



Pragmatic failure in the use of English numerical idioms among Uzbek EFL learners



 Davletova Dildora
Nadir Kizi¹⁺

 Rakhimova Guzal
Yuldashevna²

 Matmurodov
Khojimurod
Abdusharif Ugli³

 Matnazarova
Khayriniso⁴

 Jonibekova
Mehriniso Umarbek
Qizi⁵

¹Faculty of Philology, Department of Turkology and Language Theory, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, 050040, Kazakhstan.

¹Email: dildoradavletova21@gmail.com

^{2,3}Faculty of Foreign Philology, Translation Theory and Practice Department, Urgench State University Named after Abu Rayhan Biruni, 220100, Uzbekistan.

²Email: guzal.yuldashovna@gmail.com

³Email: matmurodov94@urdu.uz

⁴Faculty of Foreign Philology, Department of English language and literature, Urgench State University Named after Abu Rayhan Biruni, 220100, Uzbekistan.

⁴Email: matnazarovaxayriniso@gmail.com

⁵Department of Theoretical Aspects of the English Language, № 2, Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Uzbekistan.

⁵Email: mehrinisojonibekova@gmail.com



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 13 November 2025

Revised: 23 February 2026

Accepted: 17 March 2026

Published: 20 April 2026

Keywords

Cross-cultural pragmatics

Cultural metaphors

Numerical idioms

Pragmatic failure

Socio-pragmatic failure

Uzbek EFL learners.

This paper examines pragmatic failure in the use of English numerical idiomatic expressions among Uzbek EFL learners. Figurative and culture-bound meanings of idioms often cause misunderstandings and inappropriate usage in intercultural contexts. Using principles of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, the study analyzes instances of pragmatic failure based on data from a Google Form questionnaire completed by 140 students at Urgench State University. The research emphasizes how the Uzbek linguistic worldview influences idiomatic interpretation, affecting learners' comprehension and application of idioms in English. The findings indicate that Uzbek EFL learners' pragmatic competence in understanding numerical idioms is generally satisfactory; however, they experience pragmatic failure with some idioms involving numbers. This failure results from literal interpretation or transferring native cultural metaphors. The study aligns with previous research, emphasizing that pragmatic competence is not solely linguistic but also rooted in cultural cognition. Such competence can be improved through understanding cultural norms or living within the society. Limitations include focusing only on idioms with numbers and participants from a single educational context, which may not fully represent all Uzbek learners.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to existing literature by exploring issues in pragmatics and cognitive linguistics. It provides new insights into idiom misinterpretations and improves the understanding of pragmatic failure causes among EFL learners. The study emphasizes the importance of raising learners' awareness of idiomatic usage in authentic contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, interest in learning English is growing rapidly among Uzbek students. While learning a foreign language, it is important not only to master its grammar and vocabulary but also to use idiomatic expressions appropriately. Idiomatic expressions play a central role in everyday English discourse, functioning as lexical units and carriers of cultural and pragmatic meaning. However, for many EFL learners, especially those from linguistically

distant backgrounds, idioms are among the most challenging aspects of language acquisition. Uzbek learners of English often face difficulties in both understanding idioms and using them correctly in context. Such challenges may lead to pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983), where the speaker's intended meaning is misunderstood or perceived as inappropriate.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Numerical idioms are particularly challenging among idiomatic expressions because they convey implied meanings and specific speech functions that depend on context and cultural knowledge. These idioms differ significantly between English and Uzbek. When Uzbek learners encounter English numerical idioms, they often face pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic failures, highlighting the importance of cultural and contextual understanding for accurate comprehension and usage.

1.2. Research Objectives

The main objectives of the research are the following:

- To examine whether Uzbek EFL learners correctly understand English idioms.
- To analyze their ability to use idioms appropriately in communicative contexts.
- To identify types of pragmatic failure and cultural misunderstandings in idiom use.
- To explore learners' awareness of the cultural background underlying English idioms.

1.3. Research Questions

- To what extent do Uzbek EFL learners understand the meanings of English idioms correctly?
- How appropriately do Uzbek EFL learners use English idioms in context?
- What types of pragmatic failure or cultural misunderstanding occur when Uzbek learners use English idioms?
- How aware are Uzbek EFL learners of the cultural meanings associated with English idioms?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While much research has focused on learners' linguistic competence, fewer studies address pragmatic competence development, especially regarding idiomatic expressions. This review examines scholarship on pragmatic failure, idiom acquisition, and cross-cultural differences in idiom use, highlighting gaps relevant to Uzbek EFL learners.

2.1. Pragmatic Failure

The concept of "communicative competence" as a pragmatic idea was introduced by Hymes (1972), highlighting the importance of sociocultural context in language use. This concept established a basis for understanding language's pragmatic function in social interactions. Building on this framework, Thomas (1983) explored the consequences of inappropriate language use, introducing the concept of pragmatic failure. Pragmatic failure occurs when language is used inappropriately or misinterpreted in social interaction (Thomas, 1983). Thomas categorizes pragmatic failure into two primary types: pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic.

The first type involves situations where the listener misunderstands the speaker's intended grammatical meaning in a specific context or fails to grasp the speech act or illocutionary force (Thomas, 1983). For idioms, if a student cannot understand the figurative meaning due to limited idiomatic knowledge, vocabulary, or structure, it is considered a pragmalinguistic failure.

The second type, in contrast, results from differences in the cultural beliefs and assumptions of interlocutors, demonstrating how variations in cultural values can influence understanding (Thomas, 1983). Even when learners recognize the figurative meaning of an idiom, they may still misuse or misunderstand it due to cultural or contextual

differences. For example, a learner might know the idiomatic meaning of "break a leg" but perceive it negatively because of cultural differences in expressions of encouragement.

