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Interpreting Imageable Idioms across Cultures*

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Imageable idioms are figurative expressions that call up a conventional scene in the mind of language speakers (Lakoff, 1987). This study investigates the factors shaping Korean L2 learners' comprehension of imageable English idioms within the framework of Conventional Figurative Language Theory. Imageable idioms evoke conventional mental imagery among native speakers, yet their interpretation poses challenges for L2 learners. Forty Korean university students with intermediate or higher English proficiency participated in a task requiring the interpretation of unfamiliar idioms with and without contextual support. The findings demonstrate that learners strategically employed analogies with familiar Korean idioms, decomposition of idiomatic structures, literal imagery analysis, and the exploration of motivational links between literal and figurative meanings. Contextual cues significantly facilitated comprehension by anchoring mental imagery and guiding inferential processes. The study underscores the critical role of imagery in idiom comprehension and highlights the impact of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variation on learner interpretation. These results suggest pedagogical approaches that emphasize the motivated nature of idiomatic meaning and giving due attention to the comprehension problems, rather than treating idioms as arbitrary. A heightened focus on imagery and cultural context may foster deeper, more intuitive understanding among L2 learners, ultimately enhancing figurative language competence.

[imageable idioms/comprehension/mental image/cross-cultural perspective]

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I. INTRODUCTION

Imageable idioms are figurative expressions that are associated with conventional mental images in the minds of native speakers (Lakoff, 1987). These idioms are deeply embedded within the cultural, historical, and experiential fabric of the source language community. As a result, they present a significant challenge for second language (L2) learners, who may not share the same cultural background or the conventional imagery that native speakers draw upon when interpreting such expressions. Imageability itself is not an absolute property but rather a matter of degree, influenced by various linguistic and cultural factors (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Chitra, 1996). For instance, idioms like *to let off steam* may be more readily imageable to learners due to their transparent metaphoric link to observable physical phenomena, whereas idioms like *to hit the ceiling* may evoke less accessible imagery and therefore pose greater comprehension difficulties.

The degree of imageability is determined by a complex interplay of factors such as decomposability, historical origin, familiarity, and the underlying metaphoric theme (Gibbs & O'Brien, 1990). Furthermore, since conventions governing figurative language vary across cultures, imageable idioms in one language may not elicit equivalent mental scenes among learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Charteris-Black, 2002). Idioms grounded in metaphoric themes that are highly salient within the target culture but less so in the learners' first language (L1) culture are particularly challenging. The salience of a given metaphoric theme can be operationalized through the diversity and frequency of related idiomatic expressions within a language (Boers, 1999). For example, English demonstrates a relatively rich variety of idiomatic expressions based on the imagery of "hats"and "ships" (Boers, 1999), whereas in Korean, the domain of "food" serves as a more productive source of metaphorical expressions, reflecting different cultural emphases.

Despite substantial scholarly attention to the acquisition of metaphorical idioms by L2 learners, especially from a cross-cultural perspective (Carrol & Littlemore, 2020; Cooper, 1999; Mazzarella & Pouscoulous, 2023), the specific issue of how context influences L2 learners' comprehension of imageable idioms remains comparatively underexplored. Particularly, few studies have systematically investigated how the presence or absence of contextual clues modulates learners' ability to access the intended figurative meaning.

Building upon this line of inquiry, the present study aims to examine how Korean L2 learners of English comprehend imageable idioms, focusing specifically on the role of contextual support. By manipulating the availability of context, this research seeks to address the following specific questions: (1) To what extent does the presence of contextual information facilitate the comprehension of imageable idioms by Korean L2 learners? (2) What strategies do learners employ when interpreting imageable idioms with and without

contextual clues? (3) How does cross-cultural variation in metaphorical salience impact learners' interpretation and mental imagery construction? Through addressing these questions, the study hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of figurative language acquisition and offer pedagogical insights for enhancing idiom instruction in L2 classrooms.

