

University of Baghdad

# **ASSESSING EFL STUDENTS' CULTURAL AWARENESS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

A THESIS

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بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ (١) خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ (٢)  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The ability to understand and produce culture-bound idiomatic expressions is one of the main distinctive features that characterize English native speakers. These culture-bound idiomatic expressions are evidently lacking in EFL students' language. The main reason behind this assumption is the general tendency of culture-bound idiomatic expressions to be "semantically non-transparent".

It is believed that the process of teaching and learning these culture-bound idiomatic expressions represent a demanding task for the EFL teachers and learners. However, it is quite evident that they form such an integral and authentic part of the whole body of English language that is certainly worthy of learning.

In this study, the researcher assesses the status of Iraqi EFL students' awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expressions in English. This aim has been achieved by submitting a sample of 130 students to a test of 20 items of culture-bound idiomatic expressions. Test face validity and reliability coefficient are achieved and calculated.

The results of the test showed a considerable lack of awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expressions. The study findings led to the conclusion that the cultural element in language teaching and learning is such an effective area that needs to be emphasized and

that the EFL curriculum should provide an understanding of culture-bound idiomatic expressions in EFL education. The researcher uses the research findings of the study as a basis for a set of suggestions and recommendations in the field of English language teaching.

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### *Key to Abbreviations and Symbols*

- ELT English Language Teaching
- EFL English as a Foreign Language
- ed (s) editors
- et al. and many others
- FL Foreign language
- ibid. from same source
- L1 First Language
- L2 Second Language
- OED Oxford English Dictionary
- TGG Transformational Generative Grammar
- TL The target language
- Vs. versus
- \* grammatically unacceptable

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## ***Introduction***

## ***1.1 The Problem and its Significance***

The term culture-bound idiomatic expressions refers to those idiomatic expressions whose understanding and production presuppose the acquisition of such cultural knowledge that provides the contextual meaning of each expression (Bolt, 2003: internet pages). The ability to understand and produce these culture-bound idiomatic expressions is one of the main distinctive features that characterize English native speakers and is unfortunately lacking in EFL students' language (Dixson, 1951:3). The main reason behind this fact is the general tendency of culture-bound idiomatic expressions to be "semantically non-transparent" (i.e. the meaning cannot be inferred from the constituent parts of the idiomatic expression).

Professional insights provided by experienced EFL teachers from the Iraqi universities as well as research findings from studies dealing with the same issue in Iraqi colleges have confirmed the significance and seriousness of this problematic issue (Al Haddad, 1994, and Al Batiana, 2002).

It is a fact that learning these culture-bound idiomatic expressions represents such a demanding task on the part of the EFL curriculumists, teachers, and learners (Dixson, 1994:5). However, it is quite evident that they form such an integral and authentic part of the whole body of English language that is certainly worthy of learning,

for the fact that they are most functional and are characterized by frequency, popularity and compactness.

Research studies conducted in this area revealed a general tendency among EFL students to transfer idiomatic expressions of their own mother tongue to English in an attempt to provide for communicative ends that their linguistic means fall short to achieve (Mahmoud ,2002 : internet pages) .This strategy, which in most cases would result in what is termed as “cross-cultural miscommunication”, is part of a considerably important issue, tackled by contrastive analysts, termed as “interlingual transfer” (Fisiak, 1981:63). The term interligual transfer that was first introduced by Selinker (1972, as cited in James, 1980:40) refers to “a separate system whose existence we are compelled to hypothesize, based on the observed output which results from the L2 learners attempted production of a target language norm”.

Interligual transfer, especially with regards to culture-bound idiomatic expressions, proved to be a negative fallback strategy in the sense that it results in lexically, contextually, and/or grammatically incorrect linguistic units. For example, the following expressions might be produced by EFL students (Mahmoud, 2002 internet pages):

<b>Non-Native English</b>	<b>Native English</b>
<i>the chance of a lifetime</i>	<i>the chance of the age</i>
<i>the luck smiled to him</i>	<i>fortune smiled on him</i>
<i>people have the ability to say what they want</i>	<i>freedom of expression</i>

There is little chance that native speakers of English would be able to understand what is meant by such non-native versions of the culture-bound idiomatic expressions, and that is why this problem needs to be investigated thoroughly in order to add more information to this field of study and fill this gap.

Here is a sample of commonly mistaken culture-bound idiomatic expressions observed by Mahmoud, (ibid: internet pages): with their actual meaning in English and the meaning that might be conveyed by the same idiomatic expression in Iraqi EFL student's speech.

<b>Idiom</b>	<b>Meaning in English</b>	<b>Meaning in Arabic</b>
day after day	everyday	every other day
red-faced	embarrassed	furious
pull one's leg	(jokingly) say something untrue	let him talk
stretch one's legs	take a walk	lie down
head over heels	completely (in love)	upside down

## **1.2 Aim of the Study**

The study aims at assessing Iraqi EFL 4<sup>th</sup> year students' awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expressions in English.

## **1.3 Hypothesis of the Study**

In this study, it is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL 4<sup>th</sup> year students are not properly aware of culture-bound idiomatic expressions.

## **1.4 Limits of the Study**

The study is limited to the following:

1. Assessing Iraqi EFL 4<sup>th</sup> year students' awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expressions.
2. The target population is the Iraqi EFL 4<sup>th</sup> year students at University of Baghdad, namely College of Arts, College of Education- Ibn Rushd, and College of Languages. The sample of the study is taken from 4<sup>th</sup> year EFL students in the College of Education- Ibn Rushd. The academic year is 2004-2005.

## **1.5 Value of the study**

The study is hoped to be valuable in the following respects:



1. The assessment of the current state of the Iraqi EFL 4<sup>th</sup> year students' awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expressions would be most valuable for EFL teachers in improving their strategies of approaching the task of ELT in Iraqi colleges and schools.
2. The assessment of students' awareness of such functional aspect in the English language will certainly reveal the importance of this field.
3. The study will encourage students and teachers to pay attention to this lively and rich aspect of language as it would specify the problems that discourage Iraqi EFL students from learning culture-bound idiomatic expressions.
4. The study would also provide EFL teachers and researchers with an ample source of amenable data for both classroom applications and research purposes.

## ***1.6 Procedures of the Study***

The study is conducted according to the following procedures:

1. The target population of the study is the 4<sup>th</sup> year Iraqi EFL students at University of Baghdad.

2. The sample of the study consists of 130 students and it is taken from the Department of English 4<sup>th</sup> year, College of Education-Ibn Rushd.
3. A test is constructed to measure Iraqi EFL students' awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expressions, to be conducted on the sample of the study.
4. Pilot administration of the study is conducted to find out Validity, reliability, and item analysis for the constructed test to assure the test's suitability, usefulness and appropriateness to the sample, and the significance of its results.
5. The test is given to a representative sample of the population of the study, and then data is collected and analyzed by using suitable statistical methods to find out the final results of the study.
6. Suitable conclusions are drawn, recommendations are proposed, and suggestions for further studies are put forward.

### 1.7 **Plan of the Study**

The study is divided into five chapters. Chapter One deals with the problem of the study, the value, the aim, the limits, the procedures, and the definitions of basic terms. Chapter Two will

be concerned with the theoretical background and review of the related literature. Chapter Three deals with the procedures followed by the researcher to achieve the aim of the study. Chapter Four is devoted for the analysis of data, and computation of results with their discussions. Chapter Five is a presentation of conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions for further studies.

## 1.8 *Definitions of Basic Terms*

### 1.8.1 *Idiom:*

The lexical definition of the term *idiom* in the Encyclopedia Dictionary of the Encarta 2005 is as follows:

***Idiom** (n.) a fixed expression with nonliteral meaning; a fixed, distinctive, and often colorful expression whose meaning cannot be understood from the combined meanings of its individual words, e.g. “to have somebody in stitches”* ***Idiomatic** (adj.) characteristic of native-speaker use; or in keeping with, the way a language is ordinarily and naturally used by its native speakers; having a meaning not deducible from the combined meanings of the*

*words that make it up e.g. “an idiomatic phrase”*

The operational definition of idiomatic expression is not easy to provide, since linguists and dictionary-makers themselves differ in the way they define this term. In fact the difficulty of the task is due to the fact that each one considers a specific feature of the idiomatic expression which the other does not agree with (Strassler, 1982:20). This led Drysdale (1981:113) to describe idioms as: "those elusive, hard to define, and harder still to classify phrases that appear usually in boldface . . ." (cf. Makkai, 1972:23-24 and Strassler, 1982:20). The only definition of the term "idiomatic expression" that many prominent linguists such as John Lyons (1968:145) and David Crystal (1985:179) have used and discussed and which includes the most common characteristics of idioms is adopted here. Thus, in this study the researcher will operate with the following definition of an idiomatic expression:

*A term used in linguistics and lexicology to refer to a phrase or a sentence which is peculiar to a language and approved by its usage and whose meaning is often not predictable from the conjoined meanings of its constituent elements. Syntactically idiomatic expressions have special characteristics in the sense that they are often unchangeable and many of them defy the accepted rules of grammar. Since an idiomatic expression functions as a*

*single unit it should be entered as such in the lexicon and consequently it must be learnt as a whole unit*

### **1.8.2 Assessment:**

The term assessment has been used in the fields of applied linguistics and language testing. In the Dictionary of Language Testing, by Mousavi (1999: 17), assessment refers to test makers' final decisions, judgments, and opinions about the test results that have been transformed through the process of measurement into a much amenable form. Thus, assessment refers to the procedures used by a test maker to obtain information about the teaching-learning process, e.g. learners' abilities, teaching materials and / or teaching strategy. This last definition of assessment will be adopted as the operational definition.

### **1.8.3 Awareness**

The operational definition of the term awareness is very close to its lexical definition that to be found in many dictionaries. In the Oxford English Dictionary 2000, the word “awareness” refers to the concept of knowing or realizing that something is important and interesting. In the Encarta Dictionary (2005: internet pages) the lexical meaning of the term awareness is:

*Knowing something; having knowledge of something because you have observed it or somebody has told you about it. It also means Knowledgeable; well-informed about what is going on in the world or about the latest developments in a particular sphere of activity.*

The Encarta Dictionary 2005 also provides the core meaning of the term awareness which implies: knowledge of the existence of something; **aware** the most wide-ranging term, indicating that somebody knows something either intellectually or intuitively.

#### 1.8.4 **Culture-bound**

The term culture bound has been used by such sociolinguists as Bolt (2003: internet pages) to refer to **an element in one culture that is not necessarily universal**, in the sense that it might not be clear or comprehensible for people from other cultural backgrounds. The phrase *under the hammer* refers to auctioning off companies. The hammer is the auctioneer's hammer. The process of an auction may be fairly universal, but the individual words in this expression give no help in understanding its culture bound meaning. The above mentioned definition of the term culture-bound will be adopted as the operational definition.

### 1.8.5 Culture

Bolt (ibid: internet pages) believes that the term culture can apply to many concepts; but, as far as this study is concerned, culture refers to the social behaviour that is shared by a particular community and is based on the beliefs, the attitudes, the world views, and the inherited knowledge of that particular community.

# **CHAPTER TWO**

## *Theoretical Background and Related Literature*



## **2.1 An Introductory Note:**

This chapter is concerned with the presentation of the theoretical background of the issues that are related to the culture-bound idiomatic expressions. The following are the major points that are going to be discussed in this chapter:

1. language teaching is culture teaching,
2. cultural awareness in EFL,
3. importance of idiomatic expressions,
4. culture-bound idiomatic expressions,
5. syntax of idiomatic expressions,
6. criterion of recognizing idiomatic expressions, and
7. comprehension of idiomatic expressions.

