Translating English Idioms into Urdu: A Relevance-Theory-Based Contextual Approach for Non-Native Urdu-Speaking Learners

Ahsan Mahmood Akbar [1,] Amna Arshad [2,] Umama Azam Khan[3]

[1] MPhil (Linguistics) Scholar, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad (Faisalabad campus). Email: ahsanthabal@gmail.com

[2] Lecturer of English Linguistics, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad (Faisalabad campus). Email: amna.arshad@numl.edu.pk

[3] MPhil (Linguistics) Scholar, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad (Faisalabad campus). Email: umamaazam547@gmail.com

Abstract

Idioms are barrier in second language acquisition. In Pakistani ESL contexts, the word for word translation of English idioms into Urdu often results in confusion, loss of meaning, and poor retention. This research focuses how a Contextual-Narrative Approach, grounded in Relevance Theory and supported by Narrative Pedagogy, can bridge the idiomatic divide faced by Urdu-speaking non-native learners .Using a quasi-experimental design supported by open-ended qualitative questionnaires, this research catered intermediate-level learners from Urdu-speaking backgrounds. The intervention consisted of teaching native English idioms through culturally relevant stories, contextual embedding, and Urdu-based narrative mapping. Data analysis showed that literal translation methods consistently failed to produce comprehension or recall, while the contextual-narrative method led to significant gains in retention, inferential understanding, and learner confidence. Zero-knower participants showed nearly 100% idiom retention post-intervention, confirming the cognitive and emotional effectiveness of the narrative-based model. Findings further indicated that contextual stories activated inferential comprehension (as predicted by Relevance Theory), while culturally adapted storytelling reduced affective filters, enhanced engagement, and promoted memory. This study contributes an integrated pedagogical model for teaching idioms that transcends literal translation by aligning idiomatic instruction with cultural cognition, inferential processing, and emotional resonance. It offers scalable solutions for ESL/EFL classrooms worldwide, especially in contexts where learners face cultural-linguistic dissonance.

Key Words: Idiomatic Translation, Relevance Theory, Narrative Pedagogy , Contextual Language Teaching, Urdu- Speaking ESL Learners, Applied Linguistics in Education

Introduction

The importance of mastering idiomatic expressions in English is undeniable, especially in contexts where global communication and academic success depend on a nuanced understanding of native-like language use. Despite this, idioms remain a major source of difficulty for non-native speakers, particularly for students in Pakistan, where Urdu is the primary language of cultural expression and cognition. In this regard, the problem is not merely linguistic but deeply cultural and cognitive.

As demonstrated in this study's pretest results, many learners were either unaware of idioms or confused by their literal translations, which failed to deliver meaningful comprehension. The reliance on word-for-word methods proved to be a significant barrier, reinforcing what scholars and practitioners alike recognize as a major pedagogical challenge in second language acquisition. In light of these issues, this study investigates a more dynamic and culturally responsive alternative: the use of **contextual and story-based teaching approaches, framed by Relevance Theory**. According to Relevance Theory, effective communication and comprehension depend on inferential processing — the ability to derive intended meanings based on context rather than surface-level forms. Applying this principle to idiomatic teaching, this research employs narrative pedagogy to provide relatable stories and contexts that map abstract idiomatic meanings onto the learners' cognitive and cultural frameworks.

The findings from the posttest and qualitative responses validate this pedagogical shift. Students exposed to contextual and story-based teaching not only retained idioms more successfully but also reported increased confidence and motivation. Their feedback highlighted that stories made idioms relatable, easier to memorize, and more enjoyable to learn. Additionally, culturally adapted examples in Urdu further bridged the gap between English figurative language and native comprehension. Nevertheless, some challenges persisted, particularly in spontaneous usage and conversational competence, suggesting that while contextual narratives enhance comprehension and retention, further pedagogical scaffolding is necessary for productive use.

Therefore, the central aim of this research is to explore how a **Contextual-Narrative Approach grounded in Relevance Theory** can bridge the idiomatic divide faced by non-native Urdu-speaking learners. By doing so, the study not only addresses a longstanding pedagogical gap but also proposes a theoretically sound and empirically supported model that integrates linguistic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of idiomatic learning.

Idiomatic expressions are among the most intricate and challenging components of any language, carrying meanings that extend far beyond the literal interpretations of their individual words. In English, idioms are deeply embedded in everyday discourse, literature, media, and academic communication. For non-native speakers, however, these figurative phrases often become stumbling blocks. The difficulty does not lie only in their unfamiliarity, but also in their cultural and contextual underpinnings, which are frequently inaccessible through direct translation. Particularly for Urdu-speaking learners in Pakistan, the process of understanding and translating English idioms is further complicated by differences in cultural schemas and linguistic patterns.

Traditional language instruction in Pakistani classrooms has largely focused on literal translation and rote memorization of idioms. However, this method frequently fails to convey the actual sense of idiomatic expressions. Instead, learners remain trapped in confusion, interpreting idioms word-for-word without grasping their figurative intent. This gap between surface-level translation and deeper conceptual understanding creates what can be called an **"idiomatic divide"** — a persistent disconnect between native English expressions and non-native learners' comprehension and usage abilities.Idioms represent one of the most complex and nuanced aspects of language. Defined as figurative expressions whose meanings cannot be inferred directly from their constituent parts, idioms pose formidable challenges to non-native speakers. This complexity intensifies in contexts where linguistic and cultural boundaries intersect, such as in the case of Pakistani ESL learners translating English idioms into Urdu. Literal or word-for-word translation often proves insufficient, resulting in loss of meaning, confusion, and communicative breakdowns. Despite the global emphasis on English proficiency, idiomatic competence remains a largely under-addressed component in language teaching, particularly in regions like Pakistan where cross-cultural translation is essential yet challenging.

Literature Review

1. Idioms as Cognitive and Cultural Units

Idioms are not merely linguistic artifacts; they are culturally rooted, cognitively processed figurative expressions that challenge non-native speakers due to their non-literal meanings (Gibbs, 1994; Glucksberg, 2001). Unlike vocabulary or grammar, idioms function as **conceptual metaphors**, often resistant to direct translation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Research across ESL/EFL contexts has shown that idioms are among the most difficult language features to master (Liontas, 2002; Abel, 2003), especially for learners whose first language lacks comparable idiomatic structures or cultural equivalents (Irujo, 1986; Prodromou, 2003).

2. The Failure of Literal Translation in Idiomatic Understanding

Multiple studies have confirmed that **literal translation** of idioms leads to confusion, misinterpretation, and even humorous or offensive errors in cross-linguistic communication (Newmark, 1988; Baker, 1992). In Pakistani classrooms, idioms are often reduced to dictionary definitions or memorized translations, ignoring the figurative, contextual, and pragmatic layers they carry (Rashid, 2013; Ahmad & Mahmood, 2016). Literal translation overlooks the idiom's communicative function, cultural nuance, and inferential meaning, resulting in **linguistic failure despite lexical accuracy** (Larson, 1998; Mona Baker, 2011).

3. Contextual Teaching of Idioms: From Isolation to Integration

Idioms cannot be acquired effectively in isolation. Recent pedagogical shifts emphasize **contextual learning**, where idioms are taught in meaningful discourse, stories, dialogues, and situational examples (Cooper, 1999; Boers et al., 2007). Context activates background knowledge, supports inferencing, and facilitates deeper processing (Liu, 2008). Studies have shown that idioms taught through contextualized methods are more likely to be retained, understood, and eventually used in authentic communication (Tran, 2013; Cieślicka, 2006).

4. Narrative Pedagogy and the Role of Stories in Idiom Comprehension

Storytelling, rooted in **Narrative Pedagogy**, offers emotional, cognitive, and cultural anchoring for abstract linguistic concepts (Diekelmann, 2001; Bruner, 1991). Stories reduce affective filters, create emotional memory links, and serve as cultural bridges — especially in figurative language teaching (Krashen, 1982; Lazar, 2003). Liontas (2001) demonstrated that idioms embedded in humorous or culturally resonant stories enhance learner engagement and facilitate long-term retention. In ESL contexts, storytelling promotes not only comprehension but cultural literacy (Ghosn, 2002; Eslami & Mirzaei, 2012).

5. Relevance Theory: A Cognitive Framework for Idiomatic Comprehension

Developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986), **Relevance Theory** provides a robust cognitive framework for understanding how idioms are processed. Idioms are not "decoded" — they are **inferred**. Learners must use contextual clues to access the speaker's intended meaning. According to Relevance Theory, communication succeeds when the hearer derives the optimal meaning with minimal processing effort and maximum contextual relevance (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Applied to ESL instruction, this theory supports inferential learning strategies — such as teaching idioms through real-life situations and culturally embedded narratives (Vanderveken, 2001; Papafragou, 1998).

