Challenges in Translating Idiomatic Expressions from English into Arabic

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Abstract

The study aims to shed light on the main challenges encounter universities students in translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic and to discuss some translation strategies, which can help students in translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic. Therefore, to meet the objectives of this study the researcher used a test consisted of (10) idiomatic expressions for collecting the data of this study. The study is based on descriptive analytical approach. The test is corrected and the results have been analyzed in figures. The primary findings of the study indicate that English language students encounter significant challenges when attempting to infer the correct interpretation of colloquial idioms. Moreover, it has been observed that students possess a very low level of familiarity with English language idioms, which therefore limits their capacity to accurately comprehend these idiomatic expressions. Additionally, the process of translating idioms necessitates a comprehensive understanding of their contextual usage and the utilization of appropriate strategies to avoid literal translations and non-equivalence. The researcher additionally suggests that it is imperative for students to receive increased exposure to idiomatic expressions within educational institutions, such as schools and universities. This exposure serves to expand their knowledge base and foster familiarity with diverse idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, it is advised that students consistently demonstrate and engage in the utilization of idioms, thereby enhancing their English language vocabulary and overall linguistic proficiency.

Keywords: *idiomatic expressions, equivalence, translation, difficulties, Source Language – Target Language.*

INTRODUCTION

English idioms and expressions are significant part at people's everyday English. They come up all the time in both written and spoken English. Because idioms do not always make sense when translated literally, so you will need to familiarize yourself with the meaning and usage of each idiom. It may seem difficult, but most of the time it is fun especially when comparing English idioms to the idioms in the Arabic language.

According to Bahumaid, S. (2010, p.101) an idiom is generally defined as a group of words that is recognized as a unit of usage, its meaning cannot be deduced from its constituent words, for example, the meaning of the idiom *kick the bucket* is not related to the meanings of the individual words *kick* and *bucket*. The lack of predictability of the meanings of idioms make them particularly difficult for non-native speakers of a language to master. At the same point Cowie and Makin (1975: vi) state that the proper knowledge and use of idioms are "the distinguishing marks of a native-like command of English". Although idioms are often

associated with informal spoken language, they are common in several written forms. They are particularly pervasive in stories, and in articles in journals and magazines. O' Dell, F & Mc Carthy (2010) also define idioms as "fixed combinations of words whose meaning is often difficult to guess from the meaning of each individual word". In the same point, Shojaei, A. (2012) believes that idioms may include some cultural aspects like religious beliefs, superstitions and certain ideologies pertaining to the people originally from the culture where the idioms come from. The information reflect that idioms' translation is not an easy task and require a sufficient knowledge of different aspects related to the both source and target language.

Being a translator is not an easy task, it requires to be able to translate and transcribe a message suitably according to its purpose, taking into account not only language aspects, but also the social and cultural factors, in order to successfully and accurately complete a translation, a set of specific skills is required to overcome language barriers. Worthy, B. (2019) states that translation involves more than simply substituting a word in one language to another. If this was the case, then all companies would be using machine translation software instead of using human based translation services. In translation, there are grammar rules to be followed to preserve the meaning of the original content. Worthy also says that translators that are native speakers of the target language (the language that you are translating to) can easily adhere to grammar rules. However, the same cannot be said about idioms.

There are some challenges when someone tries to translate a context, which contains cultural, scientific, literally or idiomatic expressions. The basic problem is in conveying the real meaning of the source language into the target language. This problem may happen because of some factors such as culture, environment and the ability of finding the equivalent words in the target language. Nida, E (1964) states that:

"In order to achieve an equivalent response, the translation should make sense; convey the spirit and the manner of the original; have natural and easy form of expressions"

Nida, E (1964) suggested two main types of equivalence:

1. Formal equivalence: in which the translator focuses his attention on the similarity of form between the source language and the target language texts, as well as on the content in order to enable the target language reader to grasp and understand as much as possible of the original text.
2. Dynamic equivalence: in which the translator has to reproduce an equivalent effect on the receiver as that experienced by the source language receiver.

Larson, M (1984, P 432) notes that the process of translating idioms from one language into another is a good work which obliges a translator to have a good knowledge of both languages and cultures, more precisely, he also says that a translator has to be not only bilingual but also bicultural. People of different languages use completely different expressions to convey a similar and exact meaning, in a way that while an expression might be completely tangible and transparent for a particular community of speakers of specific language, the same set of words and expressions may seem fully vague and even in some cases nonsense to the speakers of another language. This concept reflects the fact that each language has got some culture-specific items that completely different from the corresponding items in another language. Therefore, this reflects the translator's deep knowledge of both languages.

In the case of Arabic and English languages, they are both belong to two different settings and different language families and structures. Arabic is a sematic language whereas English is Indo-European. They are culturally unrelated and different. Besides, non-linguistic

factors as religion, geographical locations and different ideologies harden the process of understanding and translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic.

Translating idiomatic expressions represent a challenge to university students, especially when translation occurs between two distinct languages like English and Arabic, which are linguistically and culturally different. You find many students fail in translating idiomatic expressions because translating idiomatic expressions may show a significant misunderstanding and mistranslation of the source text. Also it is not easy to translate an idiomatic expression or to find an equivalent one to that of the source language. Therefore, the research decided to investigate the challenges that English majoring students encounter in translating idiomatic expressions. What is new in this article is that it provides a practical experience of translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic, presenting students real performance and trying to find appropriate solutions to the difficulties they face. The study aims to; (1) Shed light on the main challenges encounter tertiary students in translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic, and (2) Discuss some translation strategies, which can help students in translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic.

