



English Idioms and Iranian Beginner Learners: A Focus on Short Stories and Pictures

Dr. Saeed Mehrpour
 Shiraz University

Nurullah Mansourzadeh
 Shiraz University

ABSTRACT

Idiomatic expressions are among the most difficult and challenging aspects in the realm of lexicon. The focus of the present study was on investigating the effect of short stories and pictures on learning idiomatic expressions by beginner EFL learners. For this aim, 52 Iranian EFL learners were chosen and assigned to three groups randomly: two experimental groups and a control one. In order to make certain that all the learners were at the same level of language proficiency, English Beginner Proficiency Test was administered at the outset of the experiment. Thirty English idioms were chosen and taught to each group in ten sessions. To measure the idiomatic knowledge of the participants, a pretest was also administered at the beginning of the study. The first experimental group was taught using short stories, the second experimental group was provided with the pictorial tools and the third group was taught based on conventional and traditional techniques. At the end of the tenth session, a posttest was administered to the three groups to see the effect of using pictures and short stories on learning idiomatic expressions. The obtained results supported the use of pictures and short stories in learning idioms.

INTRODUCTION

To use a language, we should make a choice. Grammarians believe that the restricted nature of language forces users to weigh the goodness of many different possibilities of grammatical features (Gramley & Pätzold, 1992). On the other hand, language users deal with prefabricated and semi-fixed expressions, which provide single options of lexical meanings (Sinclair, 1991). According to Zarei and Rahimi (2012), considering educational and pedagogical perspective, figurative language in general and idioms in particular have been the focus of many researchers. They argue that researchers are interested in investigating different features of human language, which are inseparable and common in conventional language use. To define an idiom as simple as possible, it is an expression with multi-words with fixed or semi-fixed elements whose meaning cannot be understood from its separate parts. Idiomatic expressions are figurative and symbolic expressions such as “strike while the iron is hot” or “cool, calm and collected” which many

linguists and experts regard as single units of meaning and their storage and retention are similar to other units of lexicon (Qualls, O'Brien, Blood, & Hammer, 2003).

As Schmitt (2000) argues, the integral role of fixed language expressions in facilitating the process of language learning cannot be ignored. It has a crucial role in developing the fluency and motivation of language users. Since one of the main features of language fluency refers to articulation of many words and expressions simultaneously, proficient speakers cannot be recognized as such until they have a good command of figurative and fixed expressions to be used in every daily life communication. Considering the significance of idiomatic phrases and their connection to language ability, many scholars have highlighted the use of these units of meaning in their investigations (Danesi, 1992; Littlewood, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Significance of the Study

According to Moreno (2011), as integral aspects of any language, idioms play a significant role in paving the way for an effective and successful communication. As a result, they should be considered and taught appropriately. The present study was an attempt to investigate the role of two presentation techniques or strategies of idiomatic comprehension through short stories and pictorial tools. The results of this inquiry may prove the superiority and effectiveness of these techniques over each other in learning the prefabricated expressions of English as a foreign language. As a result, curriculum designers, syllabus writers, teachers and all stakeholders in the realm of education can utilize the findings of this endeavor. Based on the results of the present study, EFL beginner learners can manage the barriers they face in the process of idiom learning and their use in novel situations.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Undoubtedly, one of the challenging parts of any language is its idiomatic and figurative aspects that even the native speakers cannot overcome easily and when the issue is raised in an EFL context, the problem becomes much more complicated. Consequently, English teachers in such contexts should try their best to raise the awareness of their learners and employ the most effective techniques and strategies to teach idiomatic expressions. Therefore, the aim of this study is to highlight the role of two different techniques in teaching idiomatic expression to Iranian beginner EFL learners. In fact, the evaluation of the effectiveness of each of these two techniques is the focus of the current study.

Based on the prime objectives of the study, the following questions were addressed in the present study:

1. Do using short stories in teaching idiomatic expressions improve Iranian beginner EFL learners' comprehension of idiomatic expressions?
2. Do using pictures in teaching idiomatic expressions improve Iranian beginner EFL learners' comprehension of such expressions?
3. Is using short stories more effective than pictures in teaching idiomatic expressions to Iranian beginner EFL learners?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Regarding processing of idiomatic expressions, different perspectives and theories have been proposed. Bobrow and Bell (1973) have proposed Idiom-list Model, according to which in interpreting the meaning of idioms, first one should resort to their literal meaning. If the literal translation does not meet the contextual requirements, the mental representation of that idiom is the next solution. In this regard, by considering the immediate need of the context, figurative application of the idiom is employed. The second model for idiom processing is the lexical representation model (Swinney & Cutler, 1979). It depicts idioms as long words retrieved from the mental lexicon along with all other words. In a simultaneous processing of both literal and figurative meanings, it's the context which determines the winner.

