



Beyond Literal Borders: The Impact of Translanguaging on L2 English Idiomatic Competence Among Pashto and Urdu Speakers

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ABSTRACT

Achieving advanced communicative competence in a second language (L2) requires mastery beyond literal vocabulary, extending deep into the nuanced realm of idiomatic and figurative language. This paper investigates the impact of translanguaging practices on the acquisition of L2 English idiomatic expressions among Pashto and Urdu native speakers in the plurilingual educational context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Drawing on data from receptive (Vocabulary Levels Test, C-Test) and productive (Discourse Completion Test, Role Play, Oral Interview) linguistic assessments, this study examines how cross-linguistic similarity between the first language (L1) and L2 influences initial idiom comprehension, and how context-rich translanguaging interventions affect long-term retention. Current literature confirms that translanguaging positively influences idiomatic knowledge primarily through cross-linguistic activation and enhanced vocabulary comprehension. While identical L1-L2 idioms offer a significant pre-learning advantage, context-embedded instruction ultimately benefits L2-specific idioms the most. This study provides robust empirical evidence supporting the systematic integration of learners' complete linguistic repertoires in English language teaching classrooms.

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1. Introduction

The process of developing genuine communicative competence in a second language (L2) does not merely involve the memorization of syntax and literal vocabulary, but requires a deeper understanding of figurative and idiomatic expressions. Idioms pose unique cognitive and linguistic problems for L2 learners since their meanings are generally not inferable from the meaning of their actual lexical parts. One more important aspect of higher linguistic competence is the ability to receive and produce formulaic language, including idioms, collocations, and fixed phrases. Studies involving the acquisition of a second language prove that formulaic sequences occupy a significant percentage of natural language use and are important in the process of fluent communication (Schmitt, 2010; Wray, 2002). Idioms, especially, are one of the most difficult constituents of figurative language since their meanings in most cases cannot be ascertained by grasping the literal meaning of their separate constituents. Of course, it is possible to use the expression like *spill the beans* or *break the ice*, the learner should look through the culturally embedded figurative meanings, as opposed to lexical decoding. As a result, idiomatic understanding and production by second language learners continue to be a problem at quite advanced levels of mastery. According to Boers and

Lindstromberg (2008), figurative language is an important element of communicative competence as it helps speakers to express content in culturally desired and socially subtle way. Similarly, it is emphasized by Nation and Hunston (2013) that awareness of multi-word units plays a significant role in the language fluency and understanding. In the absence of sufficient exposure to idiomatic expressions, learner may be capable of having grammatical accuracy but still appears unnatural and more literal in expression. Therefore, the question of how the development of idiomatic knowledge can be successfully achieved in multilingual classes is of central concern in the current research.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a province of Pakistan, learners continuously face a complex plurilingual situation. A student can easily switch between local regional languages like Pashto or Hindko, the national language Urdu and the target academic language English. The linguistic ecology of KP represents a particularly interesting case that can be studied. The area stands out as being characterized by high level of multilingualism where people simply feel like they are going back and forth between different systems of language in their daily lives. The main regional language in use is Pashto, with Urdu as the national lingua franca, and English greatly used in the academic and institutional spheres. This is an active language environment, which means that learners often utilize all the linguistic repertoire of which they contribute to the meaning negotiation or processing of new information. Sociolinguistically, under such circumstances there is a good ground where one can study the interplay of several languages in the language learning process. Recent theory in multilingual education has challenged the conventional beliefs and attitudes that languages should be rigidly divided in the classroom. Instead, researchers are beginning to stress more and more on the cognitive advantages of multilingual practices that allow learners to mobilize their existing linguistic assets. In reference to the usage of a flexible and strategic application of multiple languages to build meaning and to learn, (García & Li, 2014) describe this process as translanguageing. Translanguageing in the multilingual classes helps learners to make connection between the new language input and the already existed knowledge of their native languages, thereby developing better understanding and memorization.

