Measuring the Impact of Cultural Context on Chinese ESL University Learners’ Comprehension and Memorization of Figurative Idioms

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Abstract
This paper primarily focuses on the description of the results of a study conducted on ten Chinese university students ESL learners to investigate whether or not cultural context has a significant impact on university students’ ability to remember and understand English figurative idioms as part of English as a Second Language instruction in China. Since Idiom is a kind of language block which concord rich cultural elements and the figurative idiom whose meaning cannot be easy inferred by the usual meaning of its constituent elements, so the present study was based on the relationship between culture and language, the origins of the idioms and their cultural connotations. As some scholars’ studies have shown before, knowing the origins and the source domains of the idioms can enhance the learners motivation, then their comprehension and retention of idioms are improved. The present study also demonstrates that the cultural context can facilitate learners understanding and memorization of the English figurative idiom.

Key Words: figurative idiom; culture; cultural context
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1. Introduction


Idioms are a kind of language blocks which carry rich cultural elements. They are also called the live fossil of culture. In the *NTC’s Super-Mini English Dictionary*, the definition of idiom is “a phrase whose meaning is different from the combined literal meanings of the separate words that make up the phrase”. (Spears, 2002:223) This present study focuses on the namely figurative idioms (conventional multi-word figurative expressions) which cannot always be determined from the meaning of their individual parts. By taking a close look at the Chinese and English idioms, many differences can be found in various cultural aspects between Chinese and English.

In fact, several researchers have suggested that L2 learners, unlike L1 learners, appear to have great difficulties comprehending and producing idioms accurately (Cooper, 1998; Irujo, 1986, 1993). The Chinese students may be confused with figurative idioms such as “*by the skin of one’s teeth*” which is used most often to describe a narrow escape, also see squeak through. Because the meaning of this idiom cannot be learned just by adding the meanings of its individual parts together, so the students do not know the cultural information of this idiom. Boers and Demecheleer (2001) have paid attention on the cultural aspects of learning and teaching idioms. They claim that because of the cross-cultural differences and their possible influence on the learners’ comprehension of idioms, the language teachers should pay much more attention to figurative expressions in the target language, since some figurative themes of the target language are less salient in the native language. Furthermore, some scholars (e.g. Nippold & Martin, 1989; Atai & Akbarain, 2003) have researched the context’s effect on the learning of idioms. They proved that cultural context can facilitate both the learning and processing of L1 and L2 idioms.

It would appear that the way for second language learners to become more fluent in the target language is not only to have a good command of grammar and vocabulary but also a good
command of the ‘idiom principle’ (Prodromou 2003). The ‘idiom principle’ refers to the reliance on multi-word syntagmatic chunks which will be the basis of the underlying principle of language production under normal circumstances (Lennon 1998). Textbooks should try to more accurately mirror the language that is used by native speakers in real world contexts. There are many factors that influence the usage and comprehension of L2 idioms, such as the lack of class input and familiarity with figurative language and the influence of L1, and so on (Wray 1999). First of all, “many second-language materials either ignore idioms entirely or relegate them to the ‘other expressions’ section of vocabulary lists, without providing exercises or other aids to learning” (Irujo 1986: 237). In China, the English idioms learning seems to be a major block for Chinese students L2 learning for the reason of having very few opportunities to come into contact with English idioms. The teachers neglect the idiom teaching and the ignorance of the idioms designed in the textbooks.

It has been estimated that a native speaker would use about 20 million idioms over a lifetime. Since the idioms are used in a broad range of everyday situations in our daily life, and the inappropriate using of the idioms will discourage our comprehension and block our daily communication, therefore, the Chinese students should pay attention to the learning of English figurative idioms. Many researchers (e.g. Ellis 1997; Yorio 1989) suggest that adequate knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in L2 is an important indicator of L2 communicative competence.

The aim of this study is to establish whether or not cultural context has a significant impact on university students’ ability to remember and understand English figurative idioms as part of English as a Second Language instruction in China. Through the present study the researcher try to find a useful strategy for the English figurative idioms’ comprehension and retention for the Chinese university students’ L2 learning.

1.1 Aim

The aim of the present study is to establish whether or not cultural context has a significant impact on university students’ ability to remember and understand English figurative idioms as part of English as a Second Language instruction in China.
1.2 Material

The primary material consisted of three tests: the pre-test, the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test, and two questionnaires.

The participants were ten Chinese English as a Second Language university students. They have studied abroad for one year and all have a Bachelor’s Degree in English. According to Cooper (1999), idiom study presents a special language problem for all language learners because the figurative meaning is unpredictable. For Lakoff and Johnson (1999) figurative idioms are of great importance for five major reasons. First, they demonstrate that words can describe and give access to portions of conventional images. Second, these conventional images do not vary among people but are shared by a large proportion of language communities. Third, a part of cultural knowledge is closely related to the nature of these conventional images. Fourth, lexical differences among the various languages may attribute to differences in conventional imagery. Finally, figurative idioms show that their overall meaning is not the sum of their constituent parts. Instead, the relationships among idiomatic expressions’ parts prove to be complex. For this reason, figurative idioms were chosen in this study which meanings were strongly linked to their origins and cultural source domain and need cultural context to help understand.

The pre-test contained twenty-four figurative idioms chosen from two English dictionaries ( *NTC’s Super-Mini English Idioms Dictionary* and *Boatload of Idioms: Over a Thousand English Expressions*) and a teaching unit of nine idioms. The pre-test’s aim was to identify nine target idioms with which none of the students was familiar.

The immediate post-test took the form of an examination in which the students were required to use the nine idioms which were picked out from the pre-test to fill in the blanks in nine sentences. The nine sentences were picked out by the researcher from the illustrative sentences of the idioms of *Wiktionary* (a wiki-based Open Content dictionary) and *Boatload of Idioms: Over a Thousand English Expressions*. The aim of this test was to find out which group of the Chinese students comprehended these idioms best.
The delayed post-test consisted of a test in which the testees filled in the blanks in nine different sentences, the same nine idioms which were used in the immediate post-test. The aim of the second post-test was to find out which group remembered these idioms best.

The questionnaires were designed to demonstrate the learner’s positive or negative attitude towards the connection between the cultural context of the idioms and how the English as a Second Language learner understand them. The questions posed in the questionnaire were:
1. Do you think it is difficult to understand figurative idioms without the cultural context?
2. Does an understanding of the origins of these figurative idioms help you to remember and understand idioms better?
3. Does it make a difference that you are taught these figurative idioms instead of just trying to find the meaning by yourself?
4. What is the most important reason in influencing Chinese students’ understanding of English idioms? For example, is it the cultural differences between Chinese and Western countries, the students’ English level or the different types of idioms?
5. How common are idioms in English magazines, newspapers, books, movies and communications in your daily life?