II. IMAGEABLE IDIOMS

1. Imageability of Idioms

Figurative imageable idioms encountered by L2 learners during the process of second language acquisition typically embody both a literal and a figurative meaning. The literal meaning provides an image component, which serves as a bridge to the figurative meaning through conventional associations (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022). For instance, the idiom *to break one's heart* qualifies as an imageable idiom insofar as its lexical structure conveys the non-literal meaning—"to cause someone who loves you to experience profound sadness"—via the culturally entrenched image of the "heart" as the seat of emotions. However, because cultural conventions differ, an image that appears salient and intuitive within one culture may not elicit a similar response in another. Consequently, the imageable idioms of a particular language may fail to evoke equivalent mental imagery among learners from different cultural backgrounds (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Cornell, 1999). Even between linguistically and culturally related groups that share overarching metaphorical themes, subtle divergences in cultural conceptualizations can impede learners' interpretation and comprehension of imageable idioms (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001).

Therefore, comprehension difficulties are likely to increase when learners from linguistically and culturally distant backgrounds—such as Korean and English—encounter figurative imageable idioms. This is because idiomatic expressions are deeply rooted in the cultural frameworks of the source language, and understanding these cultural underpinnings is critical for successful interpretation (Pavlina, 2024). Moreover, the passage of time and the evolution of socio-cultural norms continuously reshape the conceptual foundations of linguistic units, including idiomatic expressions and metaphors (Kecskes, 2008). Phraseology, in particular, is regarded as one of the most dynamic components of the lexicological system (Boers, 2000; Hamblin & Gibbs, 1999). Although it maintains a relatively stable core of conventionalized expressions, this core is constantly subject to adaptation and change in response to shifting cultural and communicative needs (Pavlina, 2024).

In the context of language learning, figurative idioms with a high degree of imageability are generally more easily interpretable than those with lower imageability. When

encountering idioms characterized by low semantic transparency, language learners are more likely to rely on contextual clues to infer meaning (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Gibbs, 1993). In contrast, for idioms with higher transparency, learners often utilize the lexical components themselves as primary indicators for interpretation.

The degree of an idiom's imageability is determined by a complex interplay of factors, including its degree of decomposability, the presence of a shared metaphoric theme, a clear etymological origin, and its culture-specific grounding (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001). Figurative idioms whose components meaningfully contribute to their overall interpretation tend to be more imageable and, consequently, easier to comprehend (Gibbs, 1993). For example, the idiom *to miss the boat* can be readily decomposed, with *miss* representing "to lose" and *the boat* symbolizing "the opportunity." In contrast, an idiom like *to sell someone down the river* is not easily decomposable into its literal parts.

Similarly, idioms with a transparent etymological origin tend to be more accessible. For instance, *to let off steam* derives from the visible release of steam pressure in mechanical engines, a concept that provides a concrete basis for metaphorical extension. Furthermore, the cultural grounding of an idiom plays a critical role in its comprehension, as conventions differ significantly across languages and cultures. Thus, the imageable idioms of a particular language and culture may fail to evoke similar conventional imagery among learners from different cultural backgrounds.

2. Comprehension of Imageable Idioms by L2 Learners

The comprehension of imageable idioms has attracted considerable attention across various subfields of linguistics, including psycholinguistics (Carrol et al., 2016), language education (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Cooper, 1999; Gibbs, 1993; Lennon, 1998), and comparative research on L1 and L2 acquisition (Beck & Weber, 2016; Carrol et al., 2018; Pavlina, 2024), as well as within broader conceptual frameworks. Numerous studies on the interpretation of imageable figurative idioms indicate that language learners frequently rely on the analysis of underlying conceptual mechanisms to derive figurative meanings (Carrol et al., 2016, 2018; Pavlina, 2024). As Pavlina (2024) points out, two conceptual frameworks that have significantly shaped research in this area are Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen's (2005) Conventional Figurative Language Theory (CFLT).

Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT) posits that phraseological expressions originate through metaphorical mapping processes, and that the figurative meanings of imageable idioms can be inferred via these mappings (Pavlina, 2024). Within this framework, the comprehension of a figurative idiom is viewed as a cognitive process in which the conceptual domain associated with the idiom's lexical structure (the Source domain) is systematically

mapped onto the conceptual domain representing its figurative meaning (the Target domain). Thus, CMT emphasizes that understanding figurative language relies on recognizing and interpreting these conceptual mappings (Pavlina, 2024).

