

# Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues, and Lexical Knowledge in L2 Idioms Learning

**Abbas Ali Zarei**

Associate Professor, Imam Khomeini  
International University, Qazvin  
a.zarei@hum.ikiu.ac.ir

**Nahid Rahimi**

M.A., Islamic Azad University, Takestan  
Venus@yahoo.com

## Abstract

To investigate the effects of etymological elaboration, contextual pragmatic clues, and lexical knowledge on L<sub>2</sub> idioms comprehension and production, 60 male intermediate level EFL students in three groups were selected. Each group was randomly assigned to one treatment condition. Group one participants were presented with the etymological explanation of idioms. In group two, the same idioms were presented in short, familiar contexts, and in the third group, the participants focused on the exact meaning of the constituent parts of each idiom. At the end of the experimental period, comprehension and production posttests of idioms were administered. Two one-way ANOVA procedures were used to analyze data. Results showed that the participants of the etymological elaboration group performed significantly better than the participants of the lexical knowledge group on idiom production. The differences between the means in all other comparisons were not statistically significant. These findings may have implications for teachers, learners, and syllabus designers.

**Keywords:** Idioms, Etymology, Contextualization, Lexical Knowledge

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## **1. Introduction**

Idioms, although neglected before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have received a great deal of attention from pedagogical point of view in recent years. It has been partly because of the growing awareness that these inseparable aspects of human language are very frequent in everyday language use. Cooper (1999), arguing for the essential role that idioms play in foreign language learning, declares that most English speakers utter about 20 million idioms in their lifetime; hence, using proper figurative language would be a mark of native-like speech in every language.

On the other hand, teaching and learning idioms is one of the most difficult areas in second language contexts because most of them have an arbitrary nature. As Charteris (2002) states, figurative idioms are challenging for SL teachers and learners because the meanings of many idioms do not arise from the sum of their grammatical and lexical parts, and this causes difficulties in the systematic instruction of idioms in SL classrooms. As a result, applying a proper approach to teaching idioms has always been of overwhelming interest among language teachers.

Opposed to this view, recent cognitive and corpus linguists believe that the meaning of idioms is not completely arbitrary to be merely learnt through blind memorization. They have inspired new insights into the field of applied linguistics suggesting more insightful and systematic approaches to L<sub>2</sub> idioms learning (Boers, Demecheleer, & Eyckmans, 2004)

The objective of the present study is to investigate three strategies on L2 idioms learning: etymological elaboration, contextual pragmatic clues, and lexical knowledge. Previous studies have shown the positive effect of these strategies on L<sub>2</sub> idiom learning. This study is an attempt to compare them with

### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

each other in order to see which one is the most effective. So, the present study will address the following research questions:

1. Are there any significant differences among the effects of etymological elaboration, contextual pragmatic clues, and lexical knowledge on EFL learners' comprehension of L<sub>2</sub> idioms?
2. Are there any significant differences among the effects of etymological elaboration, contextual pragmatic clues, and lexical knowledge on the production of L<sub>2</sub> idioms?

## **2. Review of the Literature**

### **2.1. Idioms**

Swinney and Cutler (1979, p. 523) define idioms as “a string of two or more words for which meaning is not derived from the meanings of the individual words comprising that string.” According to Irujo (1986), an idiom is a conventionalized expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts. Similarly, Abel (2003) describes idioms as fixed expressions whose figurative meaning is not clear from the literal meaning of their individual constituents.

Grant and Bauers (2004) argue that all the definitions established by the linguists are very general and can be applied to wide-ranging Multi Word Units (MWU). They, therefore, propose a clearer and more restricted definition of the notion of idiom by classifying MWUs into three categories: Core idioms (non-compositional MWUs, the meaning of which cannot be derived from the meanings of their constituents), Figuratives (MWUs with metaphors), and ONCEs (one non-compositional element). Grant and Bauers add that in traditional definitions there are three recurrent themes which are not well

defined: Non-compositionality, institutionalization, and frozenness or fixedness among which they conclude that non-compositionality is the key criterion to define an idiom.