The students in the experimental group had to answer all of the five questions while the students in the control group just answered the first one, the fourth one and the fifth one.

1.3 Method

The pre-test was conducted in a room by giving the participants ten minutes for twenty four idiom-items (See Appendix 1). Students were asked to write down the figurative meaning of each idiom they knew. All of the students finished the test in ten minutes and the test paper were handed in to the researcher immediately in order to avoid self-learning on the idioms from the pre-test. They would receive their scores after the researcher’s correction without giving the correct answers to them. Nine idioms (See Appendix 2) were picked out from the twenty-four idioms which all of the students did not know by the researcher. Then the students were divided into two equal groups randomly, one of which would serve as experimental group and the other as control group. The experimental group was chosen randomly in the teaching unit, in which the nine idioms were taught and discussed one by one. The researcher told the students about the figurative meaning and cultural background and
origin of each idiom, while the control group was just taught the meanings of these idioms in the other room.

In the immediate post-test, the two groups of students took an examination after the teaching unit. Ten minutes was given to each student to fill in blanks of nine sentences (see Appendix 3). They would choose the best idiom from the nine idioms to the appropriate sentence respectively. After the examination, the test papers were handed in to the researcher. The results were counted by the researcher. Each correct answer was recorded as 1 and the total score of this test was 9 if the students could choose all idioms correctly.

The reason for administering the delayed post-test a week after the immediate post-test was because seven days is a good time-span to test language retaining (according to the forgetting curve by Hermann Ebbinghaus 1885). Hulstijn suggests that the interval between two tests is a week because it will not influence the investigation process (Hulstijn 2003:351). The delayed post-test was conducted by the same group of students with the same format as the immediate post-test but the ten sentences were different from the immediate post-test (see Appendix 4).

Finally, the experimental group participated in a questionnaire (see Appendix 5), with all of the five questions while the control group just answered the first one, the fourth one and the fifth one because they had not been asked to participate in the teaching unit.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical background of this study is divided into seven sections. The first two sections give the definition of idiom and figurative idiom. The importance of learning figurative idioms is mentioned in the third section. Modern approach to figurative idioms in ESL is introduced in the fourth section; the definition of cultural context is also given in this section. The following two sections discuss the relationship between idioms and culture, the origins of idioms, and the learning and retention of idioms. Finally, previous research on idioms is introduced in the last section.
2.1 The definition of idioms

Viewed from the cognitive linguistics, idioms were initially defined as a specific subgroup of conventional linguistic units. On the one hand, they are relatively fixed, composite multi-word with a non-compositional meaning and an ideational function, such as phrases or semi-clauses. On the other hand, idioms are institutionalized as they are a part of our daily communication and embodying with cognitive grammars. (Andreas 2006: 497-98)

Idioms are regarded as a special category of lexical items due not only to their structures, but also because they indicate a special type of behavior when used in language discourse. Fernando (1996:3) argues that idioms are the fixed phrases and idiomatic collocations that are established by usage and with a stabilized structure and limited variation. Idioms can be a word such as “nevertheless”, a phrase such as “in favor of”, and also a sentence, such as “The coast is clear”. Another scholar, Coulmas, operates with the definition of idiom like that, although the individual parts of these kinds of formula occur in other contexts with different combinations, but the knowledge of the meaning of the parts does not suffice to tell the meaning of the whole formula. It must be learnt as a unit. Like idioms in general, the whole expression is greater than the sum of the parts. (Coulmas, 1979:241)

In the Longman Dictionary of English idioms, idiom is “A fixed group of words with a special different meaning from the meaning of the separate words”. The Oxford dictionary of Contemporary English Idioms explains it as “A combination of two or more words which function as a unit of meaning.” Although there is always a little difference between each of the definitions of idiom, they all have the same agreement on that idiom has the obvious characteristics of semantic integrated and structural stability. Structurally, an idiom usually consists of a series of words, any part of its composition cannot be substituted, and the sequence is relatively fixed. From a semantic point of view, the meaning of an idiom cannot be got from adding the meanings of its individual parts.

2.2 The definition of figurative idioms

The figurative idiom, whose meaning cannot be easily inferred by the usual meaning of its constituent elements, has been much focused on in the SLA literature in recent years (e.g. Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans, 2002; Cooper, 1999; Cornell, 1999). Furthermore, Boers and Seth (2008) have combined The Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms (Sinclair and
Moon 2002, eds.) and *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (Speake 1999), then reached a definition of figurative idiom as “whose origin or source domain was either self-evident or was explained in the dictionary entry”.

### 2.3 The importance of learning idiom

Boers, et al, (2004) have shown that because the source domains of the idioms are more prominent in the culture of the target language than in the learner’s mother tongue, so the idiom learning will pose particular challenges for comprehension and memory to the ESL students.

Cooper (1998) argues that idioms, metaphors, similes, and proverbs all belong to the category of non-literal or figurative language. He also claims that these forms of language are not easy to understand and learn because it is difficult to know their meanings from their superficial stating. Of the four kinds of non-literal expressions, idioms are the most frequently used in people’s daily communication. Some scholars Barlow, Fine, H.R. Pollio and M.R. Pollio (1977:140) have investigated the overall use of non-literal language through analyzing political debates, psychology texts, novels, and psychotherapy sessions. They found that “most English speakers utter about 10 million novel metaphors per lifetime and 20 million idioms per lifetime. This works out to about 3,000 novel metaphors per week and 7,000 idioms per week” Therefore, Geroge Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) have thus argued that figurative expressions are ubiquitous in everyday language.

Figurative language plays several important functions in discourse. At the same time, it has an important role to play in the cognitive structuring of everyday experience. One crucial function is to help people much easier understanding and communicating the abstract concepts by representing them in effective form. We use figurative language in order to give a more concrete content to nonobjective thoughts. (Beck (1982); Lakoff & Johnson (1980); Lakoff & Turner (1989)).