Idiomatic Expression

Idiomatic expressions are natural part of language usage. Some people cannot even imagine how vastly use them in their daily life whether in speech or in writing. An idiomatic expression is a colloquial metaphor that requires fundamental knowledge and experience in both the target and source language, at the same time a translator must have cultural background of both the source and target language texts. According to Langlots, A (2006 P, 2) "idioms have been described as a conventional multi-word units that are semantically opaque and structurally fixed". The main existing problem in this regard is that translating the meaning of idiom's constituents instead of translating it as a single unit. For example, the sentence "this work is a piece of cake" will be translated into Arabic as " هذا العمل عبارة عن قطعة من الكعكة" instead of " هذا عمل سهل جدا". Here the idiom is translated literally, considering the literal of the words in the idiom instead of conveying the meaning "easy" by considering it as a single unit. In general, an idiom is composed of two or more words and these words are not included in the overall meaning of the phrase. The overall meaning of these words expresses a completely different idea.

Difficulties in Translating Idioms

Culture plays a significant role in the idioms' translation. Only by having a solid foundation of the second language culture, the translator can catch the implied meaning. It requires enhancing cross-cultural awareness and needs open-minded understanding of the second language culture from different aspects. According to Straksiene, M. (2009) one of the main problems that face translator in translating idioms is the lack of equivalence on the idiom level. All languages have idioms but it is not easy to find an equivalent in the TL that corresponds to the idiom in the ST in both form and meaning. As it mentioned above idioms may contain a culture- bound item and this causes a problem for the translator.

In the same point Oualif, M. (2017) says that cultural roots play a major part in the translation process. Words that have various connotations in one language may not have the same emotive associations in other different languages frequently reflect different connotations and associations of feeling because of the differences in cultural roots. Oualif, M. (2017) also claims that the differences between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL), as well as the variation in their cultures make the process of translating a challenge. Problems of translation involve not only the linguistics and stylistic features, but also the cultural and social

differences between SL and TL. The bigger the gap between the SL and the TL, the more difficult the transfer of message from the former to the latter will be.

In translating idiomatic expressions from English into another language, a translator usually meets some difficulties that are not easy to overcome. Therefore, it is necessary to overlook some arising difficulties and discuss some solutions in order to deal with these problems. There are two main difficulties the translator encounters as stated by Baker, M. (1992, P 68), she points that one of the most difficulties for the translator may be the lack of equivalence in the target language. She says: "different languages express meaning, using different linguistic means such as fixed expressions, idioms, words, etc., and it's very hard to find an equivalent of the same meaning and form in the target language."

Baker, M. (1992, P 68) adds that the main problem that causes difficulties is culture specific idioms or expressions is that "they are not necessarily untranslatable, however, they may refer to some specific items or event common to that particular culture, and therefore it is hard to translate such idiom as well". Another difficulty that baker points out is "the use of the idiom similar in its form and meaning in different context in the target language". Many idioms are used in the literary texts in both target and source languages. Baker also adds, "Idioms may be used in both literal and idiomatic sense at the same time". In this case, if the target language idiom does not correspond to the source language idiom in its form and meaning, then it is hard to make a play of words and transfer the meaning.

In the same field, and to find suitable techniques, Baker, M. (1992) introduces the following strategies for translating idiomatic expressions as follows:

1- *Translation by using an idiom with similar form and meaning in the target language.* It must convey the exact and same meaning and be of equivalent lexical items.
2- *Translation by using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form.* In this case the lexical items of an idiom are not preserved, it's translated as a semantic equivalent.
3- *Translation by paraphrase:* in this point Newmark, P (1988, p 159) states that paraphrase is one of the most common strategies in the translation of idioms. Sometimes, it is impossible to find the right equivalent or idiom in the target language, so, a translator can use translation by paraphrasing. A translator transfers the meaning of an idiom using a single word or a group of words, which correspond to the meaning of the idiom, but it is not an idiom itself.
4- *Translation by omission:* this is by far the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the target language or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target text because of the differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target languages.

Culture- Bound Idioms

One of the most important points that translators ignore while translating from SL to TL and vice versa is the culture factor. Lahlali, E and Abu Hatab. W. (2014) discuss that translation is not simply a matter of translating words and when a person translate he is working with language and culture. Language is one of the various social activities through which the culture of its speakers is manifested. The translator need to understand the culture of the people he is communicating with. He is standing as a mediator between the SL and TL. All that you need to do in this aspect is to understand the cultural background of the target reader/ audience so as to be able to convey the SL message. At the same time you need to develop that can help you tackle, culture- bound idioms. Idioms expand people's knowledge of language. Understanding idioms reflect learners' grasping of language elements. According to Martirosyan, A. (2013) "idioms share cultural and historical information and broaden people's

understanding and manipulation of a language". Graedler, L. (2000) states that there are various ways dealing with the cultures aspects as they occur in language text as follow:

- Making up a new word.
- Explaining the meaning of the SL expression instead of translating it.
- Preserving the SL term intact.
- Opting for a word in the TL which seems similar to or has the same relevance as the SL term.

