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*Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research*  
*University of Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia, Jijel*  
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*Department of English*



**A Study of Learners' Problems in Understanding English  
Language Proverbs: The Case of Third Year Students at the  
University of Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia, Jijel**

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillments of the requirements for the degree of Master  
in didactics of foreign languages

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2020-2021

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled “**A Study of Learners Problems in Understanding English Language Proverbs: The Case of Third Year Students at the University of Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia. Jijel**”, is my own work and all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by means of references. I also certify that I have not copied or plagiarized the work of other students or researchers partially or fully. In case any material is not documented, I shall be responsible for the consequences.

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12/09/2021

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### Dedication

*"In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful".*

*I "Bousmaha ROUMAÏSSA" WOULD LIKE TO  
DEDICATE MY WORK TO:*

*TO THE MOST CARING AND LOVING PARENTS*

*To my Mother, as she is the source of happiness in my life*

*To my sister and my brother*

*To my beloved ones*

*To all of my friends*

*To me, myself*

*To everyone who has inspired me*

*Thank you from the bottom of my heart*

*Roumaïssa*

*I, Miss Sarah dedicate this humble work*

*To my precious parents for their encouragement.*

*To My brothers: Choukri and Mohammed El Haddi for their support.*

*And to all my family members and friends without exception.*

*Sarah*

### Acknowledgements

*First and foremost, we would like to express our sincere gratitude and our profound appreciation to our dear supervisor **Mr. Bakir BENHABILES** for his encouragement, guidance, and support.*

*Also, special thanks to our examiners for accepting to read our research and for the priceless comments that they will make.*

*At the end, we owe a lot of thanks to Third Year Students of Mohammed Seddik Ben Yahia University of Jijel, who have participated in the practical part of our research.*

### **Abstract**

The present research aims to investigate learners' problems in understanding English proverbs in an academic context. It seeks to explore how the surrounding context may affect the comprehensibility of English proverbs. The study was conducted with third year EFL students at the department of English, the University of Mohammed Seddik Ben Yahia – Jijel. The hypothesis showed that learners' problems in understanding proverbs originated from three main sources: students' lack of knowledge about English proverbs, proverbs undetectable form, and context deficiency. To achieve the aims of this study, a test and a questionnaire were administered to sixty (60) third year EFL learners. The results from both instruments show that learners find difficulties in understanding proverbs due to their lack of knowledge and their unfamiliarity with them. Therefore, it is suggested that both learners and teachers should attach more importance to proverbs in the classroom setting by including them in the syllabi.

**Keywords:** proverbs, context, understanding proverbs, students' difficulties

## List of Abbreviations

**EFL:** English as Foreign Language.

**Q:** Question.

**%:** Percentage.

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## **General Introduction**

- Background of the Study
- Statement of the Problem
- Aim of the Study
- Research Questions
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## **Chapter One: Theoretical Framework of Proverbs**

### Introduction

### **Section One: Nature of Proverbs**

#### 1. Definition of Proverbs

#### 2. Origin of Proverbs

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### **Section two: Strategies in Learning Proverb**

## Introduction

### 1. The Role of Literal - Figurative Meaning in Proverb Comprehension

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## **General Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

From all aspects of metaphorical language, proverbs represent a distinct category on their own. Disciplines such as linguistics, didactics, sociology, ethnology, folklore consider proverbs an interesting object of study because proverbs reveal themselves as an inexhaustible source and an indispensable instrument to language and culture acquisition. Through proverbs, habits, behaviors, values, judgments and visions of a people are all revealed. However, despite their frequent utilization in daily communication, proverbs remain difficult to tackle by students, especially in academic context. A proverb with its content as well as its formal aspect is not always uncomplicated to identify, to interpret properly and to elucidate. Hence, learners have to understand proverbs first. Despite the fact that many scholars were interested in the studies about proverbs, few of them have tackled the problem of proverbs in the academic context.

Firstly, Elham Baharian (2014) in her work entitled "The Effect of Proverbs on Learning Vocabulary through Visual Organizers" noted that the effect of proverbs on the acquisition of lexical items has not been explored yet, also the studies investigating the most appropriate method of presenting and teaching vocabulary have proliferated in recent years. However, her study aimed at exploring to what extent the visual organizers and picture cues can facilitate the learning of lexical items and their retention, the influence of learning vocabulary through proverbs, and whether proverbs can be used to improve vocabulary learning through time. The results of the experimental and the control groups of 90 EFL learners, who were selected based on their level of proficiency from Safir Language Academy, show that learning lexical items through proverbs especially via pictures is effective.

Secondly, Can Daşkin and Çiler Hatipoğlu (2019) in their study entitled ‘A Proverb Learned is a Proverb Earned: Proverb Instruction in EFL Classrooms’ . This thesis investigates: (1) What EFL student-teachers think about English proverb instruction, in order to reveal the situation about teaching proverbs in English language classrooms. (2) EFL students-teachers’ attitudes towards learning and teaching English proverbs. (3) EFL student-teachers’ thoughts about their knowledge and use of English proverbs. Finally, what they think about the extent to which their English teachers and course books at high school taught English proverbs.

The findings of the questionnaire which was administered for student-teachers, who study in English Language Teaching Department, but in different Universities in Turkey, show that the majority of the EFL student-teachers thought that their English teachers and course books at high school had not taught proverbs sufficiently. However, the results indicate that they had positive attitudes towards learning and teaching English proverbs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Proverbs represent figurative language in which they enable students in their speech. They are of crucial importance as they are part of the English language. Third year EFL students of English are not taught proverbs in the classroom which make them unknowable about them. So, all issues concerning proverbs are new for the students whether in the proverbs form or the issue of the context.

### **Aim of the Study**

This research aims at highlighting and determining the problems and the difficulties third year University students face when understanding English proverbs as well as suggesting some solutions to these problems.

## **Research Questions**

This current research attempts to answer a number of questions related to the difficulties learners face in understanding English proverbs. This is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the difficulties third year University student face in understanding English proverbs?
- Does context affect the understanding of English proverbs?
- What are the solutions that may help third year University learners to overcome these difficulties?

## **Hypotheses**

Based on the above research questions, the following hypotheses are made:

- Learner's difficulties are due to their lack of knowledge of proverbs.
- Proverbs are difficult because of their undetectable form.
- Learners may find difficulties in understanding proverbs because of the context.

## **Research Methodology**

In this study, the target population is third year students at Mohammed Seddik Ben Yahia University of Jijel. In order to test the hypotheses and to achieve the aim of the research, two different tools were used. First, a test was administered to 60 students of English. The purposes were (a) to detect students' mistakes, (b) to examine proverbs comprehension, and (c) to explore the problems that they may face in understanding

proverbs. Second, a questionnaire, which is directly related to the test, was distributed to 60 students. This latter consists of 10 questions, listed in order to assess learners' comprehension of the proverbs.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The present study is divided into two chapters. On the one hand, the first chapter is an overview of the study, which consists of two sections. Section one which is entitled "nature of proverbs" contains definition of proverbs, origin of proverbs, the characteristics of proverbs, proverbs and their neighbors. Also, it deals with the importance of proverbs. While the second section which is entitled "strategies in learning proverbs" discusses both the figurative and the literal meaning, the role of the context in determining the meaning of proverbs and ends up with the importance of the context. On the other hand, chapter two is the practical framework in which we investigate the obstacles that hinder EFL learners from understanding proverbs through discussing the findings gathered from the task and the questionnaire. Lastly, some recommendations and solutions based on the findings are submitted.

## **Chapter One: Theoretical Framework of Proverbs**

### **Introduction**

Aiming to give the reader a general idea about the topic, the present chapter is exclusively concerned with reviewing the major theoretical aspects related to the field of paremiology and proverbs. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section which is entitled “Proverbs: Nature of proverbs” provides an overview of proverbs` central terms, related definitions, common origins, main characteristics, distinct typology with the proverbs and their neighbors, and end up with the importance of proverbs. As for the second section entitled “Strategies in Learning Proverbs”, it focuses on the distinction between the figurative and the literal meaning as a first title, the role of the context in determining the meaning of proverbs as a second title and then proverbs in the EFL Algerian context.

### **Section One: Nature of Proverbs**

In order to come up with an exact meaning of proverbs, we need first to take a look at those two terms which are “Phraseology and Paremiology”. The former, is considered as a branch of Linguistics that deals with combination of words characterized by features like: stability in semantics, syntactic structure, and fixedness. While the later, deals with proverbs more specifically the collection of proverbs and their classification, their nature and origins as well as an investigation of their socio-historical significance (Burger, 2003, p.101).

#### **1. Definition of Proverbs**

Proverbs can be found in different languages and they have been a subject of discussion from the earliest times. Many scholars proposed various definitions to this term.

Proverbs are well known expressions in the English language. They could reflect people's thoughts, experiences and lifestyle. To begin with, as quoted in D'Angelo (1977) "the word proverb comes from the Latin word *proverbium* that is the combination of the prefix *pro* meaning "forth", and the root *verbum*, which means "word". Thus, the literal meaning of the word proverb is a set of words put forth" (p.365). According to the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Items (2008) proverbs are "short popular sayings of unknown authorship, expressing some general truth or superstition" (p.208).

Moreover, Proverbs have different characteristics and features which make it difficult and hard for scholars and paremiologists to include everything in one definition. Proverbs, it is out of question to expect a definition to cover the whole concept. In this sense, paremiologists have defined it from various aspects. For instance, Trench (1861) who has studied proverbs by focusing on their characteristics in which they insisted on the fact that popularity, acceptance, and adoption are what make a Proverb (p.7). In addition, Norrick (2014) stated that proverbs are short traditional expressions with a figurative meaning (p. 7).

To conclude, many scholars have defined the term proverbs, but it seems too difficult to provide the exact definition of proverbs, because the characteristics are not clear too. So Frayha (1974) pointed out that "none of the many definitions of proverbs provided the exact meaning of proverbs. There is always a difficulty in the nature of the proverbs which contain manners of ideas and hold the human experience". (p. 13).

## **2. Origin of Proverbs**

It has been quite difficult to trace the origin of proverbs of a particular language. Marvin (1922) declares "the origin of proverbs is unknown". (p. 4). That means, proverbs arise from unspecified sources, and are unfeasible to detect the actual beginnings of them.

Taylor (1994) pointed out that “proverb are invented in several ways: some are simple apothegms and platitudes elevated to proverbial dignity, others arise from the symbolic or metaphoric use of an incident, still others imitate already existing proverbs and some owe their existence to the condensing of a story or fable.” (p. 1).