According to Irujo (1986:287-303), the advanced L2 learners have more superiority in target language learning than the low-grade students, but they also have a disadvantage in not understanding idioms of the target language which will appear in movies, newspapers, books, magazines, and in daily communication. It is necessary for the second language learners to
learn and understand English idioms, because understanding and using idiom correctly has become one of the important means of measuring L2 learners’ language ability. In addition, Cooper (1999) claims that for L2 learners, the learning of English idioms will help them master the authentic language of the countries of English native speakers, not the language from the textbook, and idiom study presents a special language problem for all language learners because the figurative meaning is unpredictable. In a second language learning classroom, teachers are not required to offer students complete idiomatic teaching; but all learners must be prepared to face up to the challenge of idioms occurring frequently in spoken and written English (Hoffman, 1984; Irujo, 1986b).

2.4 A modern approach to figurative idioms in ESL

Before the 1990s, researchers paid scant attention to the teaching and learning of figurative idioms in ESL. Boers et al. (2004) have posited three reasons why idioms were largely neglected in the 1990s. Firstly, generally, language was designed as a dichotomy of grammar ‘rules’ and ‘lists’ of individual words. But idioms belonging to multiword expressions did not accord with this dichotomy. Secondly, figurative expressions were just regarded as decoration, which play a role in collecting messages in a colourful way. Thirdly, it was generally assumed that the meaning of idioms was completely unpredictable. Because of these suggested characteristics of idioms, it was believed that they could not be used in any scientific or insightful way. The only practical option for students wishing to learn idioms was to remember them blindly. As a result, idiomatic expressions played a limited role in the educational linguistics.

Meanwhile, more and more scholars in cognitive linguistics and corpus linguistics began to study the field of applied linguistics, which has been a source of inspiration in teaching and learning approaches to L2 idioms. Firstly, “the grammar-lexis dichotomy has been discarded and replaced with a more realistic conception of language as a continuum from simple units to more complex ones.” (Langacker, 1991) In this idea, it becomes much easier to regard the multi-word expressions as taking over an important zone in the linguistic system. Educational linguists now recognize the importance of learners’ mastering multi-word lexical chunks, such as idioms. (Lewis, 1993) Secondly, studies of metaphor have revealed that figurative expressions are used everywhere in everyday communication. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) Corpus data have shown that figurative expressions do really make up a very large lexical
resource. (Deignan, 1995) Thirdly, the pursuing of a pedagogical method to deal with figurative idioms has become appealing to the acknowledgement that a great quantity of figurative language is not arbitrary at all.

In fact, researches in cognitive semantics have shown that many figurative expressions (including idioms) are motivated rather than arbitrary. For example, “Ace in the hole” can easily be traced back to the source domain of card games. “Three strikes, and you are out” origins from the baseball sports. “By the skin of one’s teeth” can be traced back to the the Bible. It is said that when the Jew Job ran away from the God’s punishment, he said, “My bones stick to my skin and to my flesh. I have escaped by the skin of my teeth.” According to Lakoff (1987: 153-154, 497), even though the figurative meaning of many idioms cannot be represented completely by their constituent parts, it is still possible to explain how and why that figurative meaning has arisen. Moreover, Boers et al (2004: 376) have indicated that “If the meaning of figurative idioms is ‘motivated’ by their origins, then it may be possible to teach and learn them in an insightful way after all”. Therefore, it may be helpful for learning the figurative idioms when giving the cultural information or tracing the origins of the idioms.

‘Context’ refers to the environment of language use or communication, and is also the foundation of language communication activities (Hu Zhuanglin, 1994).

2.5 Idioms and culture

Francis Bacon once stated that “the genius, wit and spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs.” (Berendt, 2008:103) Revealing by Berendt (2008:104) that all kinds of metaphors, proverbs, idiomatic expressions and sayings are largely used in our daily communication of the commom–sense wisdom and experience of a certain cultural group. Language is the carrier of culture, and idioms almost invariably have their roots in a particular culture. Cognitive linguist Ronald Langacker (1999: 16) argues that language is an important instrument and component of culture, and its reflection in linguistic structure is pervasive and significant. Speakers take part in a discourse situation, their behaviours and conversations are related to their cultures. Paul Friedrich (1989) calls the connection between language and culture as ‘linguaculture’. He describes the concept of ‘linguaculture’ in these words, “a domain of experience that fuses and intermingles the vocabulary, many semantic aspects of grammar, and the verbal aspects of culture; both grammar and culture have underlying structure while they are constantly being used and constructed by actual people on the
ground”. (Friedrich, 1989: 307) Michael Agar (1994: 265) refers to it as ‘languaculture’ which stands for language + culture. Paul Friedrich and Michael Agar use these terms to emphasise the inseparability of language and culture.

As an important part of language and culture, idioms reflect the transformation in conceptualization of the universe and the relationship between human beings and the universe (Lennon, 1998). The early research by Gardner & Lambert (1972) of language learning revealed that it was a useful way to use the so-call ‘integrative’ motivation. The main concept of this ‘integrative’ motivation is to create the learners’ desire to learn a language through making the learner closer to the target language. The culture of the target language was considered as the best basis for success. Furthermore, Boers & Demecheleer (2001) also believe that it is good for teaching idioms if the teachers have an awareness of cross-cultural as well as cross-linguistic differences.

Moreover, a large number of experiments (e.g., Norton & Kathleen, 1979; Nippold, 1989; Atai & Akbarian, 2003) demonstrated that context can promote the learning and processing of idioms of L1 and L2. The studies of contextual effect of idioms refer to the effect that appears when understanding the figurative meaning of the idiom in context. Therefore, the cultural context occupied a very important position in idioms learning. Learners must understand the specific cultural context of the idioms, then they can understand the idioms cultural connotations well. (ZhouShuang 2006:105).

2.5.1 The definition of cultural context

The Polish anthropologist Malinowsky who is the first founder of the context theory thinks that discourse and context are mutually hanging closely together, the language environment is essential to understand language. The Chinese linguist Hu Zhuanglin (1994) divides context into three types: linguistic context, situational context and cultural context. The cultural context refers to the discourse involved in social, cultural, economic and religious contexts in customs and in contexts of political background, even refers to the particular language communities of any particular language user, and the long-term history, culture, customs and value standard of a certain language community.
2.5.2 Origins of English idioms

According to Smith (1971) the origins of idioms can generally be divided into the following sections.

2.5.2.1 From daily life

Firstly, according to Smith, most idioms derive from daily life and are associated with particular occupations, e.g. sailors have invented many phrases related to the navy and the athletes use phrases related to sports. These idioms were created in all walks of life, they are concise, oral dialect and vivid, and are closely related to our life. So soon they were used by people in the daily life of similar scenes. The most lively and useful ones have gradually evolved from common dialogue to conventional language, and are in common use, e.g. ‘to share and woe’, ‘Strike the iron while it is hot’, ‘a pot of money’, ‘to take the bread out of someone’s mouth’ and so on.