The sociolinguistic environment of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is characterized by multilingual interaction where Pashto, Urdu, and English coexist in both academic and social domains. Learners often rely on their entire linguistic repertoire while processing new linguistic input, especially when encountering complex lexical items such as idioms and figurative expressions. Research conducted in the region indicates that English language learning in KP is strongly shaped by multilingual realities and classroom constraints, where learners frequently shift between languages to negotiate meaning and comprehension (Shahabullah, Abdullah, & Hussain, 2025). In such contexts, translanguageing practices can serve as an effective pedagogical strategy that allows learners to mobilize their existing linguistic resources to understand and produce meaning in English. Historically, English Language Teaching (ELT) in this region has been strongly influenced by monolingual methodologies which discourage the use of L1 in the classroom, assuming that separation provides L2 maximization. Yet, translanguageing, which is defined as the dynamic use of languages in multilingual contexts, is an effective pedagogy/framework that disrupts this separation. The idea of translanguageing has become widely discussed in recent years as a pedagogical approach that takes into account the multidimensional linguistic nature of multilingual students. In contrast to the traditional views of bilingual education when languages are viewed as unique systems, translanguageing views bilingual speakers as having a single and integrated linguistic repertoire (García & Wei, 2014; Wei, 2018). This school of thought argues that students do not alternate between the two separated systems of languages but rather tap a common reservoir of linguistic resources in deriving and creating meaning.

As a result of the research studies carried out in the field of applied linguistics, it becomes more apparent that translingual practices may support a variety of language acquisition processes. As an example, Creese and Blackledge (2010) found that allowing learners to use various languages when interacting in the classroom allows them to acquire deeper conceptual understanding and enables them to engage actively. In a similar vein, Canagarajah (2011) argues that multilingual mode of negotiation of meaning allows learners to develop more versatile communicative strategies. In the area of vocabulary acquisition, a number of studies have determined that translanguageing has the capability of promoting,

understanding and retention through activating the existence of cross-linguistic networks between familiar and novel lexical representations. By validating the students' existing linguistic repertoires and making active use of them, teachers could facilitate thinking. Although it is known that translanguaging benefits general L2 vocabulary acquisition, we need more rigorous exploration of specific benefits regarding complex figurative language acquisition, retention, and productive use. This study fills this empirical gap by analyzing how specific Pashto/Urdu-English translanguaging practices help develop L2 English idiomatic knowledge. In particular, the present paper examines whether the L1-L2 cross-linguistic similarity plays a role in initial idiom comprehension and whether the provision of context-rich translanguaging instruction can mediate the later acquisition of L2-exclusive idioms. Utilizing a rich database of assessment data, we will show that translanguaging is not simply a compensatory strategy for lower-level students, it is also a necessary cognitive process in the development of higher-level idiomatic competence. Translanguaging has increasingly been recognized as a powerful pedagogical approach that enables multilingual learners to integrate their linguistic resources during the learning process. Rather than separating languages into rigid boundaries, translanguaging allows learners to strategically draw upon their first language to construct meaning in the target language. Empirical research in Pakistani ESL classrooms demonstrates that translanguaging practices significantly enhance learners' strategic competence, enabling them to communicate more effectively and participate more confidently in classroom interaction (Hussain, Ali, & Zeb, 2024). This pedagogical approach not only supports comprehension but also reduces cognitive barriers that often emerge when learners are restricted to a monolingual instructional environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Idiomatic Competence in Second Language Acquisition

Idiomatic phrases make up a major part of figurative language and are recognized as highly esteemed to show high levels of linguistic abilities. The concept of idioms has been generally categorized in the research of second language acquisition as a subsection of formulaic language, which includes multiword units in the form of collocations, phrasal verbs and fixed expressions that are encoded and retrieved as individual lexical codes (Wray, 2002). Such phrases are very fundamental to natural language communication and speakers get to use them to express complex meaning in an efficacious and fluent manner. According to Schmitt (2010), formulaic sequences form a significant part of daily speech, and points out those formulaic sequences are essential in the achievement of communicative competence in second language. However, idioms also present significant difficulties among second language learners since they rarely have an evident meaning. Unlike literal phrases, idioms often bear metaphoric or culture-specific connotations that cannot be easily determined by looking at single words which make them up. An example that includes terms like *hit the nail on the head* or *let the cat out of the bag* does require the learners to understand the figurative meaning of the terms which bears a sharp contrast to the way the learners will understand the literal meaning of the words. Studies have shown that second-language learners tend to take idioms literally in early-acquisition stages of learning second languages, and this often leads to misunderstanding, or evading the usage of figurative language when communicating with others (Cieślicka, 2006). Additionally, idiomatic competence is closely associated with learners' exposure to the use of authentic language. According to Boers and Lindstromberg (2008), figurative language is profoundly embedded in culture conceptualizations, and thus, learners should not only develop knowledge in the language but also gain cultural consciousness to gain an entire understanding of the expressions of idiomatic language. Therefore, learning idioms is often a requirement that may require an explicit instruction, exposure, and a chance of meaningful practice within communicative contexts.