In the aspect of translating terms and expressions related to the culture, there are significant strategies suggested by Harvey, M. (2000) to deal with culturally bound words as follow:

- Functional equivalence: where a referent in the TL culture whose function is similar to that of the SL referent is used.
- Formal equivalence, 'linguistic equivalence' or 'word-for-word' translation.
- Transcription or 'borrowing' (i.e. reproducing or, where necessary transliterating the original term).
- Descriptive or self-explanatory translation: using generic terms to convey the meaning.

There are also other strategies can be utilized to bridge the cultural gaps in translation as mentioned by Venuti, L. (1995) include domestication and foreignisation. Domestication aims at making the translated text closer to the TL culture where 'the foreign text is imprinted with values specific to the target-language culture'. Foreinisation on the other hand preserves the values of the ST in the sense that it resists dominant target- language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text. The two strategies above reflect the efforts to find a solution to the issue of culture- bound idioms and find the most suitable techniques to deal with. Moreover, translator's knowledge of both SL and TL culture has a great role in having an excellent translation free of errors.

METHOD

The research paper is based on descriptive analytical approach aims to investigate the difficulties encounter by university students in translating idiomatic expressions from English language into Arabic language. The researcher used a test consisted of (10) idiomatic expressions for collecting the data of this study. The test has been distributed to (20) students as native speakers of Arabic language; the undergraduate students have been chosen as participants in the test and expected to have a good command of the English language. The test has been corrected and the students' answers were analyzed in figures.

Upon collecting the completed tests, the researcher undertook a meticulous correction process to evaluate the students' responses. Each translation was scrutinized for accuracy, fidelity to the idiomatic meaning, and linguistic proficiency. The collected data were then quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed to identify recurring challenges, patterns, and misconceptions that emerged during the translation process. To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the findings, the results of the data analysis are presented in figures, allowing for visual representation of key trends and insights. These figures will aid in illustrating the distribution of challenges and highlighting specific areas where participants encountered difficulties in translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic.

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study results were based on the research hypothesis "There are real difficulties encounter students in translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic."

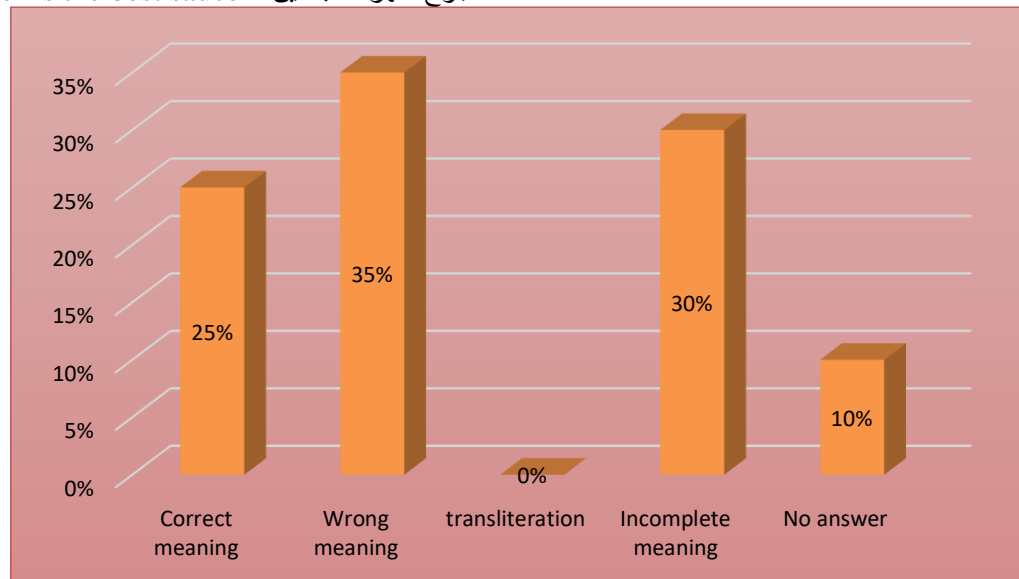1. Hunger is the best sauce   الجوع أمهر الطباخين

Figure 1. Hunger is the best sauce

It is clear from the figure No (1) which shows the results of the Participants in translating the idiom "Hunger is the best sauce" out of (20) participants (25%)have translated correctly, while (35%) have translated wrongly,(30%) gave incomplete answers, (10%) gave no answer and no one used the transliteration. The percentage of incorrect and incomplete answers is large, so it becomes clear that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.