Leech (1983) stated that pragmatic failure is not solely about grammatical errors; even grammatically correct sentences can fail pragmatically if context, social norms, or politeness strategies are ignored. Cultural differences, history, and customs influence pragmatic failure, as individuals interpret from their own cultural perspective, leading to cognitive differences and potential failure in communication.

Wolfon (1989), as cited in Muir and Xu (2011), claims that limited linguistic knowledge of the target language may lead to pragmatic failure. Non-natives often produce linguistically inappropriate utterances due to low proficiency. Wolfon (1989), as cited in Muir and Xu (2011), also found that lacking language proficiency causes non-native speakers to express an incorrect degree of regret when examining apologies.

The lack of communicative and pragmatic competence is a primary reason for failure. Pragmatic, communicative, and sociolinguistic skills are essential for effective communication, as widely recognized in research (Lihui & Jianbin, 2010; Riley, 1984; Shen, 2013; Sheng, 2016; Yan, 2022). Even with grammatical knowledge of a second language, learners may struggle in real conversations. In idiomatic language, pragmatic competence involves choosing appropriate idioms for specific contexts, understanding their connotations, and using them correctly in communication.

Rushdi, Ahmed, and Ismael (2023) investigate pragmatic failure, noting that learners may struggle due to cultural differences affecting their understanding of idiomatic meanings. They highlight that learners might find it difficult to grasp the subtleties of expressions within cultural and linguistic contexts, emphasizing the importance of cultural norms and indirect speech acts in conveying meaning.

2.2. Idiomatic Expressions

English is among the most widely learned languages, and idiomatic expressions are vital components that reflect linguistic patterns and cultural values. They often carry figurative meanings that cannot be inferred from their literal parts, making them challenging for second language learners (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to Lakoff & Johnson's conceptual theory, HAPPY IS UP, and SAD IS DOWN. This is evident in expressions like *feel up, have high spirits, give someone a lift* versus *feel down, be low, fall into depression*. Idioms such as *in the seventh heaven* and *on cloud nine* signify happiness, as *heaven* and *clouds* are conceptualized as high above. Conversely, *six feet under* indicates death or sadness, with *under* representing a downward, negative orientation.

Kunin (1984) defines idioms as fixed word combinations whose meanings cannot be deduced from individual components. Since idiomatic expressions' meanings depend on context, understanding them requires a pragmatic approach, as they cannot be interpreted separately. Context is essential for learners to grasp their meaning (Sporleder, Li, Gorinski, & Koch, 2010).

According to Nation and Meara (2002) and Nunan (2003), idioms are more than linguistic components; they enrich communication with vividness, aiding language mastery. Their meanings cannot be derived from individual words. Wright (2002) notes that set expressions are recognized by native speakers but are difficult for non-native speakers to understand and often have figurative rather than literal meanings. He emphasizes that idiomatic language is closely linked to culture.

Unawareness of cultural perceptions in a second language can hinder effective communication. Cultural awareness is vital for mastering idiomatic competence. Kövecses (2010) highlights that idioms encode culture-specific knowledge, and learners unfamiliar with this may misinterpret meanings or misuse expressions. Since idioms are embedded in cultural contexts, understanding them requires grasping the underlying conceptual metaphors and culturally specific associations.

Baker (2012) notes that an awareness of sociocultural context, tendencies, conventions, and norms is essential for successful intercultural communication; linguistic knowledge alone is insufficient for developing pragmatic

competence. Supporting this, Byram and Risager (1999, cited in Al-Issa (2005)) emphasize that culture is central to communication, especially regarding second-language learners' cultural integration. According to Alptekin (2002), Learners are not only expected to acquire accurate forms of the target language but also to learn how to use these forms in social situations within the target language setting to convey appropriate, coherent, and strategically effective meanings for native speakers. Thus, learning a new language becomes a form of enculturation, where individuals acquire new cultural frames of reference and a new worldview, reflecting those of the target language culture and its speakers.

2.3. Numerical Idiomatic Expressions

Numbers are not only used for measuring or counting but also play a fundamental role in shaping human thought and culture. Stepanov (2004) notes that numbers, especially natural ones, often serve as an explicit or implicit foundation for a wide range of cultural and social ideas. Since ancient times, the unified concepts and images found in language, mythology, philosophy, literature, the humanities, natural sciences, sociology, and political science have been shaped by simple logical principles that are clearly expressed through numbers. In his book, he quotes Lotman: "A number is a universal symbol of culture, not just one of its elements."

Previous research by Karimov (2019), Rejapov (2023), and Nematjanova (2025) shows that the symbolic use of numbers in Uzbek culture shares notable similarities with other traditions. Therefore, studying numerical idioms is important, as learners can more easily understand such expressions when the symbolic meanings in their native culture align with those in the target language. When these cultural concepts coincide, learners transfer knowledge and interpret figurative meanings more accurately. When symbolic associations differ, misunderstanding risk increases, highlighting the need for deeper cross-cultural analysis of numerical idioms.

Chinese scholar Hu (2022) emphasizes the significance of numerical idioms in language, adopting a cognitive approach for interpretation. Her research compares idioms in English and Chinese, exploring cultural factors influencing their differences. She advocates for further research on numerical idioms, considering them symbols of human social progress that mirror social and cultural life.

3. METHODOLOGY

The current research employs a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess EFL learners' pragmatic competence and cultural awareness. It examines how Uzbek learners understand and use idioms with numbers and identifies pragmatic failures in this process, providing insights into language use and cultural understanding among learners.