Zhang (2009), on the other hand, states that “idioms are a type of multiple word units that have both literal and figurative meaning. In most cases, the figurative meaning of an idiom cannot be readily derived from the literal meaning of the individual constituent in the unit.”(p. 6)

The importance of idioms has been emphasized by linguists and language teachers in recent years. Bortfeld (2003) believes that the increasing number of idioms in *Dictionary of American Idioms* is indicative of the essential role idioms play in daily language use. In this regard, Moreno (2011) refers to three main reasons why it is so crucial to teach idioms, arguing that because of their high frequency, special attention should be paid to idioms and language teachers should not relegate them to a secondary state in the curriculum:

First, frequent use of idioms makes language learners fluent speakers, and figurative competence in a foreign language is a sign of communicative competence. Moreover, idiomatic expressions which give language variety and character help learners penetrate into culture, customs, and lifestyle of the target language. Secondly, cognitive linguistic studies have demonstrated the crucial role of memory in learning fixed expressions such as idioms. Finally, many idioms are constantly changing over time. In order to find out their underlying essence, we have to resort to cultural factors and adopt a diachronic view of the language (such as etymological elaboration).

Idioms have been classified from different points of view, syntactically or semantically. Makkai (1972) divides idioms into two categories: idioms of encoding are those idiosyncratic lexical combinations that have transparent meaning involving collocational preferences and restrictions, exemplified by *at*

### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

in *he drove at 70 m.p.h.* Idioms of decoding refer to those non-identifiable and misleading lexical expressions whose interpretations could not be comprehended on the basis of only learned linguistic conventions. In other words, the meaning of decoding idioms is not predicable. Expressions such as *beat about the bush* and *fly off the handle* are examples of this type of idioms. Idioms of decoding are classified into lexemic and sememic idioms. (Makkai, 1972)

The degree of 'idiomaticity' that an idiom carries is the most important feature based on which different scholars and linguists have classified idioms. Moon (1996) classifies idioms based on 'the spectrum of idiomaticity' into four categories:

Transparent idioms are those idioms which are easy to comprehend and translate and their meaning can be derived from the meanings of their constituent parts (e.g., *Back and forth*). Semi-transparent idioms are those idioms that usually have metaphorical meaning and their constituent parts have a little role in comprehending the whole meaning of the expression, e.g. *Break the ice*. Semi-opaque idioms are idioms whose figurative meaning is not related to the meanings of their constituent words. In other words, the idiomatic expression is separated in two parts; a part with literal meaning, and the other part with a figurative meaning, e.g. *to know the rope*.

Opaque idioms are the most difficult type of idioms, because the literal meanings of their parts have little to do with the actual sense of idioms; that is, the meaning of an opaque idiom cannot be derived from the meanings of its individual parts because there are items which have cultural references, e.g., *to burn one's boat*.

Research on idiom processing and comprehension in English has resulted in the emergence of different idiom processing models, which have been

summarized as five models (Bobrow & Bell, 1973; Gibbs, 1984; Gibbs & Gonzales, 1985; Gibbs, Nayak, & Catting, 1989; Swinney & Cutler, 1979; Titon & Connie, 1999).

The first model of idiom processing, which was proposed by Bobrow and Bell (1973), is *idiom list hypothesis*. According to this model, idiomatic expressions are accessed from a 'mental idiom word dictionary' called *idiom list* that is not part of the person's normal mental lexicon and access from this list takes place through what has been called *idiom mode*. Bobrow and Bell believe that such processing strategy is different from the processing of literal expressions and normal sentences. When a person first encounters an idiom he/she would attempt to analyze it literally. If the literal analysis fails, the person will access the mental idiom list and then will interpret the idiom non-literally. This model was criticized by later studies in that the essence of this model implied serial processing of idioms, and therefore, could not measure on-line or real time language processing. Swinney and Cutler (1979) argue that the research supporting this model has relied on post-perceptual measures of idiom comprehension processes.

The second model of idiom processing is *lexical representation hypothesis*, which was supported by Swinney and Cutler's (1979) study. The main principle of this model is that idioms are simply complex long words that are stored in the mental lexicon just like all other words and are processed in the same way as ambiguous words (e.g., *bug* which has multiple meanings). This assumption was supported by Titon and Connine (1999), whose study showed that depending on the degree of familiarity with a particular expression, idioms like other lexical entries are readily accessible. According to this model, during idiom comprehension both literal and figurative interpretation of idiomatic expressions take place simultaneously and in parallel, not serial manner.

### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

The third hypothesis is *direct access hypothesis* (Gibbs, 1984), which maintains that non literal interpretation of idioms takes place before literal meaning. Gibbs (1984) argues that when a native speaker encounters a familiar idiomatic expression, s/he will access its figurative sense directly without any reference to literal meaning.

The fourth model of idiom processing is *the compositional analysis* proposed by Gibbs, Nayak, and Cutting (1989). Their study revealed that subjects process decomposable idioms faster than non-decomposable idioms. Decomposable idioms are idioms whose figurative meanings are related to literal meanings (e.g. *pop the question*) while in non-decomposable idioms the figurative meaning cannot be derived from literal meaning (e.g. *kick the bucket*). According to the compositional analysis model, during idiom processing, people analyze the meanings of individual words of the idioms and then come up with their overall meaning.

Finally, the *Hybrid model* (Titon & Connine, 1999) gained insight from all earlier models. It has been suggested in this model that the 'direct look up' model as well as the 'compositional model' are involved in idiom processing. Titon and Connine argue that none of the above approaches alone is adequate for idiom processing, and that compositional and non-compositional (direct look up) approaches are complementary and essential for idiom comprehension. The hybrid model is based on the belief that during idiom comprehension both literal and figurative meanings are activated. Abel (2003) extended the model and introduced the *dual idiom representation* model. The idea behind this model was that non-decomposable idioms are accessed from an idiom entry while decomposable idioms are represented via their constituent entries, which can develop an idiom entry if they are encountered more frequently.

Apart from comprehension of idiomatic expressions, idiom production has been of much interest in SLA. Levelt and Meyer (2000) proposed a model of idiom production (Superlemma model) based on Levelt's (1989) speech production model. Based on *superlemma* theory (Levelt & Meyer, 2000), idiomatic expressions are activated as superlemmas; then a superlemma activates its constituent single lemmas. Therefore, in idiomatic expressions, the lemma selection stage in formulator involves two stages which make the retrieval process and the production of figurative language more complex than normal non-figurative expressions.

## **2.2. Etymological Elaboration: An Effective Strategy in Teaching Idioms**

Ilson (1983) has defined etymology in a narrow and a broad conception. When etymology is used in learner's dictionaries, it means the search for 'etyma' and cognates in order to find its source in earlier stages of the same language or other languages. The broader conception of etymology includes the search for sources and parallels, and information about how a word, phrase, or sense has come to be as it is.

The significant role of etymology in L<sub>2</sub> vocabulary learning has long been embraced by researchers in the literature. Zolfagharkhani and Ghorbani Moghadam (2011) conducted a study with Iranian upper- intermediate EFL learners to show the impact of etymological instruction on vocabulary learning. The results of their study revealed that the participants receiving etymological instruction in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group, which followed its normal education.

Returning to idioms, associating idioms with information about their origin and source domains is called etymological elaboration. There are several



### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

theories that have been offered by specialists to explain the effectiveness of etymological elaboration in the comprehension of idiomatic expressions, among which *conceptual metaphor theory* and *dual coding theory* seem to be the most significant (Boers, 2001; Boers, Eyckman, & Strenger, 2007).

An essential aspect in cognitive science is the idea that metaphor is not just an aspect of language, but constitutes a significant part of the conceptual system (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Murphy (1996) confirms this claim, arguing that mental representation is in part metaphoric and not completely a linguistic phenomenon. The conceptual metaphor theory, which is based on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) work, seems to contribute to idioms comprehension because in extended conceptual metaphor theory, it is believed that metaphors have changed over time and have lost their metaphoricity and now exist within our mental lexicon as frozen idioms, not as separate semantic units in the lexicon. (Gibbs, Bogdanvich, Sykes, & Barr, 1997)

The dual coding theory (Paivio, 1991) claims that cognition involves the activity of both verbal and nonverbal systems. The meanings of words can be better recalled if learners associate their imagery representations with their verbal code simultaneously. Etymological elaboration helps learners to build up a mental image by original usage of idioms; therefore, verbal information of an idiom on the one hand, and a mental image of it on the other hand, help learners to comprehend and recall its meaning more successfully (Zhang, 2009).