## **2.2 Language Teaching is Culture Teaching**

Second language educators teach and EFL students learn about the culture of the L2/FL whether it is included overtly in the curriculum or not. This point was emphasized by McLeod (1976: 212). He points out that "by teaching a language one is inevitably teaching culture". In a discussion about discourse, Brown (2000:65) questions whether or not language may be value-free or independent of cultural background. She concludes: "there are values, presuppositions and world views to be found in any normal use of language". Such normal language use is exactly what most L2 and FL instructors aim to teach.

Beyond this perspective, Brown (ibid: 55) refers to ethnographic language studies and summarizes several reasons why "language and culture are from the start inseparably connected":

1. the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations;
2. every society orchestrates the ways in which children participate in particular situations, and this, in turn, affects the form, the function and the content of children's utterances;
3. caregivers' primary concern is not with grammatical input, but with the transmission of sociocultural knowledge; and
4. the native learner, in addition to language, acquires also the paralinguistic patterns of his or her culture.

Having outlined these findings, Brown (ibid: 60) cautions readers that "as in the case of first vs. second language acquisition, first and second culture acquisition differ in many respects". Two further observations also explain just how language teaching is culture teaching:

1. language codes cannot be taught in isolation, because the processes of sociocultural transmission are bound to be at work on many levels, e.g. the contents of language exercises, the cultural discourse of textbooks, and the teacher's attitudes towards the target culture;

2. in their role of "secondary care givers" language teachers need to go beyond monitoring linguistic production in the classroom and become aware of the complex and numerous processes of intercultural mediation that any FL learner undergoes (Brown, 2000: 55-56)

Thus, from this evidence and that provided by Valdes (1986:46) it is clear that language teaching is indeed culture teaching. Such a perspective is evident outside of the fields of applied linguistics and L2 education as well. In the literature on intercultural communication, it is believed that culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. Culture in this sense is the foundation of communication.

To summarize what has been mentioned above, culture in FL teaching and learning is an effective aspect of language, and the curriculum should provide an understanding of the cultural element in FL education. It is clear that culture is needed in the L2 and FL context. Thus, providing a background to target language culture in the classroom, and in the pedagogical literature is strongly required, because it is argued that current FL teaching is indeed culture teaching. It is also evident that there are still aspects of culture in FL education that do need further research and understanding.

### **2.3 Cultural Awareness in EFL**

It is believed that culture plays an important role in the EFL classroom activities (Al- Mutawa, & Kailani, 1989:87). It is important for the teacher to recognize potential negative (culturally based) perceptions of their learners. In Iraq, for instance, it is not uncommon to meet silent expressionless students that are supposedly English language learners. It is possible for the beginner teacher to interpret this negatively as a lack of interest in the study of English. This interpretation may play a harmful role in classroom methodology. An instructor has to be interculturally competent to be an effective teacher. It will be more effective if the instructor adopts a consistent style of instruction to allow learners to adapt within the bounds of their own personalities without being forced to behave outside their own cultural values. The FL teacher's task is to reduce the various kinds of communicative gaps that may result from poor grammatical structure and from misinterpretation because of contextual ambiguity and cultural unawareness.

Lyons (1968:122) stresses that perfect knowledge of FL implies not only the knowledge of its grammar rules and vocabulary, but also an ability to employ a large variety of spoken and written registers. Speaking an FL is a skill that has to be supported and nourished throughout the learners' lifetime. That leads to the assumption that what the FL learners pursue, is a mythical native speaker-like linguistic competence. Many would agree that it will also involve such skills as the ability to recognize allusions, understand jokes or decode newspaper headlines.

The cultural awareness aspect in ELT is, therefore; a very important precondition of language acquisition. In this respect, sociolinguistic research has demonstrated that speech is not a result of mere individual choices based on the manifestation of psychological operations, but it is remarkably patterned, in the sense that each language community has its own way of communicating ideas, feelings and desires that might be very close or similar to another language community or might be totally different.

#### **2.4 Culture-Bound Idiomatic Expressions**

In English, the unacceptability of some combinations is not necessarily based on compatibility in meanings of the individual items, but rather on conventions of the target language (Valdes, 1986: 50). Learners who are not aware of these conventions may produce unacceptable combinations that are very common in Iraqi EFL students' linguistic performance.

Students who lack culturally based collocational competence sometimes make longer or non-native sentences because they are not fully aware of the correct collocations that express precisely their thoughts. And that, of course, is the result of inefficiency of the teaching strategy adopted in presenting culture-bound idiomatic expressions to the Iraqi EFL students. For instance, in a study conducted by Abdulmoneim Mahmoud (2002: internet pages) such expressions as the ones below have been found in EFL students' expressions:

Table 1

*Non-Native Idiomatic Expressions*

	<b>Non-Native Idiomatic Expressions</b>	<b>Native Idiomatic Expressions</b>
1	<i>people have the ability to say what they need</i>	<i>freedom of expression</i>
2	<i>the situation whereby people vote for their rulers</i>	<i>democratic rule</i>
3	<i>took his right by his hand</i>	<i>took the law into his hands</i>
4	<i>the luck smiled to him</i>	<i>fortune smiled on him</i>
5	<i>they added the fire wood</i>	<i>added fuel to the fire</i>
6	<i>the chance of the age</i>	<i>the chance of a lifetime</i>
7	<i>in the seventh sky</i>	<i>on cloud nine</i>
8	<i>he was an ostrich</i>	<i>chicken-hearted</i>
9	<i>drink from the sea</i>	<i>go and fly a kite</i>
10	<i>as their mothers born them</i>	<i>in their birthday suits</i>
11	<i>a ring in her finger</i>	<i>under her thumb</i>

Mahmoud's (2002: internet pages) most remarkable finding in his study is the idea that EFL learners who are not properly taught the lexical resources of the language focus on the decontextualised lexical items as listed in the dictionaries thereby losing sight of word association. Such learners often deform their speeches using one word at a time and simple vocabulary to express both simple and complicated ideas. Familiarity with typical idiomatic expressions in English will make learners appreciate the humorous or aesthetic power of the language. Proper acquisition of culture-bound idiomatic expressions makes learners competent socially at the level of personal and technical communications.

Chomsky (1972: 44) believes that English, like any other language, is rule-governed; otherwise, English speakers would not be able to make sense of the utterances they read or hear. Grammar books are usually designed to account for the regularities of language and for some cases that are irregular, i.e., exceptions to regular patterns. Idiomatic expressions are examples of these irregularities.

The most interesting thing about idiomatic expressions is that they evade the normal rules of the language. Flavell and Flavell (1992:78) describe idiomatic expressions as unusual irregularities of language. The peculiarity of idiomatic expressions is manifested in two areas. First, meaning, which involves semantics; and secondly, grammatical structure, which involves syntax. This has led linguists such as Johnson-Laird (1993: vii) to believe that if natural language had been designed by a logician, idiomatic expressions would not exist. They are a feature of discourse that frustrates any simple logical account of how the meanings of utterances depend on the meanings of their parts and on the syntactic relation among those parts.

Thus, the first thing that makes idioms problematic is their meanings. They do not mean what EFL students would expect them to mean. Understanding an idiomatic expression is often not arrived at from its literal meaning. That is, they do not generally have the meaning they have when used in literal strings (Cowie et al, 1983:45, and Flavell and Flavell, 1992:78). For instance, idiomatic expressions such as “*kick the bucket*” (meaning to die), “*spill the*

*beans*” (meaning to reveal a secret) do not necessarily mean what their constituents imply.

Similarly, Flavell and Flavell (1992:80) describe an idiomatic expression as a new linguistic entity with the meaning that may be quite remote from the meaning of the constituent words that form it. Johnson-Laird (1993: viii) as a test of idiomaticity, suggests:

*If a compositional interpretation is non-sensical in the context of the utterance, then the listener is supposed to check whether an idiomatic sense is listed and whether it makes better sense.*

However, there are idiomatic expressions that have, in addition to their idiomatic meanings, a perfectly literal interpretation. For example, Chomsky (1980:90) notes that "John *kicked the bucket*" has two meanings; first, "John hit the bucket with his foot", secondly, "John died". Examples of idiomatic expressions that have no literal meanings are "Sam has been giving his wife *the run around*", and Chomsky's examples "John took advantage of Bill" and "John took care of Bill".

## **2.5 Importance of Idiomatic Expressions**

Do idiomatic expressions deserve a linguistic and a psycholinguistic investigation? For EFL researchers the answer is a resounding "Yes". Johnson-Laird (1993:15) justifies such an



attitude towards idiomatic expressions by presenting three reasons. The origin of idiomatic expressions is mysterious in the logical account of language, and there is no obvious reason why speakers of a particular language tend to use expressions with such non-transparent meanings; therefore, it is believed that individuals cannot speak spontaneously without passing into idiomatic usage. If you try it with a foreigner, you will notice that you have used an idiomatic expression. Even if you explain an idiom, you will find that you are using another. Thus, idiomatic expressions are pervasive and this is the first reason for their significance.

The second reason is the fact that they are considered the poetry of daily discourse (ibid: 76). Speakers invent words and phrases to force us to pay attention, to amuse us, to astonish us, and to challenge us. In addition, they create new ways to convey old meanings for the sheer joy of invention. However, the creation of idiomatic expressions also reflects new conceptions of the world, new ways in which individuals construct mental models of the world, and new ways in which to convey their contents vividly. It is through idiomatic expressions that the truly creative nature of human expression reveals itself.

Although not all of us have this capability of inventing idiomatic expressions, most of us either borrow, or learn the idiomatic expressions of others (ibid :17). Thus, we find that our usage of the language is full of used idiomatic expressions, dead metaphors and other figurative expressions. The understanding and use of these fi-

gurative expressions is spontaneous and automatic since many studies proved that the understanding of idiomatic expressions is as fast as the understanding of literal usages.

Speakers acquire knowledge of familiar idiomatic expressions and this knowledge helps them, to a certain extent, deal with idiomatic usage as easily as with literal meaning. Hence, idiomatic expressions are easy; a third important reason for using idiomatic expressions. Though idiomatic expressions are transparent to native speakers, they are a source of complexity to those who are trying to acquire a L2. Somewhere else, Johnson-Laird (ibid. ix) commented on this, emphasizing the fact that native speakers have the ability to speak in riddles that are neither constructed nor interpreted in the normal way. Yet, they use them so readily that they are usually unaware of their special character, while non-native speakers fail to do so.

English is not the only language that employs idiomatic expressions; on the contrary, it seems that the employment of such expressions is universal. Makkai (1987:10) believes that most known languages have some idiomatic expressions within their active structure. If we consider Arabic, for instance, we find that its literature is full of metaphorical, figurative and idiomatic expressions. Al-Haddad (1994:90) specifies the role of idiomatic expressions in Arabic as it is in many other languages; namely to reflect the customs, way of life and outlook on life of the Arab nation.

Lattey (1986:245) believes that since idiomatic expressions are encountered every day, they are considered the heart of the language. Experienced teachers of English think that such expressions constitute a means of adding colour, feeling, grace and precision to speech and writing. By using idiomatic expressions, speakers can communicate their attitude towards an event more readily than by using non-idiomatic expressions. Therefore, the use of idiomatic expressions in English is so frequent that it is difficult to speak or write without using them.

Thiel (1979:24) suggests a somewhat different reason for the accurate idiomatic usage that is both linguistic and psychological. He assumes that full command of idiomatic expression leads to increased reading and writing ability, heightened understanding of the figurative nature of language, and markedly more sophisticated oral expression. These contribute considerably to building the students' confidence, elicit strong praise, and hence bring their own reward.

Therefore, idiomatic expressions are not something that is substandard; in fact they are an essential part of the standard language, and consequently should not be avoided.

Lyons (1968:101) observes that the omission of synonyms from a language would not change its structure but it would certainly decrease the options available to its users. This observation, as Fernando (1978:145) asserts, could be applied to the whole range of

figurative language. Thus, omission of idiomatic expressions from languages would result in structural change of these languages. Nevertheless, if man were deprived of the power of wit, of which idiomatic expression is one manifestation, language would become closer to systems of animal communication and algorithmic operations.

