Afghan EFL students’ difficulties and strategies in learning and understanding English idioms

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Abstract: The study investigated the attitude of Afghan undergraduate EFL students towards the importance of learning English idioms, sources of difficulties in learning and understanding them, and strategies used to learn and understand idioms. It also explored the impact of students' gender and first language on their responses. The data were collected from 337 students majoring in English language and literature through a questionnaire. SPSS version 26.0 was used to analyze the data. The results revealed that Afghan undergraduate EFL students had a very strong positive attitude towards the importance of learning idioms. The study also showed that EFL learners were aware of the difficulty of learning idioms. Their difficulties mainly came from lack of cultural knowledge behind idioms, lack of analogues for English idioms in their first language, and lack of context. Furthermore, students used numerous strategies to learn and understand idioms. Afghan EFL students' gender and first language had no significant impact on their responses. The study recommends Afghan EFL instructors to incorporate idioms in their teaching activities.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
The purpose of the research was to find out the attitude of Afghan EFL students towards the importance of learning English idioms. It also investigated source of difficulties encountered by Afghan EFL students in learning idioms as well as the strategies they used to learn and understand them. Moreover, it aimed to determine the influence of gender and first language on students' responses. The findings showed that Afghan undergraduate EFL students had a very strong positive attitude towards learning idioms. They encountered a number of difficulties in learning and understanding them, which resulted from mainly lack of cultural knowledge behind idioms and lack of similar idioms in their first language. Moreover, Afghan EFL students used a number of strategies to learn and understand idioms, and the most frequently used ones were using idioms in sentences, predicting their meaning and communicating in English outside the classroom. Students’ gender and first language did not have any significant impact on their responses.
1. Introduction
Vocabulary makes up the building block of language, and specific class time should be allocated to teaching vocabulary to EFL learners (Brown, 2001). The approach to teaching vocabulary has changed in the last few decades. In the past, a list of vocabulary words was taught to EFL learners, but now chunks of English language, e.g., collocations are taught to them. The latter is claimed to be more effective and beneficial in language learning (Alhaysony, 2017). Idioms are an important part of English vocabulary and EFL learners need to master English idiomatic expressions in order to achieve native-like proficiency (Nation & Meara, 2002). EFL teachers and learners may avoid using idioms in their communication since idioms are difficult to learn even though the use of idioms is considered a high level of proficiency in English (Liu, 2008). According to Cooper (1999), avoiding the use of idioms by EFL learners may make them sound unnatural and influent. The widespread use of idioms in daily interaction and communication necessitates their learning by EFL learners (Bortfeld, 2003). For example, a study by Erman and Warren (2000) revealed that idioms are widely used in everyday communication.

Teaching/learning idioms cannot be avoided or put off for a later stage since they are a major part of figurative language, and their use by EFL learners can help them improve their communicative competence (Khan & Can Daşkin, 2014). The use of idioms by EFL learners can enable them to speak English fluently and naturally (Ayed, 2008). Further, knowledge of English idioms can help EFL learners enhance their understanding of texts, and the use of idioms can result in effective communication (Irujo, 1986). According to Littlemore and Low (2006), idioms are crucial for the development of sociolinguistic, grammatical and textual competence of EFL learners.

English is taught and learned as a foreign language in Afghanistan. It is the only foreign language, which is taught as a required course at schools and universities (Orfan, 2020). However, very little attention is paid to figurative language especially idioms in English classes both at the university level and in English language centers. Teaching English idioms is avoided in English classes since most of EFL instructors do not possess enough knowledge of English idioms, and they do not understand the significance of idiomatic expressions in everyday communication. This study aims to investigate the attitude of Afghan undergraduate EFL students towards the importance of learning idioms, the source of difficulties in learning them, and the strategies they used to learn and understand them.

2. Literature review

2.1. Idioms
There are different terms used for idioms in the literature, e.g., complex unit, fixed expression, fixed phrase, phraseeme, and phraseolexeme (Everaert et al., 2014). There is a wide range of definitions of idioms presented in the literature. Larson (1984, p. 20) defined an idiom as “a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words.” Alexander (1987, p. 178) defined an idiom as “multiword units which have to be learned as a whole, along with associated sociolinguistic, cultural and pragmatic rule of use.” According to Richards and Schmidt (1990), an idiom is an expression that functions as a single unit and its meaning cannot be understood from its constituent parts. Van de Voort and Vonk (1995) defined an idiom as “an expression whose overall figurative meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its parts.” According to Al-Kodi (2015, p. 513) idioms are expressions which cannot be literally translated since their meanings are not predictable from the usual meaning of their constituents in particular when it comes to idioms that have political, historical or socio-cultural backgrounds.
These definitions have one thing in common, the meaning of idioms cannot be worked out from their constituent parts. In this study, an idiom is defined as an expression whose meaning cannot be figured out from its constituent parts.