2. Two peas in a pod   فولة وانقسمت نصفين
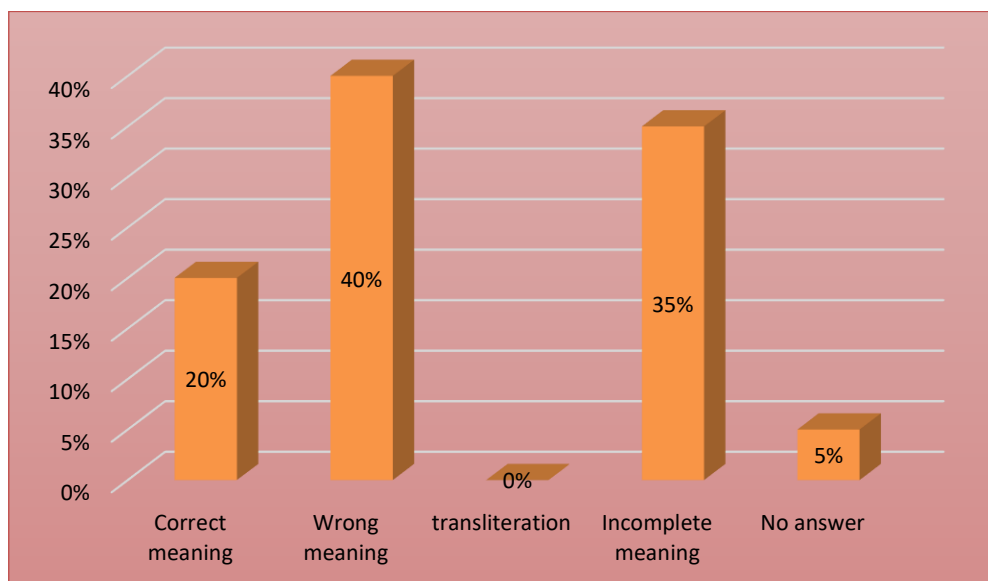
Figure 2. Two peas in a pod

The figure No (2) shows the results of the Participants in translating the idiom "Two peas in a pod" out of (20) participants (20%) have translated the idiom correctly, while (40%) have translated wrongly,(35%) gave incomplete answers, (5%) left the answer blank and no one of the participants used the transliteration. The percentage of incorrect and incomplete answers is large, so it becomes clear that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.

3. It's a donkey work to write a book   إنه لعمل شاق أن تؤلف كتاباً
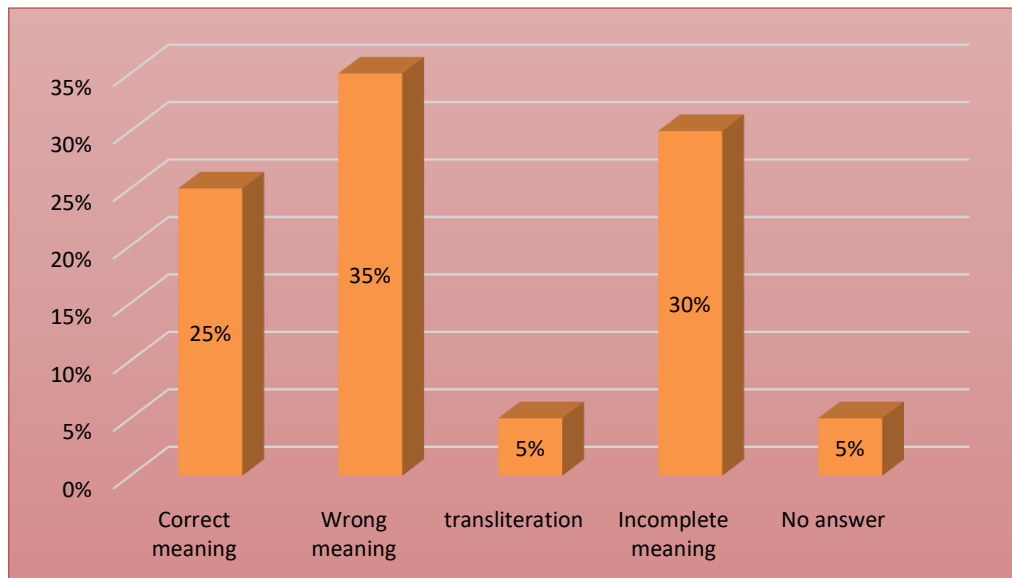
Figure 3. it's a donkey work to write a book

The clear results in the figureNo (3) shows the Participants' results in translating the idiom "It's a donkey work to write a book" out of (20) participants (25%) have translated the idiom correctly, while (35%) have translated wrongly, (30%) gave incomplete answers, (5%) left the answer blank and (5%) of the participants transliterated the idiom. It is clear from the results above, the number of wrong and incomplete answers that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.
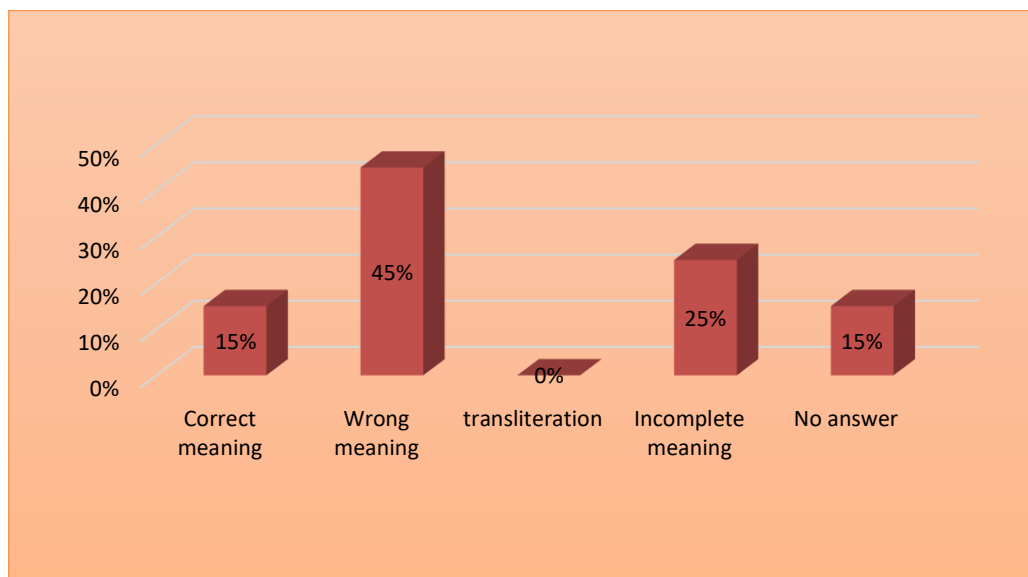
4. To walk on air   يشعر بسعادة غامرة

Figure 4. To walk on air

The analysis of results in the figure No (4) shows the Participants results in translating the idiom "To walk on air " out of (20) participants (15%) have translated the idiom correctly, (45%) have translated wrongly,(25%) gave incomplete answers, (15%) left the answer blank and gave no answer while no one of the participants used the transliteration. The percentage of incorrect and incomplete answers is large, so it becomes clear that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.

