

# Analyzing Challenges in English Text Reading Comprehension: The Roles of Polysemy, Phonetics, and Idioms

Ziqi Liu

Huaibei Institute of Technology, Huaibei 235000, China

## Abstract

This paper examines the challenges faced by upper-intermediate English learners when reading texts, emphasizing difficulties in language knowledge that can disrupt comprehension. It provides a detailed analysis of the impact of understanding polysemy and idioms on cognition and briefly discusses the influence of L1 on pronunciation. The paper suggests that improving pragmatic competence and developing a greater awareness of pragmatics are key to understanding intended meanings. Overall, it concludes that mastering all aspects of language is essential for students to enhance their language skills.

## Keywords

**Polysemy; Phonetics; Idiom; Pragmatic Competence.**

## 1. Introduction

This paper concentrates on the various challenges that learners of English at the upper-intermediate level frequently encounter when they are engaged in reading a text. It initiates the discussion by highlighting the difficulties that students may confront in the realms of polysemy, which refers to words that have multiple meanings, and phonetics, which is the study of sounds in speech. Following this, the paper delves into the reasons behind the challenges that idiomatic expressions pose for students, examining why these phrases that have a figurative meaning beyond the literal interpretation can be particularly troublesome. Subsequently, it investigates the obstacles that students face in the area of pragmatics, which is concerned with the practical use of language in social contexts, and how this can impede their comprehension and effective communication. The paper concludes with a summary of the key points discussed, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of the difficulties faced by upper-intermediate English learners when reading texts.

## 2. Vocabulary Issues (Lexical and Phonetics)

The first issue observed is polysemy which belongs to the Lexical issue. Armstrong (2005) claimed that EFL learners did worse at guessing the meaning of polysemy words. To illustrate this point, the examples of polysemy (shown and highlighted below) are extracted below.

“There’s a freshness to her work that represents a new kind of **voice**,” says Gan Uyeda, a director at Kim’s Los Angeles gallery, Francois Ghebaly.↵

She criticized Fox Sports’ decision to only **air** a few seconds of her performance as a failure of accessibility, to a sea of positive responses.↵

**Figure 1.** Examples of Polysemy

Polysemy, as defined by Ravin & Leacock (2000), meant a word instead of having only one fixed meaning, had more than one meaning. For the first example, when the context is invisible, it is natural for the learner to translate voice as the sound that is made when people speak, for the second example, it is also really inappropriate to translate air into the gases that people rely on to live. Therefore, to understand the real meaning of these confusing words in the text (voice here means the expression of an opinion, the air here means to broadcast something through the electronic messaging equipment), it is vital for the student to have a clear awareness of polysemy. Based on the claim of Liu (2013) pointed out that a polysemy word's various meanings were frequently derived from its core meaning while the extra meanings were derived from it. It is true that although polysemy words have many meanings, most of them are essentially related.

The above approach, however, has failed to address the difficulty for the student to deal with polysemy. There is evidence that it is really difficult for the student to have a full awareness of all the polysemy words' core meanings, since the large number of polysemy in English vocabulary. Skoufaki & Petrić (2021) pointed out that in The Academic Vocabulary List, 34.38% of the words are polysemes and the meaning of these words still increased with the using frequency. Furthermore, even when learners turn to dictionaries to find the meanings of polysemy words, it is still difficult to find a proper meaning in a particular context. Parent (2009) claimed that unless the student fully understood the text's context, the student would not know which of the meanings that showed in the dictionary were appropriate. Thus, it is reasonable to say that without a full understanding of the context, students' awareness of polysemy words can be greatly affected. However, a strange situation has been mentioned by Laufer (1997) unlike Parent claim that even when students found that the word had different meanings in the context of the text, students still favoured its primary meaning to understand it. The main reason, that causes this situation, concluded by Alnamer (2017), was that in many EFL classes, teachers paid little attention to the polysemy words and only taught the forms and main meanings of the word. As a result, the importance of teaching polysemy can be shown from these kinds of phenomena. It warns that when students are not sufficiently alerted by the teacher of the occurrence of polysemy in the text, they will face great difficulty.

The second issue is phonetics. Due to the negative transfer from the first language (L1) to English, many learners cannot accurately speak some phonetic symbols. Chen et al. (2001) stated that Asian language learners were prone to speak English pronunciation inaccurately. To illustrate this point, the examples show below.