The use of pictures whether still or animated is supported by dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986) which claims that the association of verbal information with the mental images leads to enhanced remembering of information.

Yeh and Wang (2003) conducted a study on the effectiveness of three kinds of vocabulary learning in academic contexts and concluded that a combination of text and picture was very effective in lexicon retention even for adult learners. Yushii (2006) investigated the role of pictorial cues in vocabulary learning and found that pictures were effective in recognition and production of vocabularies.

According to a study conducted by Sadeghi, Vahid Dastjerdi and Ketabi (2010), the role of context is significant in conveying the appropriate and pertinent meaning of idiomatic expressions. They also highlight the employment of different techniques and strategies to raise the awareness of learners toward understanding the meaning of idioms in different contexts. They add that an implicit knowledge of figurative language is valuable in the process of retaining the abstract meanings. The authors reject this perspective that idioms are bundles of words without conceptual and cultural loads. Their final point is that values, cultural issues and conceptual meanings are interwoven together in figurative language.

According to Rohani, Ketabi, and Tavakoli's study (2012), the effect of stories and video-graphic contexts on learning idiomatic expressions is not significant for short term learning, while in the case of long-term retention, the video-graphic group outperformed the short story one. This finding can be interpreted based on dual coding theory that raises the importance of mental pictures and imagery in retention of the concepts.

Zarei and Salimi (2012) came to this conclusion that the effect of pictures on retention and comprehension of vocabularies cannot be ignored.

According to a study conducted by Zarei and Rahimi (2012), it can be claimed that employing different procedures and techniques such as explanations of words roots, contextual use of words and idioms and direct presentation of those items have no significant effect on the comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. They add that; compared to other techniques, etymological data are more effective in raising the consciousness of EFL learners. Tabatabaei and Mirzaei (2014) highlighted the use of different media such as computers in teaching and learning idiomatic expressions. They argue that L2 learners' comprehension of figurative chunks can be enhanced through using different tools. Compared to traditional techniques such as literal translation and providing equivalents, new technologies provide an authentic context for learners to grasp the meaning and the gist of the expressions. They add that traditional methods are monotonous and boring while the new media provide many opportunities for learners to learn through integrated, dynamic, pictorial and attractive procedures.

Fotovatnia and Khaki (2012) conducted a study in which the role and pedagogical implications of pictorial tools in teaching and learning idiomatic expressions were highlighted. Many studies including Danesi (1995), Hashemian and Talebinezhad (2007) Ghane Shirazi and Talebinezhad (2013) emphasized the role of different modes of presentation to enhance the comprehension of idiomatic phrases to a great extent.

Finally, Mokhtari and Talebinezhad (2014) investigated the effect of short stories on learning idiomatic expressions and concluded that short stories were conducive in enhancing conceptual and meaningful fluency of Iranian learners.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Idioms

Many experts believe that using idioms in different situations is one of the manifestations of fluency in a target language. Idioms are so culture bound and context-sensitive that even many advanced learners are unable to utilize them properly (Zarei & Abbasi, 2013), and here have been different interpretations and definitions of idioms in the related literature. As Cooper (1999) put it, an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be derived from its components. Mayer (1997) highlights the role of different media that can enhance the rate of idiom retention in learners. He refers to different modes such as delivery media, presentation channels and sensory modalities.

Experimental Studies

According to Nation (2001), lexicon has not been the focus of many researchers, though this trend is changing in the current studies. Lexical features combine an integral part of any given language. In general, production and comprehension of a given language, to a large degree, depend on its lexical repertoire. According to Tajali and Tehrani (2009), idioms are the most significant aspect of lexical units of a given language. They maintain that knowing and applying idiomatic expressions are the symbol of native like command of linguistic features. The authors argue that; one of the most demanding aspects of any language is its figurative implication. The role of figurative language in general and idiomatic expression in particular is so important that no teacher or translator dare to ignore their cultural as well as contextual effects in the course of language acquisition (Fernando, 1996). Based on Tajali and Tehrani (2009), a native speaker's ability is evaluated based on the lexicon s/he has mastered and the number of formulaic and fixed phrases she/he has internalized. They went on arguing that, ESL learners should have a good command of individual words and vocabularies. Besides, knowledge of idiomatic chunks is a necessary step toward comprehension and retention language as it is used in every day communication.