2.5.2.2 From ancient myths, legends and fables

The Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations have had a far-reaching influence on English. Many idioms derive from Greek myths and legends which are widely used in writing. Such as ‘Midas touch’, ‘The apple of discord’ ‘Pandora’s box’, ‘Sour grapes’, ‘Trojan horse’, etc.

2.5.2.3 From religion

Thirdly, Smith (1971) demonstrates that religion is an important source of idioms. In Western countries, where Christianity has traditionally been the main religion, the Bible is the source of many idioms that are regularly used in verbal dialogue, e.g. ‘Olive branch’, ‘Judas’s kiss’ ‘Much cry and little wool’, ‘Turn the other cheek’, ‘cast/throw peals before swine’, ‘the writing on the wall’.

2.5.2.4 From Classical literature

Finally, Smith identifies classical literature as a main source of idioms. After the Bible, Shakespeare’s plays have been one of the most important literary sources of idioms in English. Examples include ‘Pound of fles’: fair but unreasonable request. (The Merchant of Venice). ‘give the devil his due’ all came from Shakespeare’s plays. The idiom Achilles’ heel is from the famous Greek epic poem the Iliad. ‘Screw up one’s courage’: to overcome one’s fear; to stop someone from being afraid. ‘The ugly ducking’ is from the Anderson’s fairy tales.
Idioms are not only related to a nation’s religious culture, but also to its historical and cultural heritage, life experience, geographical conditions, social customs, prevailing ideology and so on. These are the main determinate factors of the national characteristics of an idiom; idioms are thus reflecting a nation or a certain set of cultural features. Different social systems, cultural heritages, national science and technology are closely related to the national character of idioms. The United Kingdom is a country with a long history of sailing; therefore many English idioms are about the sea. (‘Ships in the night’; ‘to rock the boat’; ‘Plain sailing’; ‘to carry too many guns’, etc.) China, on the other hand, is a large agricultural nation; the vast majority of people live in the countryside. Thus many idioms are formed in the farmers’ oral language, which have become the crystallization of people’s rich experience in agricultural production process, and are accumulated and passed on by farmers from generation to generation.

Liu (2002) discusses the figurative concepts that serve as a basic part of idioms in American English and Chinese. Her research suggests that many figurative idioms in America are derived from the domain of sports, business and driving, while eating, the family and the Chinese opera have played important roles in Chinese society and have given rise to many figurative idioms. When comparing English and Dutch idiom dictionaries it seems that English has more different kinds of expressions which originate from gambling and games (‘To play with a stacked deck’; ‘The dice are loaded against someone’; ‘The chips are down’; ‘To overplay one’s hand’, etc.). Other researchers of the idioms in Europe and the United States have shown that there are more baseball-based figurative idioms in American English than in Europe because baseball is more popular in the United States. (e.g. ‘Three strikes and you are out’; ‘I had a date with Alice last night, but I could not even get to first base with her’). There are much more cricket-based and horse racing-based idioms in British English in the source domain of sport. (e.g. ‘Bat on a sticky wicket’; ‘Hit someone for six’; ‘A dark horse’; ‘Hear it from the horse’s mouth’). (Boers, et al. 2004: 377) This thesis focuses on one type of idiom, namely figurative expressions whose origins can be traced and which have a very specific cultural context.
2.6 The learning and retention of idioms

Wray (1999) claims that there are many factors that influence memorization and comprehension of L2 idioms, such as the lack of class input, familiarity with figurative language and the influence of L1, and so on. Because of these reasons, many scholars doubt whether or not second/foreign language speakers make use of the knowledges of their mother tongue while they are learning and processing the L2 idioms. Irujo (1986), in her experiment, asked the Spanish learners of English to recognise and give the meanings of these groups of English idioms. The idioms in the first group were identical to, the idioms in the second group were similar to, and the idioms in the last group were very different from Spanish idioms. The data obtained from this study showed that the students easily comprehended and produced the idioms that were identical to Spanish idioms while the different idioms were hard to be comprehended. Similarly, Kellerman (1983) found a relationship between L1 knowledge and understanding of the figurative use of L2. These researches demonstrate that the cultural background knowledge of L1 may have a significant effect on learners’ comprehension of L2 idioms when they come across new idioms.

It is always a keen interest to psychologists how vocabulary can best be learned. After many years researching, Anderson and Baddeley both claim that elaboration on features of new words promotes their comprehension and retention. (Anderson 1995: ch. 6; Baddeley 1997: ch.7). Moreover, William James (1890: 662) also points out that “[A]ll improvement of the memory lies in the line of elaborating the associates.” This means that the more abundant associations that are made with existing knowledge and give much more attentions of the formal and semantic aspects of words will cause higher chance of retention of the new information. Boers (2000) claims that if learners are sensitized about the metaphorical aspects of normal communication, then figurative vocabulary learning will be enhanced and this knowledge will be retained longer in their memory. A large number of experiments have shown that by raising the L2 learners’ awareness of the origins and source domain of the figurative idioms can help them understanding and remembering these expressions well.

On one hand, the stimulation of the original sense or cultural background of a figurative idiom is probably to give rise to a mental image of a concrete scene. Storing verbal information as a mental image is thought to pave an extra pathway for memory because the information is thus decoded in a double modes. On the other hand, carrying out the task of recognizing the source
domains behind figurative idioms is said, to some extent, to be a certain degree of cognitive effort. This operation of elaborating the cultural source is more likely to be used in a deep level of processing than shallow rote learning. This deep-level learning process of the figurative idioms with detailed information is believed to cause better memory storage.

2.7 Previous research

In our daily lives, a large proportion of communications is made up by idioms. Understanding and producing them have become a focus of studies of idioms in both first and second language literature. Many studies conducted in the 1990s (e.g., Cronk & Schwegert 1992; Colombo 1993; Botelho da Silva & Cutler 1993; McGlone, Glucksberg, and Cacciari 1994) focused on how to understand idioms. Some scholars, such as Botelho da Silva & Cutler focus on the role of ill-formedness in idiom processing while some people (e.g., McGlone et al.1994) are interested in the case of ambiguity and the relationship between context and different types of idioms. Others, such as Schweigert & Cronk, identify familiarity and literalness as two important indications for dealing with and representing of idiomatic meaning in humans’ mental lexicon.