3.1. Description of the Research

In this research, a structured questionnaire via Google Form (including four sections) was conducted. The first section covers background information such as gender, age, and English proficiency level. The second section, titled 'Comprehension of Numerical Idioms,' presents 10 multiple-choice questions where respondents select the correct answer. The third section helped us identify learners' abilities to use idioms contextually; they were given situations requiring them to select the most appropriate idioms. This section aligns with Thomas' framework for analysis, specifically, understanding the meanings and references of numerical idiomatic expressions. In the final sections, respondents answer questions about cultural awareness and attitudes toward idioms.

This research examines Uzbek EFL learners' understanding of numerical idioms and pragmatic failure, which is the inability to grasp the intended meaning behind speech. Interpretation of numerical idioms varies across cultures due to differences in norms and values that influence language use and comprehension. While some numerical idioms are culturally appropriate and carry positive connotations in both languages, others are unsuitable in Uzbek. Such expressions can be selected and presented to learners within their contexts to enhance pragmatic competence.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study were EFL Uzbek students attending Urgench State University in Uzbekistan. A total of 140 respondents, aged 18 to 30, participated in the questionnaire. Most had an upper-intermediate language level, and nearly all had been learning English for over three years.

3.3. Data Collection

The idioms in the questionnaire were sourced from Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries. Researchers carefully studied these idioms before selecting them. The following idioms were chosen from these sources, ensuring accuracy and relevance for the study.

At sixes and sevens - to be confused or disorganized.

In the seventh heaven/on cloud nine- extremely happy.

Kill two birds with one stone- to achieve two things with one action.

Put two and two together - to deduce something from the facts.

Two-faced- to be hypocritical and deceitful.

Two peas in a pod- two people who are very similar in appearance or behaviour.

Behind the eight ball- to be in a difficult or troublesome situation.

At the eleventh hour- at the latest possible moment.

Have nine lives- to be very lucky or able to survive dangerous situations many times.

Six feet under to be dead and buried.

To be back to square one- to be forced to think of a new course of action because your first course of action failed.

These numerical idioms were chosen because some resemble their Uzbek equivalents, while others differ significantly. Analyzing these idioms helps determine whether learners' cultural awareness influences their understanding of the meaning and proper usage of such expressions.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

All participants voluntarily completed the questionnaire. Personal identity was not collected, and responses remained confidential. Participants were informed that the data would be used solely for academic purposes.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Comprehension of Idioms

The results of the students are presented in this section as follows:

As it is illustrated in Figure 1, the failure rate of students in understanding numerical idiomatic expressions is relatively low; 82 out of 140 learners succeeded, while 58 did not.

"At sixes and sevens" means:

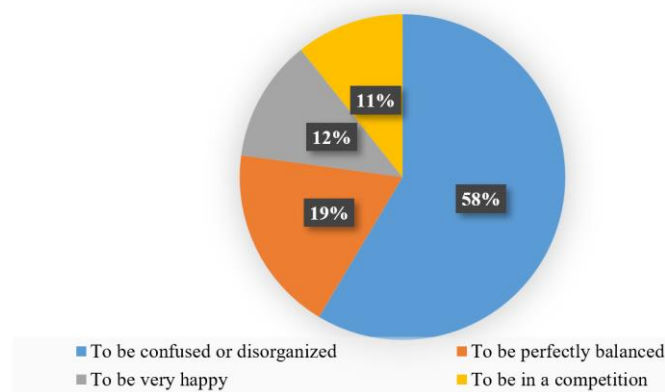


Figure 1. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical idiom: "At sixes and sevens."

The main reason for the pragmatic failure in interpreting the idiom "at sixes and sevens" is the lack of an exact Uzbek equivalent. Additionally, in Uzbek linguoculture, the number "seven" is mainly associated with positive connotations, such as "seven treasures," which further complicates understanding.

Figure 2 illustrates that a similarity between Uzbek and English linguocultures is the idiom seventh heaven, which reflects a positive association with the number seven. Many students performed well on this item, with 115 answering correctly. However, 10% chose the incorrect answer due to cultural misconceptions, aligning with Leech's statement. In Uzbek culture, the idiom (To fly in the sky) is used ironically to describe someone who is daydreaming.

"In the seventh heaven" means:

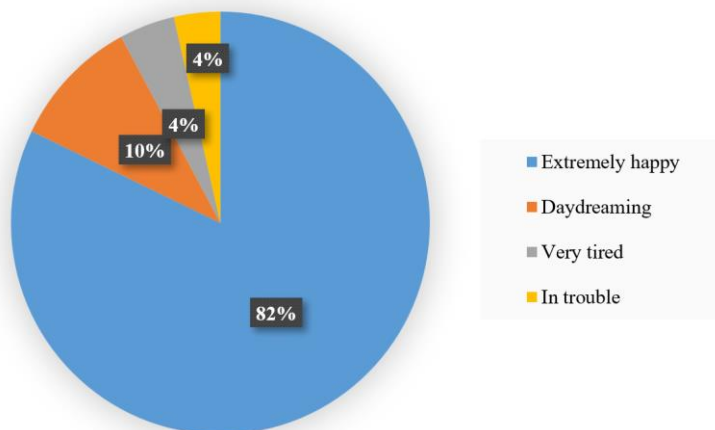


Figure 2. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical Idiom: "In the seventh heaven".

Figure 3 demonstrates that the analysis highlights a notable success in understanding the idiom's intended meaning, with 129 out of 140 students answering correctly. This high success rate is due to the idiom having a close Uzbek equivalent, Bir o'q bilan ikki quyovni urmoq (literal translation: "kill two rabbits with one stone"), which helps students grasp its figurative sense. However, some students experienced pragmatic failure by interpreting the idiom literally, focusing on the word "birds," which sometimes appears as "animals" in variants and can act as a near-synonym. This focus hindered their comprehension of the idiom's figurative meaning.

