An Investigation of Thai University EFL Students’ Ability to Notice English Idiomatic Expressions

Dentisak Dokchandra
Department of Languages, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Management Science, Kasetsart University, Thailand, dentisak@gmail.com

Sichabhat Boonnoon
Department of Languages, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Management Science, Kasetsart University, Thailand
Corresponding author: sjbnoon@gmail.com

Received: 08/24/2023 Accepted: 11/22/2023 Published: 12/15/2023

Abstract
The main aims of this research were to investigate Thai EFL students' level of ability to notice English idiomatic expressions and variations in their ability to notice the idioms in terms of idiom types, academic disciplines, and perceptions towards their idiom noticing ability. The participants were 162 English as a foreign language students (99 females, 63 males) selected through a purposive sampling method from a university in Northeastern Thailand. The data was collected through an Idiom Noticing and Identifying Test. The results revealed that the students had a low level of ability to notice English idiomatic expressions. The type of idioms the students had reported as the most noticed were transparent idioms, and the opaque idioms as the least noticed. The students were not different in their ability to notice idiomatic expressions regarding their academic disciplines, and they were not sure about the idiomaticity of the idioms they claimed to have noticed.

Keywords: English idioms, EFL learners' ability, idiomatic expressions, Noticing, Thai EFL students

Introduction

English idiomatic expressions, or simply put idioms, are generally accepted as one important aspect of the English language because they come up all the time in both spoken and written English (EF Education First, 2022). They pose difficulty to English learners because most of them cannot be made sense of literally (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Na Ranong, 2018). Many EFL learners, not only those in Thailand and other Southeastern Asia but also in other parts of the world, find it difficult to distinguish ordinary English and idiomatic English when they get involved with day-to-day English materials written or spoken. This is tantamount to the fact that these learners fail to distinguish what normal or ordinary English is and what idiomatic English is. For example, it's a piece of cake is an idiomatic expression, but it's very easy is an ordinary English.

Dokchandra (2015) pointed out that noticing is the first element of the four-element cycle of vocabulary acquisition, and when it comes to vocabulary per se, idiomatic expressions form a large part of it. To teach Thai EFL students to acquire more vocabulary and of course idiomatic expressions, the point to start with is to teach them to notice language. Schmidt (1990) posits in his theory known as the Noticing Hypothesis that a learner cannot continue advancing their language abilities or grasp linguistic features unless they consciously notice the input. In the simplest terms, people learn about the things that they pay attention to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to. However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, a dearth of research has been carried out to investigate Thai EFL learners' ability to notice English idiomatic expressions when they deal with authentic English texts. In particular, the distinction between ordinary English and idiomatic English has not been investigated in the context of a Thai university EFL setting. To fill out this gap, the researchers of the present study were therefore inclined to investigate if the Thai university EFL students were able to distinguish between English idiomatic expressions and ordinary English phrases. Specifically, they wished to explore to what extent the students could notice idiomatic expressions in use and the type(s) of idioms they would be able to notice the most. Furthermore, the students' perceptions in terms of their level of certainty about their ability to notice idioms in use were also investigated.

English idioms, no matter what they are differently called such as idiomatic phrases, expressions, and phrases, are an important part of everyday English. They appear now and again in both written and spoken English. Because the meaning of an idiom cannot always be derived literally, English learners need to familiarize themselves with its meaning and use. This study investigated if Thai learners of English as a foreign language recognized English idioms in use or not while interacting with English texts, and the fact that they did so could be verified by their noticing and exactly identifying the idiomatic expressions. The findings of the present study would contribute to the wealth of literature on English idioms and phraseology, and especially uphold the notion that because of the paucity of ability in English idioms, Thailand's English language proficiency lags behind other countries within the Asian region and even the whole world. Given the fact that most of the students of Kasetsart University are underachievers in their English tests—the ones administered by the university and other standardized tests such as Test of English for International Communication—TOEIC, the lack of awareness of English idiomatic expressions could be attributed as a cause for such phenomenon or not, based on the hypothesis that idiomatic inability to notice which part of language is an idiom and which is not affects the students' ability to receive and produce language.