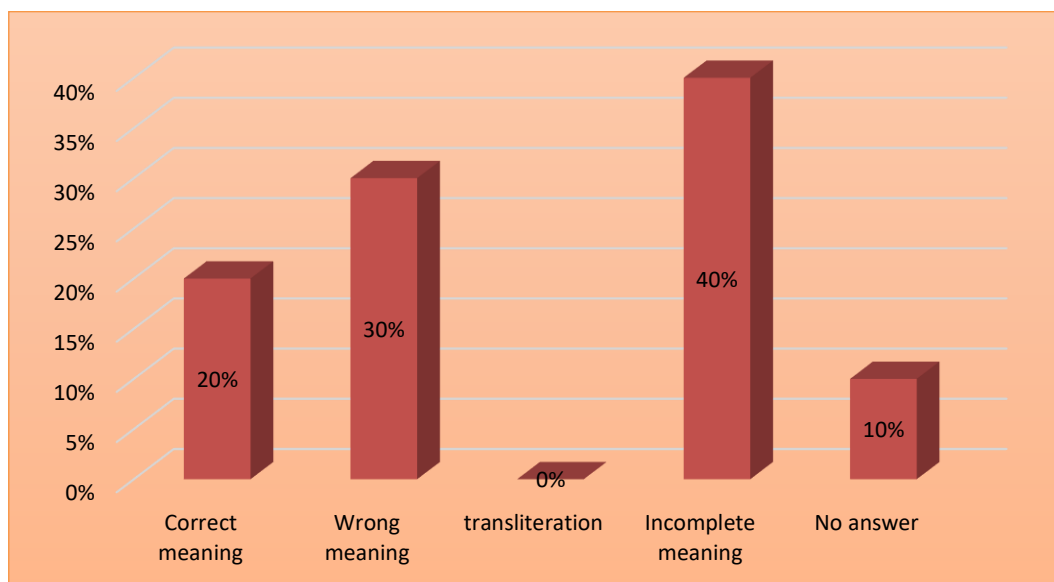5. Forbidden fruit is sweetest   كل ممنوع مرغوب

Figure 5. Forbidden fruit is sweetest

The analysis of the figure No (5) shows the results of the Participants in translating the idiom "Forbidden fruit is sweetest" out of (20) participants (20%) have translated the idiom correctly, (30%) have translated wrongly,(40%) gave incomplete answers, (10%) left the answer blank and gave no answer while no one of the participants used the transliteration. The percentage of incorrect and incomplete answers is large, so it becomes clear that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.
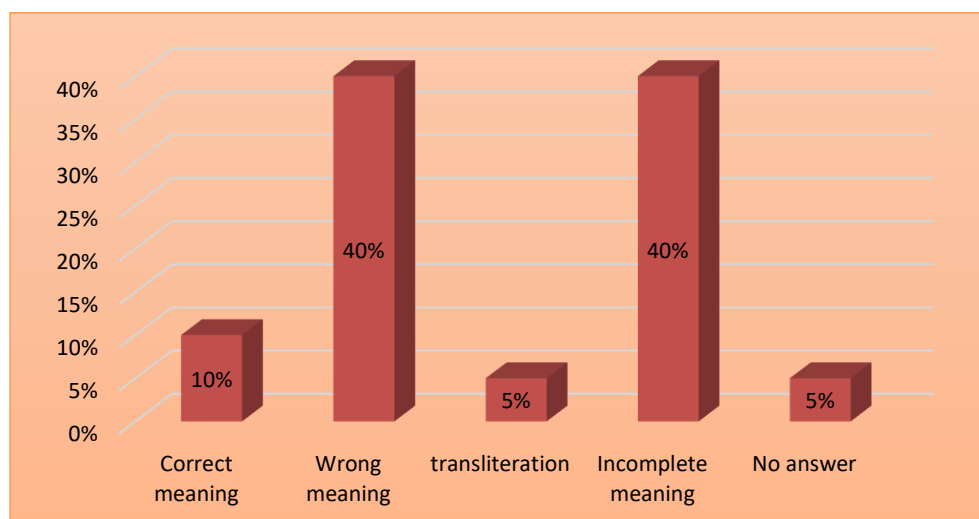
6. To move earth and heaven   يقيم الدنيا ويقعدها