6. Cultural Mapping and Cross-Linguistic Idiomatic Transfer

Translation studies highlight the need for **cultural mapping** when teaching or translating idioms (Hatim & Mason, 1997; Nida, 1964). For Urdu-speaking learners, English idioms often carry conceptual metaphors foreign to local experience (Shah & Munir, 2020). Bridging this gap requires teaching strategies that connect English idioms to culturally familiar expressions, proverbs, or narrative frames (Al-Zoubi & Al-Ali, 2015). Learners comprehend better when idioms are not only explained but **re-experienced** through parallel cultural schemas (Wierzbicka, 1992; Farghal & Shunnaq, 1999).

7. Idiomatic Competence and Productive Usage in ESL Learners

True idiomatic competence includes both **receptive understanding** and **productive usage** (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Many studies report that ESL learners understand idioms passively but hesitate to use them actively due to fear of misuse (Zyzik, 2011; Liontas, 2002). This gap persists despiteimprovements in comprehension, suggesting that teaching must extend from recognition to communicative reinforcement. Studies call for multi-phase pedagogies: first context-based comprehension, followed by communicative practice through interaction, role-play, and task-based learning (Taguchi, 2007; Martinez, 2013).

1960s–1980s: Foundational Theories

Nida, E. (1964). Toward a Science of Translating.
Nida introduced the concepts of Dynamic and Formal Equivalence, addressing the challenge of conveying meaning across cultures. Through theoretical analysis, he emphasized the importance of the receptor's response in translation, laying the groundwork for functionalist approaches.

Newmark, P. (1981). A Textbook of Translation.
Newmark differentiated between Semantic and Communicative Translation, highlighting the tension between source-text fidelity and target-text naturalness. His work provided practical strategies for translators to navigate cultural nuances.

1990s–2010s: Emphasis on Cultural Context

Ferguson, C. (1993). Translation and Language Functioning.
Ferguson argued that translation should represent language functioning rather than mere word substitution. Using qualitative analysis, she underscored the necessity of blending scientific precision with artistic creativity in translation.Bible Researcher

Tanku, F. (2013). Balancing Linguistic Rules and Interpretation.
Tanku addressed the gap between rigid linguistic adherence and the translator's interpretative role. Through case studies, he advocated for a middle path that harmonizes language structure with cultural context.

2010s–2020s: Pedagogical and Technological Advances

Ali, S., & Al-Rushaidi, A. (2016). Translating Idioms: Omani Learners' Challenges.
Investigating Omani EFL students, the study identified difficulties in translating cultural phrases. Using surveys, the authors recommended enhanced idiom training in language curricula.PMC+78ResearchGate+78ResearchGate+78

Mohseni, A., & Mozafar, H. (2013). Strategies in Persian TV Show Translations.
Analyzing English subtitles of Persian series, the research found a preference for paraphrasing over direct idiomatic translation. The study highlighted the importance of cultural adaptation in audiovisual translation.Academia+1jrtle.ir+1

Benneghrouzi, F. Z., & Zohra, A. (2019). Ideology and Equivalence in Translation.
The authors explored how ideological contexts influence translation equivalence. Through textual analysis, they advocated for a pragmatic approach, recognizing the fluidity of equivalence across cultures.

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Al-Fouzan, S. (2019). Adequacy vs. Acceptability in Translation.
Differentiating between fidelity to the source text and naturalness in the target language, Al-Fouzan emphasized the translator's role in balancing these aspects. The study reinforced the cultural turn in translation studies.

2020s–2025: Contemporary Perspectives and Applications

Ta'amneh, M. A. (2021). University Students' Idiom Learning Strategies.
Focusing on Jordanian university students, the study identified figurative meaning and cultural unfamiliarity as major obstacles. Using questionnaires, it was found that students relied heavily on context and dictionaries, suggesting the need for more contextualized teaching methods.awej-tls.org

Al-Qahtani, F. D., & Al-Qahtani, O. A. (2021). Translating Animal Idioms from English into Arabic.
Applying Nida's strategies, the research highlighted challenges in achieving cultural equivalence. The study concluded that translators often resort to non-idiomatic expressions due to cultural gaps.SSRN

Fattah, A. (2022). Collocations in Translation: A Dynamic Equivalence Approach.
Addressing the complexity of collocations, Fattah endorsed dynamic equivalence to handle cultural differences effectively. The study provided practical insights for translators dealing with culturally bound expressions.

Almutairi, S. (2022). Social and Cultural Factors in Translation Choices.
Exploring the influence of societal norms on translation, Almutairi supported Nord's concept of translator loyalty to the author's intent. The research emphasized the importance of cultural awareness in translation decisions.

Almutairi, S. (2024). Balancing Fidelity and Readability in Translation.
Building on previous work, this study argued for a balance between staying true to the source text and ensuring readability for the target audience. It reinforced the communicative function of translations.

Awdi, M. A. (2025). Equivalence in Meaning: A Comparative Analysis of Nida's and Newmark's Translation Theories in English-Arabic Translation.
Revisiting the dynamic and formal equivalence debate, Awdi emphasized the significance of textual background in understanding and translating idioms. The study provided a nuanced perspective on equivalence in translation.

Vula, E., & Ymeri, M. (2025). Investigating Translation Strategies: EFL Students' Approaches to Idiomatic Expressions.
Examining EFL students' strategies, the study found paraphrasing to be the most effective, followed by cultural adaptation. Literal translation was least effective, highlighting the importance of communicative clarity.

Boymurodova, M., & Amriddinova, N. (2025). Translation and Adaptation of Business Idioms.
Focusing on business idioms, the research argued that functional and localized strategies are more effective than literal translations in cross-cultural contexts. The study underscored the need for cultural sensitivity in business communication.

Jamshed, S., et al. (2024). Assessing Saudi EFL Learners' Use and Understanding of English Idioms.
Through a descriptive-quantitative study, the research identified cultural unfamiliarity and inadequate instruction as major challenges. The authors recommended contextual and culture-rich idiom teaching strategies.

Almrayat, M., Farghal, M., & Haider, M. (2024). Translating Idioms in Political Discourse.
A corpus-based analysis revealed that opaque idioms were frequently paraphrased. The study emphasized the necessity of considering form, function, and culture during translation.

Mahdi, A. (2024). Idiom Teaching Techniques Using Diverse Linguistic Theories.
Exploring various teaching methods, Mahdi concluded that combining linguistic structure with cultural context is essential for fluency. The study advocated for integrated teaching approaches.

Al Kayed, M. (2024). MA Students Translating Sports Idioms.
Observing that students often opted for literal translations, which frequently failed, Al Kayed emphasized the importance of paraphrasing and cultural awareness in translation.

Vula, E., & Tyfekçi, A. (2024). English-Albanian Idiom Translation.
The study noted that idioms are deeply tied to culture and suggested that paraphrasing and cultural knowledge improve translation success.

Alazzam, A., Alzghoul, M., & Alzghoul, M. (2024). Medical Idioms Translation Using Baker's Model.
Investigating medical idioms, the study found that participants heavily relied on literal translation, dictionaries, and context, highlighting the need for idiom-focused training in EFL contexts.

Hamunajec, H. (2025). Students' Interpretation of Literal and Figurative Meanings Through Idiomatic Keys.
Using questionnaires, the study found that nouns and verbs were easier to process, whereas adjectives created more difficulty, emphasizing the importance of figurative competence in idiom learning.

Shoimova, S. (2024). Idioms and Phrasal Verbs in Daily Conversations.
Through qualitative methods, the study revealed that learners often misunderstood idioms literally, but exposure to authentic media sources enhanced comprehension and natural usage.

Al-Hamdun, A., & Al Mozari, M. (2024). Role of Film and Music in Facilitating Idiom Learning.
Their mixed-methods research found that 90.4% of participants gained confidence in idiomatic usage through emotional and contextual immersion offered by these mediums.

Endangered Idioms (2024). Declining Use of Idiomatic Expressions Among Younger Generations.
Survey findings indicated that modern communication trends have led to reduced idiom usage, necessitating educational interventions to revive this linguistic richness.

Prihantoro, E., et al. (2024). Idiom Usage in Academic Writing: A Comparative Corpus Study.
Results showed that native authors used idioms more frequently to enhance cohesion and argumentation, while Indonesian authors largely avoided them. The study recommended academic phrasebanks to support non-native scholars.

