

**TURKISH STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSPARENT AND OPAQUE  
IDIOMS IN ENGLISH IN READING AS WELL AS IN SPEAKING**

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**Abstract**

The objective of this study was to investigate the understanding of transparent and opaque English idiomatic expressions of Turkish students. In order to carry out the study, randomly selected 35 intermediate and 36 advanced level students in the Department of English Language and Literature at Kafkas University, Kars, Turkey, were given a 40-item containing Turkish version of idiomatic expressions and a 40-item containing English version of different idiomatic expressions. The students were wanted to write the equivalences in English and Turkish. According to the result of the study, Turkish students can understand transparent and common opaque idioms more easily. However, if the idioms are both opaque and uncommon, they cannot get their meanings if they haven't learned them directly. The result of the study has indicated that there is no significant difference between intermediate and advanced students in understanding transparent, opaque/common and opaque/uncommon idioms, however, a significant difference has been observed between the subjects to transparent, opaque/common and opaque/uncommon idioms in both for the answers from Turkish to English and English to Turkish ( $p < 0,001$ ). The highest scores are those for the transparent idioms which are followed by opaque/common and opaque/uncommon, respectively.

**Keywords:** idioms, opaque, compositional, non-compositional, transparent, expression, figurative language.

**Özet**

Çalışmanın amacı Türk öğrencilerin şeffaf ve şeffaf olmayan İngilizce deyimleri anlama durumlarını incelemektir. Çalışmayı yapmak amacıyla Kars Kafkas Üniversitesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı bölümünden rasgele metotla seçilmiş 35 orta düzey, 36 ileri düzey öğrenciye 40 Türkçeden İngilizceye, 40 tane ise İngilizceden Türkçeye olan farklı deyim

verilerek karşı dile çevirmeleri istenmiştir. Çalışmanın sonucuna göre Türk öğrenciler şeffaf veya yaygın fakat şeffaf olmayan deyimleri daha kolay anlayabilmektedirler. Öte yandan eğer deyimler hem şeffaf değil hem de yaygın değilse direkt olarak öğrenmeme durumunda anlamlarını kestirebilmeleri oldukça zordur. Çalışmanın sonucu şeffaf, şeffaf olmayan/yaygın ve şeffaf olmayıp yaygın olmayan deyimleri anlama açısından orta ve ileri düzey öğrenciler arasında önemli bir farkın olmadığını göstermiştir. Ayrıca öğrencilerin şeffaf, şeffaf olmayan/yaygın ve hem şeffaf olmayan hem de yaygın olmayan deyimlere verdikleri yanıtlar arasında gerek Türkçeden İngilizceye, gerekse İngilizceden Türkçeye verdikleri yanıtlar arasında önemli bir fark bulunmuştur. ( $p < 0,001$ ). En yüksek puanlar sırasıyla şeffaf, şeffaf olmayan/yaygın ve hem şeffaf olmayan hem de yaygın olmayan deyimlerden alınmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:**deyimler, şeffaf olmayan, tanımı şeffaf olan, tanımı şeffaf olmayan, şeffaf, ifade, mecazi dil.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In our daily life in order to express ourselves more effectively and clearly, we frequently need to call upon idioms. According to Johnson-Laird (1993) ‘... it is difficult to speak spontaneously without lapsing into idiomatic usage. Try with a foreigner, and you will see that you are often aware of using an idiom only after the event. Even explaining an idiom, you can find to your expense that you are using another. Hence, the first reason for the importance of idioms is that they are pervasive ‘(pave). ‘Idioms are an important part of any language and may be said to be an indicator of one’s fluency in that language’ (McDevitt, 1993; p. 4). Idioms, therefore, have a considerable role in a FL as in the mother tongue (MT). Foreign language learners learn not only the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the target language but the idioms as well to integrate into the culture of the foreign language. Idioms are important for language, reading and social communication (Seccord & Wiig, 1993). Ball (1961) states as:

The FL student wants to know which idioms to use in a given situation. He also wants to avoid the pitfalls of vulgar, inappropriate and incongruous idioms. In short, he wants both information and guidance. And he wants these not only to assist him in speaking English but also in understanding it. It follows, therefore, that some of the idioms he learns will be for use in conversation, others for recognition purposes ( p. X).

