

**STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES AND STRATEGIES IN
UNDERSTANDING IDIOMS WHEN SPEAKING ENGLISH : A
CASE STUDY**

A THESIS

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Sarjana Pendidikan in English Education**



By :

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**ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
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K.H. ABDURRAHMAN WAHID PEKALONGAN**

2025

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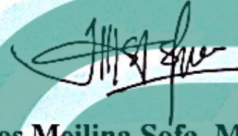
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MOTTO

“For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease. Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease.”

Q.S. Al-Insyirah 5-6

“If you never bleed, you're never gonna grow”

Taylor Swift

“Everything happens for a reason”

Nabila Attar Tsania



ABSTRAK

Pemahaman terhadap idiom menjadi tantangan besar bagi pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL), terutama dalam konteks berbicara yang membutuhkan pemrosesan makna secara spontan. Idiom memiliki makna figuratif dan sering kali terikat budaya, sehingga sulit dipahami secara harfiah, sebagaimana dinyatakan oleh Fernando (1996). Berdasarkan teori Abel (2003) mengenai kesulitan kognitif dan Cooper (1999) tentang strategi pembelajaran idiom, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjawab dua pertanyaan utama: (1) Kesulitan apa saja yang dihadapi mahasiswa dalam memahami idiom saat berbicara bahasa Inggris? dan (2) Bagaimana strategi yang digunakan mahasiswa untuk mengatasi kesulitan tersebut? Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi secara mendalam kesulitan dan strategi mahasiswa dalam memahami idiom ketika berbicara dalam bahasa Inggris. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi dan wawancara dengan empat mahasiswa (dua laki-laki dan dua perempuan) dari Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di salah satu universitas di Pekalongan. Partisipan dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan hasil observasi sebelumnya dalam kegiatan Speaking Club. Data dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman (1994) yang meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan kesimpulan dan verifikasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menghadapi empat jenis kesulitan utama: (1) kesulitan dalam mengakses makna idiom secara otomatis, (2) ketidaktepatan dalam menafsirkan idiom yang tidak dapat diuraikan, (3) kesulitan dalam menghubungkan idiom dengan representasi konseptual, dan (4) ketidakpastian dalam konteks penggunaan yang tepat. Untuk mengatasi kesulitan-kesulitan tersebut, mereka menerapkan beberapa strategi, yaitu: (1) menebak makna idiom dari konteks, (2) menggunakan makna harfiah idiom, (3) menggunakan latar belakang pengetahuan, dan (4) mengacu pada idiom dalam bahasa pertama. Temuan ini memberikan implikasi penting dalam pengajaran bahasa Inggris, terutama dalam merancang pembelajaran idiom yang kontekstual dan komunikatif untuk meningkatkan kompetensi pragmatik siswa.

Kata Kunci: idiom, berbicara, kesulitan mahasiswa, strategi pemahaman, pembelajaran EFL

ABSTRACT

Understanding idioms is a significant difficulty for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), especially in speaking contexts that require spontaneous processing of meaning. Idioms have figurative meanings and are often culturally bound, making them difficult to understand literally, as stated by Fernando (1996). Based on Abel's (2003) theory of cognitive difficulties and Cooper (1999) on idiom learning strategies, this study aims to answer two main questions: (1) What difficulties do students face in understanding idioms when speaking English? and (2) How are the students' strategies in dealing with these difficulties?. This study aims to explore in depth the difficulties and strategies of university students in understanding idioms when speaking in English. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observations and interviews with four students (two male and two female) from the English Education Study Program at one of the universities in Pekalongan. The participants were purposively selected based on the results of previous observations in Speaking Club activities. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994) which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings indicated that students faced four main types of difficulties: (1) difficulties in accessing idiom meanings automatically, (2) inaccuracies in interpreting nondecomposable idioms, (3) difficulty connecting idioms with conceptual representations, and (4) uncertainty in the appropriate context of use. To overcome these difficulties, they apply several strategies, namely: (1) guessing the meaning of idioms from context, (2) using the literal meaning of idioms, (3) using background knowledge, and (4) referring to idioms in the first language. The findings provide important implications in English language teaching, especially in designing contextualized and communicative idiom learning to improve students' pragmatic competence.

Keywords: *idioms, speaking, student difficulties, understanding strategies, EFL learning*

PREFACE

Praise and gratitude to Allah SWT who has given His mercies and blessings, as well as giving me guidance, health, and patience so that the process of writing this thesis entitled “Students' Difficulties and Strategies in Understanding Idioms When Speaking English: A Case Study” can be completed. This thesis is submitted to fulfill one of the requirements to obtain a Bachelor of Education (S.Pd.) degree in the English Education Department, Faculty of Education and Teacher Training UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. This thesis can be completed due to a lot of support from various parties. Therefore, on this opportunity, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to:

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Speaking is the ability or activity to express thoughts, ideas, or information by using spoken language. According to Pat (2022), speaking skills are one of the four important language skills and are essential for effective communication. By mastering speaking skills, individuals can convey messages clearly and confidently, thus enabling them to participate more fully in personal, academic, and professional contexts (Kusnierek, 2015).

