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The Interpretation of Unfamiliar Formulaic Expressions: A Study on Native-like Speakers of English

Rehan Almegren *
Department of Applied Linguistics, College of Languages, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study investigates how native-like Saudi speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL) interpret unfamiliar formulaic English expressions and the strategies they use to interpret these expressions. It specifically examines which strategies the Saudi subjects share with native English speakers and explores the potential differences in strategies employed by male and female individuals. Participants included 50 Saudi EFL native like speakers and 20 native English speakers, who were given an English idiom test. This research embraces the cognitive linguistic theory behind processing and interpreting unfamiliar formulaic expressions. Findings were analyzed by examining the frequency and percentages of the strategies used by the participants to understand the meaning of the expression. They indicated that Saudi EFL speakers used the context of the phrase, analogies, and their knowledge of English lexis and phonology to parse unfamiliar formulaic English expressions, and that they looked to the context of the phrase most often. The study also found that native English speakers used the same strategies, but with different number of occurrences, and that women used more strategies than men. Findings will help better understand the interpretation of unfamiliar expressions.

Keywords: Formulaic expressions, Interpretation strategies, EFL, Linguistics, Language proficiency.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the interpretation of unfamiliar formulaic expressions by Saudi native-like speakers of EFL. It examined the shared interpretation strategies between native speakers of English and Saudi EFL speakers and the differences in strategies between males and females.

1. Introduction

Languages are, to a large extent, formulaic (Meunier 2012; Sinclair 1991). Formulaic expressions or sequences are important in first- and second-language learning. Formulaic sequences are sequences of words that have a well-formed semantic and syntactic structure; these are then saved and produced as a whole (Qi and Ding 2011). They include lexical units such as proverbs, lexical bundles, idioms, and expressions of conventions (Schmitt and Carter 2004). This study focuses on idioms—that is, expressions

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* Corresponding Author: **rehanmeg@gmail.com**

with meanings that are not always configured from the constituent elements of the expression itself (Long 1990). Idioms are different from other formulaic sequences because their meaning is hidden and not literal, is mostly fixed, and is widely known to a community of speakers (Laval and Bernicot 2002; Wray et al. 2016). Rafieyan (2018, 2) stated that "the ubiquity of formulaic sequences in language indicates that their mastery is a key determiner of language proficiency," and that many researchers "claim that appropriate use of formulaic sequences can help language learners reach a higher level of language proficiency not only in terms of fluency, but also in terms of range of expression and accuracy."(2). In saying so, Rafieyan sums up considerable body of scholarly literature in a concise way (e.g., Barfield and Gyllstad 2009; Biber et al. 2004; Boers and Lindstromberg 2012; Boers et al. 2006; Bybee 2002; De Cock 2004; Henriksen 2013; McGuire 2009; Meunier 2012; Peters 2014; Stengers et al. 2010; Stengers et al. 2011; Wood 2010; Wray 2002; Wray and Perkins 2000). Furthermore, Nippold (2006) suggested that people learning English as a foreign language (EFL) have difficulties interpreting formulaic sequences that are hardly used in spoken or written language.

Recent studies have examined the various strategies that learners of a foreign language employ to comprehend idioms, including different aspects of how EFL learners interpret formulaic sequences in English (e.g., Al-Mohizea 2013; Alqarni 2019; El-Dakhs et al. 2017; Rafieyan 2018; Steyn and Jaroongkhongdach 2016). However, few studies have examined the strategies that Saudi EFL speakers or relatively proficient (or indeed nearly fluent) EFL speakers use to interpret formulaic English expressions. Moreover, few studies have examined how these speakers tackle unfamiliar formulaic English expressions or differences in strategy adopted by gender. This study fills these gaps in the literature by addressing each of these concerns in detail. The coming section will be a review of the literature pertaining to the key concepts leveraged in this study.