Liontas (1997), who has investigated how L2 learners understand, process and represent idiomatic expressions both in and out of context, found that if contextual knowledge is presented to the learners, their idiom comprehension performance would significantly improve. The most important finding of Liontas’ (1997, 2001) researches is that knowledge and understanding of vocabulary are directly connected to idiom performance irrespective of whether contextual information is provided to learners. Boers & Demecheleer (2001) also focus on the cultural aspects of learning and teaching idioms. They claim that due to the cross-cultural differences and their possible influence on the learners’ understanding of idioms, the language teachers should pay extra attention to figurative expressions in the target language. Because some metaphoric themes of the target language are less salient in the native language. Furthermore, Boers & Demecheleer (2001) also believe that it is beneficial when teaching idioms if the teachers are aware of cross-cultural as well as cross-linguistic differences. The studies of contextual effect of idioms refers to the effect that appears when understanding the figurative meaning of the idiom in the context.
In China, the study of English idioms focuses primarily on the following aspects: A number of scholars (e.g., ZhangPeiji, 1980; HuaXianfa, 1998; LiuZaixiang, 2002; LiuZhengguang, 2001) researched the structures and meanings of idioms. Some people studied the literary quotations and origins of the idioms (e.g., SunHaiyun, 1988; ZhuangHecheng 2002) while others focused on analysing the structures, classification, semantics and the usage of the idioms (e.g., WangJihui, 1998; WangQinjiang, 2000). Moreover, XinXianyun (1994) and SongZhiping (1998) have researched the techniques of idioms, and some scholars (e.g., Zhangning1999; ZhangRuolan 2003) are interested in comparing the study of English and Chinese idioms from the angle of the differences between the English and Chinese language and culture. There are others aspects, such as the research into the linkage function of the idioms in the discourse (TaoLeshuo 2002); the models of memories of idioms (ChenTufa 2001) and introducing the research and development of the idioms understanding from the cognitive linguistic angle (LiuZhengguang 2002; ChenDaoming 1998). Furthermore, SheXianjun (1998, 2000, 2001, 2002) & WangMingjun (1998) introduced the development of the research of foreign idioms understanding from the linguistics angle. The Chinese linguist (TangLing 2009) has studied the effect of language proficiency and idiom type on Chinese EFL learners’ comprehension of English idioms. First, she got the same results as Irujo, namely that the idioms which are different from the learner’s mother tongue are more difficult to comprehend than the similar idioms. Secondly, she suggests that the different language proficiency plays an obvious influence on idioms’ learning. The students with high ability of language acquisition have a better command of idioms than the low level learners.

The above introductions reveal that there is a few people studying the ESL idioms acquisition from the perspective of language acquisition. Even some scholars have made researches on the factors which influence the idiom comprehension from the aspects of the second language level and the idiom types. But there are few Chinese scholars who focus on the idiom comprehension from the cultural context.

3. Analysis and Discussion

To find out whether or not the cultural context affects the learning and retention of figurative idioms, a pre-test and two tests (immediate and delayed) were given to two groups of students. The results of the pre-test and two tests are discussed in the first three sections. The following
two sections make a comparison of the results of the immediate test and the delayed test of the two groups of students. The results of the questionnaire are discussed in the final section.

3.1 The result of the pre-test

The researcher went through three tests to conduct the present study. The nine idioms that none of the students knew are from the Bible, Greek mythology and fables, games, sports and customs pertaining to English-speaking countries. Some students said they had not seen the idioms before, while others claimed that they thought they recognised them but could not explain their meaning. With poor results, some students even tried to translate the figurative meaning into their L1 in order to understand the idioms.

Irujo (1986) has researched whether learners use their knowledge in L1 to help them understand and produce idioms in L2. His study demonstrates that such is the case. At the same time, Irujo confirms that different idioms were more difficult to comprehend than identical and similar idioms. He found out that when the form and meaning of the idiom of the target language is the same or similar as in the learner’s mother language, it may be much easier to be learnt than the different idioms which form and meaning are different from the learner’s mother language. In one result, fewer different idioms were comprehended correctly for the learner could not find the effective information from their mother language or find the wrong clues to comprehend these idioms. Take the idiom, ‘cry wolf’, for example. Many of the students thought it has the same meaning as a Chinese idiom which was the equivalent of the English idiom ‘to cry crocodile tears’. In fact, ‘cry wolf’ means to give a false alarm or complain about things that are not really a problem. This idiom originates from Aesop’s fable. As the Chinese students in the present study are not familiar with western culture, they could not understand the idiom. Another example is “to burn the candle at both ends”. All of the students gave the wrong answer to this idiom. In China, people think that the candle burns itself for giving warmth to people. In one result, the teachers are regarded to candle because they always work hard and contribute themselves to teach students. So the Chinese students all consider the meaning of this idiom as selfless contribution of people. In fact, this idiom has no relation with the teacher but implies to do many things at the same time.
3.2 The results of the immediate post-test

In the immediate post-test, all of the students filled in the questions with blanks. The target idioms had been extracted from the example sentences in order to let the students fill the blanks with the appropriate idioms. The example below is a case in point:

*A government paper to be published will recommend to the judicial sector a ____ policy for illegal file shares on the Internet.*

The aim of this examination was to test whether or not the students had comprehended the target idioms and whether or not the cultural context had an effect to their learning.

Two students scored seven points and three achieved a score of nine in the experimental group. In the control group, one student gained a score of nine, two scored seven points and the remaining two scored five. The accuracy rate was ninety-one percent of the experimental group as against seventy-three percent in the control group. In the experimental group, the average score was 8.6. The average score of the control group was 6.6. The average score between the experimental group and the control group was increased by twenty-four percent. The two sets of scores are displayed in the chart below.
The above chart shows that the experimental group performed better than the control group. The students in the experimental group mastered more idioms and understood them better than the students in the control group. The comparison of the two groups’ scores demonstrates that cultural context is an effective aid to promoting the understanding of figurative idioms.