Idioms are expressions or language constructions consisting of words, phrases, or sentences whose meaning cannot be understood directly from the lexical or grammatical meaning of the words that compose them.

As stated by Maftuhah & Mulyadi (2023), idioms are a form of expression whose meaning cannot be interpreted literally, but must be understood in the context of the entire expression. According to Kovács (2016), idioms are units of meaning that can only be understood as a whole, not by interpreting the individual words that compose them. Thus, idioms function as linguistic units with specific meanings that require cultural and contextual understanding, making it difficult to understand them only through word-by-word analysis.

In an English-speaking environment, idioms often appear in written and spoken form. When used in spoken communication, idioms make

conversations sound more natural, expressive and fluent. Idioms allow speakers to convey complex ideas more concisely while demonstrating a more native-like command of the language. However, many non-native students face challenges in understanding idioms when engaging in English language activities. This difficulty often comes from the figurative and culture-bound nature of idioms. According to Alhaysony (2017) the non-literal meaning of idioms can confuse students, especially in live oral interactions. For example, idioms such as “kick the bucket” (which means “die”) or “break the ice” (which means “start a conversation”) can be misunderstood if interpreted literally. Moreover, cultural differences can lead to further misinterpretations, as idioms often have unique meanings in the context of the native speaker's culture (Suchanova, 2013).

Although several studies such as those conducted by Anjarini and Hatmanto (2021), Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016), Ahmad Sazali et al. (2020), and Nguyen et al. (2022) have explored challenges and strategies related to idiom understanding, they tend to focus on reading or listening contexts. There is a lack of research that specifically examines how students understand idioms during speaking activities.

To fill this gap, this study aims to investigate students' difficulties and strategies in understanding idioms when speaking English. Using a case study approach, this research will provide a detailed and in-depth investigation into students' experiences and the methods they use to understand idioms in spoken communication. The findings are expected to

contribute valuable insights into how idioms function in speaking contexts and how learners can be better supported in developing their idiomatic competence.

1.2 Identification of the Problem

Based on the background of the study described above, the identification of the problem use as research is:

1. Many students struggle to understand the meaning of idioms due to their non-literal and figurative nature.
2. Students often face confusion when encountering idioms during English speaking activities, especially in spontaneous conversations.
3. Cultural differences contribute to misinterpretation of idioms, as idiomatic expressions often contain culturally specific references.
4. Existing studies focus more on idiom comprehension in reading or listening, with limited attention to the speaking context.
5. There is a lack of information about the specific strategies students use to understand idioms while speaking English.

1.3 Limitation of the Problem

This study was limited to exploring students' difficulties and strategies in understanding idioms specifically in English speaking contexts. The focus of this study is placed on how idioms are understood in informal and semi-formal spoken interactions, rather than in formal written or academic contexts. The study was also limited to a small sample of four participants, all of whom were students from the English Education Study Program in

one of the universities. Therefore, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to a wider population, but are intended to provide an in-depth understanding in this specific context.

1.4 Formulation of the Problem

Based on the background of the study that has been described previously, it is necessary to formulate specific problems so that this study is directed and focused. The formulation of this problem aims to clearly describe the aspects that will be studied in the study related to the difficulties and strategies of students in understanding idioms when speaking in English. The formulation of the problem in this study are as follows:

1. What difficulties do students face in understanding idioms when speaking English?
2. How are the students' strategies in dealing with these difficulties?

1.5 Aims of the Study

In line with the formulation of the problem above, the aims of this study are to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study. This aims to give a clear direction to the results to be achieved in the study of idioms in the context of speaking. The aims of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the difficulties students face in the understanding idioms when speaking English.
2. To explore the strategies students use to understand idioms during spoken communication.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is expected to make a meaningful contribution both theoretically, empirically, and practically. The benefits of this study can be explained as follows:

1. **Theoretical Significance** : This study will contribute to the existing literature on second language acquisition, particularly in the area of understanding idioms in spoken communication. The findings of this study are expected to support the development of theories related to language learning and pragmatics, as well as expand the understanding of how idioms function in the context of spoken communication.
2. **Empirical Significance** : This study provides empirical data regarding the difficulties and strategies experienced by university students in understanding idioms when speaking English. Through interviews and observations, this research will highlight the specific challenges, the strategies applied by learners, and the speaking

contexts in which idioms are commonly encountered.

