

Promoting Chinese English Learners' Idiomatic Competence via Nida's Translation Theory

Zhengjie Li*

Hui Long

Wei Lou

Guangzhou College of Technology and Business, China

(Corresponding author. Email: zhengjieli@usf.edu)

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Abstract

Guided by Nida's translation theory, this article advances an integrated theoretical and methodological framework for developing students' idiomatic competence via with systematic translation strategies. This article first describes the idiomatic challenges that Chinese English learners (ELs) face as well as their inability to understand and use English idioms while studying in the U.S. school system. It then addresses a systematic approach to tackle different types of idioms aligned with Liontas' (1999, 2002) vivid phrasal (VP) idiom system. The VP idioms are comprised of three subcategories, Lexical Level idioms, Semi-Lexical Level idioms, and Post-Lexical Level idioms, which can be associated with three corresponding translation strategies, literal translation, adaptation translation, and equivalence translation respectively. Thereafter, this article reviews several studies pertaining to idiom translation principles and strategies. Finally, this article presents pedagogical implications for ESL/EFL practitioners to help Chinese students decipher and acquire English idioms and ultimately promote their idiomatic competence.

Keywords

Idiomatic competence, idiom translation strategies, vivid phrasal idioms, equivalence translation, bi/cross-cultural awareness

Introduction

Liontas (2017) noted that an idiom is “a form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of the language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one” (p. 7). Despite the stated peculiarity, the scarcity of effective teaching strategies for learning idioms in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) context has been proven a major obstacle in the teaching of idioms in the classroom and beyond (Cooper, 1999; Liontas, 2007, 2015; Nippold, 1991). Indeed, Liontas (2015) argues that “[d]espite all the emerging theoretical accounts of idioms to date, little attention has been paid to teaching and learning idioms in the English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classroom, anecdotal evidence aside” (p.622). It is therefore essential to incorporate idiomatic awareness into the English learning curriculum as English learners (ELs) need to walk out of the marginalized zone (not able to understand English idioms) and become actively responsive in both subject area classes and real-life situations. Moreover, the English language is particularly noted for its wealth of idioms—also known as slangs, proverbs, allusions, simile, dead metaphor, social formula, and habitual collocation (Liontas, 2017, p.6). Since idioms tend to involve complex cultural and historical backgrounds of languages, ELs may need to develop their bi/cross-cultural awareness and linguistic

competence by drilling down to the iceberg below the service of the sea. Importantly, idioms, in general, have “their origins in the fabric of human communication” (Liontas, 2015, p.621), and thus contain “extraordinary communicative effectiveness and rhetorical power yet convey complex realities and human behavior with the help of simple but colorful, and very powerful, figures of speech that are to a large extent frozen in time” (Liontas, 2015, p.622). As such, to unfold the deep layer of second language (L2) idioms goes way beyond L2 learners’ linguistic knowledge used to parse the syntactic structure and comprehend the semantic meaning of particular phrases or expressions.

Though research supports idiom translation in enhancing students’ English proficiency (Chen, 2010; Liao, 2006; Smadi & Alrishan, 2015), achieving this goal remains a formidable challenge. In particular, this challenge has been seen critically foregrounded among Chinese students studying in the U.S., and many of them do not have the awareness of how to utilize appropriate translation strategies to wrestle with English idioms presented by their teachers and classmates. Notwithstanding the rapid growth of the number of Chinese students studying in the U.S. in the past decade, there are few studies that explore the teaching of English idioms among ESL/EFL practitioners in the U.S. school system to empower Chinese students both socially and academically. In order to help Chinese students with their communication issues and adapt to the mainstream classes within a short period of time, it is essential to investigate the interplay between translation strategies and English idiom learning for Chinese students.

Globalization has been progressively making English a “world language.” China embraces globalization proactively, particularly after a series of world-class events held in China, such as the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, the 2010 Expo in Shanghai, and the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. In addition, speaking English will allow Chinese students to be recognized as global citizens. This is in part because China has positioned itself as a leader of globalization and free trade (HSBC, 2017). Also, China has been promoting “The Belt and Road Initiative,” which aims to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa, covering more than sixty-eight countries along five routes by addressing an “infrastructure gap” that involves infrastructure investment, education, construction materials, railway and highway, automobile, real estate, power grid, and iron and steel (Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2016). According to Tang (2015), approximately “300 million Chinese—nearly as many people as there are in the U.S.—are English language learners” (para. 8). Moreover, Tang also showed that, based on the estimates from the language training company EF English First, the number of English online learners in China would grow from 67.2 million in 2013 to 120 million by 2017. And these estimates have been reflected by Yang & Du (2018), based on data from the China Internet Network Information Center, concluding that 144 million people have experienced online education, as of June 2017. What is even more surprising is that the number of Chinese students studying in the U.S. ranks number one, with 362,368, among 1.18 million international students (Smith, 2017), which results from the rise of middle-class families with a total number of 430 million in China who are financially capable of supporting their child(ren) to study abroad (Babones, 2018). It is likely that the use of exemplary English in this highly competitive world will not only empower Chinese students with more career opportunities, but develop their intercultural understanding to better interpret the world as well as intercultural skills to face and solve challenging issues globally.