Application of etymological elaboration to L<sub>2</sub> idiom comprehension has long been of particular interest in second language acquisition research. Boers (2001) conducted an experiment with two parallel groups of upper-intermediate Dutch students studying English as a second language. The control group would process idioms by the use of the context in which they

were used. The experimental group was asked to supply a possible origin of the idioms by looking up the literal sense of the unknown words which would help them hypothesize about the origin of the expressions (imagery processing). The result of follow up tasks showed that relating figurative idioms with a concrete image had a positive effect on the retention of idiomatic phrases.

In another study (Boers, et al., 2004), two groups of on-line participants received two types of exercise for idioms: identify-the-source and identify-the-meaning exercises. This order was reversed for the control group. The high performance of the experimental group over the control group confirmed the significant role of etymology in idioms acquisition.

Boers, et al., (2007) examined how source domain of idioms motivated their figurative meanings with regard to cross-cultural variations. The study was accomplished through an *idiom teacher* exercise (A self-study technique consisting of 1200 on-line exercises on 400 idioms). The exercises included *matching to source* task for the experimental group and *matching to definition* task for the control group followed by a *gap filling* task for both groups as a post test. Results revealed that etymological elaboration could help learners effectively comprehend and recall figurative idioms.

Parallel to this study, Zhang (2009) designed a web-based learning experiment with Chinese students in order to estimate the actual effect of etymology on receptive and productive knowledge of target idioms in an on-line environment. The participants were given on-line learning units that were designed in different forms for two groups. In the experimental group, each idiom was associated with information about their origin, but the control group received only brief explanations about figurative meaning of idioms. The results showed that while etymological information did not have more

### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

influence on L<sub>2</sub> idiom acquisition than traditional rote learning, it was effective on the retention and productive knowledge of target idioms.

In the same vein, Bagheri and Fazel (2010) explored the role of the mentioned technique in Iranian learners' comprehension and retention of idioms on the basis of dual coding theory. The same treatment as Boers et al's (2007) work was given to 50 advanced EFL learners in experimental and control groups. The results of this study were in line with the previous studies and confirmed that etymological elaboration enhanced idiom learning.

### **2.3. Idioms and Contextual Clues**

Physical and discourse environments constrain the possible interpretations of phrases or sentences and the referent of their constituents. Using contextual clues to infer the meaning of unknown words is an effective strategy which helps learners acquire skills and aids vocabulary learning (Dunmore, 1989). In addition, using contextual pragmatic clues seems to have a considerable effect on L<sub>2</sub> idiom comprehension, particularly in understanding opaque idioms whose meaning cannot be inferred from the individual word meanings.

As Swinney and Cutler (1979) state, most idioms have the feature of ambiguity. This means that idioms which are grammatically well formed have an acceptable literal meaning as well as figurative meaning. So, the comprehension of such idioms will be problematic. In the case of normal phrases and sentences, this ambiguity seems to be resolved through prior context. In other words, contextual clues can influence the interpretation of an ambiguous sentence with literal and non-literal meanings (Bobrow & Bell, 1973). Hence, contextual clues can account for ambiguous idioms too.

Studies on using contextual clues in L<sub>2</sub> idiom comprehension have found that guessing from context is an effective strategy and is recurrently used in L<sub>2</sub>

idiom comprehension. Cooper (1999) used the think-aloud research method to investigate the kind of strategies L<sub>2</sub> learners employ in the comprehension of unfamiliar idioms. The results showed that the most frequently used strategy was guessing from context as it led to correct answers 75% of the time.

In a similar vein, Towse and Knight (2009) investigated the contribution of inference from context to young children's understanding of idiomatic sentences. Results showed that very young children were sensitive to meanings in context and could process language at the phrasal and discourse level while these processing skills, which help idiom comprehension, were not fully developed in 11-12 year-olds.

#### **2.4. Lexical Knowledge and Idiom Learning**

Lexical knowledge involves not only knowing the literal meaning of a word, but also having knowledge about its different connotations, morphological aspects, and syntactic structure. Research in the area of SLA has demonstrated the crucial role of word knowledge in learners' level of proficiency in receptive and productive knowledge of English. August, Carol, Dressler, and Snow (2005) examined the critical role of vocabulary development for English language learners. Their study showed that students with low vocabulary knowledge performed poorly in comprehending English texts.