According to Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2018), however, Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT) overlooks the crucial role of cultural knowledge in processing the figurative meaning of idioms. They argue that imageable idioms are fundamentally cultural products and cannot be fully comprehended without consideration of cultural conventions and culture-specific imagery. Within the Conventional Figurative Language Theory (CFLT) framework, conventional imageable idioms are often unique to specific languages and tend to be irregular linguistic units (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2018). In other words, the phenomena that give rise to idioms are culture-specific rather than near-universal, making them difficult to account for within the CMT framework, which emphasizes near-universal conceptual correspondences (Pavlina, 2024).

CFLT incorporates a broad continuum of cultural influences that shape linguistic and conceptual systems across different languages and cultures. According to this framework, the conceptual structure underlying the meaning of a figurative idiom involves two stages: the literal interpretation of the idiom's underlying structure and the lexicalized figurative meaning (Pavlina, 2024). The image component within this conceptual structure serves as the crucial link connecting the literal and figurative levels of meaning (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2005). Furthermore, the connection between figurative meanings and image components is established through motivational ties, which are classified into two types: metaphor-based motivation and symbol-based motivation (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022).

The metaphoric motivation type includes both conceptual metaphors and frame-based metaphors. A conceptual metaphor, such as SEEING SOMETHING AS COVERING, underlies idioms like *sweep something under the carpet*, where the figurative meaning—to hide a problem or keep it secret instead of addressing it—derives from this conceptual mapping. When frame-based metaphors are involved, the non-literal meaning of an idiom typically emerges from an associated frame of reference (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2022; Pavlina, 2024). For example, the literal reading of the idiom *to dig one's heels in* evokes a concrete frame of someone physically planting their feet firmly, which conceptually connects to the figurative meaning of stubborn resistance to change.

In contrast, symbol-based motivation is inherently culture-specific, as the figurative meanings of idioms often incorporate cultural symbols drawn from domains such as food, clothing, nature, and social conventions (Pavlina, 2024). For instance, within European languages, the symbolic role of "bread" mirrors the role of "rice" in many Asian idioms, both representing basic sustenance and survival (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2010). Similarly, the symbolic meaning associated with "boat" in English idioms is comparable to that of "ship" in Korean idioms. The present study aims to investigate the strategies by

which advanced L2 learners interpret the symbolic and metaphorical motivations underlying idioms in order to infer their figurative meanings.

Studies investigating figurative expression comprehension among L2 learners have shown that idiom understanding is influenced by various structural features, including the degree of transparency (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Carrol & Littlemore, 2020; Liu, 2017), decomposability (Carrol & Littlemore, 2020), cross-linguistic similarity (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Carrol & Conklin, 2017), and the novelty of idioms, particularly with or without the support of contextual clues (Pavlina, 2024). Transparency refers to the extent to which the literal meaning of an idiom is connected to its figurative meaning. More transparent idioms are generally more decomposable into segments whose literal meanings closely relate to the figurative interpretation (Pavlina, 2024). Cross-linguistic similarity in figurative idiom comprehension pertains to the extent to which an idiom in the target language (L2) can be directly mapped onto an equivalent expression in the learner's first language (L1) (Cieślicka, 2015). Contextual clues have also been shown to significantly facilitate idiom comprehension (Beck & Weber, 2016; Pavlina, 2024). Building upon the theoretical frameworks proposed by Boers and Demecheleer (2001), Omazić (2008), and Pavlina (2024), the present study seeks to investigate the strategies employed by advanced Korean learners of English to process figurative imageable idioms.

III. METHODS

1. Data Collection

This study was conducted in Korea. The group of participants was relatively heterogeneous; however, most shared a similar English proficiency level (above intermediate) and were of a comparable age (22–25 years old). A total of 40 participants were divided into two groups of 20. One group was tasked with guessing the meanings of selected idioms without any contextual clues, while the other group attempted to infer the meanings with the help of contextual information. Each group was given approximately 20 minutes to complete the task. Participants were also asked to indicate whether they had encountered the idioms before.

Twelve figurative, imageable idioms were selected from various English dictionaries and previous research (Pavlina, 2024). These idioms involved imagery related to ships, food, clothing, colors, the body, and housing. Care was taken to ensure that the chosen idioms were not frequent enough to have become part of the participants' active vocabulary. To confirm the idioms' unfamiliarity, participants rated their familiarity on a four-point scale: absolutely familiar, slightly familiar, quite unfamiliar, and absolutely unfamiliar. Only those idioms that

were rated as “quite unfamiliar” or “absolutely unfamiliar” were retained.