However, Mieder (2004) stated that “proverbs like riddles, jokes, or fairy tales, do not fall out of the sky and they are neither products of the mythical soul of folk. Instead they are always coined by an individual either intentionally or unintentionally.” (p. 9). Also, he (2004) argued that the technological development and the power of mass media have contributed in the spread of a new form of proverbs especially with the Television, the Press and even the Radio. In addition, it is generally extremely difficult to trace the basis and history of a proverb in a specific language as expressed in Meider’s book (2004) where he gave four sources for the distribution of European proverbs which are discussed concisely:

To begin with, we have Greek and Roman antiquity, whose proverbial wisdom found a broad spatial spread throughout the Latin language. One of the pioneers of this study was Aristotle (p.10).

Secondly, The Bible represents a second source of proverbs for the entire European continent and far away, whose proverbs date back to classical antiquity and early wisdom literature. Actually, the Bible had a main impact on the distribution of common proverbs because different translators were dealing with the same texts (p.11). Thirdly, Medieval Latin and its status of Lingua Franca in the Middle Ages established new proverbs that cannot be traced back to classical times. Many Medieval Latin proverbs in their exact translations have spread to European languages, and they certainly belong to some of the most popular proverbs today. A few well-known examples are: “*Crows will not pick out crows’ eyes*” (p.12).

Finally, the historical move of proverbs from Europe to the United States represents the fourth source for the common European proverbs. They are considered as modern texts that have been distributed since the middle of the twentieth century all over Europe through technological development and media. A few American proverbs that are already spreading across the European continent either in the new lingua franca of English or in new loan translations are: “*A picture is worth a thousand words*”, “*It takes two to tango*”, and “*Garbage in, garbage out*” represent American proverbs that had an expansion over Europe whether as a lingua franca or as a loan translation (p.12-13).

### **3. The Characteristics of Proverbs**

The field of paremiology has witnessed the attempts of many scholars to identify different characteristics that form a proverb and distinguish it from another expression or statement. Proverbs unveil numerous characteristics. Many of these scholars were Norrick and Trench.

To begin with, Trench (1861) highlighted three characteristics that constitute a proverb: shortness, sense and salt (p.07). To him a proverb must include shortness (brevity). “..... It must be succinct, utterable in a breath”. (p. 07). Proverbs should explain meaning in a condensed way. He added that “...it is indeed quite certain that a good proverb will be short, as short, that is, as compatible with the full and forcible conveying of that which it intends. (p.08); proverbs need to be short but also accurate to express the intended meaning. Additionally Trench (1861) added the term Brevity “*the soul of wit*”, which is eminently the soul of a proverb's wit. Oftentimes it will consist of two, three, or four, and these sometimes monosyllabic words”. This characteristic is found in proverbs such as “*Forewarned, forearmed*”, “*Old sins breed new sores*”. (p.08). A proverb must contain a few short words which express the meaning concisely. Speaking of the second

characteristic which is sense, Trench (1861) claimed that both salt and sense are ascribed to proverbs (p.09). As for the third characteristic, proverbs should have salt; to Trench (1861) “it must have point and pungency, and, so to say, a barb which shall not suffer it to drop slightly from the memory”. (p.8), in order to be memorized and can’t be effortlessly forgotten. Moreover, Norrick (2015) has also added some characteristics of proverbs such as traditionality, and didactic content which will be discussed in details:

### **3.1. Traditionality**

Norrick (2015) stated that proverb’s nature is related with their status as items of folklore, in which he has referred to several scholars who agreed with him such as Firth, Mieder, Seiler and Taylor... According to Norrick, folklore is considered a traditional item which keeps on appearing and happening, that's why it is considered without source and unlearned (p.10).

### **3.2. Didactic Content**

Proverbs have a crucial role in education as they serve as a tool in teaching children as well as building the mind of the society. To this regard, Mieder (2004) pointed out “proverbs have long been used as didactic tools in child rearing, in linguistic and religious instruction in schools, and in teaching about general human experiences”. (p. 146).

## **4. Types of Proverbs**

As cited in “The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs”. (2008), proverbs are classified into three categories: Those of the first type are considered as Abstract statements expressing general truths, like “*Absence makes the heart grow fonder*”, and “*Nature abhors a vacuum*”. Proverbs of the second type include colorful examples, the use

of specific observations from everyday experience to make a point which is general; such as *“You can take a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink”* and *“Don’t put all your eggs in one basket”*. The third type of proverb contains sayings from particular areas of traditional wisdom and folklore. For example, the health proverbs *“after dinner rest a while, after supper walk a mile”* and *“Feed a cold and starve a fever”*. Based on Speake (2008), there are also traditional country proverbs which may relate to husbandry, the seasons, and the weather, such as *“Red sky at night, shepherd’s delight; red sky in the morning, shepherd’s warning”* and *“When the wind is in the east, ‘tis neither good for man nor beast”*.

## **5. Proverbs and their Neighbors**

All the literary expressions sound the same although they are different. Sometimes they could be referred to as synonyms because each one of them has its own features that distinguish it from the others. By this, we are going to compare them to other expressions such as adage, sayings, maxims, slogans, and anti-proverbs.

### **5.1. Proverb and Anti-Proverb:**

*“Anti-proverb”* or *“perverb”* was mainly coined by the Paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder whose definition goes as follows Mieder (2004) *“...parodied, twisted, or fractured proverbs that reveal humorous or satirical speech play with traditional proverbial wisdom”* ( p.28). Mieder (2004) added they are a type of proverbs which are created by Mieder following a humorous effect (p.28). It is not a term that is contradictory to Proverbs; rather, an anti-proverb usually follows the original proverb but differs in some individual words. Mieder, et al (2000) expressed that *“The anti-proverbs also indicate clearly that the structure and wording of proverbs are by no means sacrosanct”*. (p.90). Mieder (2004) emphasized this by giving examples:

The proverb “*A fool and his money are soon parted*” has resulted in such anti-proverbs as “*A fool and his father’s money are soon parted,*” “*A fool and his money are soon popular,*” “*A fool and his money stabilize the economy,*” “*A fool and his wife are soon parted*”(p.33) . Litovkina (2015) stated that some proverbs were questioned in terms of telling the truth by anti- proverbs through the employment of antonyms such as: “An exception disproves the rule, An exception proves the rule, transforming the proverb into its opposite A friend that isn’t in need is a friend indeed, a friend in need is a friend indeed”. (p. 327).

## **5.2. Proverbs VS Sayings, Adage, Aphorisms, and Maxims**

A proverb is an expression that expresses an idea in a condensed way or teaches a moral lesson. Proverbs and many other literary expressions may sound the same but there’s a difference between all of these terms. For a saying, it is a statement that is commonly used among people which makes it recurrent. In this regard, D’Angelo (1977) defined a saying as “...it refers to any wise or truthful saying that is repeated often”. (p. 365). D’Angelo (1977) has also given a definition to adages in which she believed that an adage is a famous saying which expresses truth as result of its frequent usage. (p.365).Moreover, D’Angelo (1977) asserted the definition of both “*aphorisms*” and “*maxims*” in which she considers them to be alike (p.365). For D’Angelo (1977) a maxim is an expression or a principle obtained from encountering people and its constant experience and “*aphorism*” is an expression that includes evidence without the need to apply it as rule, an example of this “He that cannot conceal his wisdom is a fool”. (p. 365).

## **6. The Importance of Proverbs**

Proverbs are considered as sayings which are utilized to reveal wisdom. They are short expressions that teach a moral or tell the truth about something. Different point of

view was given in this matter as a number of paremiologists claimed that proverbs are no longer useful in our society and that they have lost their value. However, their importance in society lies in their ability to help people interact and communicate with each other. In this framework, Mieder (2004) Proverbs tend to build social relationships as they contain wisdom. They also enable people to socialize and communicate whether in everyday life, politically or even religiously. (p.1). Finally, Umarova (2020) has insisted on the importance that proverbs have toward teaching in which he said that they are important for students as they provide them with knowledge, they also teach students more lessons and they boost their level in English because they have a didactic perspective. (p. 46).

## **Conclusion**

Proverbs are part of the speech and they are significant to EFL learners. In order to meet the aim of the study this section has been devoted to explain the typology of proverbs and their origin along with their characteristics, their relationship with other figurative expressions as well as the importance that they have in the educational field.

## **Section Two: Strategies in Learning Proverb**

### **Introduction**

Language is a system of communication which is used by speakers in different communities, all over the world. Every single community has its own language. In fact, human language has both literal and figurative meanings. The former, refers to the direct meaning of a word, or a sentence, while the latter is different from the former, it does not make a sense on its own, unless you refer it to a real situation in order to understand the real meaning behind it.

Expressions such as proverbs have both a literal and a figurative meaning, which means the intended meaning of proverbs can either have figurative or literal sense. In guessing proverbs' meaning, the context plays an important role, that's led to the appearance of many contradictory models by researchers.

### **1. The Role of Literal - Figurative Meaning in Proverb Comprehension**

#### **1.1. The Literal Meaning**

According to Meriem Webster, literal meaning can be defined as: “adhering to fact or to the ordinary or usual meaning (as of a word)” (Woolf, 1974, p. 410). However, Searle (1979) defined literal meaning as: “the meaning of a sentence can be called literal if the intended meaning is the same as the expressed meaning of the words in the sentence, (p.92). An example of that:

- the cat is on the mat.

The word “cat” refers to a small furry animal, and “mat” refers to a small floor covering, the word “is on” indicates the location of the animal relative to the floor covering. (Ferenz

& Turner, 2013, p. 19).

In the last few decades, some researchers have proposed several models who agree on the idea that literal meaning occurs first as the intended meaning of figurative language understanding.

### **1.1.1. Gibbs' Model (1997)**

In 1997, Gibbs introduced “the multistage model”, also called “the extended conceptual base theory”. It stated that literal meanings require less time than figurative meanings, also literal meanings must be developed before figurative meanings. (p.106). More specifically, this model introduced many steps for proverb comprehension which are as follows: build the literal meaning, recognizing that it doesn't make sense, building the figurative meaning in mind and then creating the meaning of the proverb. In order to build a meaning, there must be; first, a literal interpretation to reach the meaning and; second. a figurative construction if the first step doesn't work. Gibbs (1997, as cited in Ramirez 2015, p. 34).

Honeck & Temple (1999) illustrated more this idea, by the fact that the figurative meaning of a proverb involved “problem solving, entailing understanding and integration of the proverb topic, discourse context, figurative meaning and speaker's pragmatic points. (p. 66).

### **1.1.2. Katz and Ferretti's Model (2003)**

This model was named after Katz and Ferretti as “the literal first model”, that means the literal meaning occurs first in the intended meaning, and then the non-literal which refers to the figurative meaning, occurs as a second alternative. That is to say, when learners try to guess the meaning of a proverb they rely on the figurative meaning if the

literal meaning does not fit the context. In other words, the first literal meaning occurs when the hearer realizes that the literal meaning of a proverb is not valid for the given context, so he will seek for the figurative meaning of a proverb.