3.3 The results of the delayed post-test

The delayed post-test was taken one week after the immediate post-test for the reasons explained in the theory section. In the delayed post-test, two students scored seven points, two students gained five points and one scored two points in the control group. In contrast, four students scored nine points and one gained seven points in the experimental group giving a ninety-five percentage accuracy rate as against fifty-seven percentage in the control group. In this test, however, the mean score of the experimental group illustrates that there was a greater improvement in this group than in the control group. A blind learning and remembering of the figurative idioms of the control group just got an average score of 5.2 while the average score of 8.6 gained by the experimental group of the elaborated learning and retention of those idioms. The average score of the two groups was increased by sixty-five percentage as the table below illustrates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>S5</th>
<th>mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CG</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>EG</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Experimental and Control Groups Scores Compared

The diagram demonstrates that the provision of cultural context clearly facilitates comprehension of figurative idioms. Providing information about the origins of idioms also significantly contributes to retention of the figurative idioms.
As Boers (2000) claims, if learners are familiar with the metaphorical information of the idioms in everyday communication, figurative vocabulary learning will be strengthened and this knowledge will be stored for a longer period in the memory. The students in the experimental group were given the figurative meaning of the selected idioms including information about the origins and cultural context of the idioms. The students in this group are thus familiar with the idioms and are clear about the usage context of them.

Take the two target figurative idioms (by the skin of one’s teeth, at the eleventh hour) for example. Reviewing the results of both the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test, these two idioms take the highest error rate of the wrong answers. The students seem to mix the meanings of them, because they always make a reversal of the answers of the sentences of these two idioms. The item examples of the two idioms of the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test are listed in the following:

The example from the immediate post-test:
1. Almost too late Negotiators reached agreement by the skin of their teeth, (correct answer: at the eleventh hour) just in time to avoid a strike.
2. The dog was chasing us, and we made it inside the house at the eleventh hour, (correct answer: by the skin of one’s teeth.).

The example from the delayed post-test:
1. The bill was about to be defeated, but by the skin of our teeth (correct answer: at the eleventh hour) enough votes were found to pass it.
2. We escaped the charging bull at the eleventh hour, (correct answer: by the skin of our teeth.).

The meaning of “by the skin of one’s teeth” is barely making it; avoiding danger, by a narrow margin; with nothing to spare. (Sera et al, 2004: 50) With origins in Job 19:20 in the Bible, in the Biblical source of this phrase is the passage, where Job is complaining about how illness has ravaged his body: “My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth” (Job 19:20, in the King James’s Version). The point here is that Job is so sick that there is nothing left to his body. “At the eleventh hour” means at the last moment which also comes from the Bible. (Sera et al, 2004:13) The story is as follows, once there
was a rich man who owned a vineyard. He needed several people to rebuild his vineyard. He began to hire people from 5 o’clock in the morning. The last man came at eleven o’clock in the evening. The work finished at midnight. Every one was paid the same sum of money. Then the people who started to work at 5 o’clock thought it was not fair since they worked so long time but gained the same wages as the men who just started to work at 11 o’clock. In a result, they thought as long as not later than 12 o’clock, it is best to come at 11 o’clock. Since then on, “at the eleventh hour” was used to mean at the last possible moment.

When translated into Chinese, the two idioms have a similar meaning, at the last moment. This leads to a confusion by the learners. By being told the two stories behind these idioms, the students can rely on the stories to comprehend these idioms, and distinguish from them.

In the immediate post-test, two students in the experimental group made mistakes when using these two idioms while four students made mistakes in the control group. In the delayed post-test, just one student in the experimental group mixed up the two idioms while all the five students mixed them up in the control group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The numbers of students who made mistakes of the two idioms</th>
<th>The immediate post-test</th>
<th>The delayed post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The experimental group</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The control group</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chart above obviously demonstrates that less students in the experimental group made mistakes when using of the two figurative idioms, and almost of all the students in the control group can not master them well. More specifically, after been taught the origins of these idioms, the students in the experimental group comprehended these idioms much better than the students in the control group. Moreover, one week later, the error rate in the experimental group was increased by fifty percent against the error rate was increased by twenty percent in the control group. After the test, the students in the control group said that it is hard to distinguish those two idioms from the beginning, not to say to remember them without any deep cultural information about them. In contrast, the students in the experimental group feel much easier to understand and remember these idioms for the help of the origins of them.
3.4 Comparison between the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test results of the experimental group

According to the chart above, some students had a lower score in the delayed post-test than in the immediate post-test. The average score of the whole group has nonetheless increased by four percent. More specifically, S3 was the exception. She/he filled in all of the blanks correctly in the immediate post-test; it seemed that she/he mastered all of the idioms well. However, one week later, she/he lagged behind and scored only seven points in the delayed post-test. There may be many reasons for this result, e.g. personal learning and memory ability, the idiom types or the student’s state of health on the particular day. Such factors are, however, beyond the scope of the present project. In other words, the data obtained by comparing the results of the immediate post-test and delayed post-test of the experimental group suggest that learning figurative idioms in their correct cultural context generally leads to better recall.
3.5 *Comparison between the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test results of the control group*

The above chart demonstrates that the mean score between the immediate post-test and delayed post-test is dropped by 26.9%. More specifically, the table demonstrates that three students retained the same scores for both tests, although what they wrote correctly in the first test was not necessarily correct in the delayed post-test. That result suggests that they did not really understand or could not remember the idioms. The example below is a case in point:

a) The man tried to persuade the firm to give him a job, and his *ace in the hole* was a great recommendation from its founder.

b) The terrorists regarded the hostage *as their Achilles heel*.

The student gave the right answer in sentence a), but the wrong one in sentence b). The correct answer of b) was also *ace in the hole*. (meaning it is a useful thing to fall back on, in case the course one is pursuing does not work out). Moreover, S3 had forgotten the meaning of the majority of the idioms she/he knew a week earlier. In reality, however, it turned out that the students in the control group could not find any effective clues to facilitate retention of the figurative idioms. This makes a clear contrast with the experimental group in idiom retention, which can be demonstrated in the answers of the questionnaire. One student’s answers who
was in the experimental group is listed below unrevised, as they originally written by the student:

1. Yes, it is definitely difficult to understand idioms without the cultural background.

2. Key words, although I have not remember all of the exact story or original background of these idioms, but though some of the key words from these stories, I can recall the similar meaning and even usage of these idioms, for example, ace in the hole, ace is the key words to help me to memorize the meaning, ace in the poker also stand for the key or very important thing. Another example, the eleventh hour, form the holy bible, means the last time which the story from holy bible helps me to remember this idioms.

3. Yes, it is different, especially when I find the meanings of these idioms without the background informations, in this way, these idioms can not be memorized well and in a long term memory.

4. I think the cultural context and the influence of different traditional cultures and the different levels in mastery of the background informations of the idioms are the most important reasons for idioms learning.

The answers by this student reveal that when learning a new idiom, the students need to rely on some key words or source domain which, to a great extent, may come from the cultural context of the idioms. The results showed in the chart demonstrates that these figurative idioms seemed to be forgotten quickly without the detailed cultural informations of the idioms.