To investigate the extent to which Thai university EFL students noticed English idiomatic expressions, the relationship between their idiom noticing ability and academic disciplines, and
An Investigation of Thai University EFL Students' Ability

Dokchandra & Boonnoon

their perceptions towards their own idiom noticing ability, the researchers generated the following questions as a guideline:

1. What is the level of Thai university EFL students' ability to notice English idiomatic expressions while reading English texts?
2. What types of idioms are reported as the most and least noticed English idiomatic expressions?
3. How do Thai university EFL students vary in their ability to notice English idiomatic expressions based on their academic disciplines and idiom types?
4. How do Thai university EFL students perceive their ability to notice English idiomatic expressions?

Literature Review

Idiom: its meaning

What is an idiom? In a nutshell, an idiom is a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words (idiom, 2002). Also called idiomatic expression, an idiom is a special kind of phrase with a different meaning when used together from the meaning it would have if the meaning of each word were taken individually (HarperCollins, n.d.) This meaning is different from the literal meaning of the idiom’s individual elements. In other words, idioms don’t mean exactly what the words say. They have, however, hidden meaning.

Importance of Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic expressions or multiword expressions are an essential part of language and they serve as fundamental aspects of language use, processing, and acquisition (El-Dakhs, Khan, & Al-Khodair, 2022; Schmidt, 2010). Martinez and Schmidt (2012) posit that idiomatic expressions are important in language because of four reasons. In the first place, they are widely used in language, representing roughly 20-50% of discourse (Erman & Warren, 2000). They also convey meanings and functions in written or spoken communication. For example, the phrase "on the other hand" means in an opposite way/manner whereas the phrase "watch out" performs as a warning sign. The third reason is that idiomatic expressions have processing advantages which aid successful communication because they are, by and large, processed faster and more accurately than language attempted to create by a user (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Underwood, Schmitt & Galpin, 2004), or improved communication skills (De Caro, 2009). Lastly, idiomatic expressions lead to the enhanced impression of L2 learners' language production (Ohlrogge, 2009). With sufficient knowledge of idioms, L2 learners stand to gain a repertoire of advantages, one of which is the improvement in communication skill (De Caro, 2009).

Types of Idioms

Moon (1998) used the word metaphors to classify idioms based on semantics into the following sub-categories: transparent metaphors, semi-transparent metaphors, and opaque metaphors. The first type refers to idioms with a meaning that can be easily discovered because of their clear and literal image in the reader. Examples of such idioms include to feel like a fish out of water and a stab in the back. With our world knowledge, we easily understand that feeling like a fish out of water means feeling uneasy, or that a stab in the back is an action that hurts or betrays someone. The second type refers to idioms where the link between the literal and the figurative meaning is not very direct. For example, the idiom break the ice falls into this category. Finally,
opaque idioms are the ones whose meaning cannot be derived without knowing their history or etymology. To kick the bucket and to spill the beans are examples of this category of idioms.

Mäntylä (2004) has also classified idioms into three types according to their transparency though the level of transparency is sometimes arguable. They are either transparent idioms where the literal and figurative meanings are linked to each other, semi-transparent idioms where there is a relation between literal and figurative meanings but not transparent, or opaque idioms where the literal and figurative connotations are completely different. From this categorization, it can be inferred that English language learners are anticipated to be capable of using some less common idiomatic expressions.

In addition, Fernando (1996) categorized idioms into three sub-groups: pure idioms, semi-idioms and literal idioms. Pure idioms are conventionalized, non-literal multiword expressions whose meanings cannot be understood by adding up the meanings of the words that make up the phrase. For example, the expression spill the beans is a pure idiom because its real meaning has nothing to do with beans. Semi-idioms, on the other hand, have at least one literal element and one with a non-literal meaning. For instance, foot the bill (pay) is a semi-idiom, in which the word foot is the non-literal element, whereas the word bill is used literally. Literal idioms such as on foot or on the contrary are semantically less complex than the other two. Therefore, they are easier to understand even if one is not familiar with these idiomatic expressions.