Like single lexical items, some idiomatic expressions are common while others are language-specific, which is the major concern of this study. Whether common or language-specific, their frequent, spontaneous and appropriate daily use is an indication of native or near-native command of the language. In this respect, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989: 73 as cited in Mahmoud, 2002: web page) say "the foreign learner of English who tries to avoid them, will immediately single himself out as a foreigner". However, the learner's non-use of idiomatic expressions could also be due to the lack of knowledge rather than 'avoidance' which implies knowledge and choice to use or not.

Idiomaticity may not be expected of many FL learners; their non-use of idiomatic expressions is attributed to their low level of proficiency in the language. Iraqi learners of EFL are not different in this respect. After twelve years of formal classroom instruction, many of them hardly attain an intermediate level of proficiency in EFL. The purpose of this study is to present empirical data verifying the assumption that the avoidance and the misuse of idiomatic expressions will lead to linguistic deficiency.

Adults use idiomatic expressions fluently and frequently in their mother tongue. Therefore they are aware of their importance in learning and using EFL. They know that the use of idiomatic expressions is a mark of good English. The pedagogical implication here is that these adult learners could be made aware of this linguistic aspect and its learning outcome.

## **2.6 Syntax of Idiomatic Expressions**

A distinguishing feature of idiomatic expressions is their resistance to syntactic variations. In fact, idiomatic expressions respond to some syntactic variations and do not respond to others. Those idiomatic expressions that allow syntactic variations are termed "flexible idiomatic expressions". This phenomenon is considered a challenging problem to linguists (Al-Haddad, 1994:30). Thus, idiomatic expressions differ with regard to the syntactic transformations that they undergo and still retain their idiomatic meanings. For example, the passivization of "*John kicked the bucket*" results in the loss of the idiomatic meaning of the sentence (i.e. "The bucket was kicked by John"). Moreover, the substitution of the parts, even for near synonyms, is often unacceptable. For instance, in the idiom "*beat about the bush*", there is no way we can say "hit about the bush", while "bury the tomahawk" is an acceptable variant of "*bury the hatchet*". The pluralization of "bush" is not acceptable either. It is believed that no one has ever heard of "*to beat about the bushes*"! Besides, the passivization of this idiom looks very strange (Crystal, 1985:152).

Hence, idioms range from expressions that allow a wide range of grammatical transformations, such as "*throw in the towel*", "*read the riot act*", etc. to idioms that resist all transformations, such as "*face the music*", "*kick the traces*", etc.

Fraser (1970:92) puts forward the most distinguished analysis of idiomatic expression in the mode of Transformational Generative Grammar. He suggests that syntactic transformations could be grouped into five classes arranged according to a hierarchy ranging from the most flexible idiomatic expressions to the most fossilized ones. Fraser (Ibid: 94) concludes that idiomatic expressions are regular to a certain extent, in terms of their syntactic behaviour, with the fact that there is a considerable variation from one speaker to another. Wasow et al. (1983:67) attribute the syntactic behaviour of idiomatic expressions to the semantic relationships among their parts.

Chafe (1968:51) on the other hand, observes that idiomatic expressions behave like their non-idiomatic synonyms. For example, "*kick the bucket*" though meets the structural description for passive, cannot be passivized because its synonym "*die*" is an intransitive verb. Whereas the idiom "*bury the hatchet*" which means "make peace" can undergo the passive-transformation, because "bury the hatchet" satisfies the structural description for passive and because "make peace" can be passivized (peace to be made). Meanwhile, Newmeyer's (1974:77) suggestion is similar to Chafe's (Ibid: 122). He suggests that idiomatic expressions such as "*spill the beans*" (=

reveal a secret) and "*pop the question*" (= propose for marriage) can undergo passive transformation for two reasons; first, because the predicates in the literal senses of these idioms allow passivization; secondly, because the predicates in the actual meanings of these idioms also undergo passivization.

However, Michiels (1977:87) argues that the problem is not deciding the meaning of an idiomatic expression, as Newmeyer (1974: 79) thinks, but it is how to choose the proper way of formulating its meaning. For example, the meaning of the idiomatic expression "*to drop a brick*" is either (= to commit a social blunder) or (= "goof" or make a small mistake). Now, with the former meaning, the idiomatic expression can be passivized, but with the latter, the idiomatic expression cannot be passivized because "goof" is intransitive.

Chafe (1968:124) for instance, chooses "disclose" as a paraphrase for "*spill the beans*", and not "disclose a secret", to exclude the passive transformation "the beans were spilled by Helen"\* because he observes that this idiom functions semantically as an intransitive verb and consequently it does not undergo the passive transformation.

Reagan (1987:106), on the other hand, argues that appealing to paraphrase is related to the idea that the meaning of an idiom can be divided into parts and each part can often correspond to parts of the idiom. For example, in "*spill the beans*"; "beans" nearly refers to a

"secret" or "information". This phenomenon depends on the metaphorical origin of such idiomatic expressions. Yet, it is not always the case that we know the meaning of the whole idiomatic expression from the meaning of "beans". Roughly speaking, it is obvious that "beans" means "confidential information" in this idiomatic expression because it is known that "spill the beans" means "spread confidential information". However, Reagan (ibid: 420) argues that:

*We do not derive the meaning of the whole from the meaning of the parts even if we can start with the meaning of the whole and then assign parts of the meaning to parts of the phrase. This phenomenon of "semantic decomposability"- is likely to be an important factor in future attempts to explain idiomaticity.*

Cutler (1982:93) draws attention to another characteristic of idiomatic expressions. She observes that there is a correlation between the syntactic and semantic frozenness of idiomatic expressions and their historical age. Cutler (Ibid: 95), analyzed each idiomatic expression in the Oxford English Dictionary. She finds out that those idiomatic expressions that are more resistant to syntactic manipulations are those which have the earliest date of citation in the Oxford English Dictionary.



Michiels (1977:56) discusses some transformations that are difficult to be integrated into Fraser's categorization, such as pronominalization (a term used in transformational grammar to refer to the process of replacing a noun or noun phrase in a sentence with a pronoun). The application of pronominalization is very restricted in idiomatic expressions (ibid: 193). Examples such as *\*did John also kick it?* for “*kick the bucket*” or *\*Are they shooting it?* for “*shooting the breeze*”, are inappropriate, whereas it is acceptable to say, “*We are ready to bury the hatchet, are you ready to bury it too?*”. Chomsky (1972:169) discusses the same point and concludes, “there are no anaphoric processes internal to such expressions as “*kick the bucket*”. That is, one cannot say *\*“John kicked the bucket and Bill kicked it too”*, meaning both died.

A question might be asked: Why are some idioms amenable to syntactic variations while others are impervious to any transformations? On the basis of many studies, some of which are mentioned above, there is strong evidence that this behaviour of idiomatic expressions are attributed to the interaction between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics as well (Nunberg, 1978; Strassler, 1982, and Lattey, 1986).

Glucksbery (1993:20) highlights this idea when he states that syntactic operations for idiomatic expressions are constrained primarily by the semantics and pragmatics of an idiom's components and idiomatic meaning.

Finally, it is noteworthy that to some linguists (ibid: 30), the best examples of idiomatic expressions are those that are fixed syntactically and cannot be understood from the prior understanding of the meanings of the parts. However, not all idiomatic expressions satisfy these strict criteria. In fact, there are idiomatic expressions that can find a link between the literal meaning of the words and the idiomatic meaning. This is because many phrases pass through metaphorical stages in their way to become idiomatic expressions, where the origin is still perceptible.

Therefore, the problem is not whether a phrase is an idiomatic expression or not but whether an expression is more or less "idiomatic" on a scale of language usage ranging from normal literal use of language through different degrees of metaphor and grammatical flexibility to the pure idiomatic expression. This looks like the colour spectrum in which there is unanimous agreement on what is green and what is yellow but it is impossible to tell where exactly one colour becomes the other. Similarly, it is difficult to point where a flexible metaphor becomes fossilized idiomatic expression with a new meaning.

## **2.7 Criteria for Recognizing Idiomatic Expressions**

The widely adopted approach to the definition of idiomaticity is the one that largely depends on semantic criteria, i.e. the difficulty of understanding the meaning of an idiomatic expression from the meanings of its parts (Bolinger and Sears, 1981:57). This feature of idiomaticity, as Fernando (1978:318) observes, "is generally

recognized as being the highest common denominator (or standard) of idiomaticity.” In other words, the level of semantic transparency is an indicator of the level of idiomaticity.

However, depending exclusively on this approach in the definition of idiomatic expressions will end up with a limited number of idioms. Cowie et al. (1983: xii) affirm that “an approach based simply on the semantic opaqueness (or transparency) of whole combinations yields a very small class of idioms”. So, depending on semantic criteria is not enough, even though these criteria clarify the peculiarity of one class of idioms, such as "*kick the bucket*", "*burn the midnight oil*", "*spill the beans*". Moreover, this approach will leave out of consideration many expressions such as "*break sb's heart*", "*behind sb's back*" etc. which have figurative (and often transparent) meanings. Consequently, in defining idiomaticity, or in distinguishing between idiomatic and non-idiomatic expressions, other points, in addition to meaning, should be considered such as the possibility of lexical and syntactic variation.

After all, it is not advisable to believe that idiomatic expressions constitute a special category separated entirely from non-idiomatic expressions. In fact, there are units that form a bridge category between idiomatic expressions and other categories, such as collocations, e.g. "*catch one's breath*" and "*foot the bill*" where in each expression it is the verb which has the figurative meaning (Cowie, 1981:132). Thus, Cowie et al. (1983: xii) state that "idioms

are not divided as a category from non-idioms but are related to them along a scale or continuum."

Cowie (1981:15) argues that idiomatic expressions join the properties of many kinds of language phenomena, such as figures of speech, synonymy, polysemy, and homonymy. However, the different judgments, with regard to whether an expression is considered idiom proper, metaphor, etc. "represent differences in the linguistic and cultural experience of individuals."

Again, a view of idiomaticity, which treats fairly the large variety of word-combination in English, has to realize that the meaning of a combination may be related to the meaning of the constituents in different ways, and to consider the possibility of internal variation (ibid:16). In this study, three main types of idiomatic expressions are recognized:

### 2.7.1. **Pure idiomatic expressions**

Pure idiomatic expressions are also called "true idioms" or what Cowie (1981:125) refers to as "idioms proper". These idioms constitute one end of a spectrum of related categories. Idioms in the strict sense represent the end of a historical process in which word combinations first establish themselves through continuous use and re-use until they become fossilized after they undergo figurative extension. The optimal representatives and the most frequently cited idioms of this category are "*kick the bucket*", "*burn the midnight oil*", "*spill the beans*". The expression "*on the spot*" for many

people—is a pure idiom, because they fail to identify any connection between a "*spot*" and the sense "*at once*" or "promptly". Moreover, the expression is immutable. For example, there is no opposite like \*"*off the spot*". The expression "*part company*" (to leave the group) also falls under this category. The form of the expression is also unchangeable. Thus, expressions such as \*"*leave company*" or \*"*break company*" are impossible.

### 2.7.2. **Figurative idiomatic expressions**

Figurative idiomatic expressions may be difficult to set apart practically from the pure type. Cowie et al. (ibid: 126) distinguish items of this kind as being idiomatic in the sense that variation is hard to find and pronoun substitution unlikely. One example from the present data is "*red tape*". For some people this example is a figurative idiomatic expression, since they know that lawyers and governmental officials have been keeping their papers, official documents and records in bundles tied with red tape. However, for those who do not know how the idiomatic expression originates, the expression is a pure idiom. The idiomatic expressions that belong to this kind are also invariable. Thus, neither "red" nor "tape" can be substituted in the idiom "red tape". Cowie (1981:229) stresses that the literal senses of these expressions do not survive alongside their figurative one in normal, everyday use and for some speakers they may indeed be unrealizable.