Moreover, from a metaphorical standpoint, the verb "kill" carries inherently negative associations, leading students to focus on its literal meaning rather than the idiom's implicit pragmatic message. Only 11 students failed the third item of the questionnaire, as shown in Figure 3.

"Kill two birds with one stone" means:

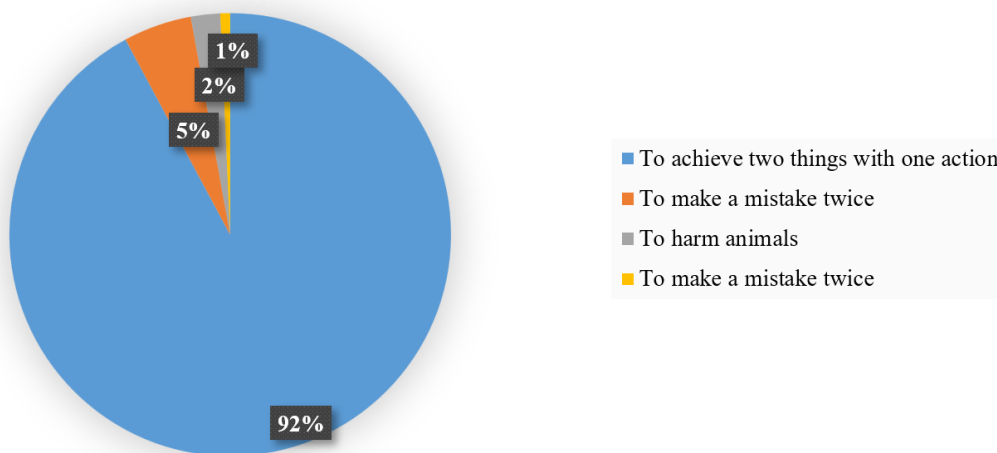


Figure 3. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical idiom: "Kill two birds with one stone".

The following item shows a conceptual similarity between English and students' first language, as well as their cultural background. The high proportion of correct responses to item 4 is attributable to this cultural similarity, which likely facilitated understanding and response accuracy.

Regarding pragmatic failure, students lacked the pragmatic competence to understand the idiom's intended meaning; they focused on literal, word-by-word translation. The expression put two and two together might be interpreted as "calculate," "study mathematics," or "add numbers." Additionally, the Uzbek equivalent of this idiom does not include numerical elements, which may have contributed to the misunderstanding. Specifically, 75% of students' answers were correct, while the rate of pragmatic failure was 25%, as illustrated in Figure 4.

"Put two and two together" means:

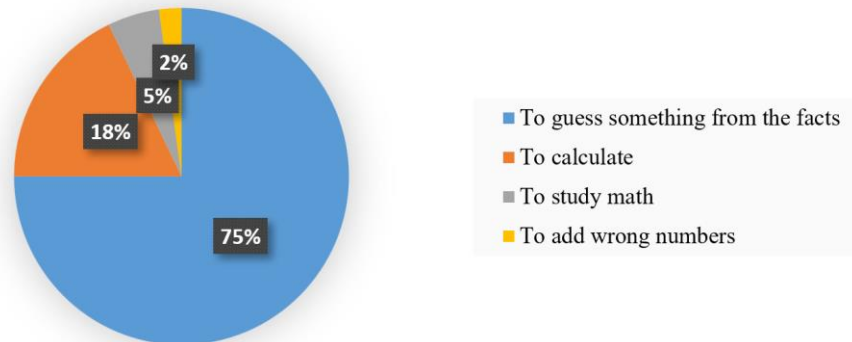


Figure 4. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical idiom: "put two and two together".

A high number of students pick the correct meaning of the given idioms in Figure 5. The meaning of this idiom reflects expected implications across many cultures, including Uzbek. The Uzbek version is formed using the components (two) and (Faced). Out of 140 students, 129 answered correctly, while 11 failed to understand the meaning. Pragmatic failure may occur when students do not recognize the idiom's figurative usage or intended meaning.

"Two-faced" means:

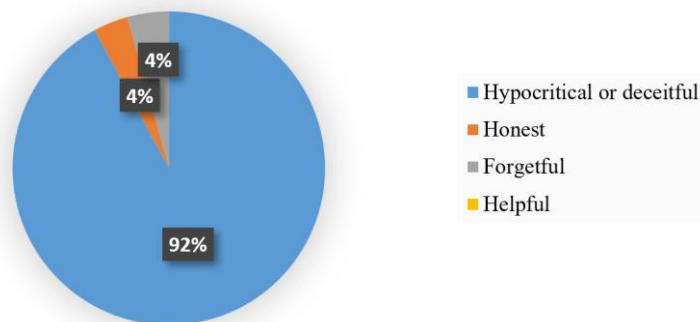


Figure 5. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical idiom: "Two-faced".

According to the results, some students provided answers similar to an idiom with a negative meaning: a dispute between two people. Thirteen percent of learners chose an incorrect alternative with a negative connotation. Although most selected the correct answer, pragmatic failure occurred in interpreting this example's meaning. In Uzbek, the idiom *ikki qo'chqorning kallasi bir qozonda qaynamaydi* (literally, "the head of two sheep is not boiled in one pot") refers to a dispute and has a negative connotation. Consequently, students confused its meaning with the English idiom "two peas in a pod" due to interference from their first-language perceptions. The result is seen in the following Figure 6.