Figure 6. To move earth and heaven

It is clear from the figure No (6) which shows the results of the Participants in translating the idiom "To move earth and heaven" out of (20) participants (10%) have translated the idiom correctly, while (40%) have translated wrongly,(40%) gave incomplete answers, (5%) left the answer blank and gave no answer (5%) of the participants transliterated the idiom. The percentage of incorrect and incomplete answers is large, so it becomes clear that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.
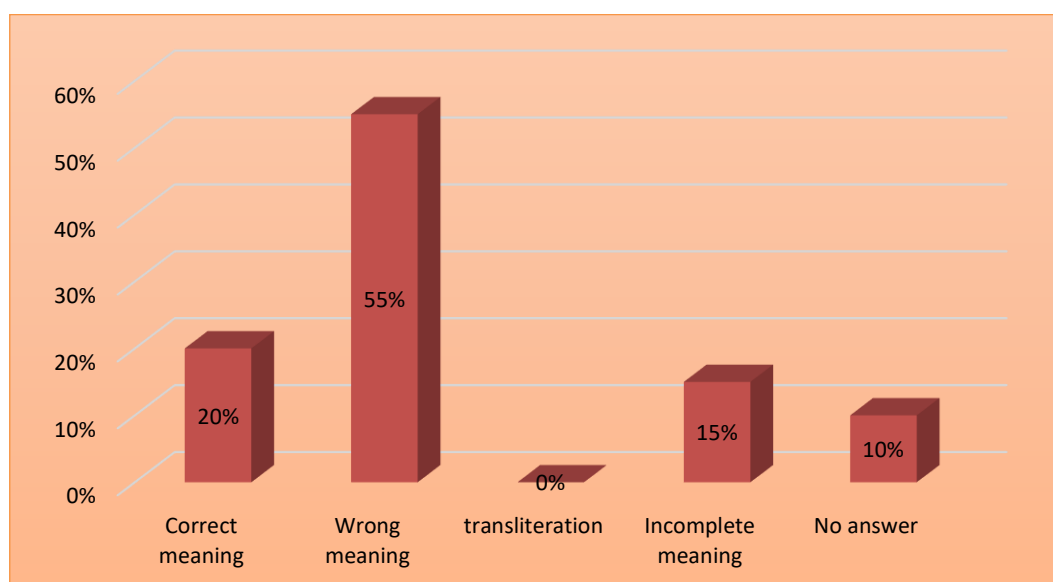
7. To add insult to injury   يزيد الطين بلة

Figure 7. To add insult to injury

The results in the figure No (7) shows the Participants performance in translating the idiom "To add insult to injury " out of (20) participants (20%) have translated the idiom correctly, (55%) have translated wrongly,(15%) gave incomplete answers, (10%) left the answer blank and gave no answer while no one of the participants used the transliteration. The percentage of wrong answers is large, so it becomes clear that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.

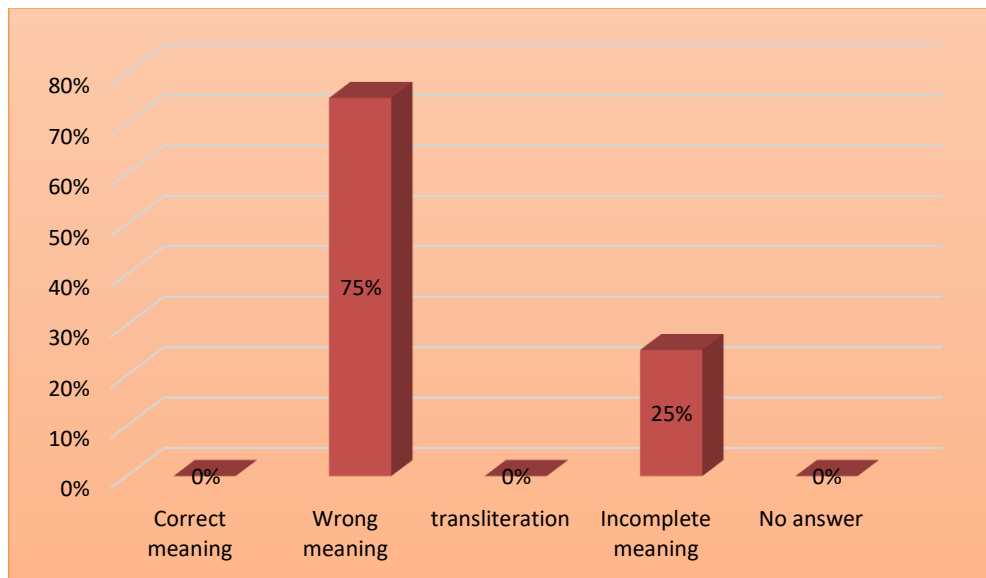8. One word is one's bond   وعد الحر دين عليه