### 2.7.3. Restricted collocations:

Restricted collocations this group is also important as a "phraseological" category. They are sometimes referred to as "semi-idiomatic", i.e. not fully idiomatic (Cowie et al., 1983: xiii) or "transparent stereotypes". Members of this category are ready-made and stored in the memory as whole units. In restricted collocations, one element (in the case of two-word expressions) has a figurative meaning that cannot be found outside that restricted context, while the other element has an ordinary literal meaning. Examples of this category are: "a blind alley", "catch one's breath", etc. Thus, the use of the term "restricted" to refer to collocations of the type just mentioned reflects the fact that in each case the elements are not freely combined.

There is another category that is rather different from the three categories discussed above. Members of this category are often called "speech formulas". Instances of these phrases are "*let me see*", "*by no means*" and "with all my heart". These phrases have a discourse function, so they are unlike the others discussed above in that they are used in interaction with another speaker as a response to something he has said. The following two sentences may clarify the function of such phrases as "*by no means*" and "*let me see*", in discourse:

- May I smoke? *By no means* . . .
- Do you remember when you met Margaret? Oh, *let me see* ...

These expressions are considered idiomatic, because they are unchangeable and semantically opaque, but they have a function rather than a form in discourse; that is to say they can be defined in terms of their function rather than their lexical meaning.

All the idiomatic expressions so far mentioned in this chapter occupy syntactic units larger than the word and smaller than a simple sentence. Cowie et al. (1983:23) note that there are many reasons for considering as idioms such expressions as "*the early bird catches the worm*", "*when the cat's away the mice will play*", etc. which span a complete sentence. These expressions have the characteristics of figurative idiomatic expressions. Hence the first one is a metaphor in origin and it is fixed in form; for instance \*"*the early cat catches the mouse*" is unacceptable. Moreover, there are exceptional cases in which variation is found, e.g. "*give sb an inch and he'll take a mile/a yard/an ell*". These idiomatic expressions are recognized by native speakers as well-known sayings or proverbs. They are used to give a word of advice or of warning, or a wise general comment on a situation, and they do this in a precise style that makes them easy to remember and use.

## **2.8 Boundaries of Idioms**

### **2.8.1 Idioms vs. Collocations**

A collocation is a term used to refer to "a composite unit which permits the substitutability of items for at least one of its constituent elements (the sense of the other element(s), remaining constant)" (Cowie, 1981:224). Cruse (1986:54) presents another definition of a

collocation when he uses the term to refer to "sequences of lexical items which habitually co-occur, but which are fully transparent in the sense that each lexical constituent is also a semantic constituent". Examples of a collocation are expressions such as "*fine weather*", "*run a business*", "*torrential rain*", (= intense) etc. Clearly, these expressions are easy to distinguish from an idiomatic expression. The most outstanding characteristic of collocations is that they have a semantic cohesion in the sense that the constituent parts share, to varying degrees, a reciprocal selection. This notion is clearer if the sense of one or more constituents is contextually restricted e.g. the sense of "*heavy*" in "*heavy drinker*".

There are other expressions in which the semantic cohesion is even more crucial, e.g. the expression "*foot the bill*" (= pay the whole cost of sth.). In these expressions, one element of the collocation has a specialized meaning that requires a specific lexical item in that context. These expressions represent a border area between collocations and idiomatic expressions in the strict sense, i.e. the end of one category and the beginning of another. Therefore, these expressions share some characteristics of both idiomatic expressions and collocations. Thus, "*foot the bill*" has the characteristics of an idiomatic expression, since "*foot*" requires the presence of a specific lexeme in the expression (Cowie et al., 1983:25).

Benson (1985:61) recognizes two types of collocations, namely "grammatical collocations" and "lexical collocations". He defines the former type as "a recurrent combination, usually consisting of a



dominant word (verb, noun, adjective), followed by a grammatical word, typically a preposition, for example: *aim at*, *applied to*, *accused of* *give up*"

Lexical collocations, on the other hand, do not include a subordinate element. They are usually made up of two "equal" lexical constituents such as (adjective + noun collocations), e.g. "*confirmed bachelor*", "*pure chance*", "*well informed circles*", etc. Another pattern is (noun + verb collocations), e.g. "*adjectives modify*", "*bells ring*", etc., and (verb + noun collocations), e.g. "*make an estimate*" (but not \*"*make an estimation*"), "*commit treason*" (but not \*"*commit treachery*"), "*commit suicide*" (but not \*"*make suicide*"), one "*makes a mistake*" (but not \*"*make a misprint*"), etc.

### **2.8.2** Idioms vs. Metaphors

The lexical definition for the term metaphor is a figure of speech based on implicit comparison that persuades the listener (or reader) to imagine something that is not meant literally. This means that the comparison is implied and indirectly stated. For example "*He was a lion in the fight*" where the comparison is implied, while "He fought like a lion" is not a metaphor but a simile because the comparison is directly expressed (ibid: 107).

The origin of most idiomatic expressions is metaphorical. Take for example, the idiom "throw in the towel" (= give up) and try to investigate its origin, you will find that only few users know that this idiomatic expression comes from a symbol for surrender in the

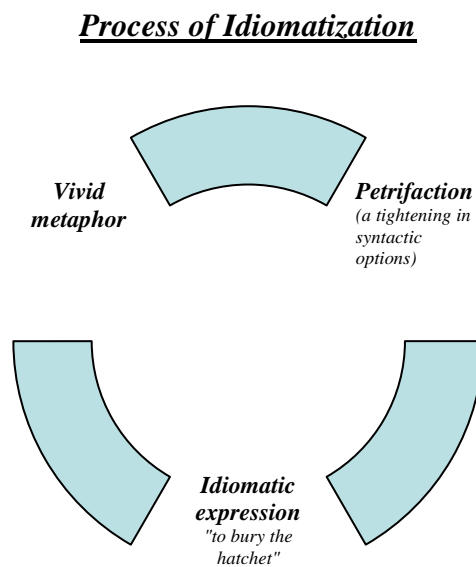
sport of boxing. Similarly, the metaphorical source of the idiom “*kick the bucket*” is not recognized by most, if not all, its users.

Reagan (1987:90) notes that, at some time in the past, the meaning of this idiomatic expression must have had something to do with the parts; otherwise, the meaning "die" would never have been expressed by "*kick the bucket*". The OED (2004) testifies to this fact. Hence, the word "bucket", according to the OED (2004), refers to the beam from which a pig was suspended by its feet after it had been slaughtered. In addition, this is how the expression originates and comes to mean "die". Nevertheless, idiomatic expressions keep their meanings even after the loss of the original metaphor.

Michiels (1977:185) observes, while making a comparison between metaphors and idiomatic expressions that the meaning of metaphors cannot be given outside the context in which they appeared, whereas idiomatic expressions can be assigned a meaning without looking at the context. For example, "*kick the bucket*," means, "die" and in recognizing this, you do not need to look at the context. But talking about “*the steep cliffs of knowledge*”, you will want to be given a context to understand the meaning, (“*knowledge is dangerous*” or “*knowledge is hard to obtain*”).” Michiels (Ibid: 190) also notes that even if the context is given, the problem of which meaning is to be chosen remains there; in this case, the concept of polysemy is involved. Another distinction is that idioms are institutionalized

Akimoto (1992:5) states another difference between metaphors and idioms; he realizes that metaphors have a more vivid image than that of idioms. As far as an expression maintains its vivid image, it is grasped as metaphor, but when the expression has lost its vividness together with syntactic tightening and semantic abstracting, it is going in the direction of idiom. Consequently, the process of Idiomatization for Akimoto (Ibid: 9) proceeds as shown in figure 1:

Figure 1



In addition, Akimoto (Ibid: 22) notes that parts of idiomatic expressions might have metaphorical referents. For example, the word "beans" in the idiom "*spill the beans*" refers to any information that is supposed to be kept secret. "Spill" is related to the process of spreading this information or secrets.

## **2.9 Comprehension of Idiomatic Expressions**

Understanding how people use and understand language is an extremely important issue in psychology. Psychologists and psycholinguists try to focus their research on the way in which people understand and use their language. A complete understanding of any language cannot be arrived at without understanding the exceptions to the standard usage of that language. One kind of this exception, which has recently attracted the attention of researchers in psycholinguistics, is the idiomatic expression. Furthermore, there are so many idioms in every language (Weinreich, 1969:35; Makkai, 1987:98) and they are widespread in everyday use of English.

What has been mentioned above justifies the concern of researchers on the comprehension of idiomatic expression. Consequently, various models of idiomatic expressions comprehension have been suggested. The most widespread proposal suggests that the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression is constructed from the meanings of the parts, whereas the figurative meaning is not derived from the meanings of the parts, but is stored and retrieved in memory (Schweigert, 1986:122; Schweigert and Moates, 1988:52). With regard to many studies on the processing of idiomatic expressions, the idiomatic model of comprehension differs in terms of order. For instance, Bobrow and Bell (1973:60) suggest that when an idiom is encountered, the literal meaning is processed first, but if this meaning is inappropriate, the idiomatic meaning is then retrieved from the "idiom word dictionary" for they believe that idiomatic expressions are stored as single lexical items or "idiomatic

words". Schweigert and Moates (1988:64) call this model-"Literal Processing Model", while Cronk and Schweigert (1992:90) refer to it as the "literal first hypothesis". Estill and Kemper (1982:143) suggest another model. This model proposes simultaneous processing of both the figurative and literal meanings. This model is called "Simultaneous Processing Model." Estill and Kemper (Ibid: 150) also agree with Schweigert and Moates (1988: 64) that idiomatic expressions are stored in the mental lexicon as single words.

The third model of comprehension of idiomatic expression is suggested by Gibbs (1980:57). Because idiomatic expressions have strong conventional and figurative meanings as Gibbs notes, the literal meaning is not as important as the figurative one in idiomatic comprehension. Hence, this model proposes that the idiomatic meaning is processed first, when an idiom is encountered, and then the literal meaning is constructed if the figurative meaning is inappropriate. This model is referred to as the "Idiomatic Processing Model" (Schweigert and Moates, 1988:65) or "figurative first hypothesis" (Cronk and Schweigert, 1992:127). Until now, each of the above-mentioned models has enjoyed some kind of support and no better theory has appeared.

Research on idiomatic comprehension is characterized by contradictory results. For instance, Gibbs (1985:144) suggests that idiomatic expressions used literally are more difficult, as far as processing is concerned, than idiomatic expressions used

idiomatically, while Brannon (1975, cited in Schweigert, 1991:46) suggests the opposite. Glass (1983:98) on the other hand observes that there is no difference in processing regardless of the suitability of meaning. This inconsistency proposes that one or more important factors have not been controlled and this yields to these conflicting results.

Two of these factors have been discussed earlier. The first one is the context in which these idiomatic expressions are embedded. This factor is studied by Schweigert and Moates (1988: 283). They assume that adequacy of the processed meaning of an idiomatic expression is determined by considering the context of the phrase. Thus, it might be expected that different contexts could lead to different results.

The third factor is that researchers, in the past, studying idiomatic expression and comprehension tended to regard idioms as one homogenous group, and few attempts are made to investigate the kind of idiomatic expressions that are being studied. This problem has been solved when Cutler (1982:123) observes that older idiomatic expressions are syntactically less productive than the newer ones. Thus, Cutler refutes the fallacy that idiomatic expressions constitute a homogenous group (Cronk and Schweigert, 1992:42). Furthermore, Gibbs (1980:145) discovered that the syntactic frozenness of idiomatic expressions affects the comprehension and memory for idioms. That is to say, idiomatic expressions do not form a homogenous class in terms of the way

these figurative expressions are processed (Mueller and Gibbs, 1987:67). Lastly, it is worthwhile to quote Cronk, et al.'s (1993:68) remark "Even though idiomatic expressions have been studied by psycholinguists for over 30 years, no universally accepted conclusions have been drawn.