METHOD

Context and Participants

The participants of the present study were 52 beginner EFL learners who enrolled at Saei Private Language Institute in Dehdasht, Iran. All of them were male and ranged in age from 14 to 16. All of the participants were native speakers of Persian language. The cultural background and socio-economic status of the participants were somewhat similar in both experimental and control groups.

In order to make sure that all the learners were at the same level of language proficiency, English Beginner Proficiency Test was administered at the outset of the experiment.

Instrument

The main material of the current study was the book of English Idioms in Use by Michael McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell (2002). The logic behind selecting the book was its availability, its frequent publication and being among the best-sellers. Thirty idioms of the above-mentioned book were chosen based on the researcher's own experience, the existence of their equivalents in Persian language as well as consultations with language teachers at Saei Language Institute.

Data Collection and Procedure

At the outset of the study, through English Beginner Proficiency Test, the homogeneity of the participants was proved to be at same level. In order to estimate how reliable the use of the proficiency test is, the researcher administered the test to a pilot group of thirty students similar to target participant of the present study. They were studying at the grade three like the participants of the present study. The KR-21 formula was used for the computation of the internal consistency of the test. The reliability index for the English Beginner Proficiency Test in this study was found to be 0.75, which is considered a positive and acceptable reliability.

The researcher taught English idioms to the three groups, namely the two experimental groups and the control group. The classes were held three times a week. One experimental group was taught English idioms through short stories, the other experimental group received its instruction through using pictures and finally the control group was taught English idioms through conventional procedures such as literal translation, providing equivalents, etc. To measure the idiomatic knowledge of Iranian beginner learners a pretest was administered at the very beginning of the study. First, thirty idioms were selected for teaching to the three groups in ten sessions (each session three idioms). At the end of the tenth session, a posttest was administered to the three groups to see the effect of pictures and short stories on learning idiomatic expressions by the learners. To avoid practice effect (test-wiseness), the order of the question was changed in the posttest. The reliability of pre-test and post-test was calculated using the (KR-21) formula and turned out to be 0.67 and 0.77 respectively which are acceptable indexes of reliability. The validity of all the above-mentioned tests was determined by a panel of experts specialized in the field.

RESULTS

The homogeneity of the groups

In order to make sure that the participants of this study were homogeneous in terms of their knowledge of idioms, an Idiom test with 20 items was administered at the very beginning of the study to the three groups. After gathering the data, the descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were calculated using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program version 19. The results of the homogeneity test are shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Descriptive Statistics for Idiom Test of Control Group, Experimental Group 1, and Experimental Group 2

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Control	20	3.15	1.87	1	7
Experimental 1	17	3.88	1.65	1	7
Experimental 2	15	4.53	2.32	1	10

As shown in Table 4.1, there are trivial differences between the mean scores of the three groups. Since means are not good indicators of differences, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to see whether these mean differences were statistically significant or not. The result of the ANOVA analysis is illustrated in Table 2.2 below.

Table 2.2

Analysis of Variance for Mean Differences between the Three Groups

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	16.62	2	8.31	2.189	0.123
Within groups	186.04	49	3.79		

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As it can be seen in Table 2.2, there was not a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by the one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 49) = 2.189, p = 0.123 > 0.05$). In order to make sure that specific groups were not different, the results of post-hoc tests are presented in Table 2.3 below.

Table 2.3

Post-hoc Test for Group Differences between each other

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Literal Translation	Short Story	- 0.732	.642	0.527
	Picture Learning	- 1.383	.665	0.126
Short Story	Picture Learning	- 0.650	.690	0.644

As illustrated in table 2.3, the results of post-hoc tests showed that no groups differed from each other with p-values of 0.527, 0.126, and 0.644 all of which are above 0.05. Therefore, it can be concluded that the groups were homogeneous in terms of their knowledge of idioms.