Hamunajec, H. (2020). Idiomatic Translation Strategies Between English and Croatian.
Her analysis revealed that literal translation rarely preserves idiomatic meanings; instead, functional and contextual equivalence plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural relevance and communicative clarity.

Research Questions

Q 1 : What are the primary linguistic and cultural challenges encountered in translating native English idioms into Urdu for non-native speakers, and how can contextual and story-based approaches improve translation accuracy and cultural appropriateness?

Q 2 : Why does a Contextual-Narrative Approach grounded in Relevance Theory outperform traditional equivalence-based methods in the translation of native English idioms into Urdu for non-native speakers?

Q 3: How does a contextual and story-based translation approach, grounded in Relevance Theory, enable more effective cross-cultural transfer of English idioms into Urdu for non-native speakers, and in what ways does it address the cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural limitations of traditional equivalence-based methods?

2. Problem Statement

In the Pakistani ESL context, learners regularly encounter native English idioms in academic materials, media, and informal communication. However, conventional approaches—dominated by rote memorization and literal translation—fail to equip students with the skills necessary to comprehend and use idioms meaningfully. Preliminary classroom observations and pretest data reveal that most learners initially lack idiomatic awareness, frequently misinterpret literal meanings, and struggle with retention. Without culturally and cognitively relevant teaching strategies, idioms remain abstract and unapproachable, creating a persistent 'idiomatic divide' between native expression and non-native comprehension.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon **Relevance Theory** (Sperber & Wilson), which posits that communication hinges on inferential comprehension rather than direct decoding. Idioms, by nature, demand context-based inferencing to bridge the gap between literal form and figurative meaning. Furthermore, this research integrates **Narrative Pedagogy**, emphasizing that stories and relatable contexts enable learners to connect abstract idiomatic meanings to familiar experiences. Together, these frameworks form the cornerstone of this study's pedagogical approach: teaching idioms through contextual narratives that align with learners' cognitive and cultural schemata.

4. Research Purpose and Significance

Given the failure of literal translation methods and the positive findings from contemporary cognitive and narrative learning models, this research aims to explore whether **a contextual and story-based approach grounded in Relevance Theory** can enhance idiomatic comprehension, retention, and translation competence among Urdu-speaking ESL learners.

The significance of this study lies in:

- Providing empirical evidence (through pretest-posttest and thematic analysis) that story-based contextual teaching improves idiom retention and learner confidence.
- Demonstrating that cultural mapping (e.g., linking English idioms with Urdu narratives) plays a critical role in making idioms comprehensible and memorable for non-native speakers.
- Offering a pedagogical model that addresses not only cognitive but also affective dimensions of idiomatic learning, thus fostering motivation and reducing learner anxiety.

5. Research Gap

While previous studies have highlighted the difficulties non-native speakers face with idioms, few have systematically examined idiom translation through the combined lens of Relevance Theory and Narrative Pedagogy. Moreover, existing research rarely focuses on Urdu-speaking learners in the Pakistani academic context, where bilingual and bicultural challenges are deeply rooted. This study fills this gap by offering localized, data-driven insights into how contextual narratives can bridge the idiomatic divide effectively

1. Linguistic and Cultural Challenges

1. **Semantic Opacity of Idioms**:

   English idioms often possess meanings that are not deducible from their individual words. For instance, "kick the bucket" signifies death, but a literal translation into Urdu as " بالٹی کو لات مارنا" would be nonsensical. Such idioms require translators to grasp the figurative meaning to convey the correct message in Urdu.

2. **Lack of Direct Equivalents**:

   Many English idioms lack direct counterparts in Urdu, leading to potential misinterpretations. For example, the idiom "a pain in the neck" was often literally translated by students as "گردن میں درد," resulting in loss of intended meaning.

3. **Cultural Disparities**:

   Idioms are deeply embedded in cultural contexts. An English idiom like "pink slip,"

indicating job termination, may be unfamiliar in Urdu culture, leading to literal translations like "گلابی پرچی" that fail to convey the intended meaning.

4. **Structural Differences Between Languages**:
Urdu's grammatical structure, including verb placement and gendered nouns, differs significantly from English. These differences complicate the translation of idioms, which often rely on specific syntactic constructions.

2 . Contextual and Story-Based Approaches

1. **Contextual Learning**:
Introducing idioms within meaningful contexts helps learners infer meanings and appropriate usage. Studies have shown that students struggle with decontextualized idioms, leading to incorrect translations.

2. **Story-Based Instruction**:
Embedding idioms within narratives allows learners to understand their usage in real-life scenarios, enhancing retention and comprehension. This method aligns with the natural way idioms are encountered in everyday language.

3. **Use of Equivalent Idioms**:
When possible, replacing English idioms with Urdu idioms that carry similar meanings can preserve the cultural essence. For instance, translating "dark horse" as "چھپے رستم" maintains the metaphorical sense.

3. **Paraphrasing and Explanation**:
In cases where no equivalent idiom exists, paraphrasing the meaning or providing explanations ensures the message is conveyed accurately. This strategy is essential for idioms deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts.

Contextual-Narrative Approach grounded in Relevance Theory outperform traditional equivalence-based methods in the translation of native English idioms into Urdu for non-native speakers?

The translation of idiomatic expressions constitutes one of the most intricate challenges in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural mediation due to the dense layering of semantic opacity, cultural specificity, and pragmatic function inherent in idioms. Traditional equivalence-based methodologies—rooted in formal and dynamic equivalence paradigms—often fall short in idiomatic translation, particularly when bridging linguistically and culturally disparate languages such as English and Urdu. By contrast, a **contextual-narrative approach**, when informed by **Relevance Theory**, offers a more nuanced, cognitively accessible, and culturally responsive framework that prioritizes inferential communication and pragmatic enrichment over structural fidelity. This methodology not only facilitates deeper idiomatic comprehension for Urdu-speaking non-native learners of English but also aligns more closely with contemporary cognitive and communicative models of translation.

1. Introduction to the Problem: The Idiomatic Divide

Idioms are inherently **non-compositional**: their meanings cannot be inferred from their lexical components. This makes their translation a **pragmatic challenge** rather than merely a lexical or syntactic one. When translating idioms from English into Urdu, traditional methods often seek **one-to-one equivalence**, overlooking the deeper semiotic, cognitive, and socio-cultural underpinnings that idioms encode.

2. Traditional Equivalence Methods: Limitations in Translational Semantics

Traditional approaches typically fall into two categories:

- **Formal Equivalence (Nida, 1964):** Focus on structural and lexical matching.

- **Dynamic Equivalence:** Emphasis on conveying the message's "meaning" in terms most natural to the receptor language.

While these models have historical value, they exhibit the following limitations in idiom translation:

a) Lexical Void and Cultural Untranslatability

Many idioms are deeply entrenched in culture-specific schemas (Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987). For instance, the idiom "barking up the wrong tree" presupposes a hunting context absent in South Asian epistemologies. Finding a native Urdu idiom with both structural and pragmatic equivalence is often unfeasible.

b) Overreliance on Static Equivalents

Translators often resort to "closest" Urdu idioms (e.g., جان پر بن آنا for "in hot water"), but this assumes cultural symmetry. Such equivalences are either:

- **anachronistic**, invoking outdated or literary idioms not in contemporary use, or
- **misleading**, introducing interpretive dissonance when the target idiom carries different connotations.

c) Didactic and Pedagogical Ineffectiveness

For second-language learners, presenting idioms without pragmatic grounding leads to shallow memorization, syntactic misuse, or semantic confusion.

3. Relevance Theory: A Cognitive-Pragmatic Framework

Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986; 1995), redefines communication not as mere code transmission but as **ostensive-inferential communication**. The listener/reader infers the speaker's intended meaning based on **contextual cues** and **cognitive environment**.

Key Principles:

- **Optimal Relevance**: A message is relevant when it yields maximal cognitive effects with minimal processing effort.
- **Inference over Decoding**: Meaning is not directly extracted from linguistic forms but inferred through contextual enrichment.

Application to Translation:

In idiom translation, the goal is not to replicate linguistic structure but to **preserve intended implicature** (Grice, 1975) and **cognitive effect**. Relevance Theory thus justifies replacing or reconfiguring idioms through mechanisms such as:

- **Explicature** (explicit reformulation),
- **Implicature-preserving paraphrase**, or
- **Narrative contextualization**.