To summarize, in standard spoken and written English today, idiomatic expression and comprehension is an established, widespread and necessary element that decorates and enriches the language. An idiomatic expression is a group of words whose meaning cannot usually be inferred from a prior understanding of the constituent words especially those that are culture-bound. They, by their very nature, break the normal rules of the language in two main areas: semantically and, syntactically, and that is why they must be learnt and used accurately.

Like single lexical items, some idiomatic expressions are common while others are language-specific. Whether common or language-specific, their frequent, spontaneous and appropriate daily use is an indication of native or near-native command of the language. The foreign learner of English who tries to avoid them, will immediately single himself out as a foreigner. However, the learner's non-use of culture-bound idiomatic expressions could also be due to the lack of knowledge (i.e. due to ignorance) rather than 'avoidance' which implies knowledge and choice to use or not. The ideas that have been discussed in this chapter will be technically

proved in the survey that is going to be conducted as is presented in the next chapter.



# CHAPTER THREE

*Procedures*

*of*

*The Study*

### **3.1 An Introductory Note**

The present chapter aims at reporting the practical steps conducted by the researcher in order to achieve the aim set in this study. In other words, it presents the following:

1. population and sample of the study,
2. instrument of the study,
3. pilot administration of the test,
4. validity of the instrument,
5. reliability of the instrument,
6. scoring scheme of the test, and
7. statistical tools adopted in the study.

### **3.2 Population and Sample of the Study**

Population is the statistical term that refers to the total number of cases under investigation from which a sample can be drawn for the administration of a specific kind of study (Mousavi, 1999: 275). In the present study, the target population is the Iraqi EFL 4<sup>th</sup> year students at the University of Baghdad which includes the College of Arts, College of Education and College of Languages. The sample of the study includes the Iraqi EFL 4<sup>th</sup> year students at the College of Education/ Ibn Rushd. The choice of the College of Education as the sample of the study has been deliberately made for the following reasons:

1. The output of the College of Education (i.e. teachers) is a major concern in ELT methodology.
2. Since it is the researcher's College it is much easier to implement the test.
3. Being able to get facilities from the head of the Department of English and from the staff members as well.

The 4<sup>th</sup> year students (males and females) of the Department of English at the College of Education are selected as the sample of the study. The reason behind choosing the fourth year EFL students is the fact that they represent a more advanced level in the EFL study, and the language aspect being investigated in this study is supposedly more distinguished in their performance, for the fact that they have been exposed to the English language more than the EFL students at other levels.

The total number of the subjects that participated in the test administration is 130 students. The subjects of the testing instrument are homogeneous in a number of aspects:

1. All of them have the same mother tongue, namely Arabic.
2. All of them studied the same syllabuses, as far as English is concerned (in primary, intermediate and secondary schools; and at the first, second and third years at college). This means that all the subjects have been educated under the same educational environment.
3. All the students are of almost the same age, about twenty-two.

### **3.3.1 Instrument of the study**

The closed-item test has been adopted in this study because of the remarkable sensitivity of the culture-bound idiomatic expressions to subjective judgment. It is undoubtedly obvious that subjective interpretations of culture-bound idiomatic expression would interfere in the final results of the test. The test aims at finding out a reliable assessment of Iraqi EFL students' awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expressions.

### **3.3.2 Description of the Testing Instrument**

In the present study, the multiple choice items test is adopted because according to Harris's (1969:42) the closed-end type of test is the most suitable to measure students' recognition ability. Of course, understanding culture-bound idiomatic expressions is one aspect of linguistic recognition ability. The suitability of the test is accounted for in terms of:

1. ***The objectivity of the test*** as it includes one and only one correct answer.
2. ***The reliability of the test results*** as it usually comes with the same results when reproduced under the same circumstances.
3. ***Practicality of the test*** as it is so easy to be completed by the students, and easy to be marked by the researcher.
4. ***Economy of time required for the test*** as a large number of subjects can be tested at the same time (Harris, *ibid*: 45).

The testing instrument is divided into two groups of multiple choice test items: group A and group B with ten items in each group. Group A is concerned with the *semantic structure* of idiomatic expression. It measures the students' semantic recognition ability of culture-bound idiomatic expressions. Group B, on the other hand, is focused on the *syntactic structure* of idiomatic expression and measures the syntactic recognition ability of culture-bound idiomatic expressions. The testees are instructed to choose the correct option from the four options given in each item. The selection of the idiomatic expressions in the test is based on:

1. *The frequency of occurrence* of the culture-bound idiomatic expressions in the major prescribed textbooks they studied at the college level, and
2. *The semantic non-transparency* of the items selected for the test to avoid guessing the answers by the students.

The testing instrument has been set in this way in order to acquire more accurate and more objective results that should provide amenable data for the basis of the decisions and inferences that will be presented later.

### 3.4.1 **Validity of the Instrument**

Validity is such a considerably important component in the process of test construction. Brown's (1987:221) definition of the term explains so clearly what is meant by validity. He describes validity as "*the degree to which the test actually measures what it*

*has been intended to measure*". Validity in this sense should present answers to Harris's (1969:30) two questions that can be put as follows:

1. *What precisely does the test measure?*
2. *How well does the test measure?*

The answers of these two questions are so important for establishing solid grounds for the inferences and decisions that are to be made on the basis of the test results. Here, it is worth noting that validity of test is of three major kinds: Face validity, Content validity, and Construct validity.

Face validity is the most important one of these three for the testing instrument, because of the significant impact it implies on the test results. Therefore, it should be pointed out very clearly so that the testing instrument is determined as valid or invalid to allow the researcher modify and change.

### 3.4.2 **Face Validity**

Mousavi (1999: 124) Face validity is the term that describes the extent to which a test measures what it has been actually set to measure. According to McNamara (2000:138) face validity of test instruments refers to "*the extent to which a test meets the expectations of those involved in its use*", i.e. test makers, administrators, teachers, and candidates. Face validity, in this sense, is no less important to the testees because they need to be convinced

that the test is indeed testing what it claims to test. Thus, in order to provide face validity to the test, the initial form of the test (see App.1) has been exposed to the jury members mentioned in table2:

***Table 2***  
**The Jury Members**

1. Prof. Abdul Latif Al- Jumeily, Ph.D.	College of Arts / University of Baghdad
2. Asst. Prof. Abdul Jabbar A. Darwish, Ph.D.	College of Basic Education / University of Al-Mustansiria
3. Asst.Prof. Abdul Karim Al-Jumeily, Ph.D	College of Education Ibn Rushd / University of Baghdad
4. Asst.Prof. Fatin Khairi AL-Rifaa'i, Ph.D.	College of Education Ibn Rushd / University of Baghdad
5. Asst.Prof. Mu'ayyad Muhammad Sa'eed, Ph.D.	College of Education Ibn Rushd / University of Baghdad
6. Asst.Prof Nahida Al-Nasiri, Ph.D.	College of Basic Education / University of Al-Mustansiria
7. Asst.Prof. Istiqlal Al-Marsumi, Ph.D.	College of Arts / University of Mustansiria
8. Asst.Prof. Firas A. Marouf, M.A.	College of Education Ibn Rushd / University of Baghdad
9. Asst.Prof. Lamyia Al-Anni, M.A.	College of Education Ibn Rushd / University of Baghdad

Twenty items of the initial test form have been judged valid by seven jury members out of nine (63%). Therefore, they are included in the final form of the test because they received the required validation of the jury members. The rest of the test items have been omitted because they are judged invalid by the experts in the jury members. Also, in response to the experts' recommendations and suggestions the following changes have been made:

1. The number of the items is reduced to 20 instead of 33.
2. The test has been reconstructed into two groups of test items ten in each.
3. The instructions of the test in the two groups of items have been reworded.
4. Invalid items have been omitted.
5. Items (3, 4, 5, 7, 10 in group A, and 9 in group B) have been modified.

### **3.5 Pilot Administration of the Test**

Pilot study is the term used to refer to the tryout administration of the test items that are to be given to a sample similar to the sample of the study (Mousavi, 1999: 280). The major goal for pilot study is to collect information about the suitability of the test that would be so useful in revising and rewriting the test items in the final form for the operational administration. The main objectives of the pilot administration of the test can be summarized in the following points:

1. determining the adequacy, appropriateness / efficiency of administrative procedures adopted in the test,
2. determining appropriate time required,
3. identifying problems in task specification and clarity of instructions,
4. discovering how test takers respond to the test task,
5. finding out the reliability of the test, and
6. performing item analysis.



In the present study, a group of 30 students is taken as a sample for the pilot study. This sample is selected randomly from the 4<sup>th</sup> year EFL students at the College of Languages, Department of English so as to be representative of the population of the study.

### **3.5.1 Item Analysis**

Mousavi (1999: 93) defines item analysis as the process of analyzing the subjects' responses to the items on a test, in order to determine:

- the identification of the items that are too easy, and the items that are too difficult, and
- the effectiveness of the items in discriminating between good and weak students.

### **3.5.2 Item Facility / Difficulty**

Finding item facility value is one of the analytical processes of testing items, by means of which a researcher can determine the degree of easiness and difficulty of each item on a test. This process is simply based on finding out the percentage of the subjects who got the item right (ibid, 94).

### **3.5.3 Item Discrimination**

According to Allen et al (1977: 30), deciding item discrimination power of test items is another analytical process used by researchers to determine the effectiveness of each test item to positively discriminate between good and weak subjects (i.e. on each item,

there should be more test takers in the upper ranking subjects who got the item right than in the lower ranking subjects).

### 3.5.4 Distracter analysis

Mousavi (1999: 95) defines distracter analysis as a process of analyzing the distribution of responses to (multiple-choice) test items between the correct and the incorrect alternatives. Distracter analysis determines distracter efficiency under the criterion that distracters should always be more attractive to the lower group of test takers than to the upper group. The response frequency distribution of the pilot study (see table4) proves the efficiency of

**Table3**  
**Item Facility and Item Discrimination**

GROUP A				GROUP B			
NO.	Right	Item Facility	I.D Power	NO.	Right	Item Facility	I.D Power
1	11	36.6%	0.6	1	13	43.3%	0.6
2	12	40%	0.3	2	15	50%	0.4
3	11	36.6%	0.5	3	13	43.3%	0.5
4	9	30%	0.2	4	11	36.6%	0.6
5	12	40%	0.5	5	14	46.6%	0.5
6	9	30%	0.1	6	11	36.6%	0.6
7	9	30%	0.5	7	11	36.6%	0.6
8	8	26.6%	0.1	8	12	40%	0.4
9	8	26.6%	0.1	9	12	40%	0.6
10	8	26.6%	0.4	10	12	40%	0.5

**Table4**  
**Response Frequency Distribution**

NO.	GROUP A					GROUP B				
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
1	High	0	7	1	0	High	0	6	1	1
	Low	2	1	4	1	Low	3	3	1	1
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
2	High	0	3	5	0	High	5	1	1	1
	Low	2	3	2	1	Low	0	3	2	3
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
3	High	0	3	5	2	High	2	2	0	4
	Low	1	5	0	2	Low	0	2	4	2
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
4	High	1	2	2	2	High	0	5	1	2
	Low	4	0	2	3	Low	4	2	2	0
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
5	High	0	0	7	1	High	1	1	5	1
	Low	1	3	2	2	Low	3	3	1	1
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
6	High	0	2	1	3	High	2	1	3	2
	Low	4	1	1	2	Low	3	1	2	2
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
7	High	0	0	6	2	High	2	1	1	4
	Low	0	2	1	5	Low	2	2	1	3
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
8	High	0	2	4	2	High	4	2	2	0
	Low	1	1	5	1	Low	3	2	2	1
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
9	High	2	3	1	2	High	0	5	1	2
	Low	1	2	4	1	Low	2	3	1	2
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D
10	High	1	4	2	1	High	2	2	3	1
	Low	2	0	4	2	Low	2	3	2	1
	Alternatives	A	B	C	D	Alternatives	A	B	C	D

### 3.6.1 **Reliability of the Test**

According to Mousavi (1999:323) reliability of test scores is the term used in language testing to refer to the consistency of measures across different times, testers, and other characteristics of the measurement context. Reliability, in this sense, is synonymous with dependability, stability and consistency. Al-Mutawa and Kailani (1989:166) define reliability as "the degree to which a test produces similar results on different occasions

under similar conditions". Researchers are invited to enhance the reliability of the test scores by:

1. making the test instructions absolutely clear,
2. restricting the scope for variety in the answers, and
3. ensuring that the test conditions remain constant.