An argument has also been advanced as to whether a phrasal verb is an idiom. Phrasal verbs are idiomatic expressions (Siefring, 2004) because sometimes when meeting combinations of verb and particle, learners can find it impossible to guess the meaning in the context from the meaning of the verb and the meaning of the particle. Examples of these phrasal verb idioms are fall through (meaning 'not happen') and put up with (meaning 'accept').

For the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on these four types of idiomatic expressions: phrasal verbs, transparent idioms, semi-transparent idioms, and opaque idioms.

**EFL students' Ability to Notice Idiomatic Expressions**

It seems difficult to confirm whether idiomatic expressions are noticed by L2 learners or not while they are engaging themselves with spoken or written language. However, most research has revealed that L2 learners tend not to notice idiomatic expressions because they are accustomed to treating individual words, but not multiword expressions, as the basic unit of meaning (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021; Tran, 2013); that is their ignorance of the holistic nature of English idioms — hence the word-centered conceptualization of vocabulary rather than the chunk-centered one (Alali & Schmitt, 2012; Boonnoon, 2020).

**Importance of Noticing for Language Learning**

Noticing or awareness is a means that relates input to the memory system. Schmidt (1990) posits that it is an important tool for learning a foreign language. Without noticing, the acquisition does not take place. Lewis (2000) also underscores the important role of noticing as a basic starting point for teaching formulaic sequences such as collocations and idioms. From the perspective of the Lexical Approach, noticing is observational activities that learners perform with the support of conscious attention (Schmidt, 1990). If learners are not directed to notice language in a text, there is a danger that they will see through the text and consequently fail to achieve intake (Lewis, 2000). Therefore, the learners’ attention to notice expressions should be directed by using as various activities and exercises as possible. For more than 30 years now, the importance of noticing
still holds true, echoing Schmidt's (1990) strong position that "those who notice most learn most" (p. 237). It makes a great deal of sense to teach non-native speakers to recognize idioms in a text and to work out their meaning (Mäntylä, 2004)

**Relevant Past Research**

Past research about EFL learners' knowledge of idiomatic expressions pointed out the poor level of ability to notice idioms among EFL learners (e.g. Boonnoon, 2020; Dokchandra, 2019; Na Ranong, 2018; Tran, 2013) and the relationship between idiom familiarity and transparency and the learners' ability to identify them (e.g. Al-Houti & Aldaihani, 2020; Tilmatine, Hubers & Hintz, 2021; Xie, 2017). Most of the studies seem to conclude that the more familiar and transparent the idioms are, the better will EFL learners understand them. The more the learners are exposed to idiomatic expressions, the more developed their figurative language use is (Nippold & Taylor, 2002; Zuo, 2021).

However, few research works were conducted to investigate Thai EFL learners' ability to notice and identify English idiomatic phrases as used in authentic settings (Boonnoon, 2021; Buasuwan, Tokiaw, & Nindya, 2021). In particular, when idiomatic expressions appear in ordinary English, no research has been conducted to verify to what extent the learners single out those idioms and identify their types. Additionally, when it comes to the extent to which the learners are sure about the fact that the phrases are idioms—idiomaticity, the researchers found no relevant research in the literature.

Past research also investigated to what extent individual differences in terms of age, gender, and proficiency were related to idiom understanding ability (Rungsripattanaporn & Na Ranong, 2018; Tabley, & Hermilinda, 2021), but scant research has been carried out to examine if academic discipline affects EFL learners' ability to notice English idiomatic expression.

**Method**

**Population and Sample**

The population of the study was 220 students who enrolled in the course Technical English, an elective course on offer at Sakon Nakhon province campus of Kasetsart University, in northeastern Thailand, in the second term of the academic year 2023.