English is a language of idiomaticity in which there are a large number of figures of speech, phrasal verbs, and idioms. Idioms are a linguistic device used to convey and perceive cultural aspects, opinions and abstract meanings (Ali-Kadi, 2015). According to Dixon (1994), idioms are crucial for successful communication in English be it listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Cowie et al. (1983) believed that the correct and proper use of idioms by EFL/ESL learners demonstrated that they had a native-like proficiency in English and it could be used as a reliable criterion for measuring proficiency of EFL/ESL learners. They further stated that it was essential to EFL/ESL learners to learn English idioms in order to successfully integrate into the culture of the target language. A better understanding of idioms is a requirement for English proficiency and accuracy, and lack of such understanding results in a great deal of misunderstanding (Shirazi & Talebinezhad, 2013). In addition, idioms are widespread in academic settings, and failing to understand them may lead to poor academic performance (Lundblom & Woods, 2012). Learning idioms help EFL learners get involved into the real world and speak English fluently and naturally since they are considered as a part of natural and conversational language (Tadayyon & Ketabi, 2014). According to Glucksberg (2001), learning idioms helps foreign language learners to learn about the culture of the target language. Moreover, Levorato (1993) believes that the proper use of idioms by EFL learners indicates that they have better communicative competence.

EFL learners experience different types of difficulties in learning and understanding idioms. They find it hard whether to consider the figurative or the literal meaning of idioms in a particular context. It might come from the fact that idioms are different in their level of formality and many of them have literal equivalents (Irujo, 1986). According to Hussein et al. (2011), arbitrariness and nonliterality of idioms is another challenge for EFL students to learn and understand them. The arbitrariness of idioms makes them hard for EFL learners to comprehend their meaning based on the meaning of their constituent words. Therefore, they cannot be taught systematically. Further, cultural differences make it hard for EFL students to learn and understand idioms because some English idioms require cultural knowledge to be understood. Lack of analogous idioms in the learners’ first language is another challenge for learning English idioms (Pimenova, 2011). McPartland (2000) reported that EFL learners mastered English idioms with exact counterparts in their first language very easily. On the other hand, they found it hard to learn English idioms with no analogues in their first language as well as idioms whose meaning cannot be understood from their constituent parts.

There is not a perfect strategy for learning or teaching idioms (Kennedy, 2008). However, a number of strategies are presented in the literature that EFL learners can utilize to learn idioms. According to Kirsner (1994), EFL learners can learn idioms by meeting them frequently in the context, and the more often the learners are exposed to idioms, the better they can use them in their communication. They cannot learn idioms in an encounter in a single context. They should meet idioms in many different contexts to be able to use them fluently (Nation, 2001). Guessing from the context is another way considered useful for understanding idioms (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997), and contextual knowledge can help learners to understand idioms quickly (Liu, 2008; Webb, 2007). In addition, Schmitt (2008) states that it is one of the most frequently used strategies for understanding unknown words in particular phrasal words and idioms in the reading passages. However, Guessing the meaning of idioms from the context can be problematic since learners may overrate their understanding of them (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). Memorization is another strategy utilized by EFL students to learn and understand idioms. It is deemed effective if learners already have the knowledge of the target language (Ding, 2007). Moreover, some researchers consider etymological elaboration a helpful strategy for EFL students to learn and understand idioms. In this strategy, they should understand the literal origins of the idioms in order to use them fluently. It is regarded useful for two major reasons. First, mastery of literal sense of an idiom leads to a mental image, and understanding the literal origins of the idioms take place at a deeper level of processing than memorization which boosts memory storage (Haghshenas & Hashemian, 2016).
2.2. Related studies

Alhaysony (2017) studied the difficulties faced by Saudi EFL learners in learning and understanding English idioms. A questionnaire and semi-structured interview were used to collect data from 85 university students majoring in English language in Aljouf University based in Saudi Arabia. The findings demonstrated that students had difficulty to understand idioms. She reported that guessing the meaning of idioms from the context and predicting their meaning were the most frequently used strategies to understand idioms. Similarly, Al-khawldeh et al. (2016) explored the perception of students about the importance of learning idioms. The authors used a questionnaire to collect data from 150 students who were majoring in English at Hashemite University based in Jordan. The findings demonstrated that students did not understand the importance of learning idioms. They reported that the difficulties students faced in learning idioms were related to less exposure to idioms and lack of cultural knowledge behind them. In addition, they found that students most frequently used the context to guess the meaning of idioms.