Katz & Ferretti (2003) stated that the unfamiliar proverbs are better understood by the reference to their literal sense to get the intended meaning. (p. 20).

As we have noticed, these two models “the multistage model” and “the first literal model” explained that the process of the figurative meaning in proverbs takes longer than the literal meaning. However, some psycholinguists disagreed with these models, like Kemper (1980) who claimed that proverbs are understood more quickly by the reference to their figurative meaning rather than literal meaning. (p.197). Moreover, Temple & Honeck (1999) agreed with Kemper’s findings, and they claimed “no difference between literal and figurative reading”. (p. 44). Also, Ortony (1978) argues that there is no fundamental difference between the non-literal and literal meaning. (p. 465).

## **1.2. The Figurative Meaning**

Cuddon (1979) defined figurative language as a sentence or a phrase in which “one thing is described in terms of another”. (p. 391). This occurs with proverbs, idioms, and metaphors. However, the figurative meaning of proverbs; is when the expressed meaning of the sentence is different from the exact meaning of the individual words.

An example of that is the sentence: “My job is a jail”. In this example the word “jail” does not refer to an actual prison, but instead is used by a person to express a sense of confinement about her or his job (Turner, 1995, p. 16).

For some researchers, the figurative meaning used has been viewed as esoteric forms, oddities, or obscure (Harris, Lahey, and Marsalek, 1980). Also, many of them agree on the idea that non-literal, or the figurative meaning, occurs first as the intended meaning of figurative language understanding.

### 1.2.1. Kemper's Model

According to Kemper (1980) “when proverbs occur naturally in a linguistic context, figurative uses are understood more quickly than literal use”. (p. 197). Which means the process of the figurative understanding is actually faster than the literal meaning. In other words, Kemper's study has shown that proverbs are processed more rapidly when the context supports the familiar proverbial meaning and are only processed as literal phrases when the context forces a literal reading.

Moreover, Kemper investigated comprehension of proverbs, and found that the length of the paragraph affected proverb interpretation. That means; the longer the paragraph, the easier it was to interpret it figuratively.

Many researchers agree with Kemper's findings. Giora (1997) pointed out in her model “The graded salience model” that “figurative language can be processed directly, without having to activate the literal meaning first”. (p. 5).

Bock & Brewer (1978) also support Kemper's findings by stating that “literal anomaly is not a necessary condition for the processing of the figurative meaning”. (p. 68).

To conclude, Proverbs have both a literal and figurative level of meaning. Researchers held divergent opinions because of these approaches; some of them supported the literal meaning rather than figurative meaning, and the others supported the figurative meaning rather than literal meaning.

However, Temple & Honeck (1999) pointed out that “when proverbs used in relevant context situations and relevant topics constitute important relevant information for construction a figurative or literal proverb meaning”. (p.42). Signifying that, the context plays an important role in determining the meaning of proverbs, and to solve the ambiguity between the literal and non-literal (figurative) meaning.

## **2. The Role of Context in Determining the Meaning of Proverbs**

### **2.1. Definition of Context**

The term context has been used in different domains by scholars, which ends with several definitions. Nation & Coady (1988) have defined context as “morphological, syntactic, and discourse information in a given text, which can be classified in terms of general features”. (p.102). While, Firth (1957) said "the complete meaning of a word is always contextual, and no study of meaning apart from a complete context can be taken seriously". (p.07). However, he (1968) maintained that no text should be considered meaningful unless it can be referred to some generalized context of the situation. (p. 12-3).

According to Ochs (1979) “the concept of context includes, minimally, language users’ beliefs, and assumptions about temporal, spatial, and social settings; prior, ongoing, and future actions, and the state of knowledge and attentiveness of those participating in the social interaction at hand”. (p. 5).

### **2.2. The Importance of the Context**

Context plays a crucial role in understanding proverbs, because they carry out a hidden meaning in a way or another. Meaning and context are related to each other because the meaning of the proverbs is better understood when being put in the context. More specifically, Holmes & Gray (1938) stated that “we know from experience that practically all pupils acquire many meanings from the context with little or no help from teachers”. (p. 28).

Many linguists insisted on the importance of learning - teaching through context which is viewed as an effective strategy. Harmer (1991) claimed that "Students need to get an idea of how the new language is used by native speakers and the best way of doing this is to

present language in context".(p. 57). Thornbury (2002) added "Words in context increases the chances of learners appreciating not only their meaning but their typical environments, such as their associated collocations or grammatical structures. (p.53). Moreover, Decarrico (2001) illustrated that "new words should not be presented in isolation and should not be learned by simple rote memorization. It is important that new vocabulary items be presented in context clues to meaning and that students are given multiple exposure to items they should learn". (p. 288).

Another strategy which is common and used by learners in acquiring a language, explaining a text, and vocabulary learning is guessing the meaning from context. According to Thornbury (2002) "guessing from context is one of the most useful skills learners can acquire inside and outside the classroom, and most importantly, can be taught and implemented relatively easily". (p. 202).

Also, guessing from context is useful to develop reading. Clarke & Nation (1980) demonstrated that "The ability to guess the meaning of a word without referring to a dictionary saves time and allows the reader to continue reading without interruption. In this way it increases reading efficiency. At some stage it is worth giving learners practice in deciding which unguessable words should be looked up in the dictionary and which should be ignored". (p. 217).

However, there are several benefits of learning from context which were listed by Prince (1996) as follow: first, assessing the meaning of a word in context obliges the learner to develop strategies, such as anticipating and inferencing, which become increasingly profitable as learning progresses because they instill an attitude of self-reliance that is hallmark of proficiency. Second, systematically meeting new words in context underlies the fact that words are indeed used in discourse for purposes of

communication. Finally, context provides an indication of the way the words are used. (p. 489).

### **3. Proverbs in the Algerian EFL Context**

Proverbs represent culture, customs, and tradition of people, as they are more powerful and acceptable in everyday life. Proverbs are of crucial importance especially for foreign learners as they boost their English level and they improve their skills.

After a small research we have carried out on the Algerian dissertations in relation to proverbs, we have found that almost all dissertations discussed proverbs in relation to translation:

- The first dissertation entitled “Cultural and Linguistic Hindrances in English Arabic Translation of Proverbs”, The Case Study: First Year Master Students of English at Mentouri University, submitted by Khadidja Lebsir and Soumia Lemeurs. The main aim of this research was to shed light on the type of difficulties First Year Master Students of English face while translating proverbs and to identify the different strategies that will aid to limit or avoid these hindrances.
- The second dissertation is entitled “Problems and Strategies in Arabic/English/Arabic Translation of Proverbs”: The Case of Master One Students. Submitted by; Dalele Kada and Saliha Derbal. The study dealt with the problems and difficulties students may encounter when they render Arabic proverbs into English and vice versa. Also, it discusses the methods used to find the suitable equivalent in the target language.
- The third dissertation entitled “Translation of Proverbs from English into Arabic: Strategies Used and Problems Faced”. The Case Study of First Year Master Students, Applied Language Studies at the Department of English, University of Constantine 1. Which was presented by: Mr. Hichem Saih and Mr. Abdellah Segni, aimed at indicating

the problems encountered by first year master students“ of English, while translating proverbs from English into Arabic. The research pointed out the translation strategies used during this process, and suggested some translation strategies that may help students translate proverbs efficiently from English into Arabic.

- The next dissertation was entitled “Cultural Problems in Proverbs Translation from English into Arabic and vice versa: The Case of Master One Students of English at Mentouri Brothers University -Constantine 1. The research investigated the cultural problems that students face when translating proverbs from English into Arabic and vice versa, and tries to illustrate how proverbs differ from one culture to another, and therefore, from language to another.

Only one dissertation studied proverbs in the Algerian EFL context, and discussed proverbs’ context in relation to understanding not translation. The study was entitled: “Teachers’ Attitudes towards the Role of Context in Enhancing Learners’ Proverb Comprehension and Production”, and submitted by: Sana BARKA and Chiraz HEDJAZ. This research aimed at investigating teachers' attitudes towards using context as a strategy to help students comprehend and use proverbs, and to consider the importance of teaching proverbs in EFL classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

Proverbs differ in their form; some carry out a literal meaning while some carry out a figurative one. One of the strategies that is used to accelerate proverbs’ understanding and draw attention of learners is by using context, since it is a fruitful strategy to guess meaning of words and effective for learners.

In order to meet this end, this chapter was divided into two sections in which: the first section deals with the typology of proverbs and their importance while the second

section deals with the literal and the figurative meaning as well as the role of the context and its importance in understanding proverbs.

## **Chapter Two: Research Methodology, Data Analysis and Discussion.**

Introduction

2.1. Research Methods

2.2. Data Collection Procedures

2.3. Population and Sampling

2.4. Instruments of the Study

2.4.1. Description of the Test

2.4.2 Description of the Questionnaire

2.5. Data Analysis

2.5.1. Analysis of the Learner's Results

2.5.2. Analysis of the Test

2.5.3 Analysis of the Questionnaire

3. Discussion of Results

3.1. Interpretation and Discussion of the Test's Results

3.2. Interpretation and Discussion of the Questionnaire' Results

4. Limitations

Conclusion

### **General Conclusion**

- Pedagogical Recommendations
- Suggestion for Further Research

## **Chapter Two: Research Methodology, Data Analysis and Discussion.**

### **Introduction**

This chapter of the study represents the practical framework of our dissertation which aims at investigating the Learners` Problems in Understanding English Proverbs. It covers the research methodology, data collection procedures, data analysis, along with the limitations of the study.

### **2.1. Research Methods**

In conducting the present research, the researchers have relied on the case study as a research methodology because it facilitates the gathering of data." Case studies are appropriate when there is a unique or interesting story to be told. Case studies are often used to provide context to other data (such as outcome data), offering a more complete picture of what happened in the program and why" (Neale et al., Pathfinder International 2006, p4).

A Case study is a research methodology that investigates a phenomenon. As one claims "A case study has also been described as an intensive, systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community or some other unit in which the researcher examines in-depth data relating to several variables" (Heale & Twycross, 2018).

### **2.2. Data Collection Procedures**

The following research is based on a questionnaire and a test which were submitted to third-year students of English in the classroom in order to answer them in one hour. It is necessary to say that the test has been answered before the questionnaire as the researcher aimed at refreshing the minds of the learners.

### **2.3. Population and Sampling**

The participants of this study were third year EFL students at the Department of English at Mohammed Seddik Ben Yahya University, Jijel. Following random sampling procedures, the sample consists of sixty (12 males & 48 females) EFL students. The choice of this population has been made according to the fact that they have been studying English for three years, which makes them more experienced and knowledgeable. They are also supposed to be familiar with English proverbs. The analysis of the errors made by the informants will enable the researchers to detect the problems faced by EFL learners in understanding English language proverbs.