Apart from the significant role which lexical knowledge has in comprehending normal sentences and expressions, it seems to facilitate idiom comprehension and production. Contrary to the traditional view that the meaning of most idioms is quite arbitrary and that the meanings of individual words in idiomatic expressions do not contribute to their overall interpretation, the compositional view is based on the notion that the meaning of an idiom is built out of literal word meanings and the special interpretation of word

### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

meanings in a particular context, much like other literal and figurative aspects of language (Titon & Connine, 1999).

Cieslicka (2006) addressed the question of how the literal meanings of the constituents of idioms contribute to their comprehension. The literal assumption model is a model whose major assumption is that understanding L<sub>2</sub> idioms entails computation of the literal meanings of their constituent words even if the idioms are used in a figurative context. The experiment was conducted with advanced Polish learners of English, and its results supported the effectiveness of the literal meanings of the constituent words of idioms in L<sub>2</sub> idioms learning.

In the same vein, Zyzik (2011) examined the acquisition of Spanish idioms in the classroom setting that was supplemented with explicit instruction over a 10 week period. The results of his study indicated the significant effect of prior lexical knowledge in the comprehension of Spanish idioms.

In sum, idioms are an important aspect of figurative language and discovering effective strategies to teach idioms is one of the most important concerns of researchers and teachers. Research on L<sub>2</sub> idiom comprehension has suggested a number of strategies that have been confirmed to be effective in teaching and learning idioms, among which three strategies will be examined in this study to see which one is more conducive to the comprehension as well as production of idiomatic expressions.

## **3. Method**

### **3.1. Participants**

The participants of this study were 60 male EFL students at intermediate level of proficiency. All of the participants were studying *Top notch*, an

internationally well-known course book, under the instruction of the same teacher in Shokuh language institute in Abhar, Iran. The age of the participants ranged from 16 to 30, and they were selected from among 75 participants; they were divided into three groups to receive different treatments.

Group 1 received instruction through etymological elaboration; there were 21 learners in this group.

Group 2 received instruction through contextualization and had 16 participants.

Group 3 received instruction through explicit teaching of vocabulary. The number of participants of the third group was 20.

### **3.2. Instruments**

In the present study the following materials and instruments were used:

In order to homogenize the participants, the vocabulary subtest of a standard KET general proficiency test was used. The subtest consisted of 20 multiple choice items.

To minimize the effect of participants' prior knowledge of the target idioms, a pretest was administered. The test included 100 items containing idioms which would be presented during the treatment. Each item consisted of a short sentence which included one idiom. The participants had to write the Persian translation of the idioms.

The main material presented to the participants was 100 English idioms selected from *American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* with strong etymology, from among which 60 idioms were selected and used in the post tests.

Two post tests were used in this study: a 30- item multiple choice test was used to measure the participants' receptive knowledge of idioms. Another 30-item fill-in-the-blanks test was used to measure the participants' productive

### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

knowledge of idioms. The Persian definition of the idioms was given in the parentheses to help the students fill in the blanks.

### **3.3. Procedure**

To begin with, the figurative idioms were selected based on criteria such as their frequency in English, having a clear etymology, and unfamiliarity to our intermediate participants. Sixty intermediate level learners with the aforementioned characteristics were selected, the participants were in 3 groups, and each group was randomly assigned to one of the three different treatments. The vocabulary subtest of KET was used to homogenize the participants, data from those who scored more than one standard deviation above or below the mean were excluded from all subsequent analyses.

To minimize the effect of the participants' background knowledge of the target idioms, a pretest was administered. The test included 100 idioms, each presented in a sentence, and the participants had to write the Persian translation of the idioms. Only those idioms that were unfamiliar to the participants were used in the post tests.

As mentioned above, the participants were in three groups, each group of participants received a different treatment which lasted for 6 one-hour sessions in each of which the participants were exposed to 15-17 idioms. In group one: each idiom in the list was associated with its etymology and origin. The participants were given the etymological definitions of idioms. In group two, the same idioms were presented in short contexts which were likely to be familiar for the participants, and they were asked to read the sentences and infer the figurative meaning of each idiom using contextual clues. In the third group, the participants were exposed to the same idioms followed by the English definition without any etymology and context, while an attempt was

made in the third group to teach the lexicon of the idioms explicitly, and the participants were asked to focus on the exact meaning of the constituent parts of each idiom.