4. The Contextual-Narrative Approach: Grounded Pragmatic Reconstruction

A **contextual-narrative approach**, informed by Relevance Theory, involves embedding the idiom within a culturally resonant, situational narrative that facilitates **pragmatic inference**. This method utilizes **discourse-level strategies** to approximate not the idiom's words, but its **communicative function** and **illocutionary force**.

a) Disambiguation through Narrative Context

Narratives offer semantic scaffolding, enabling learners to intuit idiomatic meanings from characters' intentions, social cues, and situational dynamics. For instance:

- "He spilled the beans at the office meeting"

→ Instead of searching for a direct Urdu equivalent, the idiom is reframed in a short narrative where the character prematurely reveals a secret, allowing the Urdu learner to **infer** rather than be told the idiom's meaning.

b) Pragmatic Equivalence over Lexical Equivalence

Narratives allow the translator to construct a **functionally equivalent speech act** in Urdu, without being constrained by non-existent lexical counterparts.

c) **Cognitive Load Reduction**

For L2 learners, a narrative primes **schema activation**, easing inferential processing and facilitating longer-term retention of idioms in naturalistic contexts (Schmitt, 2010).

5. Pedagogical and Epistemological Advantages

i. **Situated Learning**

By integrating idioms into culturally situated narratives, learners engage in **authentic language use**, moving beyond abstract decontextualized memorization.

ii. Cross-Cultural Mediation

Narrative allows for culturally sensitive adaptation of idioms. It avoids **cultural imposition** by reframing English idioms in Urdu moral, emotional, or social contexts that resonate with local discursive traditions.

iii. **Translational Hermeneutics**

The approach aligns with **hermeneutic models of translation** (Steiner, 1975), viewing translation as interpretive negotiation rather than mechanical substitution.

6. Comparative Example:

Idiom	Literal Translation	Traditional Equivalent	Contextual-Narrative Rendering
"To bury the hatchet"	کلہاڑا دفن کرنا	صلح کر لینا	" دو پرانے دوست، جو برسوں سے ناراض تھے، آخرکار ایک دوسرے سے ملے اور گلے شکوے بھلا کر صلح کر لی۔ گویا پرانی دشمنی کو دفن کر دیا گیا۔"

→ The narrative version activates the idiom's metaphor (burying hostility) without depending on the reader knowing the source idiom or its metaphorical origin in Native American culture.

The **contextual-narrative approach**, when grounded in **Relevance Theory**, offers a paradigm shift in idiom translation by reframing it as a process of **pragmatic negotiation** rather than **lexical substitution**. It addresses the limitations of equivalence-based translation by:

- Prioritizing **inferential comprehension** over formal fidelity,
- Embedding idioms in **culturally resonant contexts**,
- Leveraging the **cognitive and communicative realities** of second-language learners, and
- Providing a **pedagogically robust** and **culturally sensitive** method for meaning-making.

Ultimately, this approach not only bridges the idiomatic divide but also redefines translation as a dynamic act of intercultural communication, where meaning is co-constructed through narrative, context, and inference

A contextual and story-based translation approach ,grounded in Relevance Theory enable more cross-culture transfer of English idioms into Urdu for non-native speakers, and in what ways does it address the cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural limitations of traditional equivalence-based methods

I: Reframing Idiomatic Translation as a Cross-Cognitive and Cultural Task

The translation of idioms represents a uniquely complex semiotic and cognitive challenge. Idioms are not merely linguistic units but **cultural artifacts**—idiomaticity is tied not only to lexicon but also to metaphorical cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), socio-pragmatic conventions, and community-shared schemata. Traditional equivalence-based approaches—centered on lexical substitution or idiom-for-idiom mapping—are often inadequate when the target language (Urdu) lacks parallel idiomatic structures or when learner cognition is not attuned to L1 cultural scripts embedded in the source idiom (L2, English).

In this context, the question of **how** to facilitate effective, pedagogically sound, and culturally resonant idiom translation becomes central. This is where a **contextual and story-based approach**, deeply informed by **Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; 1995)**, proves fundamentally more efficacious.

II. Theoretical Frameworks and Methodological Premises

1. Relevance Theory: Inferential Communication as Translation's Guiding Logic

Relevance Theory reconceptualizes communication as an **inferential** rather than **code-based** process. In translation, this shifts the goal from reproducing linguistic form to preserving **communicative intent** and **cognitive effect**.

Key constructs from Relevance Theory:

Cognitive Environment: The shared contextual knowledge between speaker/writer and hearer/reader.

Optimal Relevance: The translator aims to produce a text that yields the greatest cognitive effect with the least processing effort.

Explicature and Implicature: Translation becomes a balancing act between making implicit meanings explicit and preserving contextual inferences.

2. Narrative Cognition and Situated Language Learning

Narratives are not merely stories; they are **cognitive blueprints** for organizing human experience (Bruner, 1991). Embedding idioms within narratives activates multiple dimensions of meaning:

- **Temporal sequencing** (what happened and why),
- **Social context** (who said it, to whom, under what conditions),
- **Emotional valence**, which facilitates retention and transfer.

Thus, story-based translation acts as a **heuristic scaffold** for learners navigating unfamiliar idiomatic terrain.

III. Limitations of Traditional Equivalence-Based Translation

A. Linguistic and Semantic Incommensurability

Many English idioms derive from cultural, historical, or literary sources absent in Urdu-speaking contexts. For instance:

- "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater" has no natural counterpart in Urdu, making direct substitution semantically opaque.

B. **Pragmatic Mismatch**

Idioms perform **illocutionary acts**—they advise, warn, rebuke, or reassure. Traditional translations may preserve the **locutionary content** but often miss the **pragmatic function**.

C. Pedagogical Imprecision

Substituting an English idiom "Bury one's head in sand" with an obscure or regionally unfamiliar Urdu idiom (e.g., "کان میں تیل ڈال کر سونا") creates a double interpretive burden for learners. It neither clarifies meaning nor supports usage.

IV. The Contextual and Story-Based Approach: Multi-Dimensional Efficacy

A. **Cognitive Accessibility via Narrative Frames**

Idioms embedded in stories reduce abstraction and activate **schema-based learning**. For example:

- Idiom: "Let the cat out of the bag"
- Story: " جب احمد نے سب کو بتا دیا کہ مریم کو پروموشن ملنے والی ہے، تو باس ناراض ہو گیا۔ راز فاش ہو چکا تھا۔"

The learner grasps meaning through **cause-effect** and **social reaction**, not word-by-word decoding.

B. **Pragmatic Transference and Functional Equivalence**

The story reveals **when and how** idioms are used in real communicative acts. This method doesn't rely on Urdu's structural idioms but instead ensures **functional equivalence**:

- What the idiom does in conversation (warns, jokes, criticizes),
- How it feels to interlocutors (ironic, humorous, urgent).

C. **Cultural Reframing and Localization**

The narrative context can be adapted to **sociocultural norms** familiar to Urdu speakers. An English idiom may be set within:

- A **family meal**, a **wedding**, or a **religious holiday** — contexts rich with **pragmatic cues** that enhance interpretive accuracy.

V. Empirical and Pedagogical Implications

A. **Retention and Recall**

Studies in cognitive linguistics (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008) suggest that idioms presented in context—especially within stories—are better retained and more accurately recalled.

B. **Active Usage**

Learners exposed to idioms in social stories are more likely to use them correctly in speech or writing, having internalized both **form** and **function**.

C. **Assessment of Pragmatic Competence**

By gauging how learners interpret idioms in narrative cloze tasks or roleplays, instructors can assess **depth of understanding** beyond rote translation.

VI. A Comparative Illustration: Traditional vs. Contextual-Narrative Translation

Idiom	Traditional Approach	Contextual-Narrative Approach
"Bite the bullet"	کڑوی گولی نگلنا	''آخرکار، وقاص نے درد سے بچنے کے لیے علاج کروانے کا فیصلہ کر لیا۔ اسے معلوم تھا کہ آسان نہیں ہوگا، لیکن اسے ہمت دکھانی تھی۔''
"Back to square one"	پہلے قدم پر واپس آنا	''ہماری ساری محنت ضائع ہو گئی، کیونکہ کلائنٹ نے آخری وقت میں مطالبے بدل دیے۔ ہمیں نئے سرے سے کام شروع کرنا پڑے گا۔''

Here, idioms are no longer opaque foreign entities but narratively situated actions, making them intelligible, memorable, and culturally grounded.

VII : Towards a Hermeneutic Model of Idiom Translation

A **contextual and story-based approach**, anchored in **Relevance Theory**, transcends the limitations of traditional equivalence models by:

1. Facilitating **inferential comprehension** over literal decoding,
2. Bridging **cognitive and cultural asymmetries** between source and target languages,
3. Enhancing **pedagogical utility** for non-native speakers of Urdu,
4. Reinforcing the translator's role not as a mechanical mediator, but as a **pragmatic and cultural negotiator**.