## **2.4. Instruments of the Study**

In the following study, two data collection procedures were adopted: a questionnaire and a test. The test is composed of two parts, where the first part is introductory to the second part. Besides that, the questionnaire is divided into three sections: the first section is about general information, the second section is about Problems that might encounter learners in understanding proverbs, and the last section is about further problems in understanding proverbs.

### **2.4.1. Description of the Test**

The test is a set of proverbs that is composed of three parts. In the first part, the participants were given a table which consisted of twenty proverbs classified from the easiest to the most difficult in order to match these proverbs with their meanings. In the second part, the participants were asked to explain the underlined expressions. Those expressions are proverbs put in their context and classified from the easiest to the most difficult. The aim is to check whether third year EFL students face any problems in understanding proverbs. The classification of the proverbs was done based on proverbs structure and context. The easier proverbs are common to learners, so they already have an

idea about them. The given proverbs are made up of intelligible words, a simple syntactic structure and enough contexts; consequently, the comprehension of proverbs would be easier. As for the third part of the test, it is dedicated to providing further explanation to the obstacles that may prevent learners from understanding proverbs.

#### **2.4.2 Description of the Questionnaire**

The questionnaire is partly related to the test because we want learners to have a fresh experience in mind while responding. It is divided into three sections: Background information which consists of three general questions: Learner's gender, years of studying English, and Learner's interaction with native speakers. The second section is about problems in understanding proverbs. Eight problems were presented using the Likert scale: (strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree). The third section ends up with two open-ended questions that seek to give additional information about further reasons that may prevent learners from understanding proverbs, as well as solutions and suggestions for understanding proverbs.

#### **2.5. Data Analysis**

The data gathered from the two research instruments were analyzed quantitatively by means of questionnaire and a test. Quantitative research is an approach that, as its name implies, involves quantity. It is an approach that analyzes the findings of the study. According to Khaldi (2017) it is associated with natural sciences (p. 18).

##### **2.5.1. Analysis of the Learner's Results**

The analysis of the test was based on calculating the mistakes the learners committed while fulfilling the tasks. The researchers have classified those mistakes in the scale presented in (see table 01).

### 2.5.2. Analysis of the Test

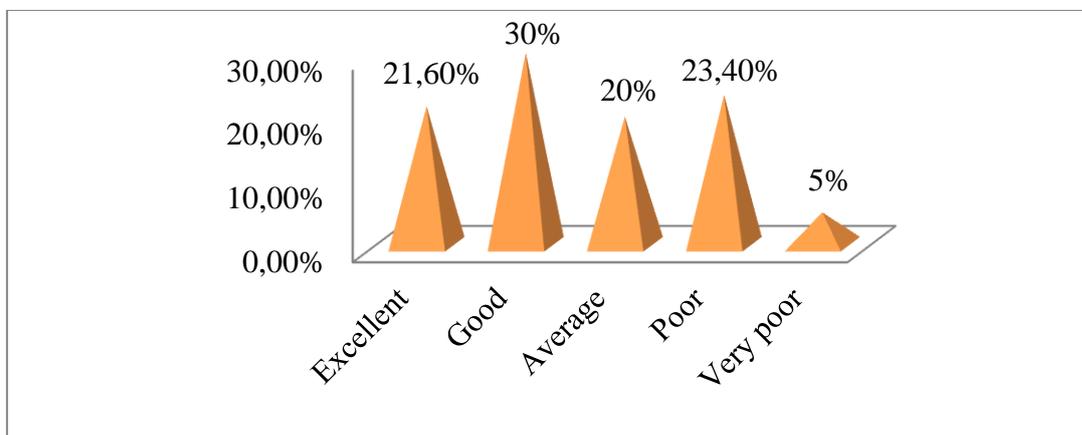
To do the analysis, the researchers have relied on a number of references:

- The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs
- The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs
- Cambridge Dictionary
- Wiktionary

► **Part one:** Match each proverb with its suitable meaning

Table 01: Learners Average in Matching Proverbs

Scale	Number of mistakes	Number of Learners	Percentage
Excellent	00	13	21,6%
Good	[ 01 – 04 ]	18	30%
Average	[ 05 – 07 ]	12	20%
Poor	[ 08 – 12 ]	14	23,4%
Very poor	[ 13 – 18 ]	03	05%
Total		60	100%



*Figure 01: Learner's Average in Matching Proverbs*

The aim behind the first part of the test is to check whether the learners are able to match the given proverbs with their appropriate meanings. Figure 01 represents the errors that are committed by the learners in the understanding of proverbs. Table 01 shows that 13 students who committed 00 mistakes were graded excellent with a percentage of 21, 26%. Next, 18 students who committed between [05- 07] errors were graded a good average with a percentage of 20%. Moreover, 14 students committed between [8-12] errors got a poor average with a percentage of 23, 4%. While, the remaining 3 students committed between 13 to 18 errors with a very poor average and a percentage of 5%.

► **Part Two:** Explain the underlined expressions: (in English)

Table02: Learner's Explanation of the Proverb "All that glitters is not gold".

Proverb	Model answer	Learner's answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
01	-Said about something that seems to be good on the surface, but might not be when you look at it more closely.	-Appearances are deceptive. -Not everything that seems good is good for real.	Correct	41	68.4%
		-Not everything that looks precious turns out to be so.	Wrong	19	31.6%

The above table illustrates the learner's answers concerning the explanation of the proverb "all that glitters is not gold" within its given context. Most of the students (68.4%) succeeded in elucidating the meaning of the proverb from the context. Whilst; some of them (31.6%) failed at guessing the meaning of the proverb. 41 student's answers were between correct and nearly correct. Their answers were as follows:

“Appearances are deceptive.” “Not everything that seems good is good for real.”

The majority of learners succeeded in guessing the meaning of the proverb because it is a common proverb.

Table03: Learner’s Explanation of the Proverb “Bad news travels fast”.

Proverb	Model answer	Learner’s answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
02	-Bad news circulates quickly because people often spread it everywhere.	-Bad news spread in a short time. -Bad news spread quickly.	Correct	48	80%
		-People speak about bad accidents a lot.	Wrong	12	20%

The above table illustrates the learner’s answers concerning the explanation of the proverb “bad news travels fast” within its given context. The majority of the students, 80% (48 students), were able to guess the intended meaning of the proverb. Whereas, only 20% (12 students), were not able to do it. Their answers were as follows: “Bad news spread in a short time.” “Bad news spread quickly.” The learners have successfully achieved the aim of the task because the given proverb was too easy for them since it is a common proverb.

Table04: Learner’s Explanation of the Proverb “As you sow so you reap”.

Proverb	Model answer	Learner’s answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
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03	-Used to mean that the way you behave in life will affect the treatment you will receive from others.	-The consequences you get depend on how hard you work. -Like you behave you will be treated.	Correct	35	58.4%
		-As the character changes, everything follows and so are the grades.	Wrong	25	41.6%

The previous table exemplifies the explanation of the proverb “As you sow so you reap” in which the answers of the students were close to each other as the percentage of the correct or the close answers were 58.4% (35 students). While, the 25 remaining students (41.6%), did not really know the answer even though they were in the context. Their answers were: “The consequences you get depend on how hard you worked.” “Like you behave you will be treated”.

More than half of the learners knew the correct answer and that’s due to the given context.

Table05: Learner’s Explanation of the Proverb “All cats are grey in the dark”.

Proverb	Model answer	Learner ‘s answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
04	-In the dark, physical appearance is unimportant.	-Physical appearances are not important. -Appearances don’t matter.	Correct	11	18.4%
		-All bad people are the same. -All girls are the same.	Wrong	49	81.6%

The data in table 05 show that a majority of respondents failed in explaining the proverb “All cats are grey in the dark” with a percentage of 81.6% (49 students). However, only 11 learners (18.4%) were able to explain the given proverb. Their answers were as follows: “Physical appearances are not important”, “Appearances don’t matter.”

The majority of learners failed at guessing the intended meaning of the proverb as it is an uncommon proverb.

Table06: Learner's Explanation of the Proverb "Fool's paradise".

Proverb	Model answer	Learner's answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
05	-To be happy because you do not know or will not accept how bad a situation really is.	-To live in a world full of lies, that is fake or broken. -He cheated on her. -Temporary pleasure.	Correct	18	30%
		-False paradise.	Wrong	42	70%

The data in table 06 show that the majority 70% of the study sample (42 learners) have not explained the proverb correctly, while the remaining 18 learners (30%) were close to the model answer. Their answers were: "To live in a world full of lies, that is fake or broken". "He cheated on her", "Temporary pleasure".

The proverb was a bit ambiguous for the learners since they have no idea about it.

Table07: Learner's Explanation of the Proverb "One's head above water".

Proverb	Model answer	Learner's answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
06	-To just be able to manage, especially when you have financial difficulties.	-To just be able to manage, especially when you have financial difficulties. -To try to survive despite all the trouble.	Correct	04	6.6%
		-By other people's money you can't be rich.	Wrong	56	93.4%

From the table above, it is noticed that almost all students 93.4% found difficulties in understanding the given proverb and they could not explain it. Only 4 students could

explain it and their answers were: “To just be able to manage, especially when you have financial difficulties”, “To try to survive despite all the trouble”.

Owing to the fact that the proverbs have been classified from the easiest to the most difficult ones, the learners have not managed to know the exact meaning behind it.

Table08: Learner’s Explanation of the Proverb “Forewarned is forearmed”.

Proverb	Model answer	Learner ‘s answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
07	-Said to mean that if you know about something before it happens you can be prepared for it.	-You know about something that is going to happen. -If you know the problem beforehand, you will be able to deal with it.	Correct	22	36.5%
		-I have talked to you on the phone don’t be surprised.	Wrong	38	63.5%

The proverb “Forewarned is forearmed” was successfully explained by 22 learners (36.5%) from the whole subject, the rest 38 learners (63.5%) failed to explain the given proverb. Their answers were: “You know about something that is going to happen”; “If you know before the problem you will be able to deal with it”.

Very few learners were close to the answer because they had no idea about the proverb.

Table09: Learner's Explanation of the Proverb "Honey is sweet but the bee stings".

Proverb	Model answer	Learner's answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
08	-You cannot have good things without paying the price; You have to accept the bad or the danger along with what you want.	-Be careful because not every person who deals with you kindly is not truly kind. -You should not be mistaken by what is shown to you; maybe the sweetest ones are the devils.	Correct	17	28.4%
		-You can't have good things without paying the price.	Wrong	43	71.6%

From the table above, approximately 71.6% of learners from the subject (43 learners) could not deduce the meaning of the given proverb. However, the remaining 17 learners' answers were correct (28.4%), and their answers were: "Be careful because not every person deals with you kindly is not truly kind", "You should not be mistaken by what is shown to you; maybe the sweetest ones are the devils".