2. Literature Review

There are many definitions of formulaic sequences in the literature. Wood (2010) defined them as "multiword or polymorphemic units of language, stored in memory as if they are single lexical units, and recalled and produced as wholes." (42). Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) suggested that formulaic sequences go through judgment from native speakers and the corpus data with giving option to the last. This leads to two points in the recognition of the formulaic sequences. The first is the judgment of whether the combined words are formulaic or not. Second, it should be confirmed by the important insights provided by the corpus data. Formulaic sequences are important ways of signaling a speaker's comprehension of language, fluency of production, and use of appropriate words or phrases (Meunier 2012; Schmitt and Carter 2004). Steyn and Jaroongkhongdach (2016) suggested that these sequences have three characteristics. First, they consist of strings of two to five words (Hyland 2008). Second, they work as a single unit and are remembered as a whole (Wood 2010; Wray 2013). Third, they can be spoken or written language (Alali and Schmitt 2012).

Although formulaic sequences aid both the speaker's production and the hearer's comprehension, learning how to interpret and use formulaic sequences is still not prioritized in foreign language teaching

(Steyn and Jaroongkhongdach 2016). Studies have shown that learners' understanding of formulaic expressions tends to be imperfect and imprecise (Natsumi 2014) and both contextual and literal meanings are important to learners' understanding of formulaic expressions as these meanings function together (Wray et al. 2016). We can get clues as to how native speakers learn formulaic expressions in their native language by observing how children acquire language. For instance, some scholars have claimed that we can explain the general language acquisition of children based on how multiword strings are processed to the point of exposition with altering the fixed relative components in them to have permitted flexibility (Wray et al. 2016).

Furthermore, Spector (1996) suggested that age was a factor in elementary school children's learning of humorous idioms. Other studies have found that language acquisition takes place through memorization and repetition of sequences (Ellis 1996). Developing an understanding of formulaic sequences is a sign of fluency (Howarth 1998; Keshavarz and Salimi 2007) and non-native speakers are considered fluent by their "use of a lot of prefabricated sequences shared by everyone in the speech community" (Foster 2001, 77).

Many linguists have examined how foreign language learners learn and interpret formulaic sequences. Conklin and Schmitt (2008) examined the speed at which native and non-native speakers process formulaic and nonformulaic sequences and found that both processed formulaic sequences quicker than they did non-formulaic sequences. This led Conklin and Schmitt (2008) to conclude that they share certain language processes. Zuo (2008) examined how Chinese EFL learners interpreted unknown idioms and found that they used a variety of strategies to do so. They found that most study participants made schematic inferences to interpret these idioms, and that study participants with a higher level of English proficiency tended to seek the meaning of an idiom by examining the wider context. Wood (2009) examined how Japanese EFL learners improved their interpretation of formulaic sequences through focused instruction, and found that focused instruction strongly increased study participants' fluency. That study also demonstrated that there is a relationship between instructions, fluency, and EFL learners' use of formulaic sequences. Laufer and Waldman (2011) suggested that second-language learners' knowledge of formulaic expressions increases the more they are exposed to the surroundings of that language.

Several studies have examined the relationship between language proficiency and interpretation of familiar or unfamiliar formulaic sequences. For instance, Wray et al. (2016) found that the higher EFL speakers' English proficiency, the more the strategies they used to interpret unfamiliar idioms resembled those of native English speakers. Rafieyan (2018) examined how university-level Japanese EFL learners with a range of English language proficiencies fared on a discourse completion test, and confirmed that there is a relationship between speakers' knowledge of formulaic sequences and their language proficiency.

Inspired by Wray et al. (2016), this study examines and focuses on how Saudi EFL speakers interpret unfamiliar formulaic expressions. It aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What strategies do Saudi EFL speakers employ to understand unfamiliar formulaic expressions?

RQ2: What strategies do Saudi EFL speakers share with native English speakers?

RQ3: What are the differences between male and female Saudi EFL speakers' use of strategies?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Fifty Saudi EFL speakers participated in this study (25 males and 25 females aged 25 to 35). They were selected randomly after meeting the criteria for this research. It was determined that each study participant had a high or near-native degree of English language proficiency by their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores (at least 6 for IELTS and between 60 and 78 for TOEFL). Study participants were colleagues, students, and friends who work or study in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in fields where English is commonly used. The 20 native English speakers were all 25 years or older. Half of them were females and the other half were males. This study was approved by the institutional review board of Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University; all participants gave their signed voluntary consent to participate, and their data was made anonymous.