Additionally, to ensure comparability in difficulty, two native English-speaking instructors currently teaching English were asked to rate the idioms’ transparency and difficulty on a four-point scale, ranging from 1 (highly transparent and very easy) to 4 (highly opaque and very difficult). Idioms rated as either 1 or 4 were discarded; only those consistently rated as 2 or 3 were included. As a result, 36 out of the 40 participants were unfamiliar with all of the selected idioms. Instances where participants indicated prior familiarity with an idiom were excluded from the final data. The final list of 12 selected idioms is presented in Table 1.

TABLE1
Figurative Idioms Selected

Idioms	Contextual Use	Context
Break a leg	Don’t worry! Break a leg!	non-informative
Burn the candle at both ends	If they can’t burn the candle at both ends, they won’t apply for the position.	Misleading
Cry over spilled milk	There’s no use crying over spilled milk.	non-informative
Dig your heels in	I kept telling them that we could go on the weekend, but they dug their heels in and demanded we go today.	Informative
Hang on someone’s sleeve	Why don’t you stop hanging on your mother’s sleeve and get a job?	Informative
Laugh up one’s sleeve	I can’t believe that Mike laughs up his sleeve whenever he’s around someone he doesn’t like	Informative
Sail through something	My brother sailed through his exams and is looking forward to starting college.	
Show one’s true colors	She seemed nice at first, but she showed her true colors later.	non-informative
Sweep something under the carpet	They are being accused of sweeping financial problems under the carpet.	Informative
Turn the tide	This last poll marked the turn of the tide, with our candidate gaining a sizable majority	Informative
Under the weather	I was feeling a bit under the weather	non-informative
Walk on the eggshell	You don’t want people walking on the eggshells when you’re sick.	Informative

2. Procedure

A list of 12 idioms was provided to the participants, who were given 20 minutes to infer and explain the meaning of each selected idiom. Participants were instructed to write down the meaning of each idiom based solely on their own reasoning. For the first group, no contextual information was provided. The second group, however, was asked to infer the meanings of idioms presented within linguistic contexts. These contexts were selected from Google search results and reputable online dictionaries. After writing their interpretations, participants were also asked to document the reasoning processes they used to arrive at their conclusions. The meanings of individual words within idioms were explained when

necessary, and participants were permitted to use Korean when describing their reasoning processes.

Following the collection of the written responses, a discussion session was held in which participants were invited to verbalize and elaborate on how they had arrived at their interpretations.

The data were analyzed in two stages. First, all idiom definitions were scored on a three-point scale: a score of 1 was assigned to incorrect explanations, 2 to partially correct interpretations, and 3 to fully correct definitions. Second, participants' documented reasoning processes were analyzed to identify the strategies they employed in comprehending figurative imageable idioms from a culturally different language. This qualitative analysis aimed to shed light on how L2 learners navigate figurative meaning construction across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

IV. RESULTS

1. Interpretation of Idioms without Context

The average comprehension scores for idioms presented with contextual support are shown in Table 2. The overall average comprehension score for the set of idioms was 1.82. Among them, *to show your true colors* (meaning "to reveal one's real nature or character") and *to walk on eggshells* (meaning "to be very careful not to upset someone") were the most easily comprehended, with mean scores of 2.90 and 2.80, respectively. These idioms exhibit similarities in structure and semantics to Korean figurative expressions such as *dangsin jinjja saekkkal-i mueya?* (literally, "what is your color?" meaning "show me your true character") and *sal-eol-eumpan-eul geodda* (literally, "to walk on thin ice," meaning "to tread carefully so as not to offend someone, especially in a delicate situation").

Almost all participants (19 and 18 out of 20, respectively) accurately grasped both the denotative and connotative meanings of these expressions. In terms of motivational type, the conceptual metaphor YOU HAVE COLORS underlies the figurative meaning of *to show your true colors*. The motivational link was clearly recognized, as 19 participants interpreted the expression as meaning "to reveal one's true thoughts or character," particularly when it is unpleasant or hidden.

