questions. Nevertheless, the nature of idioms or any figurative language always requires more than literal interpretation, hence poses challenge to the learners. The examination setter may consider this situation by accompanying context as informative as possible and including common and familiar vocabulary in forming the question related to idioms or any figurative language. The vocabulary used in forming contextual clues does not have to be difficult as learners themselves are facing obstacles to make meaning of the idioms.

5.3 Implications of the study

The study implicates the field of language learning and assessment as it may have filled the gap to the current knowledge of the use of guessing strategies among ESL learners in comprehending idioms. A lot of studies have been done on this matter but mostly on EFL learners. It is a good addition to the research to see how the other side of learners comprehend idioms and use the guessing strategies. This study will benefit English teachers specifically when teaching idioms to their learners. It raises their awareness of the processes that take place while learners are comprehending idioms. Some learners are not aware that they are using strategies when comprehending idioms. Hence this study brought up the topic of guessing strategies to raise an awareness of the guessing strategies in comprehending idioms exists and needs to be explored. Teachers must be aware of these guessing strategies in comprehending idioms and educate their learners about them. It will benefit the ESL learners in the long run as they will encounter a lot of idioms in their life. ESL learners are merely exposed to reading comprehension strategies but less focus is given on idiom comprehension strategies. It requires the extension of basic comprehension strategies as it involves figurative meaning.

All in all, the finding had shown that Malaysian ESL learners use *guessing from context* strategy the most compared to other strategy such as using background knowledge or literal meaning. Regardless of their proficiency, they opted for guessing from context when they interpret meaning of idioms. This shows that Malaysian ESL learners are adopting a good strategy when understanding figurative language such as idiom. The effectiveness of this strategy is depending on their vocabulary knowledge or their linguistic proficiency. Thus it is important to improve ESL learners vocabulary list as it is fundamental for any type of comprehension.

5.4 Recommendations from study

The present study has identified that ESL learners' competence in understanding idioms are at an average level and hence it requires more attention by teachers during their English lessons. There should be a place in the syllabus for idioms and the comprehension strategies should be taught to all ESL learners. If the ESL learners are exposed to idioms at a very young age and also with ways to comprehend them, their competency of comprehending figurative language can be improved. It is important to note that teaching idioms in isolation does not help as much as compared to when they are taught in context. In real life, idioms are used in context and rarely on their own. With a huge number of English idioms, it is impossible for teachers to teach all the idioms. Thus teaching ESL learners strategies such as *guessing from the context* and *using the literal meaning* might help them in the long run. Teachers can incorporate idioms when teaching other language skills such as speaking and writing to widen their exposure to the figurative language in English. However, teachers must remember that competency in the comprehension of idioms is related to ESL learners' language proficiency. Without a good English proficiency, ESL learners will struggle to understand idioms because they require sufficient vocabulary to infer the meaning of idioms when they are presented in context. In a nutshell, while we are striving for a good English proficiency among students in Malaysia, it will be a wise step to add on towards the figurative competence as well.

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