3.2 Instrument

This study used two written tests as research instruments. The first was the English Idiom Completion Test, which consists of 16 idioms and aims to assess test-takers' familiarity with common English idioms. The second test consisted of ten expressions taken from the novels *The Black Moth*, *The Tollgate*, and *The Reluctant Window* written by Georgette Heyer. According to Wray et al. (2016), they were chosen in order to provide semantic opaque sentences that are obsolete and are unknown to the participants. The suitability of the expressions to the participants' culture was assured by understanding the meaning of each expression. These two tests were created, used and applied on participants with different cultural backgrounds by Wray et al. (2016). These are the 10 formulaic expressions and their meanings (Wray et al. 2016, 20):

Formulaic Expression	Meaning
under the hatches	in debt
at home to a peg	very at home
have no feather to fly with	have no money
culp a wafer	hit a small object
do it too brown	so it's not credible
cut a wheedle	ingratiate oneself with someone by lying
yard of tin	post horn
handle the ribbons	drive a coach or carriage
cry rope on	give [someone] away; tell a secret
draw the bustle too freely	spend too much money

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by determining the frequency and percentages of the strategies used to understand the meaning of unfamiliar formulaic expressions. The participants used strategies that were classified according to the classifications used by Wray et al. (2016): Context (e.g. "'they're on about shooting ...maybe culp a wafer is shooting a good shot" 22), not knowing a lexical item (e.g. "I don't

know what a peg is" 22), analogy (e.g. "doing it rather too brown is that's rich coming from you" p.22), linking with lexis not mentioned in the target (e.g. "Maybe birds or something like that" 22), phonological links (e.g. 'under the hatches ... I know in modern day we say bury the hatchet" p.22), creating a metaphor (e.g. "take the reins, handle the ribbons, yeah, importance of leadership" 22), mechanisms like grammar or semantics (e.g. "So that 'for' explains the reason why he was at home to a peg" p.22), giving up (e.g. "'I'm not quite sure about this phrase" 22), and translation (e.g. "'in terms of my first language German maybe wafer could be something like weapon, Waffe" 22). The results were compared to answer the research questions.

4. Results

Each of the tables in this section shows the strategies each study participant used for each script and the frequency with which our study participants used each strategy. Table 1 below displays the data for Saudi EFL speakers who had the Test of English Idiom Completion Test.

Table 1: Saudi EFL speakers' Familiarity with English Idioms

Sentences -Idiom	Answers	Frequency	Percent of Responses
1. I think I [MAKE, MISTAKE] in my exam yesterday. (S1)	Made a mistake	50	100%
2. I'm not sure, but [FAR, KNOW] Heathrow is the busiest airport in Europe. (S2)	As far as I know	50	100%
3. Jane is 10 years old this year. [SEEM, YESTERDAY] that she was a baby. (S3)	It seems like yesterday	50	100%
4. Listen to Martin reading! [HARD, BELIEVE] he is only five years old. (S4)	It is hard to believe	50	100%
5. They tried everything, but [NO, AVAIL]. (S5)	To no avail	39	78%
6. It was such a surprise. At first I couldn't [TAKE, BOARD] (S6)	take aboard	47	92%
7. At first I didn't recognise him, but [TURN, OUT] we went to the same college years ago. (S7)	It turned out	50	100%
8. Anyway, [STORY, SHORT] we missed the bus. (S8)	Long story short	50	100%
9. [FOR, KNOW] it could be something completely different. (S9)	For all I know	50	100%
10. [CHANCE, ARE] it won't happen. (S10)	Chances are	50	100%
11. Call the police. You can't [LAW, HANDS] (S11)	Take the law in your own hands	42	84%
12. She started at the bottom of the company, but [WORK, WAY] (S12)	Worked her way up	50	100%
13. She's only a young child. That book [OVER, HEAD] (S13)	Is over her head	48	96%
14. A: You're singing that song again. B: I know. I can't [GET, HEAD] (S14)	Get it out of my head	50	100%
15. [LINE, WORK] are you in, John? (S15)	What line of work	50	100%
16. It's [LITTLE, CONCERN] to them. (S16)	A little concerning	50	100%

Table 1 presents the answers that Saudi EFL speakers provided for the English Idioms Completion Test. The results revealed that the participants noticed all idioms. The idioms that a small number of participants did not figure out were *to no avail, take on board, take the law into your own hands*, and *is over her head.*