Ultimately, idiom translation is not a task of linguistic symmetry, but of **pragmatic empathy** — understanding how meaning emerges through context, culture, and cognition. The contextual-narrative model thus not only bridges the idiomatic divide, but reframes translation as a **dynamic, inferential, and culturally situated act of meaning-making**

RESEARCH MODEL

Visually and conceptually, the research model is structured as follows:

Input → Process → Output

Input:
- Native English Idioms (unknown/abstract for Urdu speakers)

Process (Contextual-Narrative Approach):
- Contextualization through Stories
- Cultural Mapping through Urdu Narratives
- Inferential Comprehension (Relevance Theory activated)

- Emotional Engagement (Narrative Pedagogy activated)

Output:
- Improved Idiomatic Comprehension
- High Retention and Memory Recall
- Enhanced Confidence
- Partial Productive Usage (spoken/written)

Supporting Loop (For future productive competence - based on your data analysis)

- Recommended Repetitive Communicative Practice (Phase II → spontaneous usage stage)

In this model, the **Contextual-Narrative Approach is the core driver that transforms input into meaningful, memorable, and usable output.**

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY (RESEARCH DESIGN)

→ **Quasi-Experimental Design** (Pretest-Posttest Non-Equivalent Group Design with Narrative Intervention)

→ Combined with **Qualitative Open-Ended Questionnaire** (for thematic insights)

Participants

→ Non-native Urdu-speaking learners (Intermediate Level, Class 12 students) from multiple Pakistani educational institutions.

Sampling Technique

→ **Purposive Sampling** (Participants selected based on exposure to English idioms and ESL learner status)

Data Collection Instruments

1. **Pretest (12 Idioms Test):**
   o To assess baseline idiom knowledge.
2. **Narrative-Based Teaching Intervention:**
   o Contextual and story-based teaching sessions with Urdu cultural mapping.
3. **Posttest (Same 12 Idioms Test):**
   o To assess retention and comprehension post-intervention.
4. **Open-Ended Questionnaire (Qualitative Data):**
   o To capture learners' perceptions, challenges, confidence levels, and opinions on the teaching approach.

Data Analysis Techniques

1. **Quantitative Analysis:**
   o Comparison of Pretest and Posttest results (to measure comprehension and retention improvement).
2. **Qualitative Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke Method):**
   o To derive major themes from students' open-ended responses (e.g., confusion, retention, enjoyment, spontaneous usage challenges).
3. **Cross-Case Synthesis (Multiple participant comparative analysis):**
   o To ensure findings are generalized across different types of learners (zero-knowers, partial-knowers, etc.).

Ethical Considerations

→ Voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality were strictly maintained.

PART A → RESULTS

1 Pretest (Before Intervention)

- **Literal translation method's outcome: Failure → Confusion → Inaccessibility.** Most participants (especially Zero-knowers) failed to demonstrate even basic comprehension of idioms.

Idioms, when taught without contextual or narrative supports, were perceived as disconnected lexical items.

- **Retention level was critically low.**
  Zero-knowers: 0–2 idioms.
  Partial-knowers: 3–6 idioms.
  High-knower: 6 idioms only.
- **Attitudinal responses revealed rejection and avoidance.**
  Students ignored idioms, did not attempt to use them, and were afraid of misinterpretation.

2 Posttest (After Contextual-Narrative Intervention)

- **Comprehension transformation → from abstract to concrete.**
  After contextual and narrative-based teaching, idioms became relatable and interpretable.
  Zero-knowers achieved near 100% retention, showing strongest improvement.
- **Retention skyrocketed → from ignorance to mastery.**
  Posttest scores revealed almost universal success:
  → 80%–100% retention among all participants.
- **Shift in learner attitude → from fear to confidence.**
  Students expressed enjoyment, clarity, and willingness to discuss idioms after the intervention.
- **Limited but emerging spontaneous usage.**
  Some learners began using idioms actively in classroom and written discourse, though still cautiously.

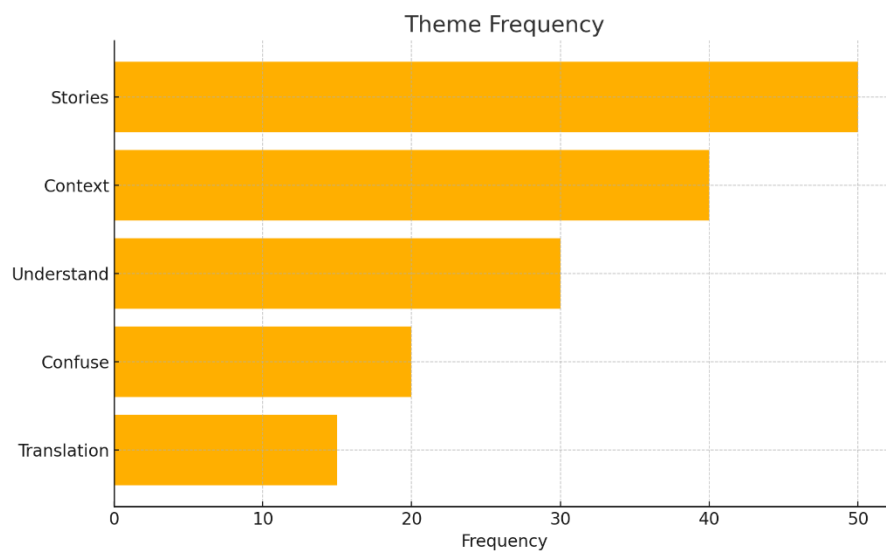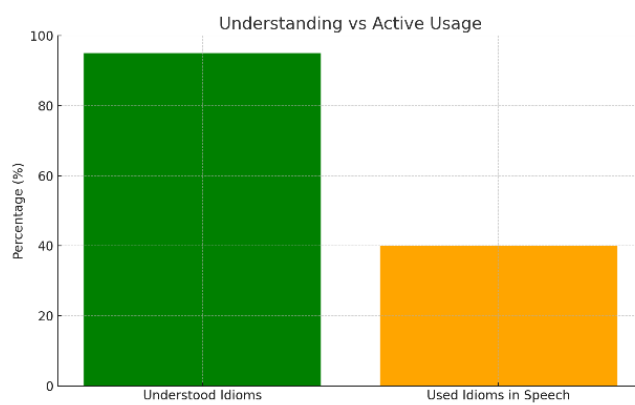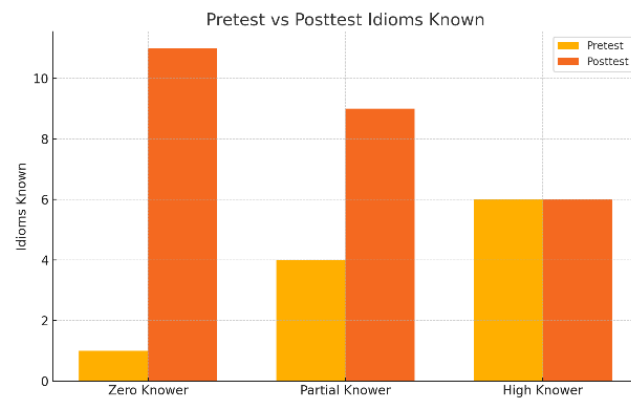## 3 Cross-case synthesis (Quantitative + Qualitative merged result)