"Two peas in a pod" means:

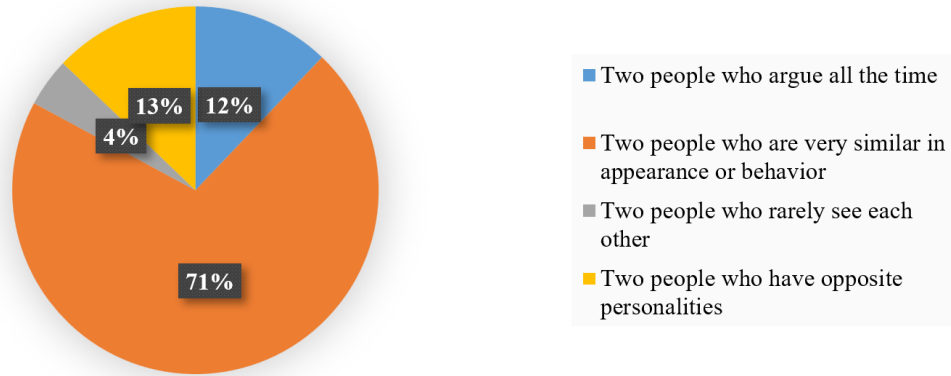


Figure 6. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical idiom: "Two peas in a pod".

The results indicate that learners were relatively successful with the item Behind the Eight Ball, with 56% recognizing its meaning. However, pragmatic failure occurred: 25% failed to select the correct answer, and 13% could not identify it, as shown in Figure 7. This may be due to the Uzbek cultural association of the number eight, like seven, with positive connotations.

"Behind the eight ball" means:

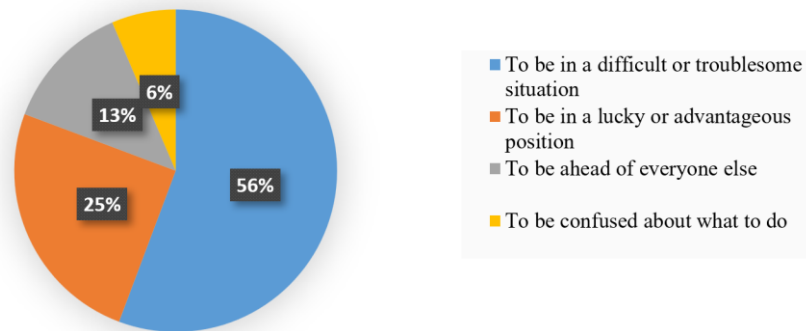


Figure 7. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical idiom: "Behind the eight ball".

A relatively high success rate was observed, with 73% of students selecting the correct answer. Although there is no exact Uzbek equivalent of the idiom "at the eleventh hour," students effectively grasped its meaning. However, 10% chose answers based on literal interpretation. As noted earlier, pragmatic errors mainly resulted from literal translation and misinterpretation of the idiom's intended meaning. See Figure 8.

"At the eleventh hour" means:

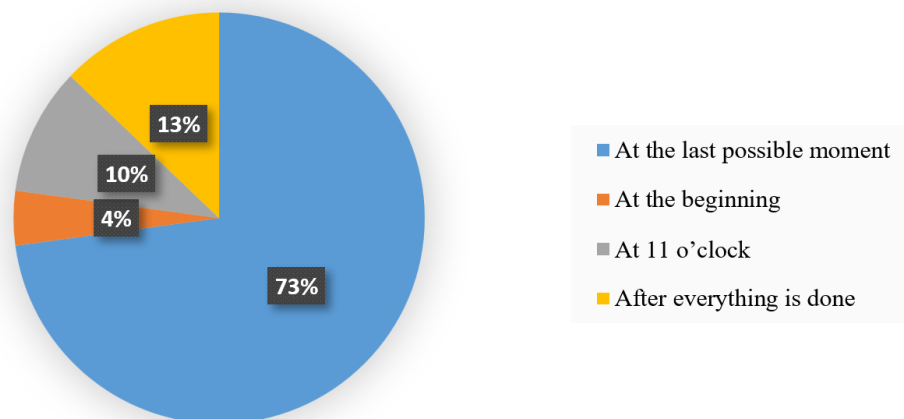


Figure 8. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical idiom: "At the eleventh hour".

Most learners (90%) selected the correct answer for item 9, while 10% chose an incorrect alternative. The idiom 'to have nine lives' has an Uzbek equivalent expressed with the number 'forty' and the word 'woman' (A woman has forty lives). Therefore, understanding the idiom's original meaning was not difficult for students. Regarding errors, students often fail to grasp the idiomatic expression's meaning and select an incorrect answer that closely resembles the original, indicating a misunderstanding of the idiom's true significance, as is noticed and seen in Figure 9.

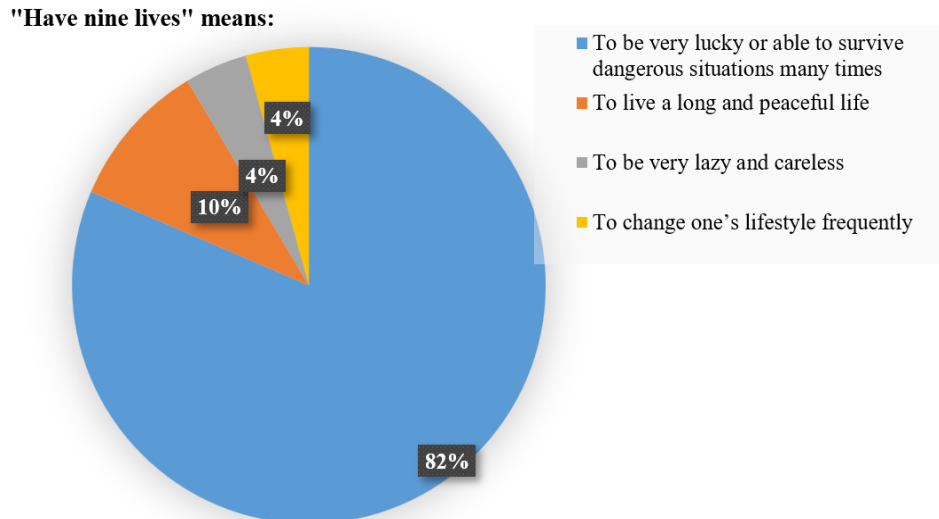


Figure 9. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical idiom: "Have nine lives".