TABLE2
Comprehension Scores for Idioms without a Context

Idioms	Scores
Show one's true colors.	2.90
Walk on the eggshells.	2.80
Seep something under the carpet	1.90
Under the weather	1.80
Cry over spilled milk	1.80
Dig your heels in	1.70
Hang on someone's sleeve	1.70
Sail through something	1.65
Laugh up one's sleeve	1.50
Turn the tide	1.45
Break a leg	1.30
Burn the candle at both ends	1.25
Average group comprehension score	1.81

A frame-based metaphor underpins the idiom *to walk on eggshells*, as its non-literal meaning is grounded in a frame of reference with well-defined properties. The expression evokes a concrete mental image of someone walking carefully over fragile surfaces, such as eggshells or ice. This source frame allows for a conceptual linkage between cautious physical behavior and an uncomfortable or precarious situation. The motivational link underlying this idiom was relatively clear to the L2 learners.

Similarly, *to sweep something under the carpet* was not particularly difficult for participants to comprehend. Fourteen out of twenty participants (70%) correctly interpreted its underlying image, recognizing that sweeping something under the carpet signifies an attempt to hide an unpleasant issue rather than addressing it. This idiom is also based on a frame-based metaphoric motivation, where the entire situation serves as the frame of reference for the metaphorical meaning. Thus, the basis for metaphorization appeared relatively transparent to the learners.

Under the weather was likewise relatively easy for participants to comprehend. Thirteen out of twenty participants (65%) successfully decoded its figurative meaning, identifying it as feeling ill or unwell. This idiom, too, is motivated by a frame-based metaphor, where the entire context serves as a metaphorical frame. It also shares structural and semantic similarities with the Korean idiomatic expression *mureup-i ssusin-geul bon-i bi-ga ogetta* (literally, "my knees hurt; it may signal that rain is coming"), based on the cultural belief that changes in weather affect the body. This example illustrates that shared cultural codes can facilitate the interpretation of idiomatic imagery.

In contrast, *burn the candle at both ends* and *break a leg* were the most difficult idioms for participants to interpret. About two-thirds of the participants failed to comprehend *burn the candle at both ends*, which figuratively means "to exhaust oneself by overworking or using up resources excessively." Participants often interpreted the idiom as referring to a

candle burning too quickly or to hastening failure by burning a candle from both sides. Some participants associated the expression with worsening a situation by consuming resources hastily, while others linked it to the Korean idiom *yangnal-ui geom* (literally, "a double-edged sword"), which conveys a situation with both positive and negative sides. Nevertheless, approximately one-third of the participants managed to infer the correct meaning, recognizing that burning the candle at both ends metaphorically describes becoming physically or emotionally drained through excessive effort.

The lowest level of comprehension was observed in the interpretation of the idiom *break a leg*, which figuratively means "wishing someone good luck, especially before a performance." Although the morphological reading of *break a leg* suggests physically injuring a part of the body, its idiomatic usage conveys a positive, encouraging sentiment. Only two participants correctly interpreted *break a leg* as an expression of wishing good luck; the majority associated it with images of misfortune or serious trouble.

As a dead metaphor, *break a leg* has lost its original literal imagery through extensive conventionalization and is commonly used in theatrical contexts to encourage performers before they take the stage. In attempting to comprehend the idiom through symbolic motivation, many participants relied on the literal image of "breaking a leg," leading them to interpret the expression as referring to experiencing a major setback or facing an irrecoverable situation. Without contextual clues and given the absence of explicit ironic or non-literal markers, participants struggled to access the idiom's figurative meaning. The lack of clear motivational links further hindered their ability to correctly interpret this culturally embedded expression.

2. L2 Learners' Strategies of Idiom Comprehension

After writing the definitions of each figurative imageable idiom, participants were asked to report the processes they used to infer the idiomatic meanings without any contextual support. Analysis of their reports revealed that participants primarily relied on idiom decomposition, motivation analysis, and reference to similar idioms in their L1.

Idiom decomposition occurred when participants broke down the idiom into its constituent lexemes and combined the literal meanings to infer the metaphorical meaning of the entire phrase. For example, both decomposition and motivation analysis were employed by several participants in interpreting the idiom *to dig your heels in*. Their interpretations were heavily influenced by the metaphorical meaning associated with *heels*, linking the physical body—particularly posture and attitude—with the act of resisting change. Three participants reported visualizing an image of someone standing upright with their heels firmly dug into the ground, leading them to conclude that the idiom meant "to stubbornly refuse to change one's actions or opinions."