2.2. Translanguaging and Cognitive Activation

The development of idiomatic knowledge relies on bilingual learners' ability to draw on their integrated linguistic repertoire. Through Wei's perspective, multilinguals don't have strictly separated language modules; people rather have a single, multilingual and multimodal repertoire for thinking and communicating. This is more than code-switching (García, 2011; Wei, 2018). Within this framework, idiomatic knowledge is positively impacted by translanguaging mainly through cross-linguistic activation and improved vocabulary knowledge. Evidence suggests that bilinguals activate idioms across languages. Bilingual education can be supported when educators actively design a translanguaging environment, which can assist in understanding idioms through the addition of native language. This teaching method builds

morphological awareness and helps learners use inference to decipher new idiomatic meanings. From a cognitive perspective, translanguaging facilitates deeper linguistic processing by activating learners' prior linguistic knowledge. When learners are permitted to use their first language as a mediating tool, they are able to interpret new vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and figurative meanings more effectively. Research conducted in Pakistani ESL contexts shows that translanguaging-based instructional practices can significantly enhance learners' communicative competence and strategic language use, particularly in multilingual classrooms where learners possess diverse linguistic backgrounds (Hussain, Ali, & Zeb, 2024). By integrating linguistic knowledge across languages, learners are able to build stronger semantic connections and develop greater confidence in language production.

2.3. The Role of Cross-Linguistic Similarity

The trajectory of early idiom acquisition is greatly influenced by the extent of formal and conceptual similarity between the learner's L1 and L2. Research suggests that similarity between first and second language helps in learning idioms. We can use idioms from students' L1 to help them learn L2 idioms, especially, in the case of idioms which are similar across languages. Bilinguals can help in this as they activate meaning in L1 when faced with similar meanings in L2. As a result, learners show a distinct pre-learning advantage, where they do best on idioms that are same in form and meaning in L1-L2 (e.g. Same L1-L2 types) in pretests, as these can be directly transferred and activated from the first language. According to studies, L1 equivalents boost acquisition of shared L2 idioms. Research has shown that an input dimension, cross-language similarity, can significantly predict learners' early L2 idiomatic knowledge; an example here would be that idioms that are similar to L1 will initially be easier to process (Soto-Sierra & Ferreira, 2024). In addition, the use of L1 such as translation was positively correlated with idiomatic accuracy.

2.4. The Mediating Effect of Context

Native language scaffolding is essential for initial understanding, but its impact changes dynamically when contextual information is offered to learners. The supportive context in translanguaging input actually negates the initial advantages: post-instruction, L2 Only idioms (no L1 equivalent) outperform all others in production, comprehension, and meaning tasks. This finding shows context reduces L1 similarity dominance, allowing learning despite cross-linguistic form overlap. Thus, the context in translanguaging input further aids novel idioms without L1 counterparts. Contextualized language instruction plays an important role in facilitating vocabulary acquisition and lexical retention. Studies conducted in multilingual ELT classrooms in Pakistan have shown that instructional approaches that integrate contextual and multimodal learning strategies can significantly improve vocabulary acquisition among learners. For instance, Farooq, Shahabullah and Hussain (2025) demonstrated that context-rich instructional techniques, such as digital storytelling and interactive learning activities, enable learners to process vocabulary in meaningful contexts, thereby improving comprehension and retention. Such findings highlight the importance of contextual learning environments in supporting lexical and idiomatic development in second language learning.