The respondents struggled to understand the meaning of the idiomatic expression six feet under. Most chose incorrect options and drew wrong inferences, mainly because the idiom lacks an exact Uzbek equivalent. Consequently, 26% of students interpreted it literally, and 21% made incorrect inferences. The overall success rate was low at 33%. The students' success can be explained by Lakoff's metaphorical principle "happy is high, sad is down." The word "under" carries a negative connotation in human cognition, which likely helped students arrive at the correct interpretation, as shown in Figure 10.

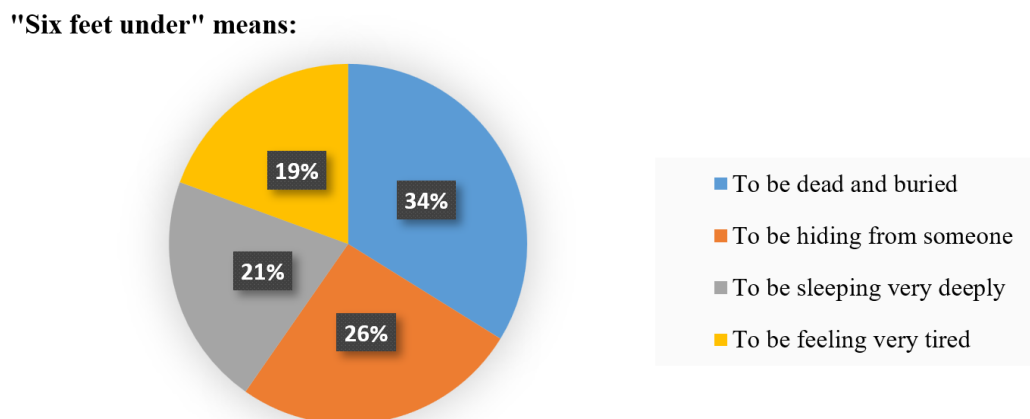


Figure 10. Correct interpretation rates for the numerical idiom: "Six feet under".

4.2. Contextual Usage (Pragmatic Production)

In the second section, five situations were presented where students selected appropriate idioms. This section assesses the correct use of idioms in various contexts. Both pragmatic-linguistic and socio-pragmatic failures were observed in the items, highlighting challenges in idiom application across different situations.

In this experiment, most students used idioms correctly, but the idiom *Back to the square one* was the most difficult, with over 50% failing to find an accurate answer. Regarding pragmatic-linguistic failure, students who chose incorrect

options understood the linguistic form but not the pragmatic meaning. Misinterpretation occurred because the L1 conceptual metaphor does not map directly onto the L2. See Figure 11.

Your teacher says you must restart your project. You say:

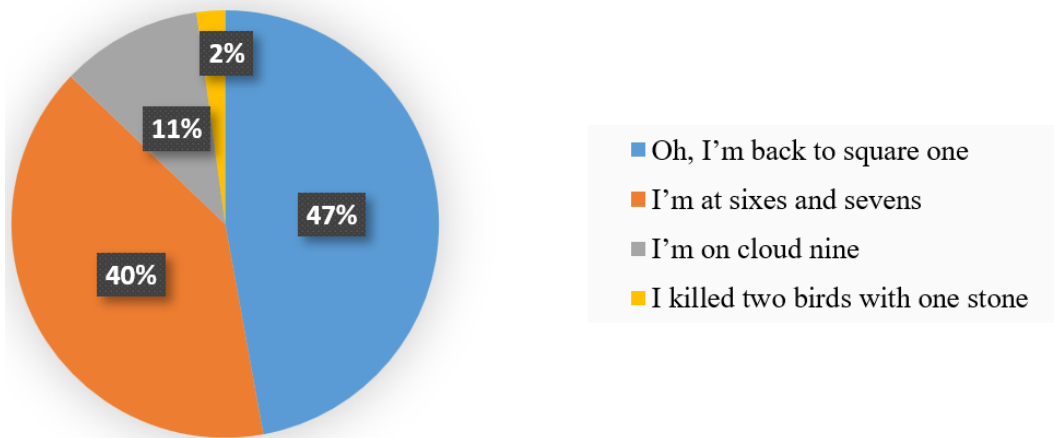


Figure 11. Contextual usage of idioms (Situation A).

Figure 12 shows that most students used idioms appropriately, indicating they possess pragmatic competence in employing numerical idioms. However, 16% of students failed to interpret and use the idioms correctly, resulting in socio-pragmatic failure. This may be due to the positive cultural connotation of the number "seven" in Uzbek culture, which influenced learners' choices and caused confusion. The socio-pragmatic failure occurred because the learner applied an L1 conceptual metaphor where happiness is not associated with the number "nine," leading to the figurative meaning being lost.