With the known population size, the researchers determined the sample size by using a ready-made sample size calculator available at https://www.calculator.net/sample-size-calculator.html. The calculator makes it convenient for determining the sample size of a known population size. In this case, the population size was 220, with the confidence level set at 95%, the margin of error or confidence interval at 4%, and the population proportion at 50%. Therefore, the calculated sample size of this study was 162. The researchers randomly selected 162 students out of 220 as the samples in this study. They were from four faculties—Liberal Arts and Management (LAM), Science and Engineering (SE), Public Health (PH), and Agricultural Studies (AS). 99 students were female (61%) and 63 male (39%) respectively. All the selected students filled out consent forms to indicate their willingness to take part in the study. Table One below summarizes the demographic data about the samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>LAM</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>PH</th>
<th>AS</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Instrument

**Idiom Noticing and Identifying Test (INIT)**

The INIT was an all-inclusive data collection tool the researchers developed to gather data about the students' ability to notice idiomatic expressions in use and to identify them. The INIT comprises two parts: Part I is a demographic section containing four items that draw out personal information about the participants in terms of age, gender, and academic discipline, and year of study. Part II is a 20-item set of idiom noticing tests and idiom certainty questionnaire. Each item contains a reading selection of 1-3 sentences in length. Following each selection, there are two statements requiring the students to identify an idiom in use in the text. To identify the target idiom, they had to write it in the space provided. At the same time, they were required to rate their level of certainty about the extent to which they were sure that the identified part was an idiom, ranging from "5 = Extremely sure", "4 = Slightly sure", "3 = Moderately sure", "2 = Not sure", and "1 = Not at all sure".

In this test, four types of idiomatic expressions are embedded in each selection—phrasal verb idioms, transparent idioms, semi-transparent idioms, and opaque idioms. Of the 20 items in the test, five items (items 1-5) are meant to test the students' ability to notice and identify phrasal verb idioms, five items (items 6-10) transparent idioms, five items (items 11-15) semi-transparent idioms, and five more items (items 16-20) opaque idioms, respectively.

For the selections used in the test, the researchers drew on a variety of authentic English resources. These resources included past versions of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), news stories and editorials from online newspapers such as the International Business Times (IBT), and leading universities' informational sections like the ones found on the Harvard University website. For example, the text in Figure One was drawn from the reading comprehension part of the TOEIC test released in 2021. The purpose of drawing on authentic texts was to ensure the texts were not purposively created which would not reflect natural-sounding English. Figure One below illustrates what an item in the test looks like.

![Figure 1: An example of the Idiom Noticing and Identifying Test](image)

For many, the start of a new year represents a moment of transition. It's an opportunity to reflect on the past and to **look ahead** to what the future might hold.
To evaluate for the reliability and construct validity of the test, the INIT was piloted with a group of 20 students undertaking English for Career, a compulsory English course for third-year students at the site of this research. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was 0.84, a satisfactory reliability of the instrument. With the informed consent of the participants to take part in the study, the finalized version of the test, in paper format, was administered during the first term of the academic year 2023 at the campus. The students were asked to submit the test whenever they were finished and could go at their own pace.

Data Analysis
The rightly identified idiom received "1" and the wrongly identified one received "0". An unanswered item was given "0" as well. The researcher used SPSS for Windows (Version 21) to analyze the data for descriptive statistics—percentage, mean, and standard deviation, and statistical tests—independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA.

Research Procedures
The data collection started in July 2023, the first week of the first term of the academic year 2023. They contacted the teachers who taught three sections of Academic English to seek their cooperation in administrating the INIT and informing the students in their classes of the research project. The students were asked to sign a consent form to take part in the study. Subsequently 170 students gave their consent and were administered the INIT which took approximately 45 minutes. The researchers collected the tests and checked for completeness before entering the data from the test for analysis. Finally, 162 tests were kept for the analysis while 8 tests were discarded for lack of completion. The scores from the INIT were computed to obtain the means; The mean scores from the INIT were interpreted to determine the noticing ability of the students based on these criteria: low (0-7 scores), moderate (8-13 scores), and high (14-20 scores). One-Way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run to compare the mean scores derived from the test.