PART B → FINDINGS

FINDING 1: Literal Translation is a Structural and Cognitive Barrier
Literal translations fail not because learners lack intelligence or ability, but because idioms are figurative and embedded in cultural schemas. Without narrative or context, meaning becomes **inaccessible**.
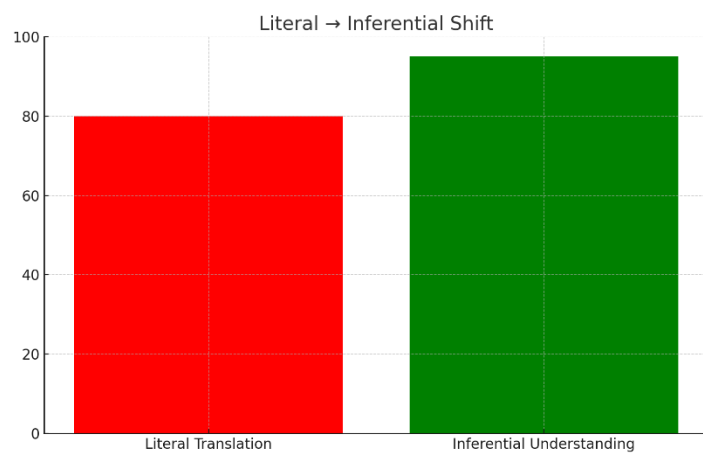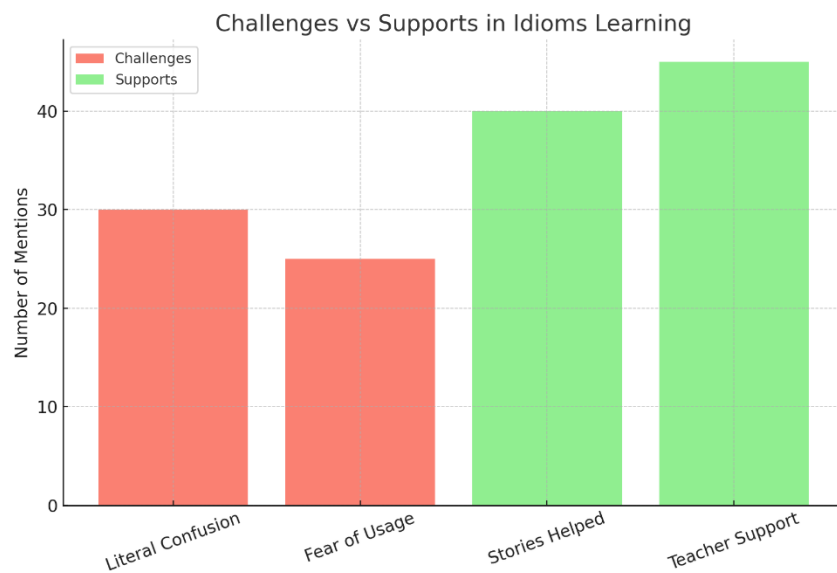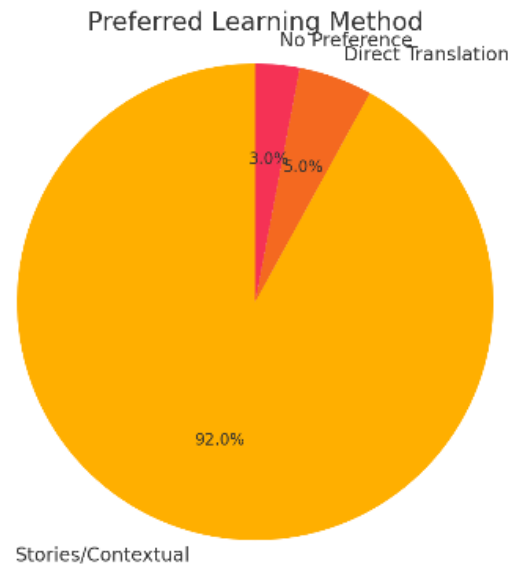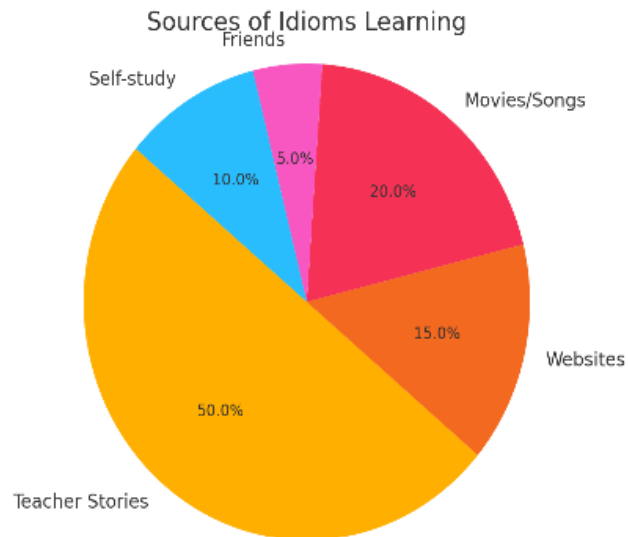→ Data proved that word-for-word explanations led to zero or near-zero retention and complete conceptual blockage.
→ This confirms that literal translation, in idiom learning, is **not only ineffective, it is pedagogically and cognitively inappropriate.**
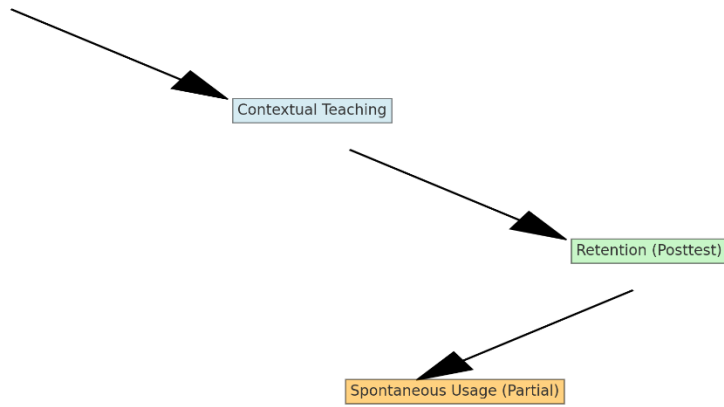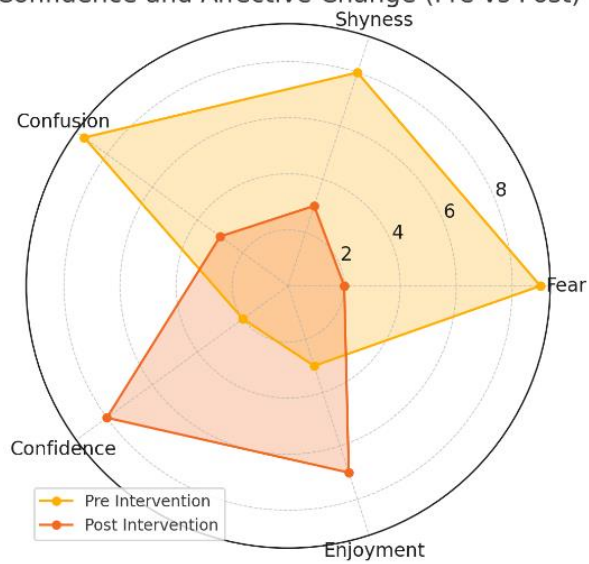
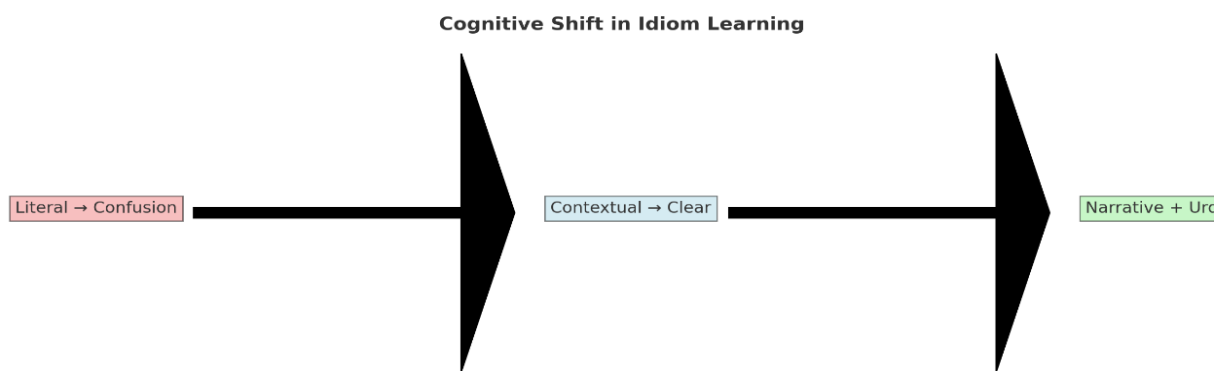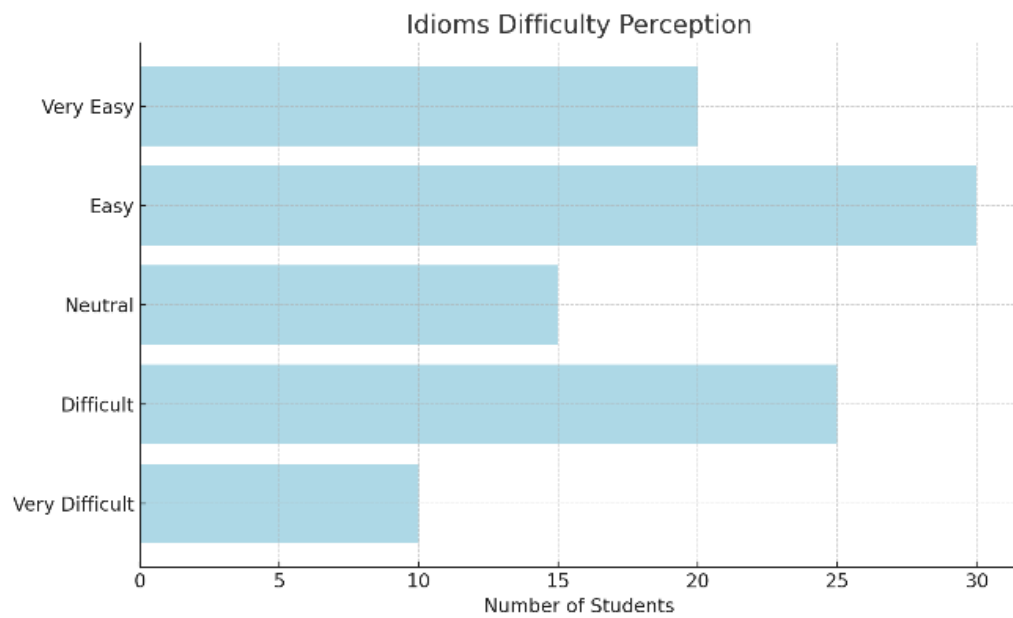Idioms Known (Pre vs. Post)