### 3.6.2 **Reliability Coefficient of the Test**

For Mousavi (1999:323) coefficient of reliability is the term that describes the quantitative expression of the reliability of the testing instrument or measurement procedure. This quantitative expression is usually produced on a scale ranging from (0) to (1), expressing the extent to which individuals have been measured consistently by a test. In this study, the K.R 21 method (or *Kuder-Richardson*) is used as a tool to insure the reliability of the test items. The researcher has found out that the reliability coefficient of the testing instrument is (0.65) according the K.R 21 method formula. On the basis of this result, the test items are judged valid and reliable.

### 3.7 **Final Application of the Test**

The final application of the test was conducted on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April in 2005. A hundred and thirty students participated in the test administration. The students were required to turn in their answer sheets within 30 minutes starting from the minute when the researcher finished his instructive notes about the test objectives. The answer sheets were collected after 30 minutes.

### 3.8 Scoring Scheme of the Test

The scoring scheme of the test refers to the scheme adopted in scoring the test items. In the present study the scoring scheme of the test is (1) score for each correct item and (0) score for each wrong item. Thus, we will have ten scores for group A and ten scores for group B, and that is twenty total.

### 3.9 Statistical Tools of the Study

The term "statistical tool" refers to the mechanisms that are used in the present study to obtain the final result on which significant inferences and decisions are going to be based.

#### 3.9.1 Percentage

This very common statistical tool is used to find out the percentage of the agreements and disagreements among the jury members concerning the validity of the items of the test. The resulting percentage is (63%).

#### 3.9.2 K.R 21 Method

The K.R 21 method reliability coefficient is defined by Mousavi (1999: 200) as an approach to estimating the reliability of test scores which provides a measure of internal consistency. This approach involves only a single administration of the test. It is simply based on the calculation of the *Mean* and the *Variance* of test scores. These values are then put in the following formula:

$$r = \frac{K}{K-1} \left[ 1 - \frac{\bar{x}(K - \bar{x})}{KV} \right]$$

K= number of items of the test.

$\bar{x}$  = the mean score

V= the variance of the test score

### 3.9.3 One Sample T-Test

Mousavi (1999: 427) defines T-test as the quantitative procedure for determining the statistical significance of the difference between the Means on two scores. The T-test value is calculated by applying the following formula:

$$t = \frac{X - M}{\frac{Sd}{\sqrt{n}}}$$

M= the theoretical mean score

X= the mean score

Sd= standard deviation

n= number of subjects

In the present study, T-test method is used to determine the statistical significance of the difference between the Mean of the test scores and the theorem Mean (the hypothetical average of the test scores which equals 5.5 for each group of test items).

### 3.9.4 Formula of Difficulty Level

$$DL = \frac{HC - LC}{N}$$

DL= Difficulty Level

HC= high group

LC= low group

N= the number of subjects

### 3.9.4 Formula of Discrimination Power

$$DP = \frac{RU - RL}{\frac{1}{2}T}$$

DP= discrimination power

RU= right answer in the upper group

RL= right answer in the lower group

T= total

# **CHAPTER FOUR**

*Analysis and Discussion  
of  
the Test Results*



#### **4.1 An Introductory Note:**

Chapter Four will present the following:

1. the data that resulted from the application of the test,
2. the results of the application of the one sample T-test,
3. the researchers' analytical views of the results of the test, and
4. discussion of the results of each item.

#### **4.2 Computation of the Results**

The results of the present investigation of the EFL students' awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expressions have shown that the recognition ability of culture-bound idiomatic expressions in the subjects' performance is far below the required average that is anticipated by the EFL instructors and teachers which equals in this study (10.5).

One might argue that the test items used in this study were so small a portion to provide reliable evidence for the wide range of idiomatic expressions. It is very important to note, however, that according to the EFL experts who honoured this study with their remarks, the test items used in the study are valid and representative of the linguistic aspect being investigated. Moreover, test items in the multiple choice format would have produced more than a ten-page test, which would have required more time for the subjects of the study to complete the test. Therefore, it should be understood that the outcome of this research will definitely produce insights

regarding the EFL students' awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expression for the fact that it can make claims for statistical generalization of the test results.

The results of this study have some implications for EFL teachers who should deal with culture-bound idiomatic expressions as an essential part in English language. The results of the investigation also imply that the EFL students' level of knowledge of culture-bound idiomatic expressions shown by the subjects in this study refers to a serious problem represented in the explicit lack of awareness in this aspect of language.

This explicit lack of awareness is clearly shown in the responses of the subjects of the study. Approximately, two thirds of the whole sample of the study are below the average recognition ability required in EFL. The tables below show the subjects' responses as compared to the Mean.

*Table 5*  
**Subjects' Scores Compared to the Mean score**

<b><i>Subjects' Scores Compared to the Mean</i></b>	<b><i>GROUP A</i></b>		<b><i>GROUP B</i></b>	
	<b><i>Frequency</i></b>	<b><i>Percentage</i></b>	<b><i>Frequency</i></b>	<b><i>Percentage</i></b>
Equals or above the Mean	25	19.2%	62	47.7%
Less than the Mean	105	80.8%	68	52.3%
Total	130	100%	130	100%

Table 6  
**Frequency and Percentage of the Test Scores**

<b>GROUP A</b>			<b>GROUP B</b>		
<i>Scores</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Scores</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
0	14	10.8%	1	7	5.4%
1	24	18.5%	2	16	12.3%
2	27	20.8%	3	10	7.7%
3	16	12.3%	4	29	22.3%
4	46	18.5%	5	38	29.2%
5	18	13.8%	6	17	13.1%
6	3	2.3%	7	8	6.2%
7	4	3.1%	8	3	2.3%
-	-	-	9	2	1.5%
Total	130	100%	Total	130	100%

The one-sample T-test is used as a statistical tool in order to find out whether the difference between the Mean score and the theorem score is statistically significant or not. The resulting T-value which is (-3.784) proved to be greater than the statistical T-value which is (1.961) and the results are significant in favor of the theorem. This leads to the conclusion that the general level of the EFL students' performance is below the average.

#### 4.3 **Discussion of the Results**

Idiomatic expressions are often culture-bound, in the sense that they refer to an element in one culture that is not necessarily universal. Often, the separate words used in the idiomatic expression do not provide a clue to the meaning of the whole idiom. This accounts for the remarkable lack of linguistic awareness of this aspect in the Iraqi EFL students' linguistic abilities. The tables below show the subjects responses on each item:

Table 7

**Subjects Responses on Each Item**

<b><u>GROUP A</u></b>	<b><u>Idiomatic Expressions</u></b>	<b><u>Right</u></b>	<b><u>Wrong</u></b>	<b><u>Percent</u></b>
	1. <i>The black sheep of the family</i>	29	101	22.3%
	2. <i>Rome was not built in a day</i>	32	98	24.6%
	3. <i>Burnt my bridges</i>	45	85	34.6%
	4. <i>Burning the midnight oil</i>	41	89	31.5%
	5. <i>The ball is in your court</i>	24	106	18.4%
	6. <i>My days are numbered</i>	26	104	20%
	7. <i>Heard a pin drop</i>	24	106	18.4%
	8. <i>No use crying over spilt milk</i>	44	86	33.8%
	9. <i>Get things off your shoulder</i>	36	94	27.6%
	10. <i>Like the back of my hand</i>	31	99	23.8%

<b><u>GROUP B</u></b>	<b><u>Idiomatic Expressions</u></b>	<b><u>Right</u></b>	<b><u>Wrong</u></b>	<b><u>Percent</u></b>
	1. <i>Adding insult to injury</i>	52	78	40%
	2. <i>Bending over backwards</i>	44	86	33.8%
	3. <i>Feel like a million dollars.</i>	52	78	40%
	4. <i>Put out the red carpet.</i>	59	71	45%
	5. <i>Have a face like thunder</i>	60	70	46%
	6. <i>Hold your horses</i>	56	74	43%
	7. <i>Sweet nothings</i>	51	79	39%
	8. <i>A skeleton in the closet</i>	53	77	40.7%
	9. <i>keep your fingers crossed</i>	62	68	47.6%
	10. <i>Walking on eggshells</i>	49	81	37.6%

Consider the following example:

- *State companies will be put under the hammer*

The phrase *under the hammer* refers to auctioning of companies. The hammer is the auctioneer's hammer. The process of an auction

may be fairly universal, but the individual words in this expression give no help in understanding its idiomatic meaning.

In a similar vein, the idiomatic expressions used in the present study are culture-bound and semantically non-transparent. The idiomatic expression A1 *the black sheep of the family* is a very common expression in English, yet it is hardly used by Iraqi EFL students because of its culture specificity. The idiomatic imagery utilized in this idiomatic expression is not one that an Iraqi EFL student might be exposed to in his/her culture. So it is not part of the students' cognitive structure. Only 29 students out of 130 were able to give the right answer.

The idiomatic expression A2 *Rome was not built in a day* is a typical example of culture-bound idiomatic expressions for the fact that it utilizes such historical imagery that is culturally related to the English. In the present study only 32 EFL students were able to provide the correct answer, while 98 students failed to.

The idiomatic expression A3 *Burnt my bridges* is relatively closer to an Arabic version of this idiomatic expression which is burn *my ships* (= احرق سفيني), that is the reason why 45 students were able to provide the correct answer of this item and that makes 34.6% of the whole sample. The results of this item show that students' linguistic competence, as far as idiomatic expressions are concerned, is intensely affected and governed by the cultural element in linguistic

awareness. The students that provided the correct answer must have utilized their interlingual transfer strategy in transferring the Arabic version of the idiomatic expression to the English one.

The idiomatic expression A4 *Burning the midnight oil* is purely culture-bound and does not have an Arabic identical or semi-identical equivalent. For this idiomatic expression 41 students provided the correct answer out of 130 which makes the percentage 31% which reflects the lack of cultural awareness of idiomatic expression use in the English language.

The idiomatic expression A5 *the ball is in your court* is another culture-bound idiomatic expression. Only 24 students out of 130 were able to provide the correct answer which makes the percentage 18.4% and that is a very low one compared to the others. In this idiomatic expression, the mother tongue of the students interferes and again we have what has been referred to above as **interlingual transfer** of idiomatic expression. The idiomatic expression in this item does have an Arabic semi-equivalent (الكرة في ملعبك). This fact distracted the students from the correct answer that is not as attractive as the others. The words (field, ground, and side) are more inviting to replace the Arabic word (ملعب) than the word (court) which is the correct answer in this item. The results of this item show that the students might misuse the interlingual transfer strategy and produce non-English versions of idioms transferred from the students' mother tongue. Thus, they should be aware of the native

speakers' version of the idiomatic expression, and should avoid negative interlingual transfer of idiomatic expressions.