At the end of the experimental period, two post-tests were administered to investigate the effects of etymological elaboration, contextual clues, and lexical knowledge on learners' comprehension and production of idioms. The collected data were organized and submitted to statistical analysis.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

To answer the research questions, two separate one-way ANOVA procedures were used; one to investigate the effects of etymological elaboration, contextual clues, and lexical knowledge on L<sub>2</sub> idioms comprehension, and the other to investigate the effects of the same techniques on L<sub>2</sub> idioms production.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Investigation of the First Research Question**

The first research question sought to investigate the effects of etymological elaboration, contextual clues, and lexical knowledge on Iranian EFL learners' comprehension of idioms. To answer this question, a one-way ANOVA procedure was used. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1:

**Table 1.**

Descriptive Statistics for the ANOVA on Idiom Comprehension

groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
etymology	21	17.47	2.37	16.39	18.55
contextualization	16	17.43	2.12	16.30	18.57
lexical knowledge	20	16.00	3.72	14.25	17.74
Total	57	16.947	2.90	16.17	17.71



### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

Based on Table 1, it can be observed that the group instructed through etymological elaboration has the highest mean, followed closely by the group instructed through contextualization. The group taught through lexical knowledge has the lowest mean. In order to see if group differences are statistically significant, the one way ANOVA procedure was used, the results of which are presented in Table 2:

**Table 2.**

ANOVA Results on Idiom Comprehension

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	27.66	2	13.83	1.67	.19
Within Groups	445.17	54	8.24		
Total	472.84	56			

Table 2 shows that there are no statistically significant differences among the three groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that different strategies of teaching idioms have no differential effect on learners' idiom comprehension.

## **4.2. Investigation of the Second Question**

The second research question sought to investigate the effects of etymological elaboration, contextual clues, and lexical knowledge on L2 idiom production. To this end, another one-way ANOVA was used. Table 3 contains the descriptive statistics:

**Table 3.**

Descriptive Statistics for the ANOVA on Idiom Production

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Etymology	21	17.52	2.92	16.19	18.85
Contextualization	16	15.62	3.48	13.77	17.47
lexical knowledge	20	14.05	3.50	12.41	15.68
Total	57	15.77	3.56	14.82	16.71

Based on Table 3, it is evident that the group instructed through etymological elaboration has the highest mean, followed by the group that received contextualized idioms; the lexical knowledge group has the lowest mean. The second one-way ANOVA procedure was used to see the extent to which the observed differences among the groups are statistically significant. The results are shown in Table 4:

**Table 4.**

ANOVA Results on Idiom Production

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	124.09	2	62.04	5.71	.006
Within Groups	585.93	54	10.85		$\eta^2 = .17$
Total	710.03	56			

As it is clear in Table 4, the observed F value and the significance level are indicative of significant differences among the groups ( $F(2, 54) = 5.71; p < .05$ ). This means that there are significant differences among the effects of etymological elaboration, context, and lexical knowledge on idiom production. At the same time, the index of the strength of association indicates that 17% of total variance in the dependent variable (production of idioms) is accounted for by the independent variable, namely, technique of presentation. This means that the remaining 83% of the variance is left unaccounted for. To locate the statistically significant differences among the means, a Post-hoc Scheffe test was used. The results are presented in Table 5:

**Table 5.**

Multiple comparisons of means for groups' idiom production

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Etym	context	1.89	1.09	.23
	lexical know	3.47	1.02	.00
Context	lexical know	1.57	1.10	.36

### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

Based on the Table 5, it can be argued that there is a significant difference between the group instructed through etymology and the lexical knowledge group. In other words, the participants of the etymological elaboration group have performed significantly better than the participants of the lexical knowledge group. Table 5 also shows that although the etymology group outperformed the contextualization group, the mean differences are not statistically significant.

### **4.3. Discussion**

The present study attempted to investigate the effects of etymological elaboration, contextual clues, and lexical knowledge on idiom comprehension and production of intermediate EFL learners. Regarding the first research question, the results showed no significant differences among the three experimental groups. This means that etymological elaboration, contextual clues, and lexical knowledge had no differential effects on learners' idiom comprehension.

This finding is not consistent with a number of studies some of which were reviewed earlier (e.g., Baleghizadeh & Mohammad Bagheri, 2012; Bagheri & Fazel, 2010; Boers, 2001; Boers, et al., 2004; Boers, et al., 2007). While all these studies confirmed the significant role of etymological elaboration in idiom comprehension, this study did not find evidence in support of the use of etymological elaboration in enhancing idiom comprehension.