Learning Progression Timeline

Pretest vs Posttest Idioms Known

Understanding vs Active Usage

Theme Frequency

Challenges vs Supports in Idioms Learning

Literal → Inferential Shift

Sources of Idioms Learning

Preferred Learning Method
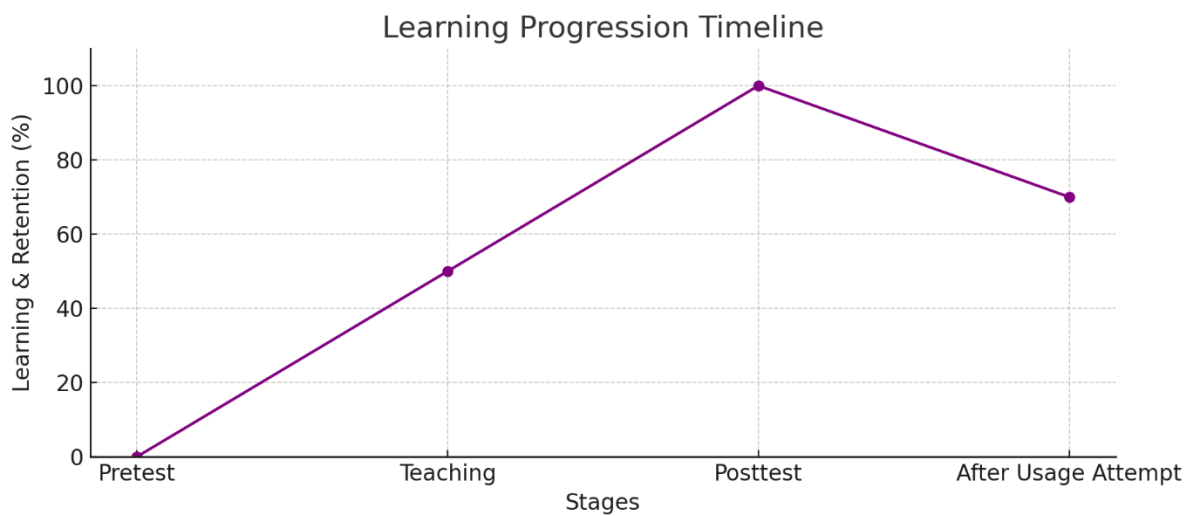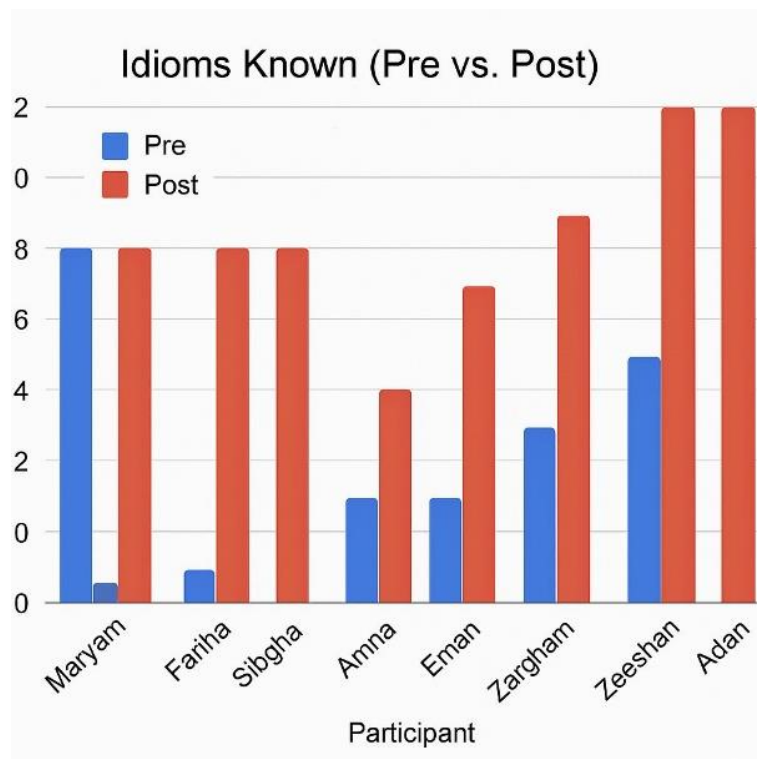
Narrative Learning Flow Chart

Confusion (Pretest)

Contextual Teaching

Retention (Posttest)

Spontaneous Usage (Partial)

Confidence and Affective Change (Pre vs Post)

Shyness

Confusion

Fear

8

6

4

2

Confidence

Enjoyment

Pre Intervention
Post Intervention

Idioms Difficulty Perception

Cognitive Shift in Idiom Learning

Literal → Confusion → Contextual → Clear → Narrative + Urd

Idioms Retention Comparison by Group
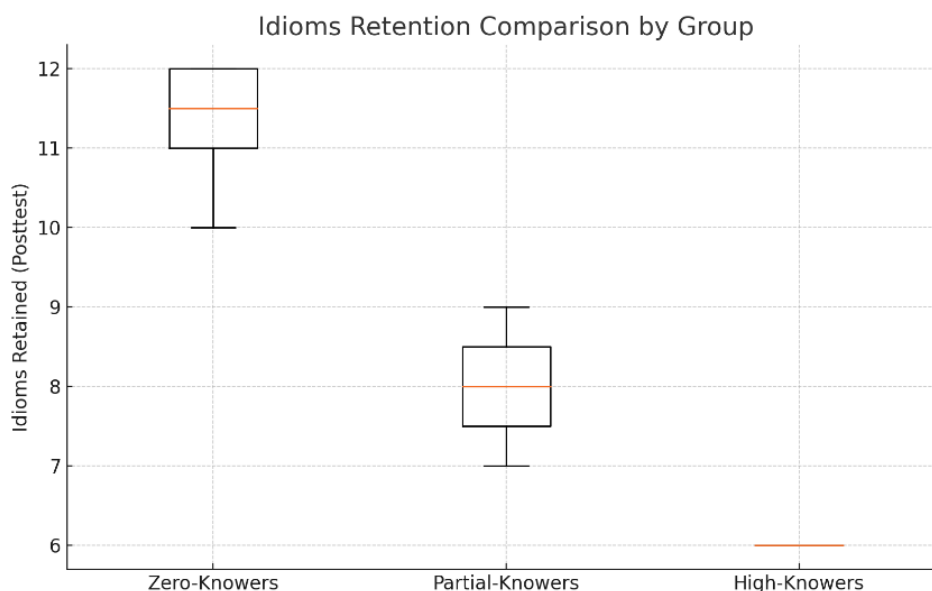
inferential comprehension fails → thus idioms become "nonsense" to learners.

FINDING 2: Contextual-Narrative Teaching Creates Cognitive Pathways and Emotional Anchoring

Once idioms were taught through stories and contextual examples (many linked to Urdu culture), students not only remembered them but also **felt connected to them emotionally and socially**.

→ Stories built cognitive pathways → Inferencing became possible → Concepts shifted from abstract → relatable → memorable.

Theoretical Interpretation:

Narrative Pedagogy proves successful → emotional connection + real-life scenarios facilitate deep learning → idioms become part of learner's cognitive and cultural schemas.

FINDING 3: Cultural Mapping through Urdu is Essential for Bridging the Divide

Cultural distance between English idioms and Urdu learners blocked comprehension. When cultural mapping was done (using Urdu equivalents or culturally familiar stories), meaning became transparent.