Saleh and Zakaria (2013) investigated difficulties faced by Libyan students in learning idioms as well as strategies used to understand them. A questionnaire was used to collect data from 40 Libyan students who were majoring in different fields. The study found that lack of cultural background behind the idioms and less frequent exposure to them were the major sources of difficulties for EFL students to learn and understand Idioms. Moreover, guessing from the context was the most common strategy students used to understand their meaning. Furthermore, Smadi and Alrishan (2015) investigated the strategies used by EFL graduate students in translating English Idioms into Arabic. The data were collected from 90 students who were pursuing their masters degree in translation at Yarmouk University. The results of the study revealed that the participants mostly used literal translation and paraphrasing to translate English idioms into Arabic.

Haghshenas and Hashemian (2016) studied the effects of etymological elaboration, pictorial elucidation, and their integration on learning idioms. The data were collected from 80 EFL students who were studying English in English language centers in Isfahan. The participants were divided into control, etymological, pictorial and integration groups. Idioms were taught to the groups using these strategies. The results showed that all three strategies, i.e., etymological elaboration, pictorial elucidation and integration of the two were effective in helping students to learn idioms. The study also reported that the integration of etymological elaboration and pictorial elucidation was the most effective strategy in helping students to learn idioms. Similarly, Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014) studied the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners towards English idioms. They used an attitude questionnaire to collect data from 40 students who were majoring in English translation and literature in Isfahan University. The results showed that the Iranian EFL learners carried a strong positive attitude towards learning English, and they were highly interested in learning and using idioms.

The attitudes of Afghan EFL students towards learning English have been studied before. For instance, Orfan (2020) studied the attitude of Afghan undergraduate students towards learning English. He used a questionnaire to collect data from 210 students who were majoring in different fields in Takhar University. The findings showed that Afghan undergraduate students had positive attitude towards learning English. However, no research has been carried out to find the sources of difficulties encountered by Afghan EFL students in learning idioms and strategies they use to learn and understand them.

2.3. Problem statement

Idioms are extensively used by English native speakers in all forms of discourse, but they are neglected in EFL teaching materials (Liu, 2008; Tărăoanu, 2012). Little attention is paid to teaching idioms in English classes both at the university and English language centers in Afghanistan. It might be due to the complex structure of English idioms. There is a wide range of studies that have investigated the attitudes of EFL students towards learning English idioms in other countries. Unfortunately, no studies have been carried out to examine the attitude of Afghan EFL learners towards the importance of learning idioms, their source of difficulties in learning them and the strategies used to learn and understand them. The current
research attempts to eliminate this gap in the literature. It makes a contribution to an understanding of learning and teaching English in Afghanistan, and it contributes to the growing body of literature on the spread of English. Furthermore, understanding attitude of Afghan EFL students towards the importance of learning idioms provides valuable teaching techniques and recommendations, and it may motivate Afghan EFL teachers to integrate idioms in their teaching activities. The findings of the study may guide Afghan EFL teachers to develop effective techniques for teaching idioms. In addition, it offers insights for language attitudinal studies on gender and first language variables in EFL context in Afghanistan.

2.4. Purpose of the study
The study aims to explore the attitude of Afghan EFL students towards the importance of learning English idioms. It also investigates the source of difficulties they encounter in learning them. In addition, it explores strategies they widely use to learn and understand idioms. The study addresses the following research questions.

(1) What is the attitude of Afghan undergraduate EFL students towards the importance of learning English idioms?

(2) What are the sources of difficulties encountered by EFL students in learning and understanding idioms?

(3) What strategies are widely used by EFL students to learn idioms?

(4) Are there statistically significant differences in the responses of EFL students by their gender and first language?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design
The research is a quantitative study. A questionnaire was used to collect data. The author utilized descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. The participants were required to express their responses to 28 items that sought their attitude towards the importance of learning idioms, the source of difficulties in understanding them and strategies they used to learn them.