Table 2: Differences between Native English Speakers' and EFL Speakers' Performance on the English Idiom Completion Test

Sentence - Idiom	Answer Scores			
	Native English speakers		EFL speakers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1. (S1)	50	100%	20	100%
2. (S2)	50	100%	20	100%
3. (S3)	50	100%	20	100%
4. (S4)	50	100%	20	100%
5. (S5)	39	78%	20	100%
6. (S6)	47	92%	18	90%
7. (S7)	50	100%	20	100%
8. (S8)	50	100%	20	100%
9. (S9)	50	100%	20	100%
10. (S10)	50	100%	20	100%
11. (S11)	42	84%	20	100%
12. (S12)	50	100%	20	100%
13. (S13)	48	96%	20	100%
14. (S14)	50	100%	20	100%
15. (S15)	50	100%	20	100%
16. (S16)	50	100%	20	100%

Table 2 shows that both native speakers of English and Saudi EFL speakers attained high or perfect scores on each of the 16 idioms. The idiom for which both groups did not get a full score was (6) *take aboard.* The idioms that only the Saudi EFL speakers did not get full scores on were as follows: *is over her head, to no avail,* and *take the law in your own hands.*

Table 3: Frequency of Strategies used by Saudi EFL Speakers

Script	Strategy	Frequency	Percent
Script 1	Context	47	94%
	Lexis	3	6%
Script 2	Context	39	78%
	Lexis	10	20%
	Giving up	1	2%
Script 3	Context	40	80%
	Analogy	8	8%
	Lexis	2	4%
Script 4	Context	47	94%
	Lexis	3	6%
Script 5	Context	48	96%
	Giving up	2	4%
Script 6	context	46	92%
	Giving up	2	4%
	Lexis	2	4%
Script 7	Context	46	92%
	Lexis	4	8%
Script 8	context	39	78%
	Lexis	7	14%
	Analogy	3	6%
	Giving up	1	2%
Script 9	Context	49	98%
	Phonology	1	2%
Script 10	Context	44	88%
	Lexis	1	2%
	Analogy	2	4%
	Giving up	3	6%

Table 3 reveals the strategies Saudi EFL speakers used to interpret unfamiliar formulaic expressions. This table indicates that they used context, lexis, analogy, and phonology to interpret the expressions, and that some study participants used gave up. Context was the most frequently used strategy in all scripts, and the highest percentage was 98% in script 9.

Table 4: Frequency of the strategies used by Native Speakers of English

Script	**Strategy**	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Script 1	Context	14	70%
	Phonology	2	10%
	Lexis	2	10%
	Giving up	2	10%
Script 2	Context	20	100%
Script 3	Context	17	85%
	Phonology	1	5%
	Analogy	2	10%
Script 4	Context	18	90%
	Giving up	2	10%
Script 5	Context	19	95%
	Analogy	1	5%
Script 6	context	18	90%
	Lexis	1	5%
	Giving up	1	5%
Script 7	Context	17	85%
	Analogy	1	5%
	Lexis	2	10%
Script 8	Context	16	80%
	Analogy	1	5%
	Lexis	1	5%
	Giving up	2	10%
Script 9	Context	18	90%
	Analogy	1	5%
	Giving up	1	5%
Script 10	Context	15	75%
	Lexis	3	15%
	Analogy	1	5%
	Giving up	1	5%

Table 4 displays the results of native English speakers' use of strategies on the 10 scripts. Like Saudi EFL speakers, native English speakers used context more than any other strategy in order to determine the meaning of unfamiliar formulaic expressions in all 10 scripts.