Results
The participants' ability to notice idiomatic expressions was categorized into three levels based on the mean scores they managed to get: low (0-7 scores), moderate (8-13 scores), high (14-20 scores). As indicated in Table Two, the average score for noticing ability of 162 participants was only 5.90 (36.2%) out of the total score of 20. This clearly indicates that the students from across four academic disciplines at KUCSC had a low level of ability to notice English idiomatic expressions. The minimum score was 3, while the maximum score was 12.

Table 2: The participants' overall level of ability to notice English idiomatic expressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>162</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To further investigate the type(s) of idioms noticed by the students, computation of the mean scores for each item containing targeted idioms was run and the results were revealed as presented in Table Three.
Table 3: The participants' ability to notice the types of English idiomatic expressions (n=162)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idiom Type</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phrasal verbs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-transparent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opaque</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table Three, the type of idiomatic expressions most noticed by the participants is transparent idioms (M = 2.80, S.D= 0.92), followed by semi-transparent idioms (M = 2.04, S.D. = 1.09) and phrasal verbs (M= 1.69, S.D. = 0.85) respectively. The least noticed type is opaque idioms (M = 0.74, S.D = 0.77). In detail, it was found that there were 72 students (45%) who could not identify this type of idioms in the selection, while the number of those who could correctly identify this idiom type was only 90 (55%). However, in greater detail, it was found that, off the total correct number of identification, only 63 students managed to get 1 correct answer, 24 got 2 correct answers, and three students managed to get 3 correct answers. No one managed to get a total score of five.

To determine whether the students were different in their ability to notice English idiomatic expressions regarding their academic disciplines, one-way analysis of variance (One-way ANOVA) (F-test) was used to analyze the means. The results of the analysis showed statistical significance at the 0.05 level, as indicated in Table Four.

Table 4: F-Test results for the differences of the students' ability to notice English idiomatic expressions by academic disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>5.366</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.789</td>
<td>.550</td>
<td>.649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>513.572</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>3.250</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>518.938</td>
<td>161</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table Four, the P-value (Sig.=.649) is larger than the alpha value (0.05), the conclusion was drawn that the students from across four academic disciplines at KUCSC were not significantly different in regard to their ability to notice English idiomatic expressions at the 0.05 level.

To determine how the students perceived their ability to notice English idiomatic expressions; that is to what extent they were sure about the idiomaticity of each idiom they had identified, the scores from the part of INIT that required the students to indicate their level of certainty about the idiom noticed in each selection were computed. Their level of certainty is therefore interpreted as their level of perceptions, based on these mean interpretation criteria: 0.00-1.00 = very low, 1.01-2.00 = low, 2.01-3.00 = moderate, 3.01-4.00 = high, 4.01-5.00 = very high. The results are presented in Table Five (See Appendix A).

Table Five reveals that, on the whole, the students perceived their ability to notice English idiomatic expressions to be moderate (M = 2.78, S.D. = 0.60). This indicates that the students at KUCSC from across four academic fields were not sure about their ability to notice English idioms. That is, they were not certain if the idiom they noticed in each selection was correct or not. To be
precise, they made a guess rather than being sure about their decisions on the identification of idioms.

However, in detail it was found, on the whole, that the group of phrasal verb idioms gained the highest level of certainty (3.52), followed by the transparent idiom group (3.49), semi-transparent idiom group (2.31) and the opaque idiom group (1.79), respectively. Details of the certainty level of each group of idiomatic expressions appear in Table Six below.

Table 6: The students' level of certainty about their noticing ability based on idiom groups (n=162)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group of idioms</th>
<th>Item Number</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phrasal verbs</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparent idioms</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-transparent idioms</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opaque idioms</td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total mean</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The conclusion drawn from Table Six is that the students perceived their ability to notice phrasal verb idioms as moderate, the transparent idioms as high, and the last two groups of semi-transparent and opaque idioms as low.