3.2. Participants
The participants of the study were 337 undergraduate EFL students who were majoring in English language and literature at Badakhshan University, Kunduz University and Takhar University in Northeastern Afghanistan. There were around 600 EFL students majoring in English language and literature in these universities at the time of the study. Around 55% of the participants (184) were males while 45% of them (153) were females. The largest number of the participants were native speakers of Dari (66%) followed by Uzbek speakers (19%) and Pashto speakers (15%).

3.3. Data collection instrument
A thorough review of the literature was carried out to design the questionnaire. The questionnaire items were adopted from the relevant literature (e.g., Alhaysony, 2017; Al-khawaldeh et al., 2016; Ababneh, 2016; Khan & Can Daşkin, 2014; Saleh & Zakaria, 2013; Guduru, 2012; Pimenova, 2011; Liu, 2008; Liontas, 2002; Pucelj, 2018). The first part of the questionnaire sought demographic information of the participants, i.e., gender and first language. The second and the third parts of the questionnaire aimed to elicit the attitude of participants towards the importance of learning idioms, and the sources of difficulties they faced in learning them. The participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree). The last part of the questionnaire sought the participants’ use of strategies for learning and understanding idioms on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, 5 = very frequently).
3.4. Data-collection procedure
The author used Google Form to collect data for the study. The link of the survey questionnaire was shared with students, who were majoring in English language and literature at Badakhshan University, Kunduz University and Takhar University. They were required to read the consent form and express their agreement through checking a box containing “I agree to participate in the study” before completing the questionnaire. Further, they were also made sure of the confidentiality of their responses. The instructions were provided for each section of the questionnaire, and the participants were required to read them in order to complete the questionnaire appropriately. The questionnaire was available for a period of two weeks.

3.5. Data analysis
The author downloaded the data from Google form in Excel spread-sheet after the questionnaire was closed. The data were numerically coded and imported to SPSS version 26.0 for analysis. The data were closely examined to make sure the participants completed the questionnaire appropriately although all the items in the questionnaire were created as mandatory. Descriptive statistics was employed to determine the frequency, the mean and the standard deviation of the data. The independent sample T-test was carried out to explore the differences between two groups of the participants, i.e., gender. Furthermore, one-way ANOVA test was run to determine the differences between more than two groups of the participants, i.e., first language.

4. Results

4.1. Students’ overall attitude towards the importance of learning idioms
The results of the descriptive analysis show that the overall mean score of the participants towards the importance of learning idioms is 4.2196 (Table 1). It indicates that Afghan EFL students carry a strong positive attitude towards the importance of learning idioms.

|                | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------------|----|------|----------------|
| General attitude | 337 | 4.2196 | .71392 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 337 |      |                |

4.2. Importance of learning idioms
The first 10 items of the questionnaire elicited the participants’ responses about the importance of learning idioms. More specifically, they enquired their responses about the importance of idioms on effective communication, understanding everyday language and the culture of the target language, making EFL learners sound natural, and teaching idioms in English classes. Over 85% of the participants have agreed and strongly agreed with all the 10 statements that sought their responses about the importance of learning idioms (Table 2). For instance, 92% of the participants believed that learning English idioms was important for developing their speaking skills. Moreover, 91% of the participants believed that it was important to teach idioms in English classes.

4.3. Sources of difficulties in learning idioms
The second eight items of the questionnaire sought the participants’ responses about the types of difficulties they encountered in learning idioms. The analysis of the data showed that students were aware of the difficulty of learning idioms. Over 75% of the participants agreed and strongly agreed with eight statements aimed to determine sources of difficulties in learning and understanding idioms (Table 3). These difficulties resulted from lack of cultural knowledge, lack of experience dealing with idioms,
unfamiliar words in idioms, no opportunities for EFL students to practice use of idioms, lack of analogues of English idioms in their first language, and lack of context.
4.4. Strategies of learning idioms

The last section of the questionnaire consisted of 10 items aimed to seek the participants’ responses about the frequent use of strategies for learning and understanding idioms. The mean rating of frequency of strategies was calculated to determine which strategies were most widely used by students to learn idioms. They were ranked from the most frequently to the least frequently used strategies. Afghan EFL students used these strategies to varying extent. As Table 4 shows, using them in sentences with mean frequency rating of 3.94 is the most widely used strategy followed by predicting the meaning of idioms with mean frequency rating of 3.75. Memorization with mean rating of 2.37 and regular revision of idioms with mean rating of 2.24 are considered by Afghan EFL students to be the least frequently used strategies for learning idioms.