Normality of the Distribution of the sample

Being a prerequisite for statistical methods, the normality of the distribution of the sample in terms of knowledge of idioms is displayed in the following figures. The histograms (Figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4) show the normal distribution for the sample as a whole and also for the three groups.

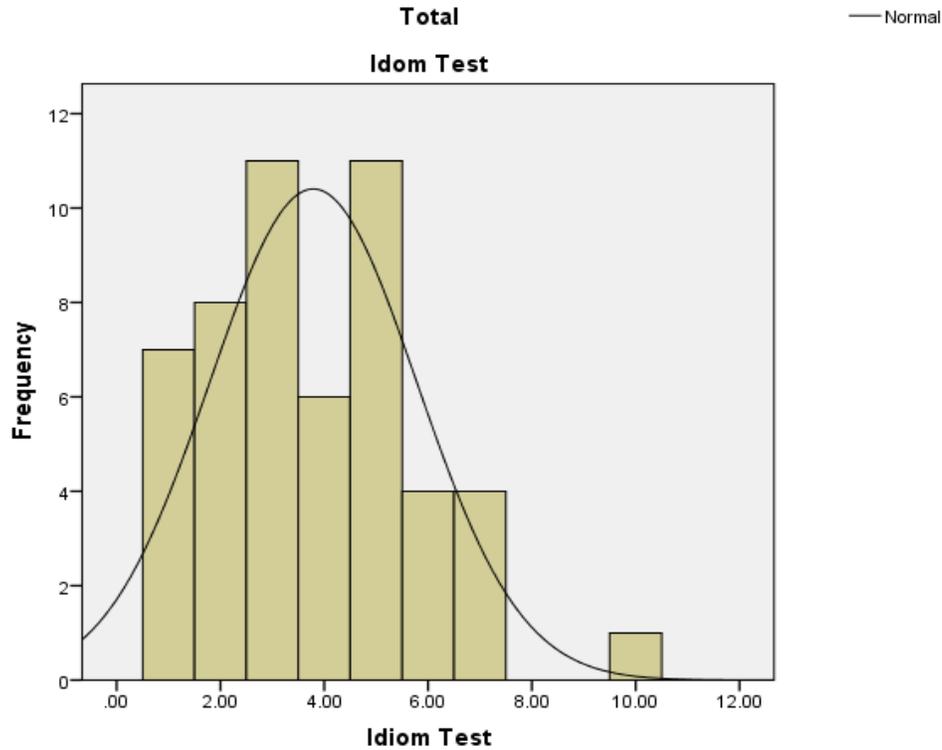


Figure 2.1 The Distribution of all participants' Idiom Test Scores