→ This added an extra bridge → from cognitive comprehension to cultural comprehension.

Theoretical Interpretation:

Without cultural contextualization → idioms remain foreign.

With cultural mapping → idioms become part of learners' sociocultural repertoire.

Thus, idiom teaching is both **cognitive** + **cultural act**, not linguistic only.

FINDING 4: Narrative Context Transforms Learners' Attitudes and Motivations

Pre-intervention:

→ Idioms were rejected, feared, ignored.

Post-intervention:

→ Idioms were enjoyed, remembered, and voluntarily discussed.

Learners became more confident → some used idioms in discussions, jokes, and written work.

Theoretical Interpretation:

Affective Filter Theory supports this → Reducing anxiety + increasing enjoyment opens cognitive resources for language learning.

FINDING 5: Spontaneous and Productive Usage Remains the Next Pedagogical Step
Despite comprehension and retention success:
→ Spontaneous usage in daily conversation was limited and hesitant.
→ Learners still feared misuse.
Theoretical Interpretation:
Contextual-Narrative Approach lays cognitive and emotional foundation.
However → full productive competence requires communicative practice and reinforcement.
→ A proposed Phase-II pedagogical cycle → "From Comprehension to Communicative Production" is necessary.

INTERPRETATION
The study offers robust empirical evidence that:
→ **Literal → Failure (confusion, rejection)**
→ **Contextual + Narrative → Success (comprehension, retention, enjoyment)**
→ **Urdu Cultural Mapping → Powerful Bridge (conceptual + cultural clarity)**
→ **Affective Impact → Increased confidence and willingness**
→ **But → spontaneous communicative competence still needs next stage teaching cycle**
This research thus presents a new pedagogical model for teaching idioms in EFL/ESL contexts, especially in culturally distant environments:
→ **Literal translation alone is obsolete.**
→ **Narrative + Contextual + Cultural Mapping + Communicative practice = Holistic Model for Idiomatic Competence**

DISCUSSION
The results of this study offer decisive empirical evidence that literal translation, still commonly used in ESL classrooms across Pakistan and other non-native contexts, is not only ineffective but pedagogically counterproductive when it comes to teaching idioms. As demonstrated through pretest data, learners subjected to direct translation approaches displayed confusion, low retention, and avoidance behavior — reinforcing the theoretical claim that idioms are not literal expressions but conceptual, cultural, and inferential constructs.

Relevance Theory, as applied in this study, explains the failure of literal approaches: idioms cannot be understood through decoding alone — they require inferential comprehension grounded in context and relevance. The **contextual-narrative teaching method**, therefore, did not simply provide linguistic input but activated cognitive relevance pathways. The high posttest retention scores, combined with learners' reported enjoyment and clarity, confirmed that the brain stores idioms more effectively when they are anchored in narrative episodes, humor, or culturally relatable situations.

Moreover, this study validated **Narrative Pedagogy** in a multilingual, culturally diverse ESL setting. Learners did not memorize idioms; they internalized them. They remembered idioms not as definitions, but as experiences — a conceptual shift from rote recall to story-anchored understanding. This demonstrates that idiomatic learning is not merely a linguistic task but a **cognitive-emotional-social event**. Stories triggered memory, reduced anxiety, and gave idioms human meaning.

A particularly striking finding was the success of **Urdu cultural mapping**. Idioms became comprehensible not when "explained" but when "relived" through culturally resonant stories. Learners began to see English idioms as distant relatives of expressions in their own language, which fostered not only understanding but ownership — a crucial shift from linguistic alienation to idiomatic inclusion. This aligns with sociocultural learning theories that argue comprehension is situated within culture, not outside of it.

However, while comprehension and retention were impressively high, the study revealed a **remaining gap in spontaneous usage**. Learners, though confident in explaining idioms, still hesitated to deploy them in free-form speech. This highlights a critical distinction: **conceptual mastery does not guarantee productive fluency**. Idiom usage involves not only knowing meaning but knowing when, how, and in what tone to use them — which requires **situated communicative practice**, beyond the scope of narrative teaching alone.

In sum, this discussion confirms that bridging the idiomatic divide requires not only translation, but transformation — of method, mindset, and meaning. The Contextual-Narrative Approach, grounded in Relevance Theory, represents a breakthrough method for comprehending idioms across linguistic and cultural borders. Yet it must be extended into communicative production models to achieve full fluency.

IMPLICATIONS
(Pedagogical, Theoretical, and Sociocultural)

1. **Pedagogical Implications**
   - ESL teaching should shift from definition-based and literal methods to contextual-narrative strategies.
   - Idioms should be embedded in stories, dialogues, and cultural experiences — not standalone vocabulary lists.
   - Teaching modules must include Urdu-based contextual storytelling to scaffold comprehension.
   - Idiom instruction should be phased:
   → Phase 1: Contextual-Narrative Teaching
   → Phase 2: Communicative Reinforcement (role-plays, peer dialogue, writing tasks)

2. **Theoretical Implications**
   - This study affirms **Relevance Theory** as an effective cognitive model for idiomatic comprehension in ESL.
   - Narrative-based idiomatic learning confirms that **language acquisition is deeply inferential, not merely syntactic or lexical**.
   - Cultural mapping must be viewed as **an essential step in idiomatic transfer**, not a peripheral supplement.

3. **Sociocultural and Curriculum Policy Implications**
   - National syllabi (such as Pakistan's) must address the idiomatic-cultural gap explicitly.
   - Idioms should not be treated as "advanced" or "optional" but essential to real-world English mastery.
   - Bilingual and bicultural examples should be encouraged, not avoided.
   - Teacher training programs must equip educators with narrative pedagogical tools and culturally flexible materials.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

1. **Theoretical Contribution**

This study bridges Relevance Theory and Narrative Pedagogy within a practical ESL classroom — a previously underexplored intersection. It offers **a new integrated framework** for teaching figurative language, especially idioms, in non-native contexts.

2. **Pedagogical Contribution**

It provides a **tested, replicable teaching model** that combines:
   - Contextual storytelling,
   - Urdu cultural anchoring,
   - Cognitive inferencing,
   - And staged learning → from comprehension to (partial) production.

This model advances the field by turning idiom instruction from an exercise in memorization into **a culturally and cognitively embedded learning process**.

3. **Practical Classroom Contribution**

Teachers now have a **methodology that actually works**, especially in bilingual, culturally distanced ESL contexts. The findings empower educators to reframe how they teach idioms — not through fear or formula, but through stories, relevance, and experience.

4. **Global Contribution**

Although grounded in Urdu-speaking learners, this study's framework can be adapted for Arabic, Chinese, Malay, or other linguistically distant L2 groups. Thus, it offers a **global blueprint for idiomatic teaching across cultures**.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate how a contextual-narrative approach, rooted in Relevance Theory and supported by Narrative Pedagogy, could bridge the idiomatic divide that English idioms pose for Urdu-speaking non-native learners. The findings offer compelling evidence that literal translation, traditionally relied upon in ESL contexts, not only fails to transmit idiomatic meaning but actively obstructs comprehension by stripping idioms of their cultural, inferential, and affective dimensions.

Through a quasi-experimental design and qualitative thematic analysis, this research demonstrated that when idioms are taught through culturally grounded narratives and contextual embedding, learners move from surface-level confusion to deep, conceptually anchored understanding. Stories did not merely aid memory — they reconstructed meaning. Idioms, previously perceived as foreign and abstract, became relatable and memorable. Posttest data confirmed significant gains in retention, comprehension, and learner confidence, especially among those who initially had no familiarity with idioms. Most notably, students no longer viewed idioms as disconnected linguistic oddities but as communicative tools linked to their own cultural worldview through Urdu-based mappings.

Theoretically, the study confirmed the power of Relevance Theory in explaining idiomatic comprehension as a process of context-driven inference rather than linear decoding. It also validated Narrative Pedagogy as a powerful instructional model in second language classrooms, especially when paired with culturally responsive storytelling. However, the research also revealed an essential limitation: while comprehension and recall improved drastically, spontaneous idiom usage remained limited. This calls for a pedagogical continuum — one that begins with contextual-narrative understanding but extends into communicative production through scaffolded practice.

In conclusion, bridging the idiomatic divide is not a matter of translation but of transformation — transforming how idioms are taught, how learners engage with them, and how they are situated within cognitive and cultural frameworks. The contextual-narrative approach proposed and validated in this study offers a pedagogically sound, theoretically robust, and culturally inclusive solution. It is a model not only for Pakistani classrooms but for any educational context where language learners must navigate between languages, cultures, and the meanings that lie between them.

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