| No. | Statement                                                                 | N   | Mean  | SD   |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-------|------|
| 1   | I learn idioms by using them in sentences.                               | 337 | 3.94  | 1.106|
| 2   | I predict the meaning of idioms.                                         | 337 | 3.75  | 1.073|
| 3   | I learn idioms by communicating in English outside the classroom.        | 337 | 3.69  | 1.025|
| 4   | I learn idioms through group discussion.                                 | 337 | 3.46  | 1.267|
| 5   | I learn idioms through flashcards.                                       | 337 | 3.39  | 1.311|
| 6   | I use descriptive definitions in English to learn idioms (meaning in L2).| 337 | 3.31  | 0.981|
| 7   | I learn idioms by using key words.                                       | 337 | 2.88  | 0.966|
| 8   | I translate the literal meaning into my L1 to understand idioms.        | 337 | 2.96  | 1.193|
| 9   | I learn idioms through memorization.                                     | 337 | 2.37  | 1.104|
| 10  | I learn idioms by regular revision of them.                              | 337 | 2.24  | 1.201|
|     | Valid N (listwise)                                                       |     |       |      |

4.5. EFL students’ demographic profile

The author discusses the influence of the participants’ demographic profile, i.e., gender and first language on their attitude towards the importance of learning idioms, sources of difficulties they faced in learning and understanding them, and strategies they used to learn and understand idioms.

4.5.1. Gender

Inferential statistical analysis was run to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the attitude of female and male students towards the importance of learning English idioms. The overall mean score of female students’ attitude is 4.1223 (SD = 0.56999) while that of male students is 4.3366 (SD = 0.62257). The difference in mean score is 0.2143 (Table 5). Moreover, the results of sample T-test (Table 6) reveals that the p value (0.06) is greater than the alpha level (0.05). Therefore, it is concluded that students’ gender has no significant impact on their attitudes towards importance of learning idioms. Furthermore, the results of descriptive analysis and sample T-test revealed that female and male students were not statistically significantly different in difficulties they faced in learning and understanding idioms. They also used similar strategies to learn idioms.
4.5.2. First language
To explore the differences in the attitude of Afghan EFL learners towards the importance of learning idioms by their first language, statistical analysis and one-way ANOVA test were carried out. As Table 7 demonstrates, Pashto-speaking participants have the highest mean score followed by Dari speakers. Uzbek speakers have the lowest mean score. The result of ANOVA test (Table 8) shows that p-value (0.272) is greater than the alpha level (0.05), and thus it is concluded that the participants’ first language has no significant influence on their attitude towards importance of learning idioms. The results of One-Way ANOVA show that the participants’ first language does not have any significant impact on the difficulties faced in learning idioms and strategies used to learn idioms.

| Gender | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------|-----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| Female | 153 | 4.1223 | .76999 | .05676 |
| Male   | 184 | 4.3366 | .62257 | .05033 |

| Language | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error |
|----------|-----|------|----------------|------------|
| Uzbek    | 64  | 4.0938 | .78110 | .09764 |
| Dari     | 224 | 4.2411 | .72583 | .04850 |
| Pashto   | 49  | 4.2857 | .54006 | .07715 |
| Total    | 337 | 4.2196 | .71392 | .03889 |

| Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F   | Sig. |
|----------------|----|-------------|-----|------|
| Between Groups | 1.331 | 2 | .666 | 1.308 | .272 |
| Within Groups  | 169.920 | 334 | .509 |       |   |
| Total          | 171.251 | 336 |       |       |   |
5. Discussion
The study aimed to investigate the Afghan undergraduate EFL learners’ attitude towards the importance of learning English idioms, difficulties in understanding them and strategies used to learn and understand them. It also attempted to find out whether students’ gender and first language had any significant impact on their responses. The analysis of the data revealed that the attitude of the Afghan undergraduate EFL learners towards the importance of learning idioms was very positive. This result is in line with the findings of the studies carried out by Orfan (2020), Al-Houti and Aldaihani (2018), Ababneh (2016) and Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014). However, it contradicts the results of the studies by Abidin et al. (2012) and Al-Zahrani (2008) who found that EFL learners carried negative attitudes towards learning English.