2.5. Pedagogical Challenges in Implementation

With the cognitive advancement, heavy reliance on L1 raises classroom issues. If idioms do not have equivalents in the target language, direct transfer will result in translation errors, which warrants specific instructional strategies. For example, paraphrasing and providing equivalents follow the principles of translanguaging like in translation. Moreover, there are larger systemic issues that exist within educational structures such as institutional limitations, teacher training issues, and limited focus on idiomatic development. Despite the growing recognition of multilingual pedagogies, several structural and institutional challenges continue to influence English language teaching in Pakistan. Educational institutions often operate within traditional monolingual frameworks that discourage the use of learners' first languages in the classroom. However, studies examining English language learning in KP indicate that students frequently rely on their multilingual competencies to understand academic content and engage in classroom interaction (Shahabullah, Abdullah, & Hussain, 2025). Furthermore, research on Pakistani teachers highlights that limited training, institutional constraints, and rigid curriculum structures often restrict teachers' ability to implement innovative pedagogical strategies such as translanguaging (Shahabullah, Abdullah, & Hussain, 2025). These challenges suggest the

need for more flexible pedagogical frameworks that acknowledge the linguistic realities of multilingual classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

In the current research, a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design was used by incorporating both pre- and post-tests to look into the impact of translanguaging practices on learning English idiomatic expressions by learners who spoke more than one language. The mixed-method research combines quantitative and qualitative research designs to provide a deeper insight into complex educational phenomena. Creswell and Clark (2017) argue that combining numerical data and contextual interpretation can help researchers evaluate the learning outcomes as well as the formative processes. Mixed-methods design proves to be of great importance in applied linguistics as language acquisition is a process that combines tangible progress and social interaction (Dörnyei & Griffee, 2010). As a result, the pre-test/post-test design made it possible to measure the idiomatic competence of the participants prior to translanguaging-based instruction intervention.

3.2. Research Contents and Participants

The sample included 59 students in tertiary levels studying in institutes based in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan. Pashto and/or Urdu were the first cognitive and social languages (L1) of these selected students, whereas English was the target language of learning (L2) for them. Purposive sampling was used to select participants which is a common practice in educational research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The linguistic background of participants reflects the nature of language use in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where students are often seen to use Pashto, Urdu and English fluidly in both schools and daily communication. This context provides appropriate background to explore the effects of translanguaging practices on acquisition of idioms in second language.

3.3. Research Instruments

In the assessment of the receptive and productive levels of idiomatic competence, a multimodal assessment battery was conscripted. Various instruments used in research increase the validity of research because the communicative language ability cannot be adequately measured using one testing tool (Brown, 2001). Receptive knowledge of idiomatic expressions was also tested by testing the vocabulary levels test (VLT) and the c-test which tested the ability of learners to identify and comprehend figurative expressions. Productive competence was assessed using Discourse Completion Test (DCT), role-play activity, and semi-structured oral interview, and thus, allowing researchers to see how learners use idiomatic language subconsciously in a communicative scenario. The idioms used in the study were grouped into three levels, in terms of their relation between Pashto and Urdu, in idioms which have the same form and symbolic meaning across all languages; those which follow the same form but different meaning; and those which are unique to English language and do not have the same equivalent in the native languages of the learners.

3.4. Procedure

The procedure designed for this study was three-phases, namely pre-testing, instructional intervention and post-testing. In pre-test stage, the participants were given the entire range of assessment tools to determine the baseline measurements of idiomatic competence and also be able to determine the effect of transfer from L1 to L2. The intervention involved application of translanguaging-based teaching methods, whereby learners were prompted to rely on their linguistic endowments in both languages (Pashto and Urdu) by interpreting words that contained idiomatic expressions in English language. The teaching involved bi-lingual descriptions, contextual talk and cultural comparisons aimed at explaining the figurative meanings. The concept of translanguaging is generally seen as efficient pedagogical tools since it enables multilingual students to utilize their entire linguistic repertoire in meaning construction (García & Wei, 2014). The last step involved the participants re-administering the same assessment tools that were applied in pre-test to identify gains in idiom recognition and production after intervention.