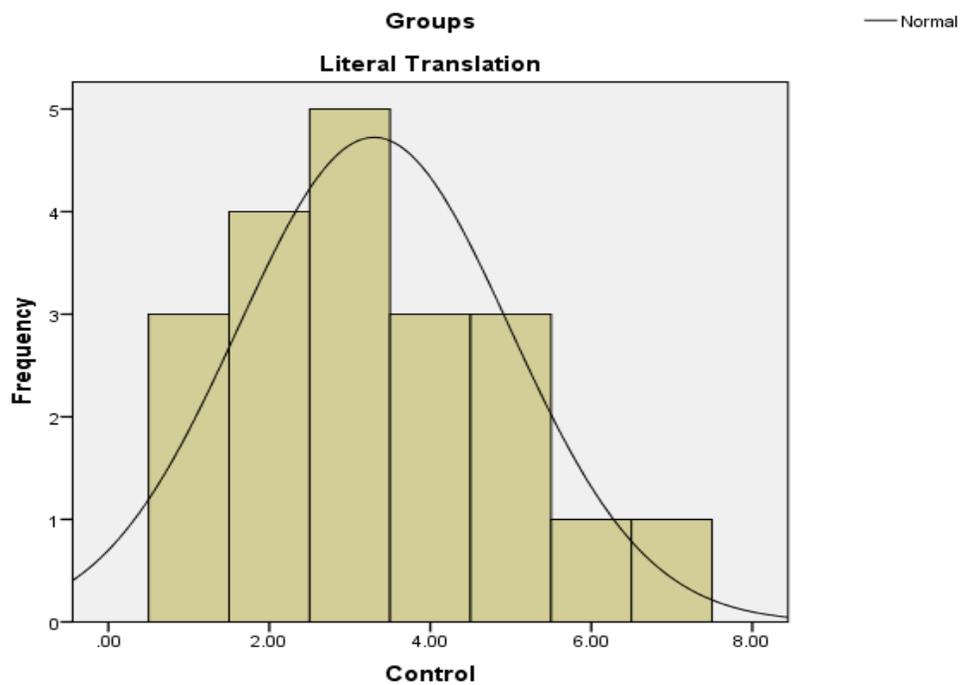


Figure 2.2 The Distribution of the participants' score in the control group

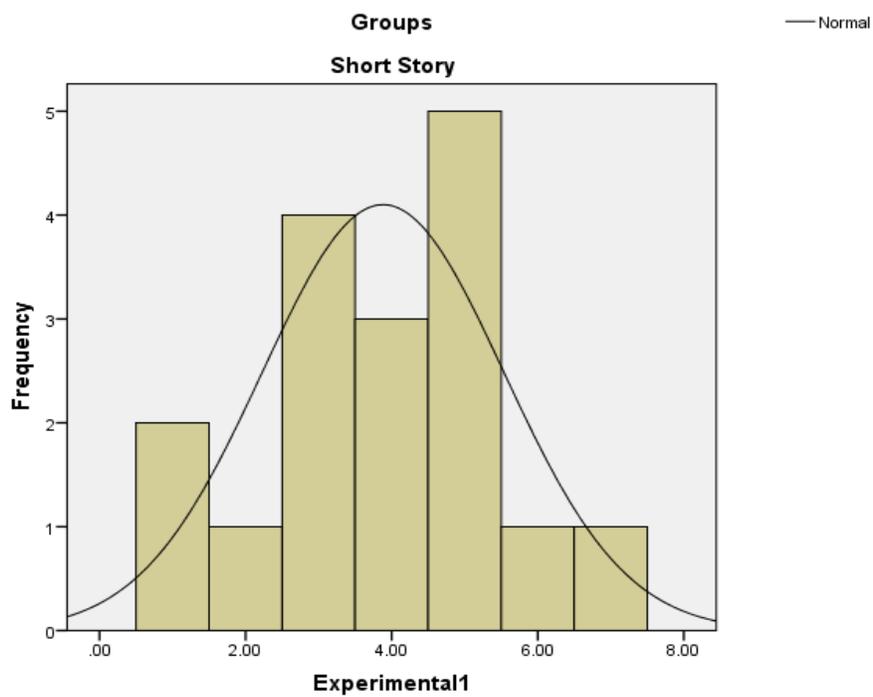


Figure 2.3 The distribution of the participants' score in the Experimental group 1

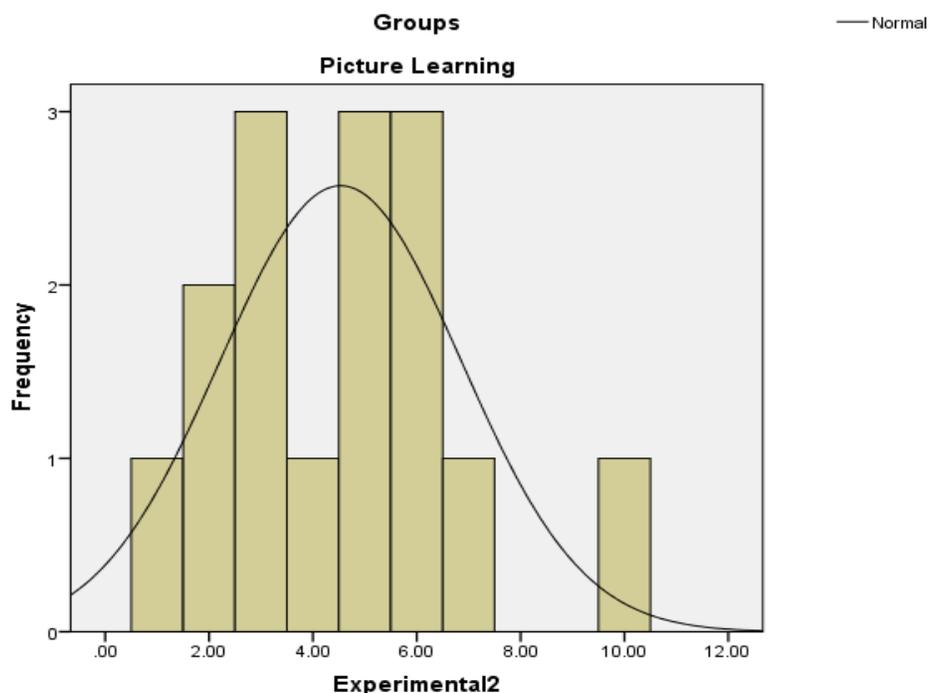


Figure 2.4 the distribution of the participants' score in Experimental group 2

As illustrated here in the figures, the data are distributed normally. Therefore, participants have the same level of knowledge of idioms.