Your sister is extremely happy because she won a prize. You say:

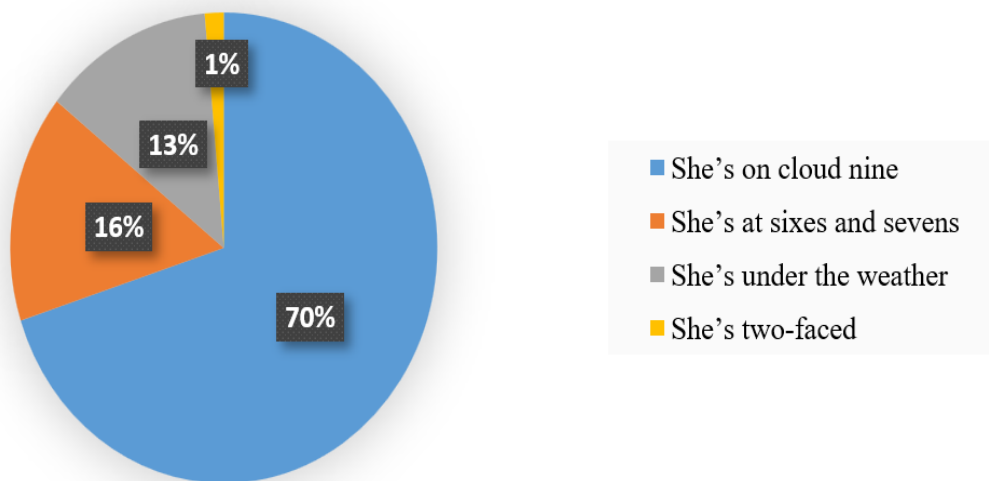


Figure 12. Contextual usage of idioms (Situation B).

According to the total range of students' pragmatic failure in using these idiomatic expressions (Table 1), their success rate is relatively high; however, over 50% of students failed to understand the idioms *Six feet under* and *back to square one*. This is mainly because they interpret the idioms literally, as in the case of *Six Feet Under*, or confuse their meanings with similar options close to their L1.

Table 1. The total ratio of the questionnaire.

№	Numerical idiomatic expressions	Success rate		Failure rate	
		Percentage	Number of students	Percentage	Number of students
1.	At sixes and sevens	58%	82	42%	58
2.	In the seventh heaven/on cloud nine	82%	115	18%	25
3.	Kill two birds with one stone	92%	129	8%	11
4.	Put two and two together	75%	105	25%	25
5.	Two-faced	92%	129	8%	11
6.	Two peas in a pod	71%	99	29%	41
7.	Behind the eight ball	56%	78	44%	22
8.	At the eleventh hour	73%	102	27%	38
9.	Have nine lives	82%	114	18%	26
10.	Six feet under	34%	47	66%	93
11.	Back to square one	47%	66	53%	74

4.3. Cultural Awareness

In the culture-related section of the questionnaire, participants were asked whether understanding the culture of the English language is necessary to comprehend English idioms. The majority (85%) responded affirmatively and endorsed this view, while some were uncertain, and only a small number disagreed. Additionally, when asked whether idioms are difficult to understand or use appropriately in context, more participants reported that comprehension posed a challenge. Regarding the similarity between idiomatic expressions in English and Uzbek, most participants selected “sometimes similar”; 23 students considered idioms in the two languages to be completely similar, whereas 18 viewed them as entirely dissimilar.

When respondents were asked about the main reasons for pragmatic failure in understanding idioms, many reported focusing on literal translation, paying more attention to the literal meaning rather than the figurative one. Some emphasized that idioms are deeply rooted in culture, and an insufficient understanding of the target language’s culture contributes to errors. Others stated that learning idioms in isolation from context is a key factor leading to pragmatic failure.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore pragmatic failure among Uzbek EFL learners using an online questionnaire focused on numerical idiomatic expressions. The findings align with previous research across various situational contexts, indicating that numerical idiomatic expressions reveal both strengths and weaknesses of Uzbek students in producing and understanding these expressions. Therefore, it can be noted that such conclusions could be extended to more plausible solutions for students’ development concerning their pragmatic competence. The study reveals that Uzbek students mostly interpret figurative meanings; however, culturally different idioms and contexts are difficult to master. Additionally, although they are aware of idiomatic expressions’ uses, interference from their native language persists when using the second language. The first section of the experiment, EFL learners’ comprehension of numerical idiomatic expressions, indicates they are aware of these idioms’ linguistic uses, reflecting their pragmatic-linguistic competence. The second section aims to trigger learners’ socio-pragmatic failure, assessing their ability to navigate social language use effectively. The findings indicate that learners are aware of the sociocultural perspective of numerical idiomatic expressions. Only a few, as the results show, responded incorrectly to the questionnaire items regarding pragmatics, highlighting the need for further pragmatic instruction.

The study supports the view of Shen (2013), Sheng (2016), Riley (1984), and Lihui and Jianbin (2010) that pragmatic competence is not solely linguistic but deeply rooted in cultural cognition. It highlights the importance of integrating socio-pragmatic awareness into idiom instruction, especially concerning culturally symbolic concepts like numerical idioms. This research also supports the advice given by Rushdi et al. (2023) that teachers of the English

language at the university level give students figures of idiomatic expressions and inform them about the possible uses of how to use these idiomatic expressions. Since most Uzbek students have never lived in an English-speaking country, they learn idioms mainly from textbooks, teachers, TV series, or social media, without additional sources or immersion experiences. So, it can be stated that Uzbek EFL learners are partially aware of the cultural meanings of English idioms, and they can improve their understanding through explicit cultural instruction and exposure to authentic English-language contexts.

6. CONCLUSION

The following conclusions were outlined considering the results of the analysis above.

To answer the first research question, it is revealed that Uzbek EFL learners generally demonstrate satisfactory comprehension of English idioms, especially those with culturally or structurally similar equivalents in Uzbek. Most participants could interpret and use the idioms accurately in context, indicating a developing level of pragmatic competence in idiomatic expression. The findings suggest that familiarity with cultural and structural similarities enhances learners' understanding and usage of idioms in English.