However, it is rather difficult for foreigners to learn all the idioms used in the real situation of English language. As English language is rich in idioms, learning the idioms in English language constitute the soul of the language. Yet, ‘the plethora of human situations makes it imperative to reduce them to manageable proportions ‘ (Ball, 1961; p. X), that is, learners should learn at least enough number of idioms. Tuğlacı (1987) puts forward that, ‘although every language in the world has its specific feature of idioms, none of them can challenge with the ones in English’ (p. III). He maintains:

... But it is impossible to understand the meanings of the idioms just only knowing the linguistic features and vocabulary of the language. Hence, students learning English will inevitably confront difficulties in understanding idioms and won’t be accepted as proficient without knowing the idioms sufficiently (p. III).

### **Problem**

‘... It is no surprise that students for whom English is a second language (ESL) frequently speak in the class. As a result, they don’t have the opportunity to experience English as it is really spoken. Idioms are an important part of any language.... For the student who seldom hears idioms being used, they can be frustrating barrier, to better understanding of English’ (McDevitt, 1993; p.7). It is the case for Turkish students learning English. The students learning English have difficulty in understanding and using the idioms in the target situation (TS), and especially while speaking with the native speakers this difficulty becomes more obvious if the idiom is opaque and uncommon.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The aim of the study is to determine Turkish students’ understanding of transparent and opaque idiomatic expressions in English and to show whether there are significant differences between the comprehension of intermediate and advanced students depending on transparent and opaque idioms.

### **Limitations**

Idioms included in this study have been given only in isolation, not in context.

### **Research Questions**

Specific research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. Do the students' understanding of transparent, opaque/common and opaque/uncommon idioms differ according to the levels of the students?
2. Are there any differences between students' understanding of transparent, opaque/common and opaque/uncommon idioms?

## **2. THE REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Definition of Idioms**

There are various definitions of idioms; however all of them share common features. According to Loelene and Maureen (2003), 'idioms are non-literal phrases whose figurative interpretations cannot be derived from their literal meanings' (p.188). 'An idiom is an expression whose overall figurative meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its parts' (Marlies, 1995; p. 283).

Collins Cobuild defines idioms as: 'an idiom is a group of words, which, when they are used together in a particular combination, have a different meaning from the one they would have if you took the meaning of all the individual words in the group' (p. 718).

In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary idiom is defined as 'a group of words whose meaning is different from the meaning of the individual words' (p. 643)

An idiom is a figurative expression that usually can be interpreted literally but that takes a nonliteral meaning when used in a specific context (Cain & Oakhill and Lemmon, 2005; p. 66)

On the other hand, Laval (2003) defines idioms as:

Idiomatic expressions are expressions where there is a considerable difference between what said (literal interpretation) is and what is meant (idiomatic interpretation). In other words, the meanings of an idiomatic expression depend largely on a convention that relates a given linguistic form to a given meaning (p. 723).

Rowe (2004) maintains that 'an idiom does not mean what one would expect it to mean in a literal sense and, in many cases, it cannot be easily translated into another language' (p. 428).

According to Sprenger, Levelt and Kempen (2006) 'the relationship between the meanings of the words that make up the idiom and the idiom as a whole is at best indirect, if there is any relation at all' (p.161). Idioms are pervasive in all styles of language use. Their meaning cannot be worked out by the usual syntactic and semantic rules (Pulman, 1993).

## Category of Idioms

McGlone (2001) identifies four types of idioms:

- **Non-compositional** (e.g., by and large), which by definition are not transparent.
- **Compositional opaque** (e.g., kick the bucket)
- **Compositional transparent** (e.g., spill the beans)
- **Quasi-metaphorical** (e.g., skating on thin ice) (pp. 73-75)

However Cain et al., (2005) mention two types: one is **transparent**, the other is **opaque**.

## Transparent Idioms

Transparent idioms are figurative expressions whose meanings can be easily understood more easily as compared to the opaque ones (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001).