The learners were misled by the proverb as they went for the meaning of each word as they have no idea about this proverb.

Table10: Learner's Explanation of the Proverb "Revenge is a dish that can be served cold".

Proverb	Model answer	Learner's answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
09	-Revenge is best or most satisfying when delayed after the harm which it is a response to	-Means that revenge will be better if it is long awaited. -Revenge takes time to achieve it and it is better when the other side does not expect	Correct	24	40%

		it. -People think that taking revenge from someone is satisfying.	Wrong	36	60%
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The explanation of the ninth proverb indicates that more than half of learners 60% (36 learners) were not able to explain the proverb. Whereas, the rest of learners 40% (24 learners), were between correct and nearly correct. Their answers: “Means that revenge will be better if it is long awaited”, “Revenge takes time to achieve it and it is better when the other side does not expect it”.

The response of the learners indicates that they were looking for the literal meaning rather than the figurative meaning of the proverb.

Table 11: Learner’s Explanation of the Proverb “Pride goes before a fall”.

Proverb	Model answer	Learner’s answers	Evaluation	Frequency	Percentage
10	-Said to emphasize that if you are too confident about your abilities, something bad will happen that shows you that you are not as good as you think.	-A person with too much confidence will end up making mistakes that lead to failure. -After each success, there are downs and failures.	Correct	20	33.4%
		-Success can sometimes be followed by failure.	Wrong	40	66.6%

The proverb “Pride goes before a fall” was successfully explained by only 20 learners (33.4%) from the sample, and their answers were: “A person with too much confidence will end up making mistakes that leads to failure”, “After each success ups,

there are downs and failures”, while the majority of learners 66.6% (40 learners) could not explain the given proverb.

40 learners were unable to reach the accurate meaning of the proverb because it is an unfamiliar proverb for them.

Table12: Learner’s Explanation of the Proverb “A burnt child dreads the fire”.

Prov erb	Model answer	Learner’s answers	Evaluat ion	Freque ncy	Percent age
11	-A person that has been harmed by something becomes more cautious about it.	-Afraid of experiencing a hurting feeling again. -One you go through a bad situation, you will be aware and alarmed of it.	Correct	29	48.4%
		-Children never forget the first dread when they are burnt.	Wrong	31	51.6%

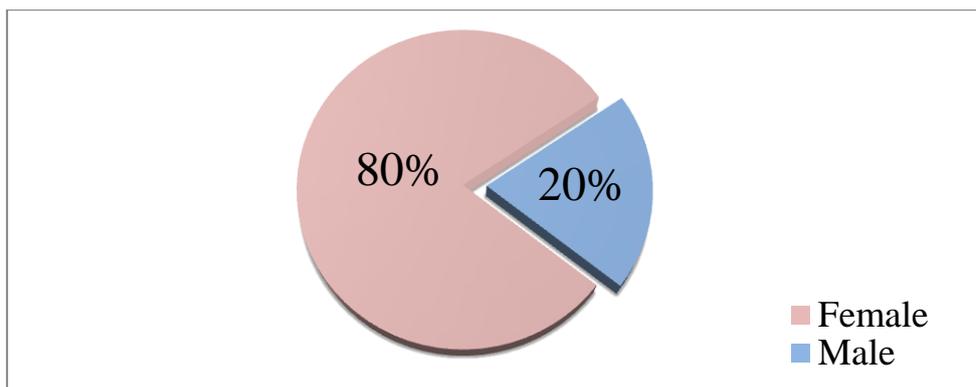
The data in table 12 show that the answers of learners were very close to each other as the percentage of the correct or nearly correct answers was 48.4% (29 learners). Their answers were: “Afraid of experiencing a hurting feeling again”, “Once you go through a bad situation, you will be aware and alarmed of it”. However, 51.6% of learners (31 learners) failed in explaining the given proverb.

Thanks to the context, the answers were very close to each other.

### 2.5.3. Analysis of the Questionnaire

#### ► Part one: Background Information

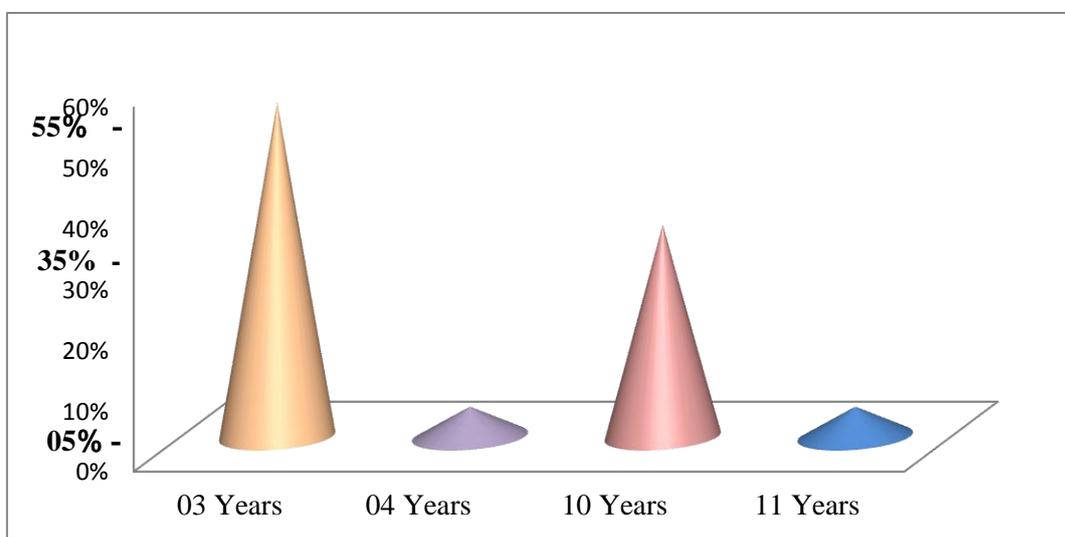
Q1: What is your gender?      Male       Female



*Figure 02: Learner's Gender.*

The main aim behind this question is to identify the learners' gender (female, male). Figure 02 shows that the participants in this questionnaire are 60 third-year students, and they were chosen randomly. The sample contains 20% males (12 males) and 80% females (48 females).

**Q2:** How long have you been studying English? Year(s) □

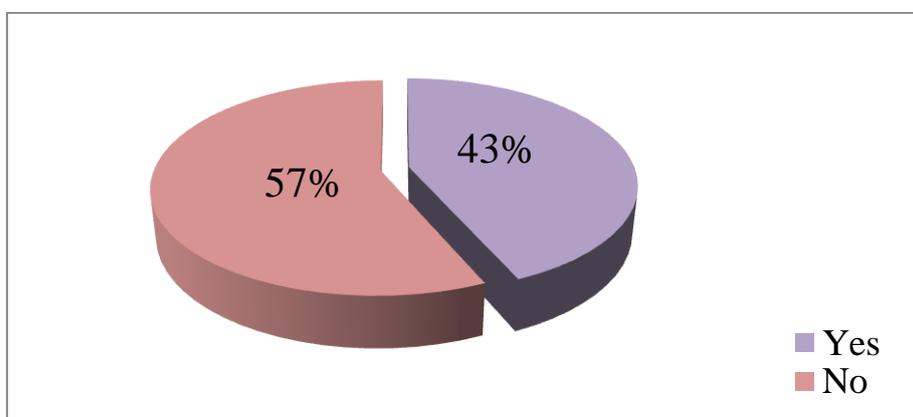


*Figure 03: Learner's Exposure in Studying English.*

The purpose of this question is to know how many years' learners have been studying English.

Figure 03 shows various answers of the participants, where each learner started counting from a different period of time. The majority of learners 55% (33 learners) have answered by 03 years; they have counted only years of university study. However, 21 learners (35%) have answered 10 years, in which they have counted both the middle school and university years. Whereas the (05%) of the remaining learners have answered by 04 years. The rest (05%) have answered by 11 years.

**Q03:** Have you ever had a chance to interact with a native speaker? Yes  No



*Figure 04: Learner's Interaction with Native Speakers*

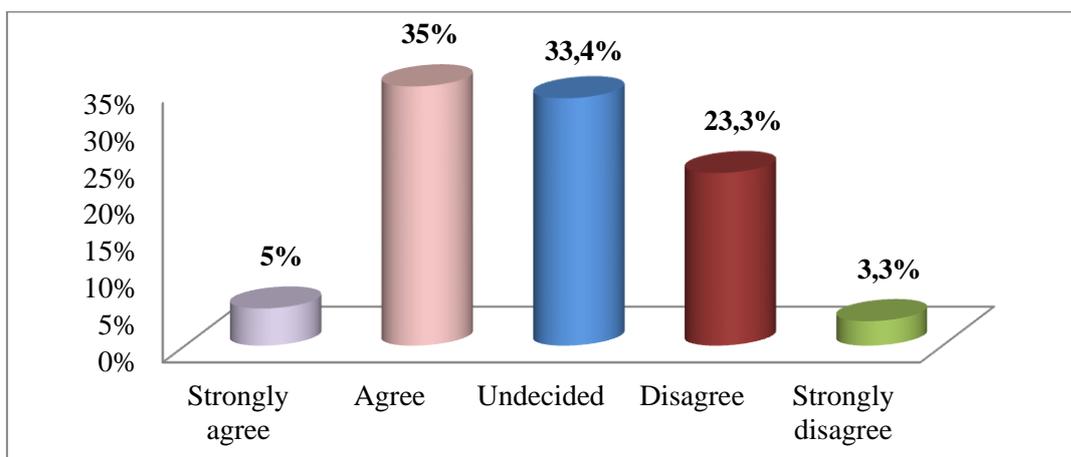
The purpose behind asking this question is to see whether learners had a chance before to interact with a native speaker.

We all know that the interaction with a native speaker is beneficial for English learners thus it improves their English language capacity and vocabulary. In figure 04, more than half of learners 57 % haven't had a chance to interact with native speakers. The remaining 43% had.

### ► Part Two: Problems in Understanding Proverbs

This part consists of eight problems in understanding proverbs; each problem is going to be presented in a single figure with its explanation and results.