The idioms learning and memory have always been interesting to the language researchers. To observe in vocabulary learning, Anderson (1995) and Baddeley (1997) and William James (1890) suggest that the more elaborate information which is associated with the vocabulary is given to the learners, the better they will comprehend and remember those new words. As idiom is a kind of vocabulary, similarly, the abilities of figurative idioms’ learning and retention of L2 learners can be improved by enhancing their knowledge of the origins, source domain and cultural background of the idioms. These methods have been proved to be the effective ways to learn and remember the figurative idioms.

Moreover, as established in the theoretical background, researchers of cognitive semantics have demonstrated that the figurative expressions are motivated rather than arbitrary; the figurative idioms should be learned in an insightful and systematic way at best.
Based on the results of the present study, the students who had been given the opportunity to enter into the teaching unit to learn the cultural context of these idioms seemed more likely to remember and comprehend the expressions than students who had just learned the figurative meaning of the idioms without cultural context. Obviously, a lack of context has a strong negative impact on the learning of idioms among L2 learners, especially when it comes to the retention of the figurative idioms.

Learners may fail to identify the source domain of an idiom for several reasons, such as the presence of unknown or ambiguous keywords, L1 interference, etc. The present study demonstrates that explaining figurative meaning yields positive results.

3.6 The analysis of the questionnaire

The questionnaires were distributed after the delayed post-test to assess the students’ positive or negative attitude to the idioms’ learning and remembering in the cultural context. Because the control group had not been given any cultural background or origins of the target idioms, they only needed to answer the first, fourth, and the fifth questions while the experimental group answered all of the questions. The first part of the analysis focused on the answers of the three questions that were common to both groups.

The first question was: “Do you think it is difficult to understand these idioms without cultural context?”

All the participants answered ‘yes’. The students in both two groups thought they needed to rely on the cultural context to understand the idioms. But there were still 30% of the students in the control group who felt some of the idioms could be understood from the meaning of the individual words. They made mistakes nonetheless. For example, “bread and butter” means the main way one supports oneself. However, some students in the present study thought it meant money or something important, someone else even thought it meant something delicious. As already established in the theoretical part, figurative idioms cannot be understood by studying their constituent elements. The idiom it must be learnt as a unit.
The answers to the fourth question will now be discussed. The question was “What is the most important in influencing Chinese students’ understanding of English idioms. Such as the cultural differences between Chinese and Western countries, the students’ English level or the different types of idioms?”

Ninety percent of these students thought that the main reason was the cultural differences between Western countries and China. One student in the experimental group said that when she/he first came across the idioms, she/he immediately searched around the similar information of these idioms in Chinese. Since for some of the idioms she/he could not find equivalent idioms in Chinese, the cultural background information and origins of them helped her/him understanding the meaning of idioms and recall them as well. Another student in the control group answered:

“First of all, I think cultural knowledge is an important factor. Second, if we get more chance to use these idioms, we can acquire more of them.”

As mentioned in the introduction, Irujo claims that because there are not always one to one correspondences between L1 and L2, idioms cannot be easily comprehended from the meaning of their parts, so many second-language materials regard idioms as special expressions of vocabulary lists, and give few exercises or aids to learning. English idioms are ignored in China because the teachers neglect those vocabularies’ teaching and there is given small space in the second language textbooks for the content designed for the learning of idioms. Unless the students are initiative to learn idioms, they would have few opportunities to learn and use English idioms in class. They would learn by themselves through watching movies, magazines, newspapers and books.

One student in the control group gave a different answer to the other students. She/he thought the student’s personal ability of language acquisition, such as mental-cognitive strategy and cultural awareness, are the main reasons influencing the idioms’ comprehension and retention. not just the passive cultural input. It is reasonable for her/his giving these answers, because there are always different opinions between people for human beings are the independent individuals. There are many scholars who have done experiments in the domain of the elements of impacting idiom comprehension, such as the Chinese linguist Tang Ling. She
reveals that the learners who have a high level of learning abilities will be more proficient in idiom comprehension than the learners who have a lower level of learning abilities.

Finally, the third question common to both groups was: “How common are idioms in English magazines, newspapers, books, movies and communications in your daily life?”

Sixty percent of the students chose the answer “High”, twenty percent of them chose the answer “Medium”, and the remaining twenty percent chose “low”. As already established in the theoretical background, idioms are ubiquitous in our daily life. With the characteristics of concise and short structure, humor and wit, and full of philosophy, idioms are widely accepted by the English and Americans and widely used in people's day-day communication, newspapers, magazines and on television. Whenever conversations are mainly took with the non-concrete subjects (such as emotions, psychology, society, vocabulary acquisition, the meaning of life, and so on), we are bound to hear and use figurative expressions. Corpus data have shown that metaphoric expressions do indeed constitute a very rich lexical resource (e.g. Deignan 1995). If figurative language is so pervasive in everyday language, then language learners will inevitably be exposed to a bombardment of figurative expressions throughout their learning process.

Those students who chose “High” all have a keen interest in learning English. As a result, they often read English magazines, novels, newspapers and watching English movies in order to get more English knowledge and improve their L2 standard. So they have more chances for learning idioms than those who are lazy in English learning. This also demonstrates that motivation plays an important role in language learning. Arguing in the same vein, motivation also can enhance the figurative idiom learning. It is proved that much more details, such as the origins and prominent cultural domain of the figurative idioms can enhance the learners’ motivation to learn. This can be concluded in the present study of the following answers which were given by the students in the experimental group to the second question.

The fourth question of the questionnaire was “Does an understanding of the origins of these idioms help you to remember and understand idioms better?”

One hundred percent of the students agreed with that understanding of the origins of these idioms benefited their comprehension of these idioms. They gave the review that after
knowing the origins of those idioms, they can recall them by some key words or some interesting stories when they see them again. There were 90% of them who thought this method was useful to their retention of these idioms while just one of them said, “it can help me to learn it but, it can not keep my memory for a long time.”

As mentioned in the theoretical background, many studies show that the meaning of idioms is motivated rather than arbitrary, then it is possible to teach and learn them in an insightful way. Experiments by Frank Boers, Murielle Demecheleer and June Eyckmans have provided further evidence to support this cognitive semantics view. They demonstrate that this theory also holds for learners processing L2 idioms. It appears that learners' understanding of L2 idioms always coincides with their recognition of the source domains, and that knowledge of the origins of idioms can help students figure out their meaning. Learning idioms from their origins is not just a mnemonic technique, but also a channel for in-depth comprehension. (Bogaards et al. 2004:75)

Finally, the last question that was answered by the students in the experimental group was “Does it make a difference that you are taught these idioms instead of just trying to find the meaning by yourself?”