Figure 8. One word is one's bond

As has been analyzed in the figure No (8) above, which shows the results of the Participants in translating the idiom "One word is one's bond" out of (20) participants. No one of them translated the idiom correctly, and (75%) have translated the idiom wrongly,(25%) gave incomplete answers, as well no one of the participants left the answer blank while no one of the participants used the transliteration. The percentage of wrong answers is large, so it becomes clear that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.
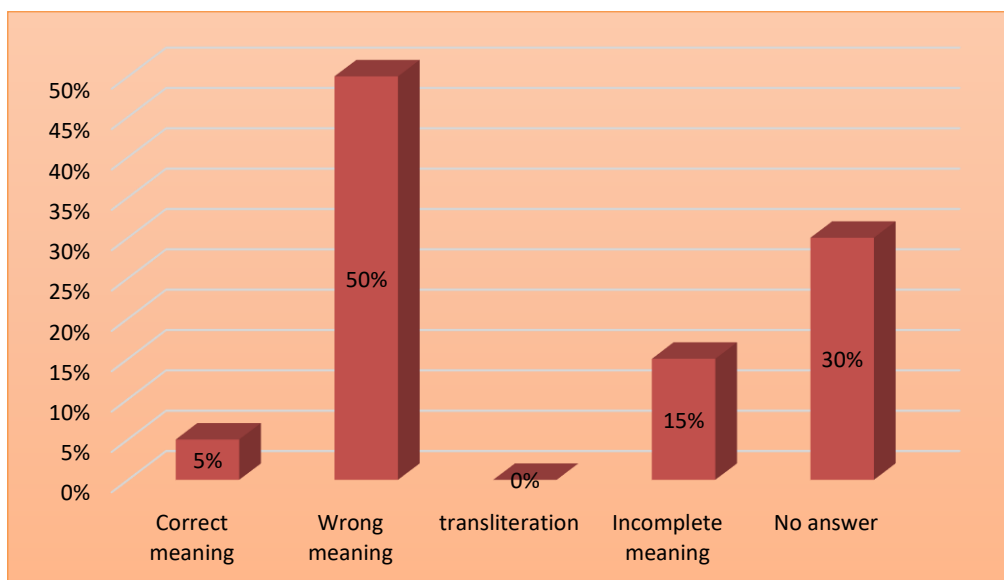
9. Hold your horses   تمهل

Figure 9. Hold your horses

The analysis in the figure No (9) shows the results of the Participants in translating the idiom "Hold your horses" out of (20) participants (5%) have translated the idiom correctly, (50%) have translated wrongly,(15%) gave incomplete answers,(30%) left the answer blank and gave no answer, while no one of the participants used the transliteration. The percentage of wrong answers is large, so it becomes clear that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.
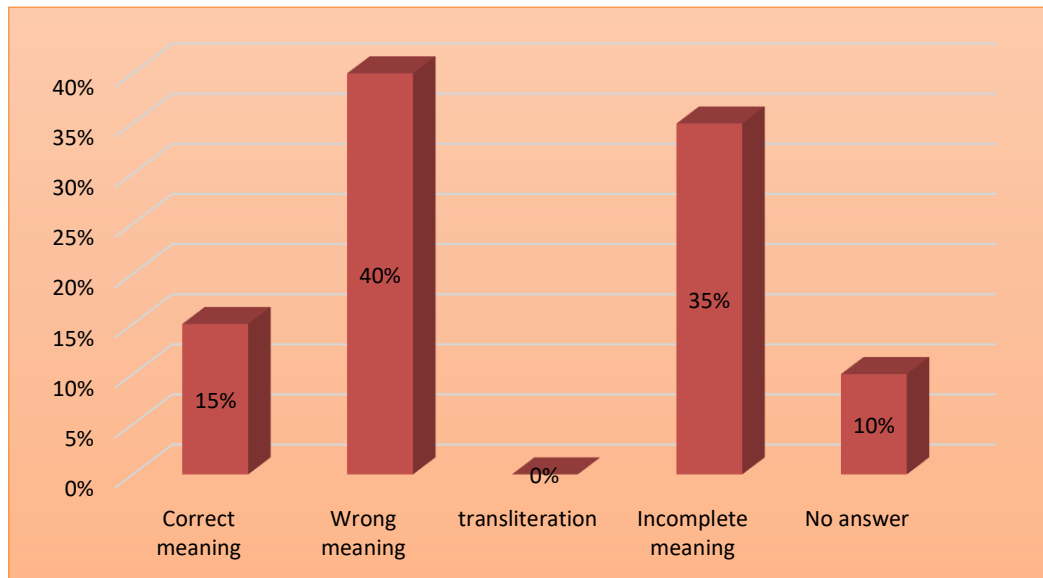
10. Silence makes consent السكوت علامة الرضا

Figure 10. Silence makes consent

The results in the figure No (10) shows the Participants performance in translating the idiom "Hold your horses" out of (20) participants (15%) have translated the idiom correctly, (40%) have translated it wrongly,(35%) gave incomplete answers,(10%) left the answer blank and gave no answer, while no one of the participants used the transliteration. The percentage of incorrect and incomplete answers is large, so it becomes clear that there is a difficulty in translating the idiom.