The Results Concerning the First Research Question

Independent-samples t-tests were carried out to find the answers to research question 1.

In order to know whether teaching idiomatic expressions improve Iranian beginner EFL learners' comprehension of such idioms, the descriptive statistics are provided in Table 2.4 below.

Table 2.4

Descriptive Statistics for Idiomatic Test of the Control and the First Experimental Group

	Groups	N	mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Idiom Test	Literal Translation	20	8.20	2.91	4	14
	Short story	17	10.70	2.75	6	15

As shown in Table 2.4, the mean score of the experimental group ($M= 10.70$) is greater than that of the control group ($M= 8.20$). Apparently, there was a difference between the means of the control and the experimental group, i.e. the experimental group outperformed the control one in idiomatic expression test. To ascertain whether there is any statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control and the experimental group, an independent samples t-test was run. Table 2.5 displays the results below.

Table 2.5

Independent Samples T-Test for Idiomatic Expression Test of Control and the First Experimental Group

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Idiom Test	Equal variances assumed	.003	.955	-2.673	35	0.011
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.685	34.56	0.011

Based on the information in Table 2.5, the P-value of the data ($P = .011 < .05$) reveals that there is a statistically significant difference between the experimental group 1 and the control group; therefore, it can be concluded that using short stories in teaching idiomatic expressions improve Iranian beginner EFL learners' comprehension of such expressions.

The Results Concerning the Second Research Question

In order to answer to the second null hypothesis of the second research question, another independent samples t-test was run to compare the mean scores of the two groups.

In the first place, the descriptive statistics of the idiom test is illustrated in Table 2.6.

Table 2.6

Descriptive Statistics for Idiomatic Test of Control and the Second Experimental Group

	Groups	N	mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Idiom Test	Literal Translation	20	8.20	2.91	4	14
	Pictures	15	13.06	2.71	8	17

As illustrated in Table 2.6, the mean score of second experimental group is larger than that of the control group ($13.06 > 8.20$). Thus, seemingly, teaching idiom expressions through pictures improved Iranian beginner EFL learners' comprehension of such expressions. In order to make sure that these mean differences were significant, another independent samples t-test was conducted.

Table 2.7

Independent Samples T-Test for Idiomatic Expression Test of the Control group and the Second Experimental Group

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)

Idiom Test	Equal variances assumed	.227	.637	-5.036	33	0.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.089	31.39	0.000

The result of the t-Test in Table 2.7 revealed that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups in their performance on for the idiomatic expression test. It can be inferred from the results that teaching idioms through pictures is effective.

The Results Concerning the Third Research Question

To get the answer to the third question, it was needed to determine which group improved than the other. To this end, we compared the mean score of the two groups. The Descriptive Statistics of the mean score of the two groups are provided in Table 2.8 below.

Table 2.8

Descriptive Statistics for Idiom Test of Experimental 1, and Experimental2 Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Experimental 1	17	10.70	2.75	6	15
Experimental 2	15	13.06	2.71	8	17

As it can be seen in Table 2.8, there are differences in the mean scores of the two groups. Regarding the idiom test scores, the students who were taught by using pictures had a larger mean score than the other ones. Since the mean score is not a good criterion for actual difference between the groups; therefore, it is necessary to perform an independent samples t-test to achieve the real difference.

Table 2.9

Independent Samples T-Test for Idiomatic Expression Test of the Experimental 1 and Experimental2 Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Idiom Test	Equal variances assumed	.199	.659	-2.436	30	0.021
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.439	29.620	0.021

As seen in Table 2.9, there are significant differences between the two experimental groups. That is, those students taught through pictures had a better performance than those who were taught through short stories. Thus, the third null hypothesis is accepted. That is, using short stories is not more effective than pictures in teaching idiomatic expressions.