**Q01/** Proverbs are difficult to understand because they are undetectable.

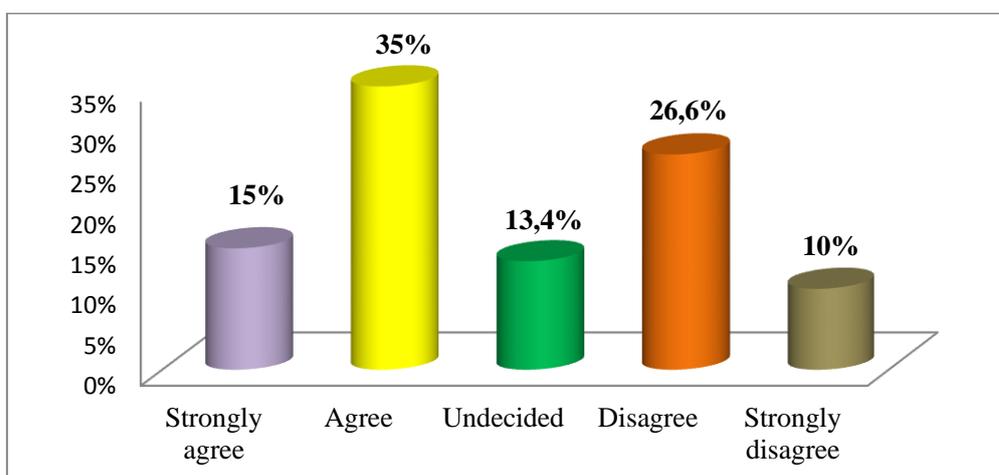


*Figure 05: Learner's Attitudes towards Undetectable Proverbs.*

The findings above show that 35% of learners from the sample (21 learners) agreed with the statement that proverbs are difficult to understand because they are undetectable, 03 learners (05%) strongly agreed with this idea. On the other hand, 14 learners (23.3%) disagreed with the idea of undetectable proverbs, and 02 of them strongly disagreed with it. The remaining 33.3% (20 learners) were undecided.

Since, proverbs are not detectable by Learners; they do not figure out that they are tackling a proverb. Hence, they cannot understand or explain it.

**Q02/** Proverbs are difficult to understand because they have unfamiliar words.

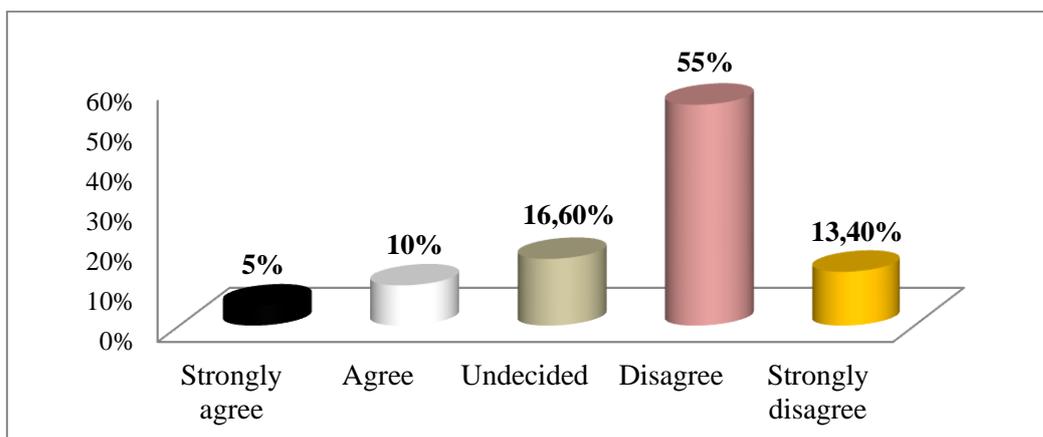


*Figure 06: Proverbs Difficulties in Understanding Unfamiliar Words.*

The findings in figure 06 indicate that 35% of learners from the sample agreed that proverbs are difficult to understand because they have unfamiliar words, and 15% of them strongly agreed. However, 26.6% of learners disagreed with this idea, and 10% of learners strongly disagreed, while the remaining 13.4% (08 learners) were undecided.

Some proverbs have by nature new vocabulary, which makes learners unable to deduce the meaning.

**Q03/** Proverbs are difficult to understand because of their grammatical structure.

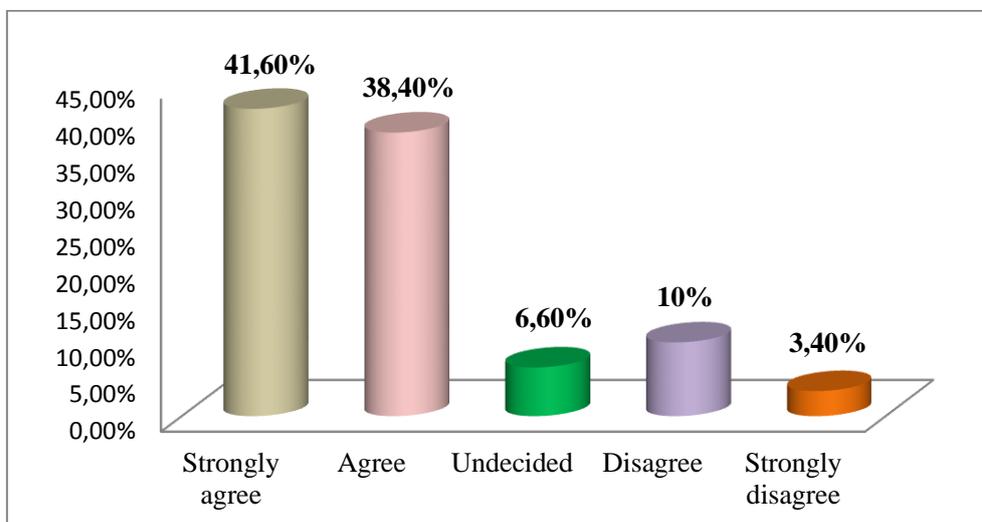


*Figure 07: Proverbs Difficulties Regarding Grammatical Structure.*

The above figure elucidates that more than half of learners 55% disagreed with the idea that the grammatical structure affects proverbs and makes them difficult to understand, and 13.4% of learners strongly disagreed. Whereas, 10% of learners, agreed with this idea, and only 05% of learners strongly agreed. The rest of learners 16.6% were undecided.

Some proverbs carry a special grammatical structure that may hinder learners from detecting proverbs.

**Q04/** Proverbs are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background.

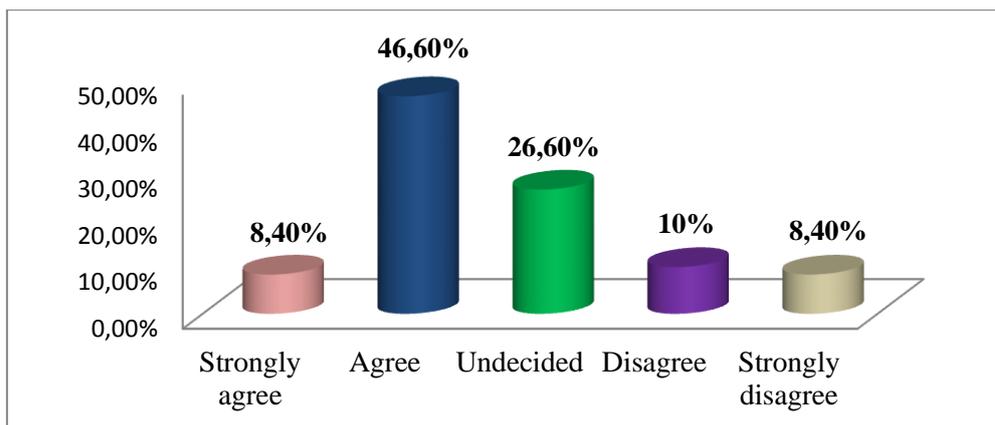


*Figure 08: Proverbs Difficulties because of the Lack of Cultural Background.*

The given figure demonstrates that almost all learners 80% agreed with: Proverbs are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background. 25 learners (41.5%) agreed and 23 learners (38.4%) strongly agreed with this idea. Whilst, a few numbers from the sample disagreed 10% of learners disagreed, and 3.4% strongly disagreed. The remaining 04 learners were undecided.

Proverbs vary across cultures, which makes learners unaware of their varieties.

**Q05/** Proverbs are difficult because they are not part of the courses' syllabi.

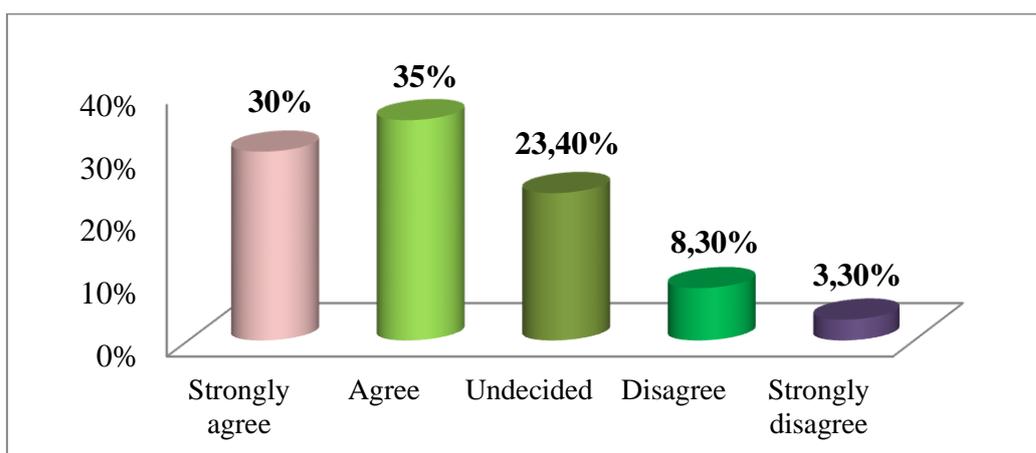


*Figure 09: Proverbs Difficulties Regarding Courses Syllabi.*

In figure 09, 55% learners from the sample agreed that proverbs are difficult because they are not part of the courses' syllabi; 28 learners agreed (46.6%) and 05 learners strongly agreed (8.4%) with the idea. However, 10% of learners from the sample disagreed and 8.4% strongly disagreed, while the rest of learners 26.6% were undecided.

In order to help learners increase their levels in English, Proverbs ought to be part of the course syllabi.