Based on the results of this study, instructing idioms through contextualization had no statistically significant effect on L<sub>2</sub> idiom comprehension. This contradicts the findings of Cooper (1999), who found evidence in favor of the benefits of contextual clues compared with other strategies which were investigated in his study. One of the possible reasons for

such differences between the present study and the above mentioned studies may be partially because of the cultural variations. The participants of the present study were Iranian learners, but they were Belgian and Korean in Boers' and Coopers' studies, respectively. Another possible reason could be the differences in the proficiency level of the participants. In this research, the participants were intermediate learners. In Bagheri and Fazel's (2010) study, the participants were advanced EFL learners, and in Boers' study, the participants were upper-intermediate.

The results of this study are also in conflict with another study. Sadeghi, Dastjerdi, and Ketabi (2010) showed the important role of context in the interpretation of idiomatic expressions and construction of idiomatic meaning. But in this study, the effect of contextual clues on the comprehension of idioms did not turn out to be significant in comparison with other strategies.

Similarly, the findings of this study are different from those of Cieslicka (2006) and Zyzik (2011). The present study showed no significant differences among the effects of lexical knowledge and the other strategies on idiom comprehension, but Cieslicka (2006) and Zyzik (2011) showed the significant effect of having lexical knowledge in the comprehension of L<sub>2</sub> idioms.

It is worth noting that one important reason why the participants of the lexical knowledge group had the lowest scores in both comprehension and production posttests could have been the idiom type, which was not taken into account in the present study. In decomposable idioms, the literal meanings of the constituent parts contribute to the understanding of the idioms. But in non-decomposable idioms, the meanings of the lexical elements of idioms cannot have a significant role in the recognition of idioms.

Unlike the above results, there is a study the results of which are in accordance with the findings of this study. Cain, Towse and Knight (2009)

### *Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

found that using context to understand idioms could be effective only for very young learners and adults were not successful in using the mentioned strategy to comprehend idioms.

Regarding the second research question, the results showed that etymological elaboration had more significant effect on participants' idiom production than lexical knowledge. This finding is in line with that of Zhang (2009), who found that etymology had no significant influence on L<sub>2</sub> idiom comprehension, while it was effective on the production of idioms. It should be noted that there is a difference between this study and that of Zhang (2009) in that it examined the effect of etymological elaboration on the learning of idioms in web-based and on-line learning environments.

## **5. Conclusion**

The results of the present study showed that in vocabulary comprehension, although the differences observed among the groups were not statistically significant, etymological elaboration turned out to be the most effective technique, followed by contextualization. Lexical knowledge was the least conducive technique to vocabulary comprehension. In vocabulary production, the difference between the etymology group and the lexical knowledge group was statistically significant. However, the differences between the etymology and contextualization groups, and between the contextualization and lexical knowledge groups were not statistically significant. Still, the same order of effectiveness was observed here. That is, etymological elaboration was the most effective technique, followed by contextualization, and lexical knowledge. This implies that etymological elaboration was the most effective of the three presentation modes on both vocabulary comprehension and production. One obvious conclusion to be drawn from this is that the present study seems to

provide support for the noncompositional view of idioms in the sense that the knowledge of the lexical constituents of idioms did not contribute much to the comprehension and production of idioms. On the contrary, learners seemed to have a tendency to regard each idiom as a unit which had an independent history of its own. At the same time, contextualization seemed to be superior to lexical knowledge in both receptive and productive learning of idioms, suggesting that idioms share another aspect of individual lexical items; that is, they are learnt more viably in a meaningful context than through memorizing lists of isolated items. In short, based on the findings of the present study, it is concluded that idioms seem to behave more or less like lexical items. Therefore, it may be beneficial to apply the already established techniques of presentation of words to idioms. This means that the findings of the present study can have far-reaching implications for teachers, and syllabus designers. Rather than applying a single method in teaching idioms, teachers can use multiple techniques in their idiom classes in order to enhance their students' learning of idioms. Also, syllabus and textbook designers can provide idiom books which are more palpable for students through incorporating more effective presentation techniques of idioms.

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*Etymology, Contextual Pragmatic Clues...*

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