In this case, decomposition and motivation analysis enabled the participants to accurately grasp the figurative meaning. Their attention to individual lexical elements, combined with an understanding of the underlying metaphor, contributed to successful idiom comprehension.

In interpreting the idiom *to sweep something under the carpet*, participants also employed the decomposition strategy by breaking the idiom into its constituent elements. They correctly interpreted the underlying image, recognizing that if someone sweeps something under the carpet, they attempt to conceal an unpleasant issue rather than addressing it. This idiom is based on a frame-based metaphoric motivation, where the entire scenario serves as a frame of reference for metaphorical interpretation. Thus, the basis for metaphorization appeared relatively transparent to the participants.

Participants also used decomposition to interpret the idiom *to laugh up one's sleeve*. They analyzed the constituent elements and accurately understood the underlying image of someone laughing while covering their face with a sleeve (i.e., with clothing), leading them to correctly infer that the idiom means "to be secretly amused by, or happy about, something—often at someone else's misfortune."

However, decomposition produced different results in the interpretation of the idiom *break a leg*. In this case, about 70 percent of the participants associated the literal meaning of *break* with encountering something negative or unfortunate, and combined this with a literal reading of *the leg*. Most participants visualized the physical act of breaking a leg and concluded that the idiom referred to experiencing bad luck or an unfortunate situation. Here, decomposition alone led to misunderstanding, as participants focused heavily on the literal elements and failed to recognize the idiom's metaphorical use and its cultural-specific origin as a "dead metaphor" with a positive meaning (i.e., wishing someone good luck, especially before a performance).

Motivational base analysis was also a common strategy employed by participants. This strategy relied heavily on background knowledge, particularly knowledge of socio-cultural practices, which facilitated the comprehension of idioms that were relatively familiar or relevant to current social trends. For example, in interpreting *sail through something*, participants associated the lexeme *sail* with navigating the challenges of life or work, conceptualizing the act of "sailing" as successfully advancing through life's tasks. From the participants' perspective, *sail through something* was interpreted as related to a topical issue in contemporary Korean society—specifically, securing employment and successfully starting one's desired career.

In addition, some participants relied on Korean figurative expressions with similar semantic compositions to infer the meaning of English idioms. Reference to L1 idioms was particularly evident in the interpretation of *turn the tide* and *hang on someone's sleeve*. For instance, learners associated *turn the tide* with the Korean idiom *mul deul-eul ttae no jeoeola*

(literally, “row when the water comes in”), which means “seize the right momen” or “everything has its time.” This prompted participants to interpret *turn the tide* as “taking advantage of an opportunity.”

However, this cross-linguistic inference led to a partial misinterpretation. The mental image evoked by *tide* suggested for participants a movement that could be controlled or directed, leading some to interpret *turn the tide* as “turning a situation to one’s advantage.” Although the constituent elements of the Korean and English idioms were similar, their semantic nuances differed. Nevertheless, *turn the tide* was relatively easy for participants to comprehend due to the shared metaphorical foundation related to the movement and timing of tides.

The idiom *hang on someone’s sleeve* closely resembles the Korean figurative expression *baji garang-ileul butjabda* (literally, “to hold onto someone’s trousers”), which means “to implore someone for help, especially in a difficult situation.” Although the two idioms are nearly identical in their constituent elements, they differ both semantically and pragmatically. In English, *hang on someone’s sleeve* means “to be completely reliant on someone,” emphasizing emotional or psychological dependence. In contrast, the Korean expression connotes actively pleading for mercy or kindness, often driven by a sense of desperation.

Some L2 learners misinterpreted *hang on someone’s sleeve* as “grabbing someone’s clothing to beg for mercy,” influenced by the literal mental image of clinging to garments such as sleeves or trousers. This misinterpretation highlights how surface-level similarities in form can be misleading. Despite the structural resemblance between the source (L1) and target (L2) idioms, differences in denotation and connotation can result in inaccurate comprehension, demonstrating that reliance on L1 figurative expressions may not always be a reliable strategy for understanding L2 idioms.

3. Interpretation of Idioms within Linguistic Context

Table 3 presents the comprehension scores for idioms presented with contextual support. As shown in Table 3, the presence of context significantly improved participants’ comprehension of figurative idioms. The mean score for idioms without context was 1.81, whereas the mean score for idioms with context increased to 2.23, representing a 23% improvement.