**Q06/** Proverbs are difficult because they are not taught well in class.

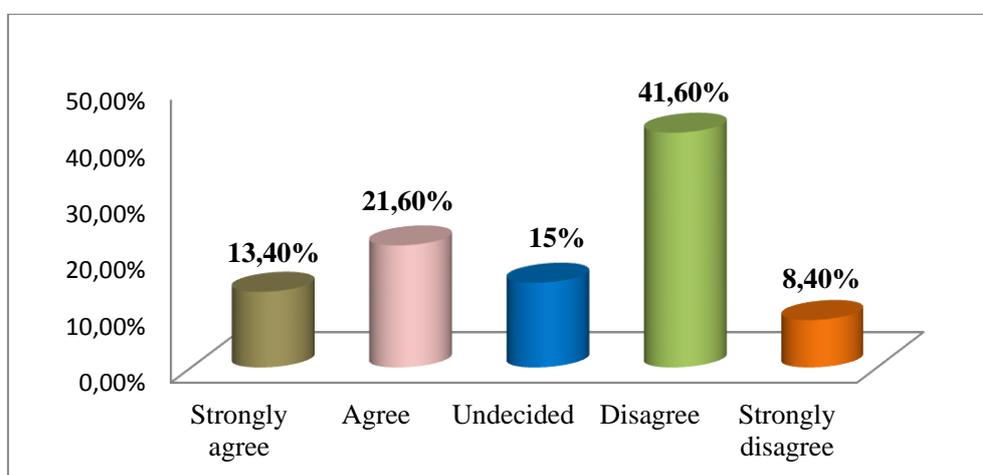


*Figure 10: Proverbs Difficulties Related to Classroom Teaching.*

We notice from the findings displayed in figure 10 that the majority of learners 65% were for the idea that proverbs are difficult because they are not taught well in class; 35% of learners agreed (21 learners) and 30% of learners strongly agreed. However (only 07)8.3% of learners disagreed and 3.3% strongly disagreed. The rest of 23.4% (14 learners) were undecided.

Since proverbs are not considered as a crucial part of the oral expression course, learners tend to neglect them.

**Q07/** Proverbs are difficult because they have no analog in Arabic.

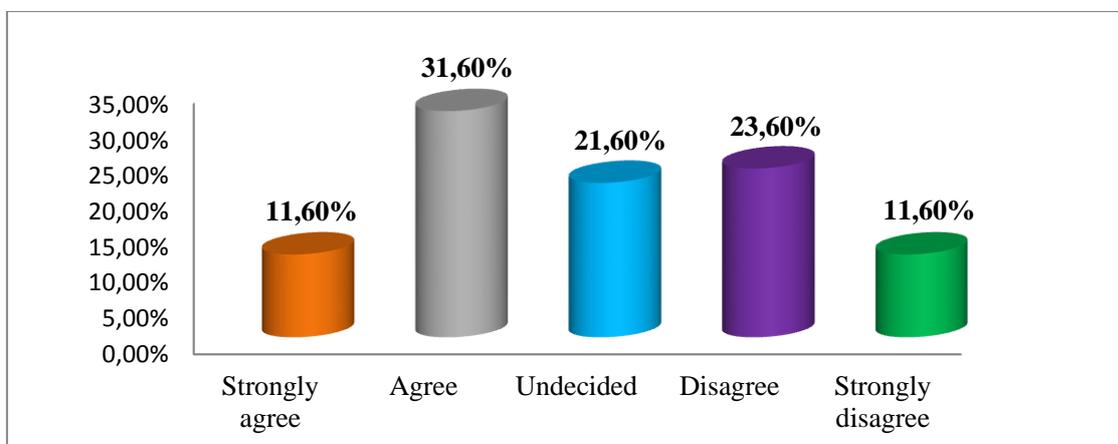


*Figure 11: Proverbs Difficulties Related to Language Differences.*

From the findings in figure 11, we notice that 25 learners from the sample (41.6%) disagreed with the idea that proverbs are difficult because they have no analog in Arabic, and 05 learners (8.4%) strongly disagreed. So, half of the learners 50% are against the idea presented. While, 21.6% of learners' agreed and 13.4% of learners strongly agreed with the idea. The remaining 09 learners were undecided.

Every single community has its own language and every single language has its own characteristics that distinguish them from one another.

**Q08/** Proverbs are difficult because there are not enough contexts in the sentences to infer the meaning.



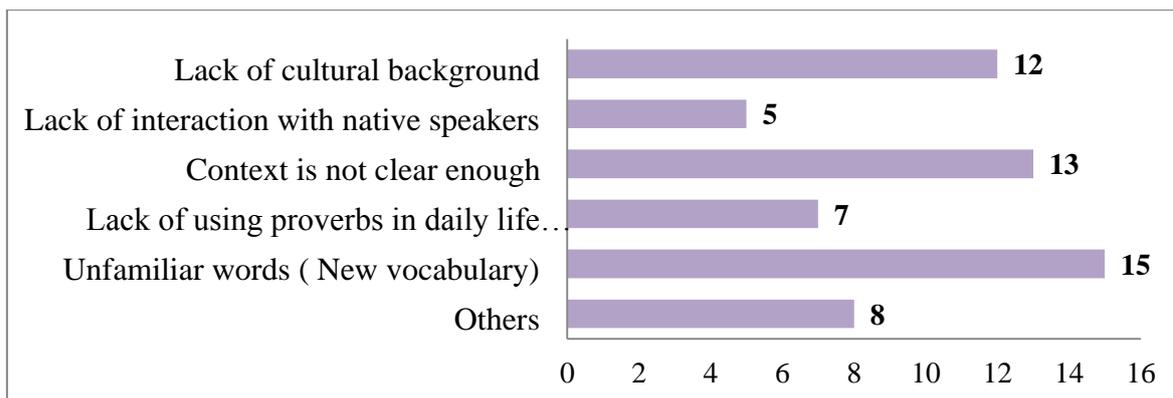
*Figure 12: Proverbs Difficulties Related to Context Absence.*

We notice from figure 12 that the findings were close to each other; 31.6% of learners from the sample (19 learners) agreed with the idea that Proverbs are difficult because there are not enough contexts in the sentences to infer the meaning. 23.6% of learners (14 learners) disagreed; however, the percentage of learners who strongly agreed and who strongly disagreed is the same 11.6% (07 learners). The rest of learners 21.6% were undecided.

The importance of the context plays a major role in understanding proverbs thus, proverbs are easily detected when they are put in the context.

### ► **Part Three: Further Problems in Understanding Proverbs**

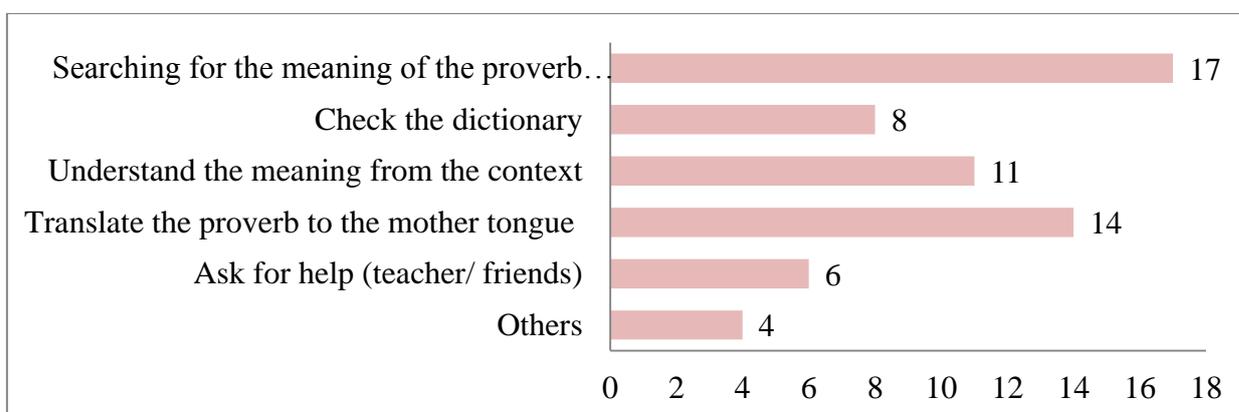
**Q09/** What are the other reasons that may prevent you from understanding the given proverbs?



*Figure 13: Learner's Justification behind Proverbs Misunderstanding.*

Learners' justification behind proverbs misunderstanding was variant, 15 learners claimed that the new vocabulary and the lack of knowledge are two reasons that may prevent them from understanding proverbs. 13 learners' answers indicated that unclear context hampered their understanding of the proverbs; 12 learners said that the lack of cultural background might be the reason behind it; 07 learners claimed that the reason behind it might be the absence of teaching proverbs at schools, and 05 learners stated that the inability to interact with native speakers is the reason. The rest of the learners had different answers.

**Q10/** What do you do when you do not comprehend a given proverb?



*Figure 14: Learners' Attitude towards Proverbs Incomprehension.*

As a response to this question, various answers have been provided: 17 learners answered, in case of incomprehension, they would search for the exact meaning whether in books or even Google. 8 learners would check the dictionary. In addition, 11 learners said that they would try to understand the meaning from the context. 14 learners said that they would rely on the translation from the source language to the target language. 06 learners would seek assistance. Only 04 learners would rely on other sources.

### **3. Discussion of Results**

This section is a part of the practical framework which deals with analyzing the results of the test and the questionnaire. The final findings will be discussed below.

#### **3.1. Interpretation and Discussion of the Test's Results**

The test which is composed of two tasks is administered to third year EFL students with the purpose of investigating whether they are able to detect proverbs in their contexts. Through the analysis of the test, it is perceived that Third Year Learners of English have faced problems in understanding English language proverbs.

To start with, the analysis of the first part of the test (which is introductory to the second part) showed that the Learners have succeeded in guessing the right definition of the given proverbs. As illustrated in Table01, 13 students have achieved an excellent average, and 18 learners have got a good average. This could be explained by the easiness of proverbs which are quite common in daily life conversation, thus the learners haven't faced difficulties in matching them with their meanings. 14 learners have got a poor average and 03 learners have got a very poor average. The reason behind the failure of these learners was the difficulty of the given proverbs (Table01).

Next, the second task of the test aims at seeing whether learners are able to detect proverbs from the context by providing learners with passages and sentences that contain proverbs and asking them to explain them. These proverbs are classified from the easiest to the most difficult ones. As shown in Table 02, Table 03 and Table 04 Learners have succeeded in explaining the given proverb especially in the first proverb “All that glitter is not gold” as it is a very common proverb. However, starting from the fourth proverb as illustrated in Table05, Table06, and Table07, the learners have struggled in explaining proverbs because of their structure and their level of difficulty. Furthermore, by referring to Table08, Table09, Table10, Table11 and Table 12, the learners could not explain the underlined proverbs due to their level of difficulty and the helping context.

To conclude, the findings of the first task demonstrate the success of the learners as the majority of them were able to know the right answers because the participants were provided with definitions which made the job easier for the learners. However, in the second task even though the researchers have provided the participants with the helping context to aid and simplify the work for them, they were not able to guess the intended meaning.

### **3.2. Interpretation and Discussion of the Questionnaire' Results**

The questionnaire which is composed of three sections aims at collecting the necessary data from the participants.