DISCUSSION

With respect to the first research question, the results indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean score of the control group and that of the first experimental group. In other words, teaching idioms through short stories improved Iranian beginner EFL learners' comprehension of such expressions. This finding is compatible with the finding of Tabatabaei and Hajizadeh's study (2015) who found the instruction of idioms via short stories effective. The findings are also in line with Khalili and Rezvani (2015) who indicated that using online short stories can have a significantly positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension scores. The reasons behind these results could be discussed in terms of the effectiveness of concepts and idiomatic expressions that students are exposed to in short stories. In fact, there is a kind of real and authentic context in short stories and the opportunities are provided for learners to enjoy and experience authentic materials in context. Thus, they relate and extend what they learn from the short stories to other situations which they experience. As Gere (2001, p. 5) points out, "Storytelling can encourage students to explore their unique expressiveness and can heighten a student's ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an articulate, lucid manner." Regarding the second research question, it was also revealed that using pictures in teaching idiomatic expressions improve Iranian beginner EFL learners' comprehension of such expressions. In line with the findings of the present study, Fotovatnia and Khaki (2012) conducted a study in which the role and pedagogical implications of pictorial tools in teaching and learning idiomatic expressions was highlighted. The findings of the present study are also consistent with those of Yushii (2006) who investigated the role of pictorial cues in vocabulary learning and found that using pictures was effective in recognition and production of vocabularies. In accordance with the findings of the present study, one possible reason behind this improvement may be due to the fact that a picture highlights a particular word through associating it with a memorable image and therefore creates very strong memories and facilitates student learning (Shapiro & Waters, 2005). However, the findings of the present study contradict Shariati and Seyyedrezaei (2015) who showed that the use of pictures and demonstration did not have any significant effect on either vocabulary learning or retention. In other words, the significant effect of the use of pictures and demonstration on vocabulary learning and retention were rejected.

The answer to the third research question demonstrated that a significant difference was found between short story learning and picture learning in teaching idiomatic expressions. That is, using pictures was more effective than short stories in learning idiomatic expressions. The reason why this result was obtained may be related to the contextualized situation of the participants and the teaching conditions.

Based on the limitations of the study, it is important to note that the findings of the present study may not be generalizable to other Iranian EFL learners or other ESL students from other countries. The participants of this study were selected from a small population, which may have affected the outcomes of the study. Thus, for more reliable results and in order to generalize the results a larger number of participants are advised to be taken into account.

CONCLUSION

The current study was meant investigate the effect of teaching idiomatic expressions through pictures and short stories on the comprehension of such expressions. The study also aimed to identify which strategy (short story or picture) is more effective in comprehension of idiomatic expressions. The obtained results indicated that teaching through both short stories and pictures was effective in comprehension of idiomatic expressions but the students learned the idioms via these strategies in the same way.

IMPLICATIONS

Idioms constitute an important aspect of a given language and convey cultural values. Teaching and learning idioms through the most effect techniques and strategies can raise the consciousness of EFL learners towards figurative and contextual implications of language in due situations. Curriculum developers, syllabus designers, teachers and all stakeholders should consider contextual factors such as pictures and short stories in presenting abstract aspects of language. Because of attractiveness and situation based uses, short stories and pictures can be effective modes of idiom comprehension.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Some limitations of the present study can be listed as follows:

- 1- Finding many homogeneous participants was the main challenge of this study.
- 2- The participants of this study were male learners; therefore, the results of the study may not be generalizable to female learners.
- 3- Since the participants of this study were Iranian EFL beginner learners, we must b cautious in generalizing the results to other settings.
- 4- The other factor refers to the size of the research sample that is too small to generalize the findings to other situations.

Dr. Saeed Mehrpour is an associate professor of TEFL and a faculty member of Shiraz University, Iran. He teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses. He has published many articles both nationally and internationally and is mainly interested in conducting research on language skills and sub-skills, language acquisition, and sociolinguistics.

Email: smehrpur@yahoo.com

Nurullah Mansourzadeh is a PhD candidate in TEFL at Shiraz University. He has taught English at different levels for sixteen years. He has published different articles in different journals both nationally and internationally. His areas of interest are vocabulary learning, teacher education, grammar teaching and curriculum development.

Email: N.Mansourzadeh60@gmail.com

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