Eighty percent of the students thought it made a difference while ten percent think there is no difference and the remaining percentage thinks she/he liked to learn by herself/himself. The student who said she/he like to learn idioms by herself/himself because most teachers she/he met in China are not very knowledgeable for the reason that they are lack of cultural awareness. Even this student’s view cannot stand of the majority of opinions of the Chinese students, but his/her words reveal one phenomenon in the L2 idioms teaching in China, that is, the cultural context has not been given much attention in L2 idioms teaching in China. Moreover, the answer of this student reveals that the cultural context is important in idioms learning. Learning idioms seems to be more interesting if cultural information is given to the students which can enhance the learners’ motivation to learn the figurative expression. The feedback of one student of those 80% who support that cultural information should be given to the figurative idioms learning and retention is presented in the following:

“Of course. Because when I was taught about that information, I can get a deeper impression of the figurative idioms, so it is more interesting to be taught by people than just to find out
With the pilot study established above, the possible impact of cultural context on the learners’ comprehension and memory of figurative idioms invites language teachers to give extra attention to the cultural source domain of the figurative expression in the target language that relates to metaphorical themes that are less salient in L1. The learners should learn and remember the figurative idioms into deep level with the help of more detailed materials.

4. Summary and Conclusion

This study investigated that the cultural context has a significant impact on university students’ ability to remember and understand English figurative idioms as part of English as a Second Language instruction in China. According to the feedback from the experimental students in all of the tests and the questionnaire, they all attribute their understanding and retention of figurative idioms and the increase in their score in all of the tests to the cultural context that they received. The results, therefore, confirm the hypothesis that cultural context of idioms will facilitate their acquisition by ESL students, and help them remember idioms better. Being taught with the origins and source domains of the figurative idioms, the students feel that their motivation of learning idioms are enhanced, and it is interesting to know the cultural background of those idioms, such as the story behind them. Moreover, when they come across with these idioms again, they find it is easy to recall the meaning of them for any clues, such as the key words of the stories or the different cultural information from China.

Since there are so many differences between Chinese and Western countries, and the cultural background information of L1 will influence the comprehension of L2 figurative idioms, so the teachers should pay more attention on the different cultural information of idiom teaching. The teachers themselves should improve their knowledge of the Western cultures.

Altogether, though, the results of our supplementary experiment do suggest some strategies for the L2 English idioms learning in the classroom by the teachers. Once the meaning of the idiom is established, guide the students to ‘motivate’ it. This stage is meant to show the motivated nature of many figurative expressions. One can associate the idiom with a more vivid or concrete scene. For example, “Bury one’s head in sand” can be imagined by the
scene of an ostrich is putting its head into the sand when it meets dangers. Another approach to ‘motivating’ idioms is to look for their possible origins. “Much cry and little wool”, for example, could be traced back to the drama of Western religion, David and Abigail. Even if not all of the figurative idioms can be easily lead to interesting image, the cognitive effort put into the brainstorming activity may nevertheless be beneficial for retention and language awareness. If the idioms exemplify a metaphoric theme that is more salient in the target culture than in the learner’s culture (e.g. the relatively high salience of the mushroom metaphors in English as compared to China), then compare the cultural differences between England and China. A comparison can lead to a deep expression. For example, “spring up like mushrooms”, is translated into Chinese like “spring up like bamboo”. Bamboo is widespread on spring in China. So the students may comprehend this idiom much easier with a familiar impression in L1.
References


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Appendices

Appendix 1
Achilles heel
Ace in the hole
Adam’s apple
At the eleventh hour
As strong as a horse
Big wig
Break the ice
Bury one’s head in sand
By the skin of one’s teeth
Burn the candle at both side
Cry wolf
Curiosity killed the cat
Dark horse
God help those who help themselves
Give the devil his due
In the red
Love me love my dog
Much cry and little wool
Meet one’s waterloo
[My] bread and butter
Olive branch
Pandora’s box
Spend money like water
24. Screw up one’s courage
Appendix 2

1. At the eleventh hour
2. Achilles heel
3. Ace in the hole
4. By the skin of one’s teeth
5. Bread and butter
6. Cry wolf
7. In the red
8. Olive branch
9. Three strikes, and you are out

Appendix 3

He played piano well, but his____ was rhythm.

The man tried to persuade the firm to give him a job, and his____ was a great recommendation from its founder.

Almost too late Negotiators reached agreement ______.

Sales began to drop and the company was soon ____. They had to sell the building.

A government paper to be published will recommend to the judicial sector a ___ policy for illegal file shares on the Internet.

The dog were chasing us, and we made it inside the house____.

If you ____ again when its not an emergency, then no one will believe you when there really is a problem.

Julia designs dress once in a while, but her ___ comes from drawing industrial uniforms.

They were not prepared to hold out the ___ to their enemies.

1. In the red
2. At the eleventh hour
6. Achilles heel
7. Olive branch
3. Ace in the hole
4. by the skin of one’s teeth
5. Three strikes, and you are out.

Appendix 4

1. Painting is his_____.
2. She’s _____so often about her children’s health that no-one believes her any longer.
3. Even after ten years of war, neither side was willing to hold out the _____.
4. He would have made a good pilot but his drinking habit was his _______
5. The terrorists regarded the hostage as their_______.
6. The bill was about to be defeated, but _____enough votes were found to pass it.
7. I can’t stand you any more for you have made the same mistake twice, so _____.
8. We escaped the charging bull _____.
9. He ran farm_____because of successive crop failure.

in the red
Olive branch
bread and butter
cry wolf
Ace in the hole

6. Achilles heel
7. By the skin of one’s teeth
8. three strikes, and you are out
9. At the eleventh hour
Appendix 5

Questionnaire

1. Do you think it is difficult to understand figurative idioms without the cultural context?

2. Does an understanding of the origins of these figurative idioms help you to remember and understand idioms better?

3. Does it make a difference that you are taught these figurative idioms instead of just trying to find the meaning by yourself?

4. What is the most important in influencing Chinese students’ understanding of English idioms. Such as the cultural differences between Chinese and Western countries, the students’ English level or the different types of idioms?

5. How common are idioms in English magazines, newspapers, books, movies and communications in your daily life?