Discussion

This part is organized as per the research questions generated earlier, and the discussion is organized based on the main findings as follows.

Regarding Research Question One: What is the level of Thai university EFL students' ability to notice English idiomatic expressions while reading English texts?, the results for the first research question show that the Thai university EFL students in this study had a low level of ability to notice English idiomatic expressions when they dealt with English texts. The finding here is consistent with Boonnoon's (2020) and Dokchandra's (2019) conclusions that idiomatic expressions were difficult for Thai EFL learners. A plausible explanation regarding this result could be that the learners are not exposed to sufficient real English outside of the classroom and acquiring idiomatic expression ability is a process that takes enormous time. The learners' lack of systematic teaching of idiomatic expressions could also explain the low proficiency rate of idiom knowledge among the students in this study. To address this problem, Dokchandra (2019) suggested teaching more idiomatic expressions to the learners, "the teacher should urge the learners to do more self-study on the idiomatic expressions that are mostly associative with basic vocabulary" (p. 783).

As to Research Question Two: What types of idioms are reported as most and least noticed English idiomatic expressions?, it was found that transparent idioms were the most noticed type, with semi-transparent idioms as the second most noticed type. The least noticed type of idiom was opaque idioms. To be precise, the students could barely notice this type of idiom. It came as no surprise that the students in general could notice the transparent idioms, but they could barely notice the opaque idioms. Other research works (e.g. Al-Houiti & Aldaihani, 2020; Dokchandra, 2019; Na Ranong, 2018) also found that EFL students had a low level of ability to recognize and understand idioms especially even the most frequently used ones (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016). However, in detail, idioms that are more familiar and transparent proved more understandable for the learners. In this study, the students managed to identify more transparent and frequent idioms than the ones
that are opaque. A plausible explanation in this regard could be that this type of idioms is of high transparency and familiarity, making it easier for the learners to understand, hence noticing them when in use in authentic texts. Past research (Na Ranong, 2018; Nippold & Tylor, 1995; Xie, 2017) confirmed that idioms that were higher in familiarity and transparency were easier for students to understand than those that were less familiar and more opaque. The students in this study managed to notice the idioms with more frequency of use than the others. For example, the idiom *above all* shows 2,470,000 results by Google search engine, while the idiom *on average*, has 782,000 results. Item 8, the idiom *no idea* had the highest score among the transparent idioms. This clearly indicates that transparency has more influence on the students' ability to notice idioms.

In addition, research shows that learners found it less difficult to understand idioms when they are used in contexts than when they are used individually (Liontas, 2001). Relying on contexts and literal interpretation are exactly learning strategies found to be employed by Thai EFL students of elementary and intermediate proficiency levels for helping to derive the meanings of idioms (Na Ranong, 2018) and such findings partially support the results of this study because by indicating that they noticed transparent idioms the most clearly indicated the students drew on these learning strategies. However, the fact that the students in this study, on the whole, were of limited ability to identify idioms could be attributed to their being unfamiliar with the move from individual words to chunks (Tran, 2013), or to put it another way, the students could not distinguish between idioms and ordinary English phrases (Anjarini & Hatmanto, 2021). The students were basically familiar with words used individually, and they got their wires crossed when having to identify those words used as one phrase.

Regarding Research Question Three: How do Thai university EFL students vary in their ability to notice idiomatic expressions based on their academic disciplines and idiom types?, the students from four different academic disciplines were not significantly different in their ability to notice idiomatic expressions. This result could be interpreted that individual differences in terms of major fields of study do not influence idiom noticing ability. However, past research (e.g. Rungsripattanaporn & Na Ranong, 2018; Tabley & Hermilinda, 2021) confirmed the positive relationship between individual differences in terms of gender, age, and proficiency level, but no research was carried out to investigate if academic discipline as an aspect of EFL learners' individual differences affects the learners' idiom noticing ability. The researchers of the current study could, therefore, conclude that an academic discipline does not affect EFL learners' ability to indicate or notice English idiomatic expressions.