‘The literal meaning of the transparent idiom string is highly related to the string’s figurative meaning. ... For such idioms there should be little if any difference between an image of the literal meaning and an image of the figurative meaning’ (Cacciari, 1995; pp. 46-47).

According to Cain et al., (2005) **transparency** refers to the degree of agreement between the literal and figurative meanings of an idiom’ (p.67). Researchers have maintained that idioms are easier to understand when there is a close relationship between their literal and figurative senses, that is transparent (Gibbs, 1991; Levorato & Cacciari. 1999; Nippoll & Taylor, 2005). Boers and Demecheleer (2001) maintain that the lower the degree of semantic transparency of an idiom, the more a language learner will have to rely on contextual clues to understand it. However, one can understand highly transparent idioms easily just through lexical components.

On the other hand if the idioms are culture-bound, it is not so easy to understand their meanings even if they are transparent. ‘Knowledge about idiomacity is not based on linguistic analysis, but is essentially a matter of cultural awareness concerning (among other things) the nonliteral-literal association involved’ (He,1990; p.31). To this end, He (1990) gives the idioms “carry coals to Newcastle” and “bury the hatchet” as examples. Grace (cited in He, 1990) maintains that if a language user has no knowledge whatsoever about their being conventional with nonliteral meanings, s/he will naturally take them literally as ad hoc expressions.

## Opaque Idioms

Opaque idioms are the ones whose words do not contribute to the understanding of the idioms' meanings. For Cain et al., (2005) 'the sense of **opaque** idioms, such as to wet behind the ears cannot be inferred from the individual words in the phrases or actions they describe' (p.67). The literal and figurative meanings of an idiom string are totally unrelated to one another in such cases we should expect literal images to predominate. 'Such images (a) would not reflect an idiom's underlying conceptual metaphors, and (b) might even interfere with any attempts to form an image of those metaphors' (Cacciari, 1995; p. 47).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### Subjects

A total of 71 students from Kafkas University, in the Department of English Language and Literature, 35 of whom were from intermediate level and 36 advanced, were the subjects of the study. The subjects were randomly selected from 160 students who were regularly attending to courses. All of the students came from the collages of intensive English programmes through the university entrance foreign language test<sup>1</sup>. Since the subjects came from all over Turkey, they can represent the whole population.

#### Instruments

A written test containing 80 idiomatic expressions of English were given to both intermediate and advanced level students studying at Kafkas University, in the department of English Language and Literature, Turkey. 80 idioms were chosen out of 400 common idioms, 40 of which were given in English (**Appendix A**) and 40 in Turkish (**Appendix B**). The expected answers of the students to idioms given in Turkish have been given in parenthesis in Appendix B, however they weren't given to the subjects. 12 of the idioms given in English were Transparent, whereas 10 were opaque/common and 18 were opaque/uncommon. As for the idioms given in Turkish, 10 were transparent, however, 12 were opaque/common and 18 were opaque/uncommon.

The significance level between intermediate and advanced students' depending on each parameter was determined by T-test and the significance level of all parameters was determined through one-way ANOVA, using SPSS for windows. Significance was determined by Duncan Multiple Range Test. Significance level was set as  $p < 0,05$ . Values were expressed as mean  $\pm$  standard error (SE).

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<sup>1</sup> In Turkey in order to study at universities, millions of students enter the placement test given by the Higher Education Council in June —by which only 10 percent of them can attend to a 4 or 5-year university.

## Procedure

The study started on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2006 after the researcher had the official permission from the University authorities. All of the subjects were handed in 40 item-containing English and 40 Turkish versions of different idioms. And the subjects were wanted to cross translate the idioms given in isolation. The results of the subjects have been given in tables in Data Analysis.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS

### Findings

Research question 1:

Do the students' understanding of transparent, opaque/common and opaque/uncommon idioms differ according to the levels of the students?"