Table 5: Saudi EFL Speakers' Gender Similarities and Differences in Strategy Choices

Male				Female			
Script	**Strategy**	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Script**	**Strategy**	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Script 1	Context	25	100%	Script 1	Context	22	88%
Script 2	Context	25	100%				
Script 3	Context	25	100%		Lexis	3	12%
				Script 2	Context	14	56%
Script 4	Context	25	100%		Lexis	10	40%
Script 5	Context	24	96%		Giving up	1	4%
				Script 3	Context	15	60%
	Giving up	1	4%		Analogy	8	32%
Script 6	Context	23	92%		Lexis	2	8%
	Giving up	2	8%				
				Script 4	Context	22	88%
Script 7	Context	25	100%		Lexis	3	12%
				Script 5	Context	25	100%
Script 8	Context	21	84%				
				Script 6	Context	23	92%
	Lexis	4	16%		Lexis	2	8%
Script 9	Context	25	100%	Script 7	Context	21	84%
Script 10	Context	25	100%		Lexis	4	16%
				Script 8	Context	18	72%
					Analogy	3	12%
					Lexis	3	12%
					Giving up	1	4%
				Script 9	Context	24	96%
					Phonology	1	4%
				Script 10	Context	19	76%
					Lexis	1	4%
					Analogy	2	8%
					Giving up	3	12%

Table 5 displays Saudi EFL speakers' gender similarities and differences in strategy choices. It shows that both genders used the context strategy most often, followed by lexis, and that among female participants, analogy was the third most used strategy. It also shows that female study participants gave up more often than male participants.

5. Discussion

This section examines the study's findings in relation to its three research questions in detail. RQ1 was about the strategies Saudi EFL speakers use to understand unfamiliar formulaic English expressions. Findings suggest that of the nine strategies presented by Wray et al. (2016) *context, lexical items in the target expression, analogy, lexis, phonological, metaphor, mechanism, giving up and translations*, this study participants only used five—*context, analogy, lexis, phonology, and giving up*. Even though participants had other strategies to use to find out the meaning of the unfamiliar formulaic expression, they used a limited number of strategies. This reflects the findings of other literature. Results reveal that

context was by far the most commonly used strategy is corroborated by Pellicer-Sánchez (2016), Liontas (2002) and Xie (2017), who pointed out that non-native speakers tend to use context to understand idioms. Xie (2017) explains this by saying that their understanding was better when supported by the context unlike when context is not presented to the students. From a personal view, this may also be related to the way the participants were taught how to figure out the meaning of a word that they are not familiar with in L2. On the other hand, Boers.., Eyckmans, and Stengers (2007) mentioned that learners may be less successful in getting the accurate meaning. They justified this in that it interfered with the learners L1 and having keywords that are ambiguous or that are unknown. I believe that the last point of justification may apply not only to learners but also to native speakers of English.

RQ2 investigated the strategies that Saudi EFL speakers share with native English speakers. Findings suggest that, in general, both groups used the same strategies, albeit with different frequencies. As mentioned above, context was the most commonly used strategy which corroborated by Wray et al. (2016) finding where it was found that context was the main strategy that non-native English speakers and native English speakers employ for interpreting formulaic sequences that are not familiar. Going into more detail, findings reveal that there were differences in the strategies used by native and non-native speakers according to the script. It aligns well with Wray et al. (2016) finding that non-native speakers use analogies more often as their language proficiency improves and becomes more nativelike. Furthermore, finding reveal that EFL speakers sometimes used lexis strategies which is corroborated by Liontas (2002), who found that language learners tend to try to predict the meaning of an idiom according to their knowledge of the lexical items it contains. One can also learn from these finding that there is a link between the strategy used and the speaker's language proficiency. This shows that the more EFL learners become more proficient, the more they use native like forms.

RQ3 investigated the differences between male and female EFL speakers' use of strategies of interpreting unfamiliar formulaic expressions. Results indicate that there were major differences by gender: male participants used only three different strategies, and female participants used five different strategies for most of the scripts. Although both men and women used context strategies most often, they had different preferences regarding the other strategies. According to Lawson and Hogben (1996), vocabulary need context for it to be learned and this is from a linguistic and psychological perspective. Lexis came as the second most used strategy for both male and female participants. Alqahtani (2015) stated that an important tool for language learners is knowledge of vocabulary because it is responsible for a successful communication. Analogy was the third most used strategy by female participants. In this case, making comparison between an expression that a learner is familiar with an unfamiliar one to create a meaning is a cognitive process. Also, it is considered a strategy to find meaning for learners who don't know many vocabularies. The third and last used strategy for male participants was giving up and the least used strategy by female participants. Frustration of failing to interpret unfamiliar formulaic expressions may lead to giving up. Participants failing to interpret these expressions may also be related to them not being taught different strategies to use in these situations. These findings are corroborated by

Katsarou (2011), who suggested that men and women "may possibly exhibit a differentiated strategic competence with respect to guessing at the meaning of unknown L2 idioms in a text context."