Interpretation accuracy declined when idioms lacked direct Uzbek equivalents or when cultural and symbolic meanings differed. In such cases, especially with culturally loaded numbers like seven, some learners relied on L1 cultural associations, leading to socio-pragmatic failure.

Regarding the second and third research questions, the findings show that Uzbek EFL learners identified 4 out of 5 idioms in the third section of the questionnaire. This indicates that over 70% of students could appropriately use these idioms in context from a pragmatic perspective. However, one idiom was not correctly interpreted by most students, possibly due to the absence of an equivalent idiom in Uzbek and the positive connotation of the number seven in Uzbek culture. As a result, students experienced socio-pragmatic failure in this case.

It can also be concluded that both types of pragmatic failure were observed throughout the questionnaire. The main reason for socio-pragmatic failure appears to be that most participants had never lived in an English-speaking country. We believe that living in the target-language country, even briefly, can significantly enhance learners' pragmatic competence in that language.

The results suggest that pragmatic failure occurs due to the following reasons.

The EFL learners tend to translate the idioms literally instead of understanding the figurative meaning.

The second main reason for pragmatic failure is confusion between L1 and L2 cultures or insufficient awareness of the target language's culture, which can hinder effective communication and understanding.

The last reason is learning idioms without context. Not knowing the proper usage of idioms in real-life communication can lead to pragmatic failure.

The analysis emphasizes idioms with numbers; a broader idiomatic landscape would better reflect overall understanding. Since participants are from a single educational context, they do not fully represent all learner populations in Uzbekistan. Including learners from various universities in the questionnaire would improve the study's effectiveness.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was approved by the Ethics Review Board of the Urgench State University named after Abu Rayhan Biruni (UrSU), Uzbekistan, under Protocol Number (IRB Protocol Number: UrSU-ERB-07/2025), dated (Approval Date: 28 August 2025). Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Disclosure of AI Use: The authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT (version November 2025) to edit and refine the wording of the manuscript. All content was reviewed and verified by the authors.

REFERENCES

- Al-Issa, A. (2005). The role of English language culture in the Omani language education system: An ideological perspective. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 18(3), 258-270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310508668746>
- Alptekin, C. (2002). Towards intercultural communicative competence in ELT. *ELT Journal*, 56(1), 57-64. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/56.1.57>
- Baker, W. (2012). From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: Culture in ELT. *ELT Journal*, 66(1), 62-70. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccr017>
- Hu, X. (2022). A contrastive study on numerical idioms and translation strategies from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, 5(17), 90-94. <https://doi.org/10.25236/ajhss.2022.051714>
- Hymes, D. H. (1972). On communicative competence, in: Pride J B & Holmes J (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: selected readings*. In (pp. 269-293). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Karimov, K. (2019). The role of memorial ceremonies in Uzbek culture. *Asian Cultural Traditions*, 15(2), 110-127.
- Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Kunin, A. V. (1984). *English-Russian phraseological dictionary*. Moscow: Russky Yazyk.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London, U.K: Longman.
- Lihui, Z., & Jianbin, H. (2010). A study of Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic failure and the implications for college English teaching. *Polyglossia*, 18, 41-54.
- Muir, P. Y., & Xu, Z. (2011). Exploring pragmatic failure into the writing of young EFL learners: A critical analysis. *English Language Teaching*, 4(4), 254-261. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v4n4p254>
- Nation, P., & Meara, P. (2002). "Vocabulary," in *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*, N. Schmitt, Ed. In (pp. 35-54). London, U.K: Hodder Education.
- Nematjanova, D. (2025). The specific features of the use of numerical components in idioms and proverbs. *Pubmedia Jurnal Penelitian Tindakan Kelas Indonesia*, 2(2), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.47134/ptk.v2i2.1463>
- Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English language teaching*. USA: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Rejapov, I. O. (2023). Symbolics of numbers in paremiology of Uzbek and English. *American Journal of Philological Sciences*, 3(11), 18-28.
- Riley, P. (1984). Understanding misunderstandings: Cross-cultural pragmatic failure in the language classroom. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 7(2), 127-144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0261976840070203>
- Rushdi, A. E., Ahmed, S. M., & Ismael, W. S. (2023). EFL Iraqi learners' pragmatic failure in English animal idiomatic expressions. *World Journal of English Language*, 13(2), 64-76. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n2p64>
- Shen, Q.-Y. (2013). The contributing factors of pragmatic failure in China's ELT classrooms. *English Language Teaching*, 6(6), 132-136. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n6p132>
- Sheng, D. (2016). *Analysis of pragmatic failure in college English teaching*. Paper presented at the 6th International Conference on Management, Education, Information and Control.
- Sporleder, C., Li, L., Gorinski, P., & Koch, X. (2010). *Idioms in context: The INDIX corpus*. Germany: Cluster of Excellence MMCI.
- Stepanov, A. I. (2004). *Numbers and culture: The rational unconscious in language, literature, science, contemporary politics, Philosophy, and history*. Moscow: Languages of Slavic Culture.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 91-112. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/4.2.91>
- Wright, J. (2002). *Idioms Organiser: Organised by metaphor, topic, and keyword*. (J. Hill & M. Lewis, Eds.). England: Language Teaching Publications.
- Yan, Y. (2022). *The effect of pragmatic competence on the communicative competence of second language learners*. Paper presented at the 2022 3rd International Conference on Language, Art and Cultural Exchange (ICLACE 2022), Atlantis Press.

Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the author(s). International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.