**Table 1.** The grades of intermediate and advanced students depending on transparent, opaque/common and opaque/uncommon idioms (Mean±SE)

Transitive Idioms from English to Turkish		
Intermediate (n=35)	Advanced (n=36)	Significance
83,37± 1,37	78,47±1,09	NS
Opaque/Common Idioms from English to Turkish		
77,51±1,15	77,86±1,06	NS
Opaque/Uncommon Idioms from English to Turkish		
28,51±0,89	28,75±0,94	NS
Transitive Idioms from Turkish to English		
77,71±1,27	83,42±1,33	NS
Opaque/Common Idioms from Turkish to English		
72,37±1,23	72,58±1,22	NS
Opaque/Uncommon Idioms from Turkish to English		
26,09±0,90	26,67±0,82	NS

Note: NS= Nonsignificant

As it is seen in **Table 1**, there is no significant difference between intermediate and advanced students related to transparent, opaque/ common and opaque/uncommon idioms.

This may be because of students' not having courses where idioms are directly taught instead of implicit learning from textbooks, literature and other materials.

Research question 2:

Are there any differences between students' understanding of transparent, opaque/common and opaque/uncommon idioms?

When **Table 2** is observed, it can be clearly seen that the highest scores are the ones related to transparent and opaque/ but common ones for both intermediate and advanced students respectively, however the lowest ones are related to opaque/uncommon ones. There is no significant difference between from English to Turkish transparent and from Turkish to English transparent idioms, from English to Turkish opaque/common and Turkish to English Transparent idioms of the intermediate and advanced students. There is no significant difference between Turkish to English and English to Turkish transparent idioms for both intermediate and advanced students.

The subjects may not know the idioms, but because the idioms are transparent students may have guessed the meaning of them.

According to **Table 2**, both intermediate and advanced students have the lowest scores from opaque/uncommon idioms, there is no significant difference between opaque/uncommon idioms of the intermediate and advanced students.

However, as seen in Table 2, there is a significant difference ( $p < 0,001$ ) between transparent, opaque/common, opaque/uncommon English to Turkish of intermediate and advanced students. Similarly, a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0,001$ ) has been observed between transparent, opaque/common, opaque/uncommon Turkish to English idioms of the intermediate and advanced students.

This may be because students can understand transparent idioms easily, and then opaque/common ones and opaque/uncommon ones, if any, respectively.

Table 2. The Grades of Both Intermediate and Advanced Turkish Students Related to Transparent, Opaque/Common and Opaque/Uncommon Idioms

INTERMEDIATE (n=35)						ADVANCED (n=36)					
From English to Turkish			From Turkish to English			From English to Turkish			From Turkish to English		
Transp.	Op/com.	Op/uncom.	Transp.	Op/com.	Op/uncom.	Transp.	Op/com.	Op/uncom.	Transp.	Op/com.	Op/uncom.
83,37± 1,37a	77,51±1,15b	28,51±0,89d	77,71±1,27b	72,37±1,23c	26,09±0,90d	78,47±1,09b	77,86±1,06b	28,75±0,94d	83,42±1,33a	72,58±1,21c	26,67±0,82d

Note: a-d: There is a significant difference between the means having different letters in the same line, statistically ( $p < 0,001$ );

Transp.: transparent; op/com.: opaque/common; op/uncom.: opaque/uncommon.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Titone and Connine(1994a, b) studied the effects of four factors believed to influence the processing of idioms these were predictability, familiarity, literality and decomposability.

However in their study Cain et al., (2005) demonstrated that there are three factors in idiom comprehension: familiarity, transparency and context. They state that idioms that are presented in texts are easier to understand than those are presented in isolation. ‘Children, adolescents, and adults find that more familiar idioms are easier to understand than less familiar ones’ (p.66).

Cain et al (2005) maintain that ‘context might facilitate the interpretation of figurative language by providing the necessary semantic information from which reader (listener) can extract or infer the appropriate sense of expression’ (p. 67). For them, ‘contexts are important for less common idioms whose meanings are not yet fully known, particularly for unfamiliar opaque idioms whose meanings are not fully derivable through semantic analysis of phrases’ (p. 67)

In a study Engel (Cited in Johnson-Laird 1993) discovered that’ ... idioms whose meanings could be inferred from their literal meanings are generally better known by second-language learners than those that are either opaque or oligosemic’ (p.68). Some researchers also support the idea that idioms are easier to understand when there is a close relationship between their literal and figurative senses (Levorato& Cacciari, 1999; Nippold & Taylor, 1995, 2002).