TABLE 3
Comprehension Scores for Idioms without a Context

Idioms	Score
Show one's true colors.	2.90
Walk on the eggshells.	2.80
Seep something under the carpet	2.50
Hang on someone's sleeve	2.45
Dig your heels in	2.40
Under the weather	2.40
Cry over spilled milk	1.90
Sail through something	1.90
Turn the tide	1.90
Burn the candle at both ends	1.80
Laugh up one's sleeve	1.80
Break a leg	1.75
Average group comprehension score	2.23

A marked improvement in comprehension was observed when figurative idioms were presented within informative contexts. Notably, comprehension scores increased by 44% for *hang on someone's sleeve*, 31% for *turn the tide*, and 44% for *burn the candle at both ends*. When *hang on someone's sleeve* was interpreted without contextual clues, 70% of participants associated it with "begging for mercy or kindness, usually due to a difficult situation." However, when presented within the sentence "*Why don't you stop hanging on your mother's sleeve and get a job?"*, 14 out of 20 participants (70%) accurately identified the intended meaning as "being totally reliant on someone else."

Similarly, for *turn the tide*, without context, 70% of participants interpreted it as "taking advantage of every opportunity presented." With contextual support—"*This last poll marked the turn of the tide, with our candidate gaining a sizable majority"*—11 out of 20 participants (55%) correctly understood the idiom to mean "reversing a situation" or "reversing the progression of events."

Interestingly, improvements in comprehension were also recorded when idioms were embedded in non-informative or even misleading contexts. For example, comprehension of *burn the candle at both ends* increased by 44% when presented in the sentence "*If they can't burn the candle at both ends, they won't apply for the position."* Although the context implied that the ability to "burn the candle at both ends" was a desirable trait, it still facilitated a more accurate interpretation compared to no-context conditions. Without context, 65% of participants misinterpreted the idiom, believing it referred to solving problems quickly or rushing to complete work. Although overall comprehension remained low, the presence of context nevertheless contributed to a significant improvement.

The number of correct interpretations for the idiom *break a leg* increased by 20% when it was presented in the context *"Break a leg on One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."* Although the title of the movie was unfamiliar to most participants, approximately 40% associated the

proper noun with a theatrical performance, leading them to infer that the idiom meant wishing someone good luck before a performance. *Break a leg* is a dead metaphor that, through extensive usage, has lost its original imagery and is commonly used to convey good luck to actors prior to going on stage. Although its etymology remains obscure, the contextual clue successfully prompted a more accurate interpretation among L2 learners.

In contrast, when no contextual information was provided, and in the absence of an ironic or culturally embedded understanding of the phrase, fifteen out of twenty participants (75%) misinterpreted the idiom. They tended to associate it with facing misfortune or experiencing unavoidable bad luck, focusing solely on the literal elements of *break* and *leg* rather than recognizing its conventional figurative meaning.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis of Korean L2 learners' comprehension of imageable figurative idioms suggests that their idiom interpretation follows basic conceptual processing mechanisms and can be effectively modeled through the Conventional Figurative Language Theory (CFLT) framework. The comprehension of imageable figurative meanings may be facilitated by motivational links between what is literally said and what is intended (Pavlina, 2024). Specifically, the literal meaning of an idiom often triggers a mental image, which relies heavily on learners' background knowledge of the world and their cultural awareness (Pavlina, 2024).

For instance, several participants reported that while interpreting the idiom *walk on eggshells*, they imagined a Disney character walking cautiously on thin ice. Similarly, when interpreting *dig your heels in*, some participants visualized cartoon characters standing firmly with heels dug into the ground, projecting an image of stubbornness and resistance to change. In these cases, the mental image elicited by the literal meaning formed the basis for constructing the figurative meaning, demonstrating that figurative comprehension integrates elements of literal interpretation through motivational links. These links, in turn, are mediated by the learners' cultural background knowledge and their ability to perceive conceptual metaphorical projections.

While the specific mental images varied slightly among participants, the underlying conceptualizations were largely shared, reflecting their common socio-cultural background. As members of the same speech community, participants drew upon similar cultural experiences and knowledge bases. For example, in interpreting *sail through something*, participants associated *sail* with successfully navigating through life's challenges, particularly in the context of achieving employment or launching a desired career—a topic highly relevant in contemporary Korean society. Supported by shared background

knowledge, the literal reading of *sail* triggered a mental image of smooth, successful progression, which was then linked to the broader metaphorical meaning of overcoming obstacles with ease.