At the Queens Museum, artist Christine Sun Kim's newly completed mural features the words TIME OWES ME **REST** AGAIN, scrawled in black, spanning a **crisp** white wall, 40ft high and 100ft wide. The familiar action lines you would recognize from comic books set the words in motion: "TIME" hops along a **pair** of bouncing curves; "OWES" zips down to the floor with

**Figure 2.** Example of Phonetics

First, it is a common problem for the Japanese to distinguish between /r/ and /l/. Taking the /rest/ and /krisp/ as an example, the Japanese students may speak them as /lest/ and /klisp/. According to Aoyama et al. (2004), the reason was the assimilation of English [l] into a single Japanese /r/ sound. As a result, when they meet the /r/ sound they naturally pronounce the /l/ sound. Second, for the Chinese students, especially north Chinese, it is hard for them to pronounce some diphthongs. For example, the sound of /peə(r)/ for many Chinses students becomes /pɪə(r)/. The reason concluded by Liang (2014) was because /eə/ was heavily influenced by the /ei/ sound in northern Chinese dialects' accents. Finally, it is not easy for Korean students to pronounce /ɔ:/, such as /skrɔ:l/. Tench (2003) explained that the long vowel /ɔ:/ did not have a similar tongue position to the long vowel in standard Korean. Overall, the

two different languages have different acoustic and articulatory characteristics (Wang, 1997). Thus, Asian students may face lots of challenges with phonetic sounds.

### 3. Semantic Issue

The following significant problem that students might be confused about is the use of idioms in the text. Thawabteh (2011) stated that idioms could be very confusing to learners, which in turn had a negative impact on their language learning. Through the literature review, there are many different types of reasons which caused a challenge to the learner when faced with the idiom. To further observe these problems, the examples of idioms (shown and highlighted below) are analyzed.

“I wanted to **start off on the right foot**,” she says, recalling the frustration of prior studio visits where “I’ve spent 45 minutes explaining deaf culture to curators and museum directors, leaving the last 15 minutes to talk about my work.”<sup>4</sup>

“I felt like he was really **watching my back**,” Kim recalls. “It saved so much time and energy not having to do all this follow-up and explanation.”<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 3.** Example of Idioms

The idiom, defined by Al-Kadi (2015), was a term that could not be literally translated because its meaning could be influenced by political, historical or sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, Orfan (2020) claimed that an idiom was a group of words whose meaning differed from each word's itself meaning. There is a common point between these two definitions that idiom cannot be simply understood just through words themselves. By observing the first example, it is also true to translate it into its literal meaning, whereas when looking at the whole context it is obviously strange. Similarly, for the second idiom, it is also weird to translate it like someone looking at Kim's back. The real meaning of these two idioms is to start with the right perspective and support someone. One of the main reasons that learners cannot guess from the word itself falls on its nonliteral meaning feature. According to Hussein et al. (2011), students faced great challenges in understanding idioms, as the nonliterary feature of the idioms made it difficult to understand their meaning based on the surface meaning of their constituent words. This is a very tricky issue because even though there is nothing wrong with translating the phrase literally, the students still do not understand its true meaning. Therefore, to know the actual meaning of the idioms, it is necessary for the learner to systematic learn the idiom.

However, it is also very difficult for the teachers to teach idioms due to the different cultures. This is also one of the reasons that made idioms extremely challenging for students. According to Pimenova (2011), for some English idioms, only when learners had a good understanding of the cultural context could they understand their meaning. In other words, it is not enough to understand an idiom with only knowledge of linguistic features. Likewise, Scarino (2010) pointed out that without the support of cultural background understanding, it was hard to understand and acquire idiom. On the other hand, Pimenova (2011) also claimed that when students' first language lack similarity with the target language in the idiom culture could also create difficulties for them in understanding the idiom. It is true that when two languages have some similar points, it is easy for students to remember and master the second language by association with the first language, such as cognate.

Considering this point, the final reason which makes idioms difficult to learn appeared. Tran (2012) pointed out that idiom teaching was not been paid enough attention by the language teachers, let alone the integration of teaching with cultural background knowledge. Furthermore, Mäntylä (2004) pointed out that many teaching materials lacked a section on

teaching idioms in the syllabus. It can be concluded from this point that many students lack exposure to idioms which to a large extent reduced the students' input of idiom knowledge. Therefore, it can be concluded by these factors that idioms do affect students' understanding of the text.