According to answers of the students to idioms from English to Turkish, transparent idioms had the highest means ( $X= 80, 89$ ). The result may be due to the students’ possibility of guessing the meaning of the idioms from the word as the words in transparent can contribute to the meaning of the whole idiom.

On the other hand researchers (Levorato & Cacciari, 1992; Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993; Nippold, Moran & Schwads, 2001) maintain that some idioms are used in daily life more often, therefore they can be internalized easily and this idea is supported by this study as the second highest answers of the students were for the opaque/common idioms ( $X=77, 69$ ). Even though the idioms in this category were opaque, as they were common, the students may have had met them in their daily lives and in authentic materials.

In another study Mola (1993) found out that ‘those idioms which were comprehended and produced most correctly were those which were frequently used (in both cultures), those

whose meanings were transparent and those which had simple vocabulary structure' (p. 19), which is also in parallel with this study.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

As the subjects of this study are the ones who are expected to teach English and work in the areas related to English language, culture and literature, it is essential that they learn uncommon opaque idioms as well as the common ones and transparents.

As a result, the following pedagogical suggestions can be glared for the teaching of idioms in English language and literature departments as well as in English language teaching departments in Turkey:

1. Idioms containing cultural aspects should be taught comparatively.
2. Idioms containing potential interference-- due to L1 or L2 culture—should be given priority.
3. Most common idioms should be taught first.
4. In EFL/ESL situation idioms should not be neglected, on the contrary, they should be taught explicitly in text as well as in isolation.

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## Appendix A. Idioms Given in English

Idiom
<b>Transparent</b>
1.Kill two birds with one stone
2.To change one's mind
3.To go red
4.From top to bottom
5.Use one's head
6.To be short of
7.To hold one's tongue
8.Under one's nose
9.To give/ land a hand
10.A storm in a teacup
11.The dead of night
12.Behind the times
<b>Opaque/but common</b>
13.To rain cats and dogs
14.To smell a rat
15.The apple of someone's eyes
16.To spill the beans
17.To butter someone up
18.A piece of cake
19.Too many cooks spoil the broth
20.It's no use crying over spilt milk
21. A cat-and-dog life
22.To pull someone's leg
<b>Opaque/uncommon</b>
23.To do/serve time
24.To smell a rat
25.To talk through one's hat
26.To laugh up one's sleeve
27.In black and white
28.Out of the blue
29.Blue pencil
30.To catch someone red-handed
31.A white-collar worker
32.Root and branch
33.To put all one's eggs in one basket
34.To be in the soup
35.To pull someone's leg
36.Every now and then
37.How come?
38.Mind one's p's and q's
39.What's up?
40.To show up

## Appendix B. Idioms Given in Turkish

Idiom
<b>Transparent</b>
1.Sahte gözyaşları
2.Konuyu değiştirmek
3.Tam zamanında
4.Kestirme yol
5.Dört ayak üstüne düşmek
6.Fikrini değiştirmek
7. Kuş bakışı
8.Sudan çıkmış balığa dönmek
9.Samanlıkta iğne aramak
10. Bir bardak suda fırtına
<b>Opaque/but Common</b>
11.Sayfayı çevirmek
12.Sütlü kahve
13.Kararsız olmak
14.Aklını kaçırmış olmak
15.Dikkatini çekmek
16.Göz-kulak olmak
17.Ayak uydurmak
18.Kurtulmak/başından atmak
19.Tepeden bakmak/ hor görmek
20.Elinden geleni yapmak
21.Ölmek
22.Vakit kazanmak
<b>Opaque/uncommon</b>
23.Küpünü doldurmak
24.Ağzını aramak
25.Kıl payı kurtulmak
26.Pastırma yazı
27.Oyun bozan kimse
28.Ucuz kurtulma
29.Mal mülk
30.Biri ile kavgalı olmak
31.Zenginler ve yoksullar
32.Asil kan
33.Bir konu üzerinde durmak,vurgulamak
34.Genellikle (
35.Sevinçten ağzı kulaklarına varmak
36.Haddini bildirmek
37.İşleri tıklarında olmak
38.Devede kulak
39.Kulak asmak
40.Ivır zıvır