6. Conclusion

This research focused on investigating three aspects concerning unfamiliar formulaic expressions. The first aspect was the strategies that Saudi EFL speakers employ to understand them. The second was finding out the shared strategies between the Saudi EFL speakers and the native English speakers, and the third focusing on differences between male and female Saudi EFL speakers' use of strategies. The participants of the study were Saudi male and female EFL speakers of English who were native-like and native speakers of English. The instrument used for this research was an English Idiom Completion Test and an Unfamiliar Formulaic Expression Test.

Findings revealed that EFL speakers lean primarily on contextual clues to interpret unfamiliar formulaic English expressions. Both native English speakers and EFL speakers share strategies for interpreting these expressions. It was also found that female EFL speakers use a wider range of strategies than male EFL speakers. Although these findings are corroborated by the literature, this study has a few limitations. For instance, its small sample size makes it difficult to generalize its findings. Furthermore, it only used 10 scripts to assess study participants' use of strategies. Future studies could use a larger sample size and more scripts to provide more detailed and generalizable findings. Future studies could also examine the qualitative similarities and differences between EFL speakers' strategies in their native and target language, and could compare their use of strategies for deciphering written and spoken idioms.

This study's findings might help EFL teachers develop strategies to help EFL learners understand unfamiliar expressions by using the strategies of native speakers. The findings might also help EFL learners determine which strategies work best for them by helping them determine which strategies native English speakers find most useful.

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The Interpretation of Unfamiliar Formulaic Expressions: A Study on Native-like Speakers of English

تفسير التعبيرات الصيغية غير المألوفة: دراسة عن متحدثي اللغة الإنجليزيّة كاللغة الأم

رهان المقرن

قسم اللغويات التطبيقيّة، كلية اللغات، جامعة الأميرة نورة بنت عبدالرحمن، الرياض، المملكة العربيّة السعوديّة

الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تفسير السعوديين متحدثي اللغة الانجليزيّة كلغة أجنبيّة بطلاقة للتعبيرات الإنجليزيّة غير المألوفة، وتهدف إلى تحديد الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمونها لتفسير مثل هذه التعبيرات. كما تدرس الاستراتيجيات التي يتشاركها المتحدثون السعوديون (EFL) مع الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزيّة، وتهدف أيضاً إلى استكشاف الاختلافات المحتملة بين الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها المتحدثون السعوديون الذكور والإناث. وتشمل عينة الدراسة 50 سعوديًا من المتحدثين باللغة الإنجليزيّة كلغة أجنبية بطلاقة و20 ناطقاً باللغة الإنجليزيّة. خضع المشاركون لاختبار تعبيرات اللغة الإنجليزيّة الذي يتكون من 10 نصوص أو تعبيرات. ويعتمد هذا البحث على النظريّة اللغويّة الإدراكيّة في فهم التعبيرات الصيغية غير المألوفة وتفسيرها، وحُلِّلَتْ البيانات من خلال تحديد التكرار والنسب المئوية للاستراتيجيات المستخدمة، وتشير النتائج إلى أن المتحدثين السعوديين استخدموا استراتيجيات كسياق العبارة والتشبيهات ومعرفتهم بالمصطلحات الإنجليزيّة وعلم الأصوات لتحليل التعبيرات الإنجليزيّة غير المألوفة، وأنهم استخدموا سياق العبارة في كثير من الأحيان، وأوضحت الدراسة أيضًا أن الناطقين باللغة الإنجليزيّة استخدموا الاستراتيجيات نفسها، ولكن بعدد تكرار مختلف، وأن النساء استخدمن مجموعة متنوعة من الاستراتيجيات أكثر من الرجال، وستساعد هذه الدراسة معلمي اللغة والمتعلمين واللغويين على فهم عملية تفسير التعبيرات غير المألوفة بصورة أفضل واستخدامها في مجالاتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعبيرات الصيغية، استراتيجيات التفسير، اللغة الإنجليزيّة كلغة أجنبية، اللغويات، إتقان اللغة.

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