#### 4. Pragmatic Issue

Following is the final issue of pragmatics that may cause trouble to the learners. The point which makes it difficult for students is the intended meaning of a sentence behind its literal meaning. For example, a phrase that at first glance may sound like a compliment but in a particular context can also convey sarcasm. However, students can be compelled by the superficially glamorous wording which fails them to understand the true meaning. To specifically explore this point, the examples of implicated meaning (shown and highlighted below) in the text will be analyzed.

“Humor is such an important part of the work, and I see how she uses it very tactically,” Uyeda adds, describing how drawings like *Shit Hearing People Say to Me* and *Degrees of Deaf Rage* are serious grievances tempered by jokes. The former is a pie chart of misguided commentary that Kim’s heard over the years: “**You’re smart for a deaf person**” or “**I’m sorry you can’t hear.**” ↩

**Figure 4.** Examples of Pragmatics

First, it is important to understand the definition of pragmatics because one sentence can contain both semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning. According to Grundy (2013), pragmatics focused on how people’s words were meant behind the literal meaning. By observing and analyzing the two examples above from the pragmatic perspective, it can be concluded that the speaker is ostensibly sincere in the praise and expressing sympathy for the painter. However, the expression is implied to be contemptuous and sarcastic. The actual meaning of these two sentences is how can the work of a deaf painter be compared to the able-bodied painter and your paintings are useless even if they are good because you are deaf. Therefore, to understand these kinds of sentences, it is essential for the learners to have a clear awareness of the intentional meaning behind the literal meaning. Besides, in these two examples, one of the significant reasons which can cause students confusion is that the two statements largely reduced the impact of the face-threatening act (FTA). This is because the sentences themselves still sound polite to the listener, although the real intention is negative. According to Thomas (2014), FTA was an act in which the speakers’ language was insulting or intimidating to others’ public self-image. The observation shows that these two sentences are very euphemistic in the wording of the statement, which shows strongly contrasts with the true intentions. Thus, it is quite tricky for the students to understand the intentional meaning under the influence of polite words. To solve these issues, a good competence in pragmatics is required. Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor (2003) pointed out that students without good pragmatic competence might fail to understand the meaning of the speaker.

However, it is a real challenge for the students to understand the pragmatic meaning when facing the texts because the language teacher seldomly teaches pragmatic competence in the classroom. Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor (2003) mentioned that despite the importance of pragmatics, it did not been paid a lot of attention in language education. The reason explained by Jeon & Kaya (2006) was due to the feature of dispersion and sensitivity to context, it was difficult to treat pragmatics as a specific teaching objective. This is a tricky point, especially for the nature of contextual variability, because the context in which the speaker expresses himself varies according to social status, age and gender. As a result, even when teachers want to teach

about the knowledge of pragmatics, it is difficult to cover all situations. Additionally, Thawabteh (2011) concluded that, for decades, the research conducted by pragmatics had focused on politeness and appropriateness. However, as in the example given above, the meaning of a sentence is not only complimentary and polite. Therefore, it is extremely likely that students' perceptions will be skewed which leads to a failed understanding.

Besides, Thawabteh (2011) also proposed that the competence of pragmatics was to a large extent inextricably linked to cultural competence. This is another great challenge for students, as the same language words may have different pragmatic meanings due to cultural differences. Hinkel (2014) showed that even though speakers of the same language might belong to different cultures, thus different pragmatic meanings appeared. Given the diversity of cultures, it is extremely difficult for students to have an excellent understanding of different cultures let alone complete master them. Therefore, pragmatics is also an important point of knowledge for the students.

## 5. Conclusion

Upon conducting a comprehensive analysis of these four key aspects, it becomes evident that students encounter a multitude of challenges when they are presented with a reading text. These challenges stem from various points of language knowledge, each of which has the potential to lead students astray from their overall comprehension of the text. The essay offered a detailed examination of how the mastery of polysemy, which refers to words with multiple meanings, and idioms, which are expressions with meanings that are not deducible from the literal definitions of the words, impacts students' cognitive processes. Furthermore, the paper also briefly touches upon the influence of L1, or the first language of the learners, on their pronunciation skills. When it comes to the difficulties students face in discerning the intentional meaning behind certain phrases or sentences, the primary strategy recommended is to enhance their pragmatic competence. This involves consciously developing a heightened awareness and understanding of the practical use of language in social contexts. In summary, if students aspire to enhance their language proficiency across the board, it is imperative that they strive to master every facet of the language to the best of their abilities.