The idiomatic expression A6 *My days are numbered*, like the case in the previous item, is semi-equivalent to the Arabic idiomatic expression (أيامك معدودة). This idiomatic expression showed that the students are attracted to the wrong alternatives (*limited, countable, few*) avoiding the correct one that is (*numbered*). The culture specificity of this idiomatic expression imposed a harder task on the part of the students. It also shows that the students are not aware of the use of this idiomatic expression. As mentioned in the definition of idiomatic expressions, they form single units and the retentive processes of single units are much easier than cluster units like sentences. This idiomatic expression is answered correctly by 26 students out of 130, which makes up 20% of the total sample of the study.

The idiomatic expression A7 *Heard a pin drop* is evidently semantically non-transparent, in the sense that the meaning of those idiomatic expressions cannot be inferred from the linguistic units that constitute them. This linguistic feature that characterizes most common idiomatic expressions (especially culture-bound idiomatic expression) formed such a challenging task for the Iraqi EFL students in the advanced level. The 24 students that answered this item correctly are only a small portion of the study sample, for they are only 18.4% of the whole sample. The subjects of the study were

distracted by the Arabic version of the idiomatic expression ( صوت الإبرة).

The idiomatic expression A8 *No use crying over spilt milk* is perfectly culture-bound. It has no equivalent what-so-ever in the Arabic language. The subjects of the study responded to this idiomatic expression so passively for only 44 subjects out of the total 130 subjects of the study sample were able to provide the right answer. This again reflects the lack of Iraqi EFL students' awareness of the culture-bound idiomatic expressions.

The idiomatic expression A9 *Get things off your shoulder* is another typical example of culture-specific idiomaticity, although it does have an Arabic equivalent. The students that were attracted to the three distracters (chest, heart, and mind) in this item are 27.6 % of the whole sample of the study, as only 36 students out of 130 were able to choose the right answer (shoulder). This again reflects the lack of awareness of the cultural element in the idiomatic expressions.

The idiomatic expression A10 *Like the back of my hand* is purely culture-specific for the fact that Arabic does not have an equivalent idiomatic expression. Only 31 subjects of the test sample answered this item and that is 23.8% of the 130 subjects that constitute the sample of the study. This reflects the idea of the linguistic-specificity of some of the idiomatic expressions in the English language on the



one hand and the serious lack of the cultural element in the Iraqi EFL students' linguistic competence.

The idiomatic expression B1 *Adding insult to injury* is a semantically non-transparent culture-bound idiomatic expression. Only 52 students out of the 130 sample of the study were able to provide the right answer, which makes 40% of the whole sample.

The idiomatic expression B2 *Bending over backwards* is another fossilized culture-bound idiomatic expression that requires the EFL students to be aware of its meaning, for the fact that the semantic structure of this idiomatic expression does not allow for the understanding of the idiomatic expression. Only 44 students out of the 130 sample were able to answer this item, and that is 33.8%.

The idiomatic expression B3 *Feel like a million dollars* is apparently culture-bound idiomatic expression for it has the word *dollars* and the currency is one of the most distinctive culture items. The Iraqi EFL students, unless aware of the meaning of this idiomatic expression, would not be able to guess its meaning, for the fact that it is one of the idiomatic expressions that are semantically non-transparent. Only 52 students out of the 130 students were able to provide the correct answer, and that is 40% of the whole sample.

The idiomatic expression B4 *Put out the red carpet* is purely culture-bound idiomatic expression for the fact that Arabic does not have an equivalent idiomatic expression. Only 59 out of the 130

students answered this item and that makes 45% of the whole sample.

The idiomatic expression B5 *Have a face like thunder* is apparently culture-bound idiomatic expression for the fact that the association between *thunder* and the idea of anger is obviously culture-specific. The Iraqi EFL students need to be informed of such idiomatic expressions. Only 60 students were able to correctly answer this item, and that is 46% of the whole sample.

The idiomatic expression B6 *Hold your horses* is purely culture-bound. It is one of those imageable idiomatic expressions which require a prior knowledge of their meaning and structure for good perception and production. The students responded to this item with 56 correct answers out of the total sample and that is 43% of the whole sample.

The idiomatic expression B7 *Sweet nothings* is a typical example of culture-bound idiomatic expressions for the fact that Arabic does not possess such an idiomatic expression. The visualization of love words as "sweet nothings" is quite unique to English. Thus, few students would be able to recognize the idiomatic expression as meaning love words. Only 51 students out of 130 were able to provide the correct answer which is 39% of the whole sample.

The idiomatic expression B8 *A skeleton in the closet* is another fossilized culture-bound idiomatic expression that requires the EFL

students to be aware of its meaning, for the fact that the semantic structure of this idiomatic expression does not allow for the understanding of the idiomatic expression. Only 53 out of the 130 sample answered this item and that is 40.7% of the sample.

The idiomatic expression B9 keep your fingers crossed is evidently semantically non-transparent and culture-bound because of the fact that the Arabic language does not possess such an expression and in fact the Arabic culture does not have the idea of crossing the fingers to mean hopeful. Thus, there is little wonder that the Iraqi EFL students are, to some extent, unable to understand the meaning of this expression. Only 62 testees answered this item and that is 47.6% of the whole sample of the study.

The idiomatic expression B10 Walking on eggshells is purely culture-bound and semantically non-transparent which makes it a typical testing item in this study. However, the students' mother tongue has an imageably equivalent idiomatic expression ( **يمشي على** ) ( **بيض** ) but with totally different meaning and context. In Arabic it means "slow", whereas in the target language it means "gentle". Only 49 out the 130 subjects of the test answered this item and that is 37.6% of the whole sample of the study.

Having discussed the above testing items, we arrive at the ground where we can infer that the cultural element in L2 and FL teaching and learning is an effective aspect of language, and the

curriculum should provide an understanding of culture in L2 and FL education. Thus, the awareness of culture-bound idiomatic expressions is therefore a very important precondition of language acquisition. The next chapter will be concerned with the presentation of the conclusions of the whole study.

# CHAPTER FIVE

*Conclusions,  
Recommendations,  
and,  
Suggestions*

## **5.1 Conclusions of the Theoretical Background**

Generally speaking, the study at the theoretical level has reached the following conclusions:

1. Although many terms have been adopted to describe the phenomenon of idiomaticity in English, it seems that linguists and lexicographers agree upon the term *idiom* or *idiomatic expression* to refer to the same linguistic phenomenon.
2. Unpredictability of meaning is not the only criterion of idiomaticity. Set phrases are also idiomatic for example : "*as a matter of fact*" , "*just to be on the safe side*"
3. The meaning of most idiomatic expressions must have had a relationship with the meanings of their constituents at some time in the past; otherwise they would never have been expressed by them.
4. The meaning of many idiomatic expressions results from the figurative extension of the original situation which is often unknown to the majority of speakers. This source may have been obscured by time.
5. Idiomatic expressions do not exist in the same degrees of idiomaticity. Thus, there are "pure idioms", "semi-idioms", and those expressions which are only marginally idiomatic.

6. The borderline between pure idiomatic expressions and other types of idiomatic expressions is not clearly drawn; actually it is imprecise.
7. Formation of idioms is a complicated process in which a mutual influence of linguistic psychological and cultural factors plays a part.
8. Learning idiomatic expressions not only introduces students to some cultural aspects of the English language, but it also makes them feel confident in using the expressions and repeating them when the chance arises. When students learn idiomatic expressions in a foreign language, for instance, they feel they own something from that language probably forever. Native speakers seem impressed when foreign language learners properly include idiomatic expressions in their own language. After all, such expressions beautify the language and make speech more eloquent.

## 5.2 *Conclusions of the Survey*

In this study, the following is concluded:

1. The subjects' poor performance on both sections of the test supports the belief that idiomatic expression in English present a serious problematic issue that needs to be

investigated by experts of EFL. This difficulty is attributed to one or more of the following factors:

- the nonliteral meaning of many idiomatic expressions,
- the odd word grouping of some idiomatic expressions,
- the unjustifiable word order of some idiomatic expressions,
- insufficiency of teaching techniques followed in this area,
- the cultural differences between Arabic and English,
- lack of cultural assimilation on the part of the students,
- inadequate teaching of English in Iraqi schools and colleges,
- inadequacy of the criteria of textual frequency, and
- inadequate curricula used in teaching English in Iraq.

2. The students' responses to the test items in its two parts proved that the frequency of occurrence of idiomatic expressions is not a crucial factor in the mastering of these expressions. This is evidence that what is actually introduced in the classroom is not necessarily taken in or processed by the learners.

3. Students' familiarity with the idiomatic expressions proved to be a decisive factor in the processing of such expressions.

4. In both parts of the test the subjects' performance has been affected by one or more of the following factors: (a)



familiarity of idiomatic expressions, (b) degree of idiomaticity, (c) the absence or existence of a particular TL idiomatic expression in the learners' mother tongue, and (d) the presence of some situational signals between the target idiomatic expressions and the sentence constituents.

5. The majority of erroneous responses on both parts of the test reflect a high degree of ignorance of the meaning and use of the idiomatic expressions in question.

6. On both parts of the test the English idiomatic expressions that have equivalents in Arabic proved to be easier to recognize than those that are more culture specific. In the cases where there are idiomatic expressions in spoken Arabic but not in Standard Arabic, such idiomatic expressions seem to be more attractive. In other words, evidence shows that students refer first to the spoken variety of Arabic before referring to the standard variety.

7. The erroneous responses made on the recognition level can be attributed to the following reasons:

- the literal translation of idiomatic constituents on the part of the subjects,
- the students' inability to differentiate between the meanings,
- the students' unfamiliarity with many idiomatic expressions,

- the high degree of idiomaticity of many idiomatic expressions,
- the wrong hypotheses made by the subjects about the link between the target idiomatic expressions and the rest of the sentence,
- erroneous interpretation either on syntactic bases only or semantic bases only, and
- interference of the students' mother tongue.

### **5.3 Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations**

Based on the conclusions stated above, the following Recommendations are put forward:

1. Due to the fact that English is very rich in idiomatic expressions, syllabus designers should not overlook integrating these expressions in the main stream of ELT materials. This integration should be based on selective materials and gradual presentation of these constructions.
2. Since transparent idiomatic expressions proved to be the easiest idiomatic expressions on both parts of the test, it is recommended that these expressions should be introduced first to the learners during their earlier stages of studying English. This must be accompanied by observation, practice, intensive drilling, very careful study, exact learning, careful

listening to native speakers, and careful reading of texts containing idiomatic expressions.

3. As the frequent occurrence of idiomatic expressions in the students' textbooks failed to improve their recognition ability textbook writers must not merely present idiomatic expressions here and there in the students' textbook without highlighting these expressions as an important part of the vocabulary of English. Thus, idiomatic expressions are best presented as they arise, and emphasized according to their usefulness and practical value.
4. A full mastery of English idiomatic expressions requires years of practice and intensive study as well as familiarity with the cultural background of the language. This study must be integrated with the regular teaching of grammar and vocabulary. This means that more than an incidental reading will be required to understand and properly use English idiomatic expressions especially in an FL learning situation.
5. Iraqi learners should be very careful in their use of fixed idiomatic expressions and must be very careful too in noticing the exact words that constitute any idiomatic expression in addition to the exact arrangement of these words since any random change in the choice and arrangement of words will make the expression meaningless.

6. Iraqi teachers of English should always advise their students that idiomatic expressions must not be translated into English from the mother tongue, since in most cases this process results in a puzzling set of words.

#### **5.4 Suggestions for Further Research**

1. A theoretical study could be carried out dealing either with the semantic aspects of idiomaticity, the syntactic aspects of idiomaticity or with both aspects, i.e. concentrating on the idiosyncratic properties of idiomatic expressions.
2. Two studies might be conducted, each of which deals with one of the following questions:
  - What can we learn about the principles of language from the properties of idiomatic expressions?
  - How culture-specific and universal factors interact in the understanding of idiomatic expressions?
3. A study can be conducted to investigate the specific behaviour of idiomatic expressions in language use, which is to establish pragmatic and discoursal models for English idiomatic expressions. This means that idiomatic expressions are in context when people interact in English.
4. A complete work can be done on "idiomatization", that is the process of idiom formation both synchronically and

diachronically, and other related issues. The researcher here has to consider some of the major causes which give rise to idiomatization both synchronically and diachronically.