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected data was compared on the basis of paired-samples t-test to examine the results of participants prior to and after the translanguaging intervention. Statistical testing

helps researchers to ascertain that the difference in performance noted is statistically significant and not due to chance occurrence. According to Field (2024), paired -samples t -tests are frequently used in experimental studies to determine the increase in learning at two levels of measurement. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed on every instrument used in assessment and effects sizes (Cohen's d) used to gauge the extent of improvement that may be attributed to the intervention. This type of analysis provided the researchers with an opportunity to assess the level of statistical significance and the practical implications of translanguaging practices to the idiomatic competence of the learners.

4. Results

A series of statistical analyses (e.g., paired-samples t-tests) were conducted on the quantitative data from assessment battery to assess the impact of translanguaging intervention on receptive and productive capacities.

4.1. Overall Receptive and Productive Growth

Table 1 outlines the comprehensive growth across all five assessment instruments from the pre-intervention baseline to the post-intervention evaluation.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Paired-Samples t-Test Results for Receptive and Productive Assessments

Assessment Instrument	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	T	df	p	Cohen's d
Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT)	45.32 (12.14)	78.45 (10.05)	14.52	58	< .001	1.82
C-Test	42.18 (11.88)	75.60 (9.92)	15.10	58	< .001	1.89
Discourse Completion Test (DCT)	35.50 (10.45)	70.25 (11.30)	16.34	58	< .001	2.05
Role Play	30.15 (9.80)	68.40 (12.15)	18.22	58	< .001	2.28
Oral Interview	32.40 (10.12)	65.80 (11.50)	17.45	58	< .001	2.18

Note: *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *df* = degrees of freedom. The *p*-value indicates the significance level ($\alpha = .05$). Scores are based on a 100-point scale

Table 1 indicates that the improvement in the instructional intervention which is based on translanguaging produced statistically significant results in all of the five assessment tools. The comparison of mean scores between the pre-test and the post-test shows that subjects had significantly improved their level of performance regarding both receptive and productive test of idiomatic competence. The relatively low mean scores before intervention were indicative of poor knowledge regarding idiomatic expressions in English language, but the post-test outcome shows significant improvement, which can be attributed to the instructional induction that led to a better understanding of figurative language. All results of paired-sample t-tests were substantially significant ($p < .001$), which resulted in the fact that improvements were not dependent on chance, but the learning gains were real. Along with the level of statistical significance, the values of the effect sizes (Cohen's d) depict immensely large practical effects of all instruments. Given the fact that the productive assessments, which include Role Play and Oral Interview, involve spontaneous application of idiomatic expressions when communicating, it was seen that these tests exhibited the most significant improvements. This tendency indicates that translanguaging intervention did not only increase the possibility of learners to recognize idioms, but it also provided learner with the power of using idioms in practice during communication. All in all, the findings prove that the teaching method had a great influence on the idiomatic competence of learners in the field of both comprehension and production.

4.2. Performance by Cross-Linguistic Category

The preliminary data about instruction fits well with the literature on early L1 transfer. Table 2 shows how performance changed depending on the idiom's relationship to Pashto and Urdu.

As it has been outlined in Table 2, the performance of learners was significantly different in the dependence on the association between English idioms and their Pashto and Urdu counterparts. In the pre-test group, the participants scored the best in the same L1-L2

category ($M = 68.50$) that is, the idioms with identical form and figurative meaning of their language were more recognized and interpreted as a result of natural transfer of the language. Conversely, the lowest mean score during the pre-test ($M=22.10$) was reported in the "L2 Only" category, which indicates that learners had a very minimal familiarity with idiomatic expressions that lacked any conception in their first languages. But after the instructional intervention based on translanguaging, the performance pattern altered significantly. The post-test performance of all three categories of the idiomatic forms shows significant improvement, but most of the change was observed in the L2 Only condition that gave a mean score of 86.75 with a mean difference of the largest one +64.65. This change implies that the contextualized instruction through translanguaging enhanced the capacities of learners to get beyond the early understanding blocks, and build a strong sense towards idioms that were previously unknown. In turn, the performance hierarchy of participants was flipped successfully, with the performance of L2 Only idiom being higher than that of mastering the level of the same idiom, L1-L2. The reported result demonstrates the high-quality of rich contextual input and multilingual cognitive support during the process of learning complex figurative language.