The study also showed that Afghan EFL learners were aware of the difficulty of learning and understanding idioms. They encountered a number of difficulties in learning and understanding them. These difficulties came from mainly Lack of cultural knowledge and lack of experience dealing with idioms. This finding supports the results of the research carried out by Alhaysony (2017) and Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016). EFL Students also reported that English idioms were not part of EFL courses. That is, rarely did students were exposed to English idioms in EFL classes and had very little or no opportunity to practice using them. As far as the author’s best knowledge (an EFL instructor), this might be due to the fact that EFL courses in Afghanistan focus more on grammatical structures of English than its communicative aspect, and figurative language receives very little attention in EFL classes. This result corroborates that of the study conducted by Saleh and Zakaria (2013). The findings also showed that students had difficulty in learning and understanding idioms with no analogues in their first language (Dari, Pashto, Uzbek). It is in line with the findings of the study by Pimenova (2011) whose findings revealed that it was more difficult for EFL students to learn and understand English idioms without analogues in their mother tongue than idioms with analogues. Furthermore, unfamiliarity of words in idioms and lack of context for idioms were other sources of difficulties Afghan EFL learners encountered in learning them. This finding is similar with that of the studies by Al-Kadi (2015) and Saleh and Zakaria (2013).

In addition, the results revealed that Afghan EFL students utilized a variety of strategies to learn and understand idioms. The most frequently used strategy was using them in sentences. However, it contradicts the findings of the study by Alhaysony (2017) who reported this strategy to be one of the least frequently used ones by Saudi EFL students. It may be due to the use of different teaching methods in EFL classes in these countries. In EFL classes in Afghanistan, English learners are most often recommended to learn English words by using them in sentences mostly in writing. Predicting the meaning of idioms was the second most frequently used strategy to understand the meaning of idioms. This might be because EFL students extensively predict the meaning of unfamiliar words in their first language. The result supports that of the studies conducted by Violetta (2015) and Moein and Khosravi (2014). The third most widely used strategy was communicating in English outside the classroom. This strategy gives students the opportunity not only to use English idioms in their real life but also expose themselves to English idioms. In other words, they meet idioms several times in different contexts, which results in getting them saved in their long-term memory. It corroborates the results of the study by Kirsner (1994) who reported that EFL learners could learn English idioms by frequently meeting them in different contexts. Moreover, EFL students used other strategies to learn idioms such as using flash cards, group discussion, key words, definitions, memorization and regularly reviewing them. The most surprising finding was that the students rated memorization as one of the least frequently used strategies for learning idioms although rote learning is encouraged in EFL classes especially when it comes to learning words and grammatical structures.

The findings demonstrated that participants’ gender and first language did not have any significant impact on the attitude of students towards the importance of learning idioms. It is in line with the results of the studies by Ababneh (2016) and Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014) who reported no significant difference between the attitude of female and male students towards learning idioms. It is also similar with the findings of the study by Orfan (2020) who reported that
EFL students' gender and first language did not have any significant impact on their attitude towards learning English. In addition, students' gender and first language did not have any significant influence on the difficulties they faced in learning and understanding idioms as well the strategies used to learn and understand them.

6. Conclusion
The study aimed to investigate the attitude of Afghan undergraduate EFL students towards the importance of learning idioms and the difficulties they faced in learning them. It also explored the strategies EFL students used to learn and understand idioms. Moreover, it studied the influence of students' gender and first language on their responses. The findings showed that Afghan EFL students had a higher positive attitude towards the importance of learning idioms, and they were aware of the difficulty of learning them. They have encountered a number of difficulties in learning idioms, which mainly resulted from lack of cultural knowledge behind idioms, lack of analogues for English idioms in their first language, and unfamiliar words in idioms. The results also showed that they have used a variety of strategies to learn and understand idioms including using them in sentences, predicting the meaning, and communicating in English outside the classroom. Furthermore, students' gender and first language had no significant impact on their responses.

Afghan undergraduate EFL students realize the importance of learning idioms and they believe that idioms are essential for effective communication in English. The literature suggests that using idioms is an indicator of proficiency in English, and lack of idioms knowledge can have a negative impact on students' overall academic performance. Furthermore, using and understanding idioms is crucial for obtaining a higher TOEFL or IELTS score. Therefore, Afghan EFL teachers are recommended to expose their students to English idioms and provide them with enough opportunities to practice using idioms inside and outside the classroom. Afghan EFL instructors should understand the origins of difficulties their students encounter in learning English idioms to be able to help them overcome the challenges. They should also teach strategies of learning and understanding idioms to their students.

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