Discussion

Table 1. The Overall Results Analysis in Percentage
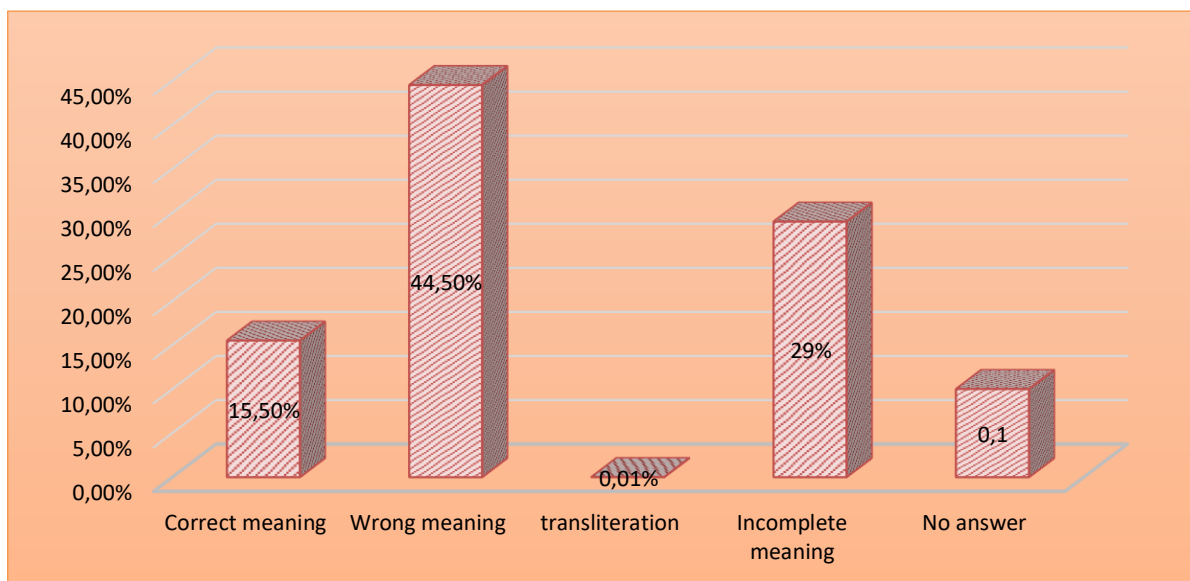
From what has been analyzed, it is clear that there is a real problem facing students in the process of translating idiomatic expressions. The result of the comprehensive analysis of

idioms that the participating students made as shown in the above figure, shows that only (15.5%) of the total participants in all the idiomatic expressions presented in the test gave the correct answer. while (44.5%) gave wrong answers, and (29%) of the participants gave incomplete answers. the percentage of participants who used the transliteration is (0.01%) and those who left the answers blank is (0.1%). The wrong answers given by students in translating a number of idiomatic expressions, in addition to many incomplete answers and a very small percentage of correct answers, illustrates the difficulty that students encounter in translating idiomatic expressions, as it must be taken into consideration and try to find appropriate solutions that develop students' performance in translation in general, and the translation of idiomatic expressions in particular. The above results support the research hypothesis "There are real difficulties encounter students in translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic".

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the study's results has yielded significant findings that provide valuable insights into the complexities of translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic. These findings have profound implications for language education and translation studies, offering a deeper understanding of the challenges inherent in idiomatic language. First are the **challenges in Interpretation** where one notable finding is the substantial difficulty encountered by students of English in accurately discerning the intended meanings of idiomatic expressions. This underscores the intricate nature of figurative language comprehension. Second was the **Limited Familiarity with English Idioms** which the study revealed that students exhibit a relatively low level of familiarity with English idiomatic expressions and possess limited interpretative abilities in this regard. This underscores the necessity of enhancing exposure to idiomatic language during language education. Third is the **Contextual Mastery in Translation** in which translating idiomatic expressions necessitates not only linguistic proficiency but also a profound understanding of their contextual usage. This finding emphasizes the importance of mastering the situational occurrences of idioms and utilizing appropriate translation techniques to avoid literal word-for-word translations. Fourth is **Prevalence of Literal Translations**, an issue observed was the tendency of participants to provide literal translations, leading to inaccuracies in conveying the intended meanings of idioms. This highlights the need for promoting a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to idiomatic translation. Fifth was **Significance of Idiomatic Expression Studies** which the research underscores the critical role that the study of idiomatic expressions plays in assessing overall language competency and proficiency, reflecting the depth of students' language knowledge. Sixth is the **Limited Familiarity with English Idioms**, Participants demonstrated a relatively low level of familiarity with English language idioms, and their capacity to interpret these idiomatic expressions was found to be somewhat limited. This highlights the need for enhanced exposure to idiomatic language in educational settings. Seventh is the **Importance of Contextual Mastery** when translating idiomatic expressions necessitates a deep understanding of their situational occurrences and the employment of suitable techniques to avoid literal word-to-word translation and linguistic non-equivalence. This underscores the importance of contextual mastery in idiomatic translation. Eight is **Prevalence of Literal Translation**, a noteworthy observation was that the majority of participants tended to provide literal translations of idiomatic expressions, leading to inaccuracies and misunderstandings in the translation process. This highlights the necessity of promoting a more nuanced approach to idiomatic translation. And finnaly the **Significance of Idiomatic Expression Studies** where this study underscores that the examination and comprehension of idiomatic expressions

constitute a crucial aspect of language learning and proficiency assessment, reflecting students' overall language competence.

In light of these findings, several recommendations emerge to improve language education and translation proficiency, particularly concerning idiomatic expressions; (1) Enhanced Exposure to Idioms: Educational institutions, including schools and universities, should increase students' exposure to idiomatic expressions, fostering familiarity with a wide range of idioms in the English language, (2) Active Practice of Idioms: Students are encouraged to actively engage with idiomatic expressions, practicing their usage to enrich their English language vocabulary and language proficiency, enabling them to express themselves effectively in various language contexts, (3) Avoidance of Literal Translation: It is essential for students to be trained to avoid literal translation when dealing with idiomatic expressions, emphasizing the need for interpreting idioms based on their intended meanings in context, (4) Training in Translation Strategies: Students should receive instruction in the appropriate strategies and techniques for translating idiomatic expressions, enhancing their translation skills and accuracy, and (5) Emphasis on Idiom Teaching: Language departments and centers should prioritize the teaching of idiomatic expressions as a fundamental component of language education, contributing to students' broader language knowledge and proficiency.

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