Table 2: Mean Scores for Idiom Recognition and Production by Cross-Linguistic Category

Idiom Category	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	Mean Difference
Same L1-L2	68.50 (10.20)	82.15 (8.40)	+13.65
Different L1-L2	40.25 (11.15)	58.40 (10.90)	+18.15
L2 Only	22.10 (8.50)	86.75 (7.85)	+64.65

Note: Same L1-L2 = Identical form and meaning in Pashto/Urdu and English; Different L1-L2 = Identical form but different meaning; L2 Only = Unique to English. Scores are aggregated averages across all assessment instruments on a 100-point scale.

5. Discussion

The data evaluated highlight the importance of plurilingualism as a means of developing high L2 competence. The significant improvement in Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) and C-Test scores points to the first benefit related to cross-linguistic similar idioms that is the natural activation of first-language knowledge in the minds of Pashto and Urdu speakers when processing English figurative utterances. This observation is consistent with the latest research that proves that multilingual students apply their overall linguistic repertoire in interpreting unfamiliar lexical nodes and figurative language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022; García & Wei, 2014). Instead of assigning their first language to an exclusively extraneous process, learners use L1 knowledge as a cognitive landmark that helps them to comprehend and to reduce difficulty in the process. Additional studies on the topic of multilingual cognition indicate that bilingual students often deploy conceptual and lexical connections of their L1 during the interpretation of L2 input, especially when languages display structural or metaphorical similarities (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Therefore, English linguistics based on the similarities of cultural/structural framing as in Pashto or Urdu present learners with easy points of entry, practically reduces the affective filter and contributes to early understanding.

However, more to the point, the findings of the Discourse Completion Test and Oral Interviews show that translanguaging will help in the development of communicative competence not acting as a transient source of assistance to the process of comprehension. The evidenced reordering of performance hierarchy in which L2 Only idioms eventually earned the largest post-instruction scores can be taken to imply that the high contextual translanguaging input can eventually override the original benefit provided by cross-linguistic similarities. This observation is in line with the current translanguaging study that shows that allowing learners to activate their multilingual resources can promote not only conceptual knowledge, but also effective language use in the classroom (Wei, 2018; Wei & Lin, 2019). In the school system of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, it seems that educators have utilized translanguaging as an instrument of direct translation as well as a pedagogical method that facilitates negotiation of meanings, paraphrasing of complicated concepts, and incorporation of culturally recognized contexts. This will help learners to extrapolate and internalize figurative wordings which do not directly correspond to the first languages. By encouraging the use of translanguaging indicators, as recent research on multilingual pedagogy proposes, it is possible to slowly decrease reliance of learners on similarity in the first language and strengthen the ability to convey a specific meaning in the target language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022; García & Wei, 2014). Therefore, this study shows that instruction with the help of translanguaging can

help students overcome figurative barriers in order to acquire advanced communicative competence in English, although conceptual synonyms do not exist in both languages.

6. Conclusion

Utilizing translanguaging as a valid theory to bridge the metaphorical gap in L2 English learning is very effective pedagogically. Using the multilingual resources that learners already have, specifically Pashto and Urdu in this case, teachers can help students think more deeply in English idioms. The use of different kinds of robust assessments proves that learners make highly significant gains in both uptake and spontaneous translanguaging production when they engage with context-rich resources that include their L1. The L1 use essentially helps learners move from initial reliance on similar cross-linguistic forms to independently using L2-only figurative language. Policymakers need to address the institutional restrictions and gaps in teacher training that undermine the systematic use of approaches to maximize these benefits beyond the classroom. This would help them enhance the educational system. Curriculum development and teacher training initiatives by provincial education departments in future should include focused translanguaging strategies for full realization of L2 learners' communicative development in Pakistan.

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