To begin with, the first section of the questionnaire consists of three general questions that aim at knowing the participants better. In the second section of the questionnaire which deals with the problems that learners face in understanding proverbs, eight problems were presented relying on the Likert scale. The learners would choose the answer that they think is more accurate according to their perspective. However, the

learners were not that cooperative as a greater part of them just answered randomly, especially the second and the third section of the questionnaire. 40% of Learners could not understand and explain proverbs; hence, they could not guess whether the underlined expressions were proverbs or not as shown in (Figure05). Besides, 50% learners have faced difficulties in proverbs' comprehension as the majority of them contain new words that are unfamiliar to the Learners such as "All Cats Are Grey in The Dark"(proverb04). Next, Learners were against the problem presented in the questionnaire as 68, 4% disagreed that grammatical structure of proverbs may hinder them from understanding proverbs as only 15% have faced this problem. Furthermore, cultural background can sometimes be a burden in front of Learners as they are unaware of the different cultures across the globe as shown in (Figure08). Proverbs have a crucial importance in the life of the individual especially EFL Learners as they enrich their vocabulary as well as boost their level in English. Consequently, proverbs ought to be included in the syllabi. They should give them importance especially in the oral expression classes, in which the teacher should refer to them in his classes as illustrated in (Figure10).

#### **4. Limitations**

No research is free from imperfections as every research faces some obstacles that may hinder the researchers from collecting and gathering their data. The major obstacles will be discussed below:

- Lack of references
  
- The pandemic (COVID 19) has affected the educational system which led to the appearance of the grouping system
  
- Due to the current circumstances, there was a shortage of time

- The target population was small
- The target population responses were not helpful as the learners were not serious in their answers
- Even though the question of the test was clear, the learners didn't know how to answer it; instead of explaining the given proverbs, most of them just translated them into the Arabic language

### **Conclusion**

This chapter aims at discovering EFL learner's problems in understanding English proverbs. For this, a test and a questionnaire have been used. The results of the test show that Learners lack knowledge about proverbs. This lack is due to the cultural gap between languages. The test was divided into two sections in which the first section is introductory to the second one. On the one hand, the results of the first task reveal the success of Learners because the researchers have provided them with the accurate definition.so; it was easy for them to detect the appropriate definition. On the other hand, the results of the second task show failure of the learners in the explanation of proverbs because of several factors such as the unfamiliarity of proverbs, their grammatical structure.

## **General Conclusion**

The current study was conducted in order to investigate EFL learners' problems in understanding English language proverbs at Mohammed Seddik Ben Yahia University. Thus, it aims to confirm the hypotheses which state that: Firstly, Learner's difficulties are due to their lack of knowledge of proverbs. Secondly, Proverbs are difficult because of their undetectable form. Thirdly, learners may find difficulties in understanding proverbs because of the context.

The research relied on the quantitative and the qualitative methods. From the analysis of the results, it has been concluded that third year students of English have faced problems in understanding proverbs, namely: learners lack of knowledge about proverbs, the undetectable form that a proverb can have, the cultural gap between the mother tongue and the foreign language, when putting the proverbs in sentences or passages and asking the learners to guess their actual meaning, the majority of them couldn't come up with an exact meaning. However, when providing the learners with their definitions many of them succeeded in knowing the right meaning of each proverb.

To sum up, the hypotheses of this research are confirmed as learners faced problems in understanding proverbs because of their undetectable form and unfamiliarity as well as learners lacking enough knowledge about proverbs.

## **Pedagogical Recommendations**

Considering what has been covered and tackled in this research, these are some suggestions that might be helpful:

- Learners are recommended to study and have more knowledge about proverbs
- Teachers ought to give importance to proverbs
- Proverbs are needed to be included in the course syllabi

### **Suggestion for Further Research**

For further researchers in this area, we suggest:

- To investigate the role of proverbs in enhancing learners' level in the English language

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# **Appendices**

## Appendix A

### Task 01

**Part one:** Match each Proverb with its suitable Meaning:

* Proverbs.*	* Meaning.*
1/ Don't judge a book by its cover.	A/ One should work in order to get things instead of wishing for them.
2/ Actions speak louder than words.	B/ Different people have different ideas and views about what is beautiful.
3/ An apple a day keeps the doctor away	C/ People who are similar spend time together.
4/ Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.	D/ You cannot know what someone or something is like just by looking at the person or thing's appearance.
5/ A friend in need is a friend indeed.	E/ When you believe that family connections are always more important than other types of relationships.
6/ Blood is thicker than water.	F/ In any situation, be optimistic about the result, but always be ready for the worst outcome.
7/ Barking dogs seldom bite.	G/ You can only judge the quality of something after you have tried, used, and experienced it.
8/ Don't bite the hand that feeds you.	H/ You can try to help someone by giving good advice, but you can't force them to accept it or follow it.
9/ Blow your own trumpets.	I/ When a situation becomes difficult, strong people don't give up; they work harder.
10/ Don't cast pearls before swine.	J/ What you do carry more weight than what you say.
11/ Every cloud has a silver lining.	K/ The person who complains in a situation is more likely to get something.
12/ The proof of the pudding is the eating.	L/ To proudly tell other people about your own achievements and successes.
13/ If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.	M/ Nutritious food will make you healthier.
14/ Time and tide wait for no man.	N/ A person who readily threatens other people does not often take action.
15/ Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.	O/ A friend who helps you when you really need help is a true friend.
16/ People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.	P/ To turn against someone who has been a benefactor in the past.
17/ The squeaky wheel gets the grease.	Q/ To offer something very valuable to someone who is unable to appreciate it.
18/ When the going gets tough, the tough get going.	R/ People cannot stop the passing time, and therefore should not delay doing things.
19/ You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink it.	S/ Every negative occurrence has a positive aspect to it.
20/ Birds of a feather flock together.	T/ Don't criticize someone if you are not perfect either; don't be a hypocrite.

**Part two:** Explain the underlined expressions: (in English).

1. My mother advised me to choose my friends wisely because all that glitters is not gold.

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.....

2. I have heard that Jacke has been arrested .Well; i guess that bad news travels fast.

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3. Mohamed was quite a bright student, but as the years went by, he became a reckless person and so he didn't get his baccalaureate exam because As you sow so you reap.

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4. A: I cannot believe that you are finally going to meet this girl that you have been talking to on your Instagram. What if she is not as you imagined her to be?

B: It's fine. All cats are grey in the dark.

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5. The poor wife has been living in a fool's paradise with her husband.

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6. He has a lot of debts to pay but still he chooses to keep one's head above water.

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7. A: I was talking to my sister on the phone and she implied that she could pay us a visit tomorrow.

B: Are you sure? We need to clean the house then, it's a mess!

A: not sure, but forewarned is forearmed.

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8. Ella is a naive girl who trusts everyone easily and i always tell her to be careful because Honey is sweet but the bee stings.

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9. A: The boss has just accused me of something I did not do and when I have not accepted it, he fired me.

B: oh really! And what are you going to do about it?

A: You know what they say revenge is a dish that can be served cold.

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10. John is someone that keeps on talking about his success in business all the time .He forgets that pride goes before a fall.

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.....

11. After her accident, she said that she is never going to ride a car again in her life because a burnt child dreads the fire.

Thank you for your collaboration!

## Appendix B

### Questionnaire:

Dear students,

We would be very grateful if you could answer these questions for the sake of our study entitled “*A Study of Learners Problems in Understanding English Language Proverbs.*” The Questionnaire is partly related to task 01 because we want you to have a fresh experience in mind while responding.

### A-Background Information:

01/ what is your gender?      Male                   Female

02/ How long have you been studying English? Year(s)

03/ Have you ever had a chance to interact with a native speaker?    Yes                   No

### B-Problems in Understanding Proverbs:

Read each statement below carefully and circle the response according to the scale below

(1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Undecided, (4) Disagree, and (5) Strongly Disagree

	S   A   U   D   S
1. Proverbs are difficult to understand because they are undetectable.	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)
2. Proverbs are difficult to understand because they have unfamiliar words.	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)
3. Proverbs are difficult to understand because of their grammatical structure.	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)
4. Proverbs are difficult to understand because of the lack of cultural background.	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

5. Proverbs are difficult because they are not part of the courses' syllabi.	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)
6. Proverbs are difficult because they are not taught well in class.	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)
7. Proverbs are difficult because they have no analogue in Arabic.	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)
8. Proverbs are difficult because there is not enough context in the sentences to infer the meaning.	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

### **C-Difficulties in Understanding Proverbs:**

9. What are the other reasons that may prevent you from understanding the given proverbs?

.....

.....

.....

10. What do you do when you do not comprehend a given proverb?

.....

.....

.....

Thank you for your collaboration!

## Résumé

La présente étude vise à montrer les problèmes rencontrés par les étudiants lors de l'apprentissage des proverbes, en anglais, dans un contexte académique. Elle cherche à explorer comment le contexte environnant peut affecter la compréhension des proverbes anglais. Cette étude a été réalisée auprès d'étudiants de troisième année au département d'anglais de l'Université Mohammed Seddik Ben Yahia - Jijel. Elle émet l'hypothèse que les problèmes des apprenants dans la compréhension des proverbes proviennent de trois sources principales : le manque de connaissances des étudiants sur les proverbes, la forme indétectable des proverbes et le manque de contexte. Pour atteindre cet objectif, un test et un questionnaire ont été administrés à soixante (60) apprenants de langue anglaise de troisième année. Les résultats montrent que les apprenants éprouvent des difficultés à comprendre les proverbes en raison de leur manque de connaissances. Par conséquent, il est suggéré que les apprenants et les enseignants attachent plus d'importance aux proverbes dans le cadre de la classe en les incluant dans les programmes d'enseignement.

**Mots clés** : proverbes, contexte, compréhension des proverbes, les difficultés des étudiants

## المخلص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى إظهار المشكلات التي يواجهها الطلاب عند تعلم الأمثال باللغة الإنجليزية في السياق الأكاديمي. حيث تسعى لاستكشاف كيف يمكن للسياق المحيط أن يؤثر على فهم الأمثال الإنجليزية. أجريت هذه الدراسة مع طلاب السنة الثالثة بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة محمد الصديق بن يحيى - جامعة جيجل ، حيث تفترض أن مشاكل المتعلمين في فهم الأمثال متعلقة بثلاثة مصادر رئيسية: افتقار الطلاب إلى معرفة الأمثال، و صعوبة رصدها، وغياب السياق. لتحقيق أهداف هذه الدراسة، تم إجراء اختبار واستبيان على ستين (60) طالب من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في السنة الثالثة. تظهر النتائج أن المتعلمين يجدون صعوبة في فهم الأمثال لقلّة معرفتهم بها. لذلك، تقترح الدراسة أن يولي المتعلمون والمعلمون أهمية أكبر للأمثال في بيئة الفصل الدراسي من خلال ادراجها في برامج التدريس.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأمثال ، السياق، فهم الأمثال، المشكلات التي يواجهها الطلاب