The analysis demonstrates that language learners' cultural awareness is a particularly crucial component of background knowledge in the comprehension of figurative idioms. For instance, *sail through something* is motivated by a symbol-based metaphor. However, interference from L1 cultural frameworks can lead to misinterpretation (Pavlina, 2024). Three out of twenty participants (15%) associated sailing not with effortless success, but with engaging in a difficult or dangerous task. Guided by the symbol of "navigating across the vast and uncertain ocean," they inferred that the idiom meant "leaping into the unknown." Although their mental image of sailing was consistent with the literal meaning, the different motivational links they constructed, shaped by divergent background knowledge, led to incorrect interpretations. This finding underscores the pivotal role of cultural knowledge in the comprehension of imageable figurative idioms; a lack of shared cultural codes or symbolic associations can significantly hinder understanding.

Hang on someone's sleeve offers another illustrative example. While participants successfully generated a mental image based on the literal meaning, they failed to establish the correct motivational links due to interference from their L1 culture. The Korean idiom *baji galang-ileul butjabda* (literally, "to grab someone's trouser") shares structural and imagistic similarities with the English idiom, yet differs semantically and pragmatically. Participants, influenced by the Korean idiom's connotation of pleading or begging for mercy, incorrectly projected similar motivations onto the English expression, thereby misunderstanding its intended meaning of emotional dependence.

Overall, the analysis reveals that L2 learners' awareness of both source and target cultures, as components of background knowledge, is vital for effective idiom comprehension. Cultural awareness facilitates the creation of appropriate mental images based on literal meanings and supports the establishment of motivational links underpinning figurative interpretations.

Furthermore, when idioms were embedded in context, comprehension improved notably. Contextual clues appeared to compensate for gaps in cultural knowledge and significantly enhanced learners' ability to process conventional idioms. This finding aligns with Pavlina's (2024) results, which showed that the comprehension of conventional idioms improves substantially when presented within contextualized discourse.

The data also indicate that L2 learners employed several strategies to interpret figurative idioms, including idiom decomposition, construction of motivational links, and reference to familiar L1 idioms. Although positive transfer from L1 can facilitate the learning process, it can also lead to negative transfer or interference (Min, 2023; Swan, 1997).

While this study acknowledges limitations, such as the relatively small sample size, the

findings support the assumption that L1 transfer can both accelerate learning and contribute to misinterpretation. More importantly, the results highlight the indispensable role of cultural awareness in enabling L2 learners to correctly comprehend figurative idioms and mitigate misunderstandings.

VI. CONCLUSION

Overall, this study examined the cognitive and linguistic determinants involved in Korean L2 learners' comprehension of imageable figurative idioms. The findings highlight the potential impact of learners' interpretations of such idioms and invite language teachers to pay particular attention to figurative expressions whose metaphoric themes may be less salient in the learners' L1. At the same time, however, the cases of *hang on someone's sleeve* and *sail through something* illustrate the pitfalls of L1 transfer even when expressions are based on seemingly shared metaphoric themes. These observations suggest that effective teaching of figurative idioms requires heightened awareness of both cultural and linguistic variations.

The selected idioms for the study, all rated as having an intermediate level of semantic transparency, were presented without contextual clues. Nevertheless, approximately 65% of participants responded with at least partially correct interpretations. This result suggests that the semantics of many imageable figurative idioms remains relatively consistent and accessible within language learning contexts (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001). Given that figurative idioms are typically encountered in context during normal learning conditions, language teachers might encourage learners to independently decode the meanings of idioms without contextual support, using problem-solving tasks that engage deep cognitive processing. Such cognitive engagement has been shown to have a positive impact on long-term memory retention (Ellis, 1994).

If language teachers develop practical strategies and guidelines to assist learners when encountering unfamiliar figurative idioms, learners' awareness of three key areas—non-arbitrary semantics, cross-linguistic differences, and cross-cultural variation—can be enhanced. These factors, in turn, may serve as crucial "windows" through which learners can effectively examine and comprehend imageable idioms in a second language.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Language: English
Applicable Levels: Tertiary

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