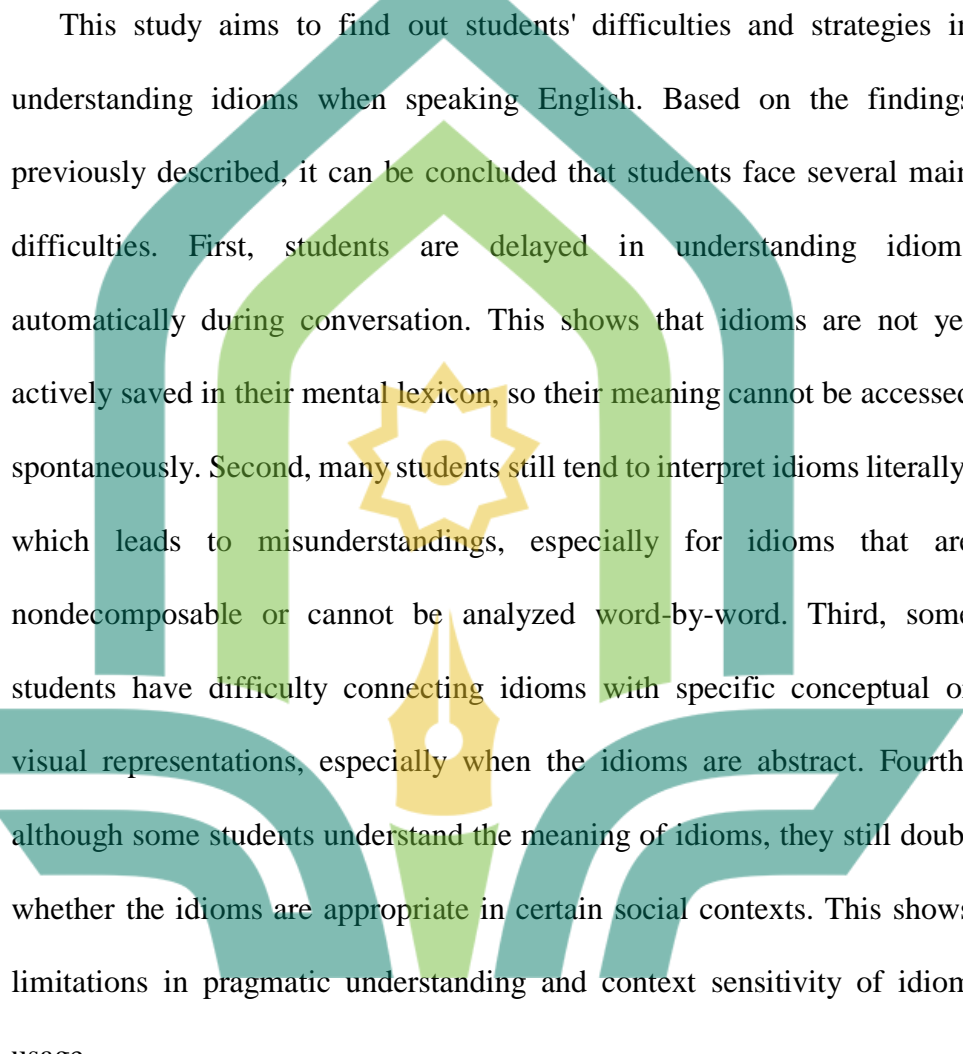
3. Practical Significance : This study have practical implications for language teaching and learning, by understanding students' difficulties and strategies in understanding idioms during spoken interactions, teachers can design more effective instructional approaches to support idiom learning in a speaking-focused environment.



CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Findings



This study aims to find out students' difficulties and strategies in understanding idioms when speaking English. Based on the findings previously described, it can be concluded that students face several main difficulties. First, students are delayed in understanding idioms automatically during conversation. This shows that idioms are not yet actively saved in their mental lexicon, so their meaning cannot be accessed spontaneously. Second, many students still tend to interpret idioms literally, which leads to misunderstandings, especially for idioms that are nondecomposable or cannot be analyzed word-by-word. Third, some students have difficulty connecting idioms with specific conceptual or visual representations, especially when the idioms are abstract. Fourth, although some students understand the meaning of idioms, they still doubt whether the idioms are appropriate in certain social contexts. This shows limitations in pragmatic understanding and context sensitivity of idiom usage.

In overcoming that difficulties, students use various strategies. The most commonly used strategy is to guess the meaning of the idiom based on the context of the situation, such as intonation, facial expressions, and the topic of conversation. This strategy helps them to conclude the meaning of the idiom without having to fully understand each constituent word. Some

students also use the literal approach, which is still quite effective for transparent idioms, but becomes less appropriate when applied to idioms with figurative meanings. In addition, students also rely on previous knowledge or experience, especially those learned through media such as movies, songs, and social media, to recognize and understand idioms they have encountered. Finally, there are also students who try to find idiom equivalents in the first language (Bahasa Indonesia), but this strategy is used in a limited way because not all idioms have equivalent meanings and contexts in local culture.

5.2 Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, there are several recommendations for various related parties. Students are advised to increase their exposure to idioms through various authentic sources such as movies, songs, and social media, and practice them actively in conversations so that understanding becomes more natural and contextual. For teachers, it is important to teach idioms not only in terms of meaning, but also in the context of their use through speaking activities such as dialog, discussion, or simulation. The English learning curriculum should also integrate idioms that are common and relevant in daily life, especially in speaking and listening skills courses. In addition, future researchers are advised to conduct a follow-up study with a wider scope to explore the relationship between idiom understanding and speaking fluency, as well as the effectiveness of idiom learning strategies in the long term.

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