5. A study can be carried out to evaluate the Iraqi prescribed textbooks at the intermediate, secondary and undergraduate levels, as far as idiomatic expressions are concerned. This includes how idiomatic expressions are presented, exercised, and taught, etc. in these textbooks.

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# **Appendix 1**

*University of Baghdad  
College of Education  
(Ibn Rushd)  
Department of Educational  
And Psychological Sciences  
Higher Studies*

## ***A Letter to the Jury Members***

**Dear Sir / Madam**

The researcher intends to conduct a descriptive study entitled "ASSESSING EFL STUDENTS' CULTURAL AWARENESS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE".

The present study aims at investigating the extent to which Iraqi EFL students are aware of using culture-bound idiomatic expressions as part of their linguistic competence.

Attached to this letter, a list containing 33 items of multiple choice test which have been derived from The Oxford Idioms Dictionary (2001). You are kindly requested to review these items in order to illuminate the researcher and help in accomplishing the aims of the present study. You are also invited to add or recommend any modification you believe necessary for the test to achieve its aims.

**With all respect and gratitude**

*Yours Sincere*

*Maitham Kadhim/ M.A. Candidate*

## *The Test*

This test is designed to measure Iraqi EFL students' recognition ability of culture-bound idiomatic expressions:

**A.** The EFL student should put a circle around one of the four choices that they think is the correct option. (Note that idiomatic expressions are *italicized*).

1. He is always treated as the black ----- *of the family*.  
a-bird      b-sheep      c-goat      d-duck
  
2. If *the ball is in your* -----it is your turn to take action.  
a-field      b-ground      c-court      d-side
  
3. They should be more patient, -----*was not built in a day*.  
a- Heaven      b-England      c-Rome      d-Earth
  
4. *Adding insult to injury* is -----  
a-being so cruel      b-making bad things worse  
c-being so rude      d-dong nothing but bad
  
5. If you are *bending over backwards* you are -----  
a-trying very hard      b-going the wrong way  
c-being disrespectful      d-being very tired
  
6. If someone *feels like a million dollars*, he is very -----  
a- happy      b-big      c- rich      d- attractive
  
7. Go back to my job! Don't you remember that *I'd burn my* -----.  
a- ships      b- roads      c-bridges      d-walls

8. If you promised to *come* ----- you should do so.  
a-rain or shine    b-good or bad  
c-day or night    d-black or white
9. If you *burn the midnight* ----- you work very late at night  
a- food    b- oil    c- wood    d- fire
10. If someone tells you *hold your horses* you should be -----.  
a- ready    b- careful    c- patient    d- brave
11. If your employer said *your days are* -----, you are fired.  
a- limited    b- countable    c- few    d- numbered
12. This is very much like moving *the deckchairs on the Titanic*.  
a- futile    b- dangerous    c- sad    d- lucky
13. If you are *at the death's* -----, you are dying soon.  
a- doorway    b- ways    c- door    d- gate
14. If you *miss the* -----, you lost an opportunity.  
a- ship    b- train    c- bus    d- boat
15. If you have the freedom to go where you want, *the world is your* -----.  
a- oyster    b- ocean    c- business    d- home
16. If you have a very angry expression on your face; then *you have a face like* -----.  
a- fire    b- storm    c- thunder    d- bomb
17. She is so thin that she is really nothing more than *skin and* -----  
a- flesh    b- skeleton    c- clothes    d- bones



18. If you deal with a very difficult and dangerous situation in a direct and brave way, you *take the bull by the* -----  
a- leg    b- horns    c- head    d- tail
19. It was so quiet in the room that you could have *heard* ----- *drop*.  
a- a feather    b- aitches    c- a pin    d- needle
20. If you look so angrily at someone, you *look* ----- *at them*.  
a- daggers    b- swords    c- knives    d- murders
21. If you give an important visitor a special welcome; then you *put out the red* -----  
a- tape    b- carpet    c- linen    d- rag
22. Someone you are very pleased to *see is a sight for*-----.  
a- blind    b- sore    c- bad    d- blue
23. A person who moves around a lot so does not have many possessions or responsibilities is *a rolling* -----  
a- cloud    b- ice ball    c- wave    d- stone
24. If you say it is *no use crying over spilt* ----- you think it's a waste of time to worry or complain about things that can't be changed.  
a- tea    b- coffee    c- water    d- milk
25. Do you want to talk about it, you might feel better if you *get things off your* -----  
a- chest    b- shoulder    c- heart    d- mind
26. If a piece of clothing fits perfectly, you say *it fits like* -----.  
a- hat    b- glove    c- dream    d- skin
27. Trying to keep two jobs and looking after the family *is no* -----*at all*.  
a- party    b- feast    c- barbecue    d- picnic

28. If an emotion can clearly be seen in someone's expression, *it is written all over his/her* -----  
a- forehead    b- face    c- eyes    d- look
29. I have lived here all my life so I know the city *like the back of my* -----  
---.  
a- mind    b- hand    c- eyes    d- head
30. If news spreads in spoken words they *spread by word of* -----.  
a- letters    b- tongue    c- speech    d- lips
31. Pleasant romantic words that lovers say to each other are *sweet* -----  
--.  
a- letters    b- whisperings    c- wordings    d- nothings
32. If you can't remember a name, but feel that you will soon remember it is  
on *the* ----- *of your tongue*.  
a- edge    b- front    c- end    d- tip
33. If you are not as well or cheerful as usual you are *under the* ----- .  
a- rain    b- clouds    c- weather    d- storm

## Appendix 2

### The Final Form of the Test after Amendments:

*College of Education*  
*Department of English*

**A test of Iraqi EFL students' recognition ability  
of English idiomatic expressions**

- B. Choose one of the four options provided below to complete the idiomatic expressions within the following sentences. Put a circle around the correct answer.
- 1- He is always treated as *the black* ----- of the family.  
a-bird    b-sheep    c- goat    d- duck
  - 2- They should be more patient, ----- was not built in a day.  
a-Heaven    b-England    c-Rome    d-Earth
  - 3- How can I get my job back? I have *burnt my* -----.  
a- ships    b- roads    c- bridges    d- walls
  - 4- You look so tired. You must have been *burning the midnight* -----.  
a-food    b-oil    c-wood    d-fire
  - 5- Now, *the ball is in your* ----- . It is your turn to take action.  
a-field    b-ground    c-court    d-side
  - 6- I must find another job. The manager said *my days are* ----- in this one.  
a-limited    b-countable    c-few    d-numbered
  - 7- It was so quiet in the room that you could have *heard* ----- drop.  
a-a feather    b-aitches    c-a pin    d-needle
  - 8- What happened will never be changed, so *no use crying over spilt* -----.  
a-tea    b-coffee    c-water    d-milk
  - 9- Come on, you should talk about it. I am sure you will feel better if you *get things off your* -----.  
a- chest    b-shoulder    c-heart    d-mind
  - 10- I have lived here all my life. I know the city *like the back of my* -----.  
a-mind    b-hand    c-eyes    d-head

C. Provide the meaning of the following idiomatic expressions using the options provided below. Put a circle around the correct answer.

1- *Adding insult to injury.*

- a- being so cruel                      b- making bad things worse  
c- doing nothing but bad            d- being so rude

2- *Bending over backwards.*

- a-trying very hard                    b- going the wrong way  
c-being disrespectful                c- being very tired

3- *Feel like a million dollars.*

- a-happy    b-big    c-rich    d- attractive

4- *Put out the red carpet.*

- a- fight    b- welcome    c- love    d- hate

5- *Have a face like thunder.*

- a- strong    b- nice    c- angry    d- annoying

6- *Hold your horses.*

- a- be ready    b- be careful    c- be patient    d- be brave

7- *Sweet nothings*

- a- nonsense    b- rubbish    c- threats    d- love words

8- *A skeleton in the closet.*

- a- secret    b- lazy    c- sick    d- fearful

9- *keep your fingers crossed.*

- a- mean    b- hopeful    c- loyal    d- kind

10- *Walking on eggshells.*

- a- funny    b- slow    c- gentle    d- scared

## تقييم الإدراك الثقافي في اللغة الإنكليزية عند منعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية

### كلغة أجنبية

تعد القدرة على استخدام و فهم المفردات الاصطلاحية المتصلة بالثقافة إحدى أهم السمات التي تميز الناطقين بالإنكليزية عن متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية. ولا بد من الإشارة إلى انه من الواضح جدا افتقار متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية في العراق إلى هذا الجانب المهم. ويكمن السبب الرئيس وراء ذلك في حقيقة أن هذه المفردات الاصطلاحية ذات الاتصال الوثيق بالثقافة تميل إلى أن تكون غير شفافة سيمانتيكيا ( أي بقدر تعلق ذلك بعلم-المعاني).

ويعد تعلم و تعليم هذه المفردات الاصطلاحية المتصلة بالثقافة من المهام التي تتطلب جهدا كبيرا من قبل الطالب، المعلم أو معد مناهج اللغة الإنكليزية كالغة أجنبية، إلا انه من الجدير بالذكر أن هذه المفردات تمثل جزءاً أساسيا لا يتجزأ من البناء اللغوي الذي يجب على المتعلم دراسته.

في هذه الدراسة، قام الباحث باستقصاء مستوى الإدراك اللغوي للمفردات الاصطلاحية المتصلة بالثقافة لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية. وقد تحقق هذا الهدف بإخضاع عينة مكونة من ١٣٠ طالباً و طالبة لاختبار مكون من ٢٠ فقرة تضمنت مفردات اصطلاحية متصلة بالثقافة.

أظهرت نتائج الاختبار ضعفاً واضحاً في مستوى إدراك الطلبة لتلك المفردات الاصطلاحية المتصلة بالثقافة. وقد أدت الدراسة إلى استنتاج أن العنصر الثقافي في عملية تعلم و تعليم اللغة الأجنبية من الجوانب المؤثرة جدا في تلك العملية، لذا يجدر بمدرسي و معدي مناهج اللغة الإنكليزية أن يزودوا الطالب بفهم وافٍ وصحيح لهذا الجانب الحيوي من اللغة. اعتمد الباحث نتائج الدراسة كأساسٍ لمجموعة من المقترحات والتوصيات التي تخص تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية.

سيقدم الباحث الدراسة في خمسة فصول. يتناول الفصل الأول مشكلة الدراسة و قيمتها العلمية، و الهدف الذي يعمل عليه الباحث، و الحدود التي ستشتمل عليها الدراسة، و إجراءات تطبيق الاختبار من قبل الباحث، و تعريفات المصطلحات الأساسية في الدراسة. أما الفصل الثاني فيعرض الإطار النظري، و يناقش الدراسات المتعلقة بالدراسة الحالية. والفصل الثالث يتناول الإجراءات التي يتبعها الباحث لتحقيق هدف الدراسة. بينما يركز الفصل الرابع على تحليل البيانات وحساب و عرض نتائج الاختبار مع مناقشة كل فقرة على حدة. وأخيراً، يشتمل الفصل الخامس على عرضٍ للاستنتاجات والتوصيات التي يتقدم بها الباحث مع مجموعة من المقترحات لدراسات مماثلة.

جامعة بغداد  
كلية التربية/ ابن رشد  
قسم العلوم التربوية والنفسية

تقييم الإدراك الثقافي في اللغة الإنكليزية عند متعلمي

اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية

رسالة مقدمة إلى مجلس كلية التربية/ ابن رشد في جامعة بغداد وهي جزء من إكمال  
متطلبات نيل درجة الماجستير في طرائق تدريس اللغة الإنكليزية

تقدم بها  
ميشر كاظم اللامي

بإشراف  
الأستاذ

عايف حبيب العاني

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