## References

- [1] Al-kadi A M T: Towards Idiomatic Competence of Yemeni EFL Undergraduates, *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol.6 (2015) No.3, p.513.
- [2] Ravin Y, Leacock C: Polysemy: An Overview, *Polysemy: Theoretical and Computational Approaches* (2000), p.1-29.
- [3] Liu D: *Describing and Explaining Grammar and Vocabulary in ELT: Key Theories and Effective Practices* (Routledge, UK 2013).
- [4] Skoufaki S, Petrić B: Exploring Polysemy in the Academic Vocabulary List: A Lexicographic Approach, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, Vol.54 (2021), p.101038.
- [5] Parent K: *Polysemy: A Second Language Pedagogical Concern* (2009).
- [6] Laufer B: What's in a Word that Makes It Hard or Easy? Intralexical Factors Affecting the Difficulty of Vocabulary Acquisition, *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy*, Vol. (1997), p.140-155.
- [7] Alnamer S A S: On the Awareness of English Polysemous Words by Arabic-Speaking EFL Learners, *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, Vol.8 (2017) No.2, p.112-121.
- [8] Chen Y, Robb M, Gilbert H, et al: Vowel Production by Mandarin Speakers of English, *Clinical Linguistics & Phonetics*, Vol.15 (2001) No.6, p.427-440.
- [9] Aoyama K, Flege J E, Guion S G, et al: Perceived Phonetic Dissimilarity and L2 Speech Learning: The Case of Japanese/r/and English/l/and/r, *Journal of Phonetics*, Vol.32 (2004) No.2, p.233-250.

- [10] Liang E: Pronunciation of English Consonants and Vowels and Diphthongs of Mandarin-Chinese Speakers, *Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol.8 (2014) No.1, p.62-65.
- [11] Tench P: *Non-Native Speakers Misperceptions of English Vowels and Consonants: Evidence from Korean Adults in UK* (2003).
- [12] Wang X: *The Acquisition of English Vowels by Mandarin ESL Learners: A Study of Production and Perception* (Ph.D., Simon Fraser University, Canada 1997).
- [13] Thawabteh M: Linguistic, Cultural and Technical Problems in English-Arabic Subtitling, *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation*, Vol.5 (2011) No.1, p.24-44.
- [14] Al-kadi A M T: Towards Idiomatic Competence of Yemeni EFL Undergraduates, *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol.6 (2015) No.3, p.513.
- [15] Hussein R F, Khanji R, Makhzoomy K: The Acquisition of Idioms: Transfer or What, *Language & Translation*, Vol.12 (2000), p.23-34.
- [16] Orfan S N: Afghan EFL Students' Difficulties and Strategies in Learning and Understanding English Idioms, *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, Vol.7 (2020) No.1, p.1796228.
- [17] Pimenova N: *Idiom Comprehension Strategies Used by English and Russian Language Learners in a Think-Aloud Study* (2011).
- [18] Scarino A: Assessing Intercultural Capability in Learning Languages: A Renewed Understanding of Language, Culture, Learning, and the Nature of Assessment, *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol.94 (2010) No.2, p.324-329.
- [19] Tran H Q: An Explorative Study of Idiom Teaching for Pre-Service Teachers of English, *English Language Teaching*, Vol.5 (2012) No.12, p.76-86.
- [20] Mäntylä K: *Idioms and Language Users: The Effect of the Characteristics of Idioms on Their Recognition and Interpretation by Native and Non-Native Speakers of English* (Ph.D., Jyväskylän yliopisto, Finland 2004).
- [21] Grundy P: *Doing Pragmatics* (Routledge, UK 2013).
- [22] Thomas J A: *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics* (Routledge, UK 2014).
- [23] Bardovi-Harlig K, Mahan-Taylor R: *Teaching Pragmatics* (US Department of State Office of English Language Programs, USA 2003).
- [24] Jeon E H, Kaya T: Effects of L2 Instruction on Interlanguage Pragmatic Development, *Synthesizing Research on Language Learning and Teaching* (2006), p.165-211.
- [25] Hinkel E: Culture and Pragmatics in Language Teaching and Learning, *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, Vol.4 (2014), p.394-408.