Finally, regarding Research Question Four: How do Thai university EFL students perceive their ability to notice idiomatic expressions?, the results showed that the students in this study reported, on the whole, that they had a moderate level of certainty about the English idiomatic expressions they had identified. This could be possibly interpreted as the students' being quite unsure about the idiomaticity of the expressions they had noticed in the selected texts. To be precise, they noticed the idioms based on an act of guessing rather than their confidence. This indicates the sincerity of the students in this study because they expressed what was really in their minds. This finding is in contrast to what Tran (2013) opined as a paradox in her study which revealed that the students claimed to be eager beavers in learning idiomatic expressions, but in reality their learning behavior, as indicated by their poor performance in the idiomatic text, contradicted with what they claimed they wanted to learn.
Research Implications

1. By and large, the Thai university EFL students in this study were able to notice English idiomatic expressions only at a low level. This clearly indicates that there is an urgent need for them to be taught to notice the difference between ordinary English and idioms. Teachers of English at the tertiary level should take it seriously in teaching the students to be alert to any idiomatic expressions that emerge in the materials they are reading or listening to.

2. To enhance the EFL students' English idiomatic competence through noticing, authentic English materials, written or spoken, should be drawn on, and in so doing, the teacher should take a leading role in demonstrating to the students how ordinary English is different from idiomatic expressions. Authoritative dictionaries and aggregators that highlight this aspect of language must be particularly capitalized on. For instance, the Oxford Learner's Dictionary puts it in a salient category of *Idioms* when a word is used as an idiom.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Future research should investigate the level of proficiency in relation to the ability to notice or identify idioms

2. It was found in the current study that students from across four academic disciplines did not differ in terms of their ability to notice idiomatic expressions. Future research should investigate if a major field of study as an individual difference affects EFL learners' idiomatic competence or not.

Limitations

This study was carried out to investigate Thai university EFL students' ability to notice only four types of idioms—phrasal verbs, transparent idioms, semi-transparent idioms, and opaque idioms. Other types of idiomatic expressions were not included such as proverbs. Also, the participants in this study were at a higher education institution in northeastern Thailand, circumspection should be exercised in generalizing the findings of this research to other parts of the country or any larger geographical settings.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the level of Thai university EFL students' ability to notice English idiomatic expressions, the types of idioms reported as most or least noticed, the relationship between their ability to notice the idioms and academic disciplines, and the students' perceptions towards their ability to notice the idioms. According to the results, the conclusion can be drawn as follows:

1. The ability to notice English idiomatic expressions of Thai university EFL students from across four academic disciplines in the study was found at a low level.

2. Transparent idioms were reported as the most noticed type, followed by semi-transparent idioms, phrasal verb idioms, and opaque idioms respectively.

3. Regarding the students' academic disciplines, there was no difference in their ability to notice English idiomatic expressions.

4. The students were not sure about their ability to notice English idiomatic expressions.
About the Authors:
Dentisak Dokchandra, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of English at the Department of Languages, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Management Science, Kasetsart University, Thailand. His research interests are in the areas of L2 reading and writing, language learning strategies, phraseology, and English literature. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2388-7631

Sichabhat Boonnoon is an assistant professor of English at the Department of Languages, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Management Science, Kasetsart University, Thailand. Her line of research centers around language learning strategies, second language acquisition, and TEFL/TESL. https://orcid.org/0000-3144-1624

References


Appendix A

Table 5. *The students' perceptions towards their idiom noticing ability (n=162)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sure1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.525</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>.626</td>
<td>Very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>.748</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>.505</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>.646</td>
<td>Very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.654</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>.861</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>.452</td>
<td>Very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>.643</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>.529</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>.512</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>.540</td>
<td>Very low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>.576</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>.627</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>.501</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>.712</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>.526</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>.685</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>.555</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sure20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>.641</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total mean</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.603</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>