Many Chinese students who study in the U.S. today report that they do not have a ‘voice’ and that they feel being marginalized in the schools because they are unable to comprehend the idioms native English speakers use (see Evenden & Kan, 2013; Shi, 2007; Smith & Murphy, 2015; Wan, 2001). To this end, it is critically important that English idiom instruction should

be incorporated in the L2 academic curriculum anchored in appropriate sociocultural contexts and authentic project/task-based situations. Also, ELs are suggested to receive intensive training in English idioms along with effective corresponding translation strategies involving the linguistic properties and communicative situations of both Chinese and English before they are placed into mainstream academic classes. To address these issues, the present article, first, revisits the literature and teases out some mainstream translation strategies for L2 idiom learning. Then, the article introduces pedagogical approaches that can guide ELs to decode vivid phrasal idioms with corresponding effective translation strategies that can empower them to become active participants in diverse academic and social environments as well as to attain bi/cross-cultural awareness and idiomatic competence.

Theoretical Framework

Vivid phrasal idioms and second language acquisition

More often than not, Chinese students in the U.S. may feel lost when they hear colloquial expressions from their professor(s) or colleague(s), such as “*I’m tickled pink to see you,*” or “*It’s all Greek to me,*” as such expressions cannot and should not be deciphered literally. This predicament is because those expressions belie their semantic understandings. As a result, Chinese students are not likely to understand the metaphorical meaning inherent in these and many other expressions. Furthermore, employing Liontas’ (1999, 2002) VP classification system, the idiom, “*I’m tickled pink to see you,*” is classified as a Post-Lexical Level (PLL) idiom. PLL idioms are “those target idioms which lexically/pictorially do not match the domain idioms” (Liontas, 1999, p.42). Accordingly, PLL idioms are semantically opaque and thus, they are unanalyzable with a student’s first language (L1) database.

Specifically, Liontas (1999) asserted that in the field of second language acquisition, vivid phrasal (VP) idioms, defined as combining “powerful visual imagery (literal, referential semantic meaning) with a memorable, striking expression (non-literal, metaphoric utterance meaning)” (p.41), pose great challenges for L2 learners. VP idioms, such as *pulling one’s leg* (to fool someone with a humorous account of something; to get someone to accept a ridiculous story as true), *taking the bull by the horns* (to take definite action and not care about risk; to act bravely in a threatening situation), and *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush* (to risk losing something by trying to get something greater), are non-compositional—having a degree to which a holistic multi-word item cannot be interpreted on a word-by-word basis (p.4). Both young native speakers of English (Cain, Towse, & Knight, 2009) and adult L2 learners (Barfield & Gyllstad, 2009), acknowledge that opaque idiomatic terms present a challenge (Smith & Murphy, 2015). This perplexing situation indicates that L2 learners cannot interpret a VP idiom literally as a VP idiom contains “an inseparable phrasal unit whose lexicalized, holistic meaning is not deducible from the individual meanings of its separate words” (Liontas, 2002, p.77). Therefore, for Chinese students studying in the U.S., appropriate idiom translation strategies are essential to decipher English idioms—VP idioms in everyday speech and ultimately promote their idiomatic competence, which is “the ability to understand and use idioms appropriately and accurately in a variety of sociocultural contexts, in a manner similar to that of native speakers, and with the least amount of mental effort” (Liontas, 2003, p. 299).

In order to better implement idiom translation strategies, it is necessary to understand the three VP idiom subcategories—Lexical Level (LL) idioms, which exhibit a one-to-one lexical and pictorial match with corresponding native-language idioms; Semi-Lexical Level (SLL) idioms, which make minor lexical and pictorial adjustments in LL idioms; and Post-Lexical Level (PLL) idioms, which present an opaqueness in terms of analyzability in native-language idioms. Thanks to Liontas’ (2002) Conceptual-Semantic Image (CSI) distance (p. 80), the

difference among these three subcategories is visually illustrated with an increasing distance between the native language and the target language, which “denotes how close or how distant a target-language idiom is from its equivalent native-language idiom both conceptually (i.e., in terms of the picture it evokes) and semantically (i.e., in terms of the literal meanings of its words)” (p. 5). More importantly, CSI distance provides a framework for researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) to exploit appropriate translation strategies to decode VP idioms. Specifically, according to the CSI distance, if the native language has zero or a short distance from the target language, ELs may capture the meaning of the target idiom by simply matching it with the native language with the least effort. However, when the distance is extended, ELs have to instill more linguistic and cognitive effort into the decoding process. This mental and linguistic effort increase can be noticed when ELs are confronted with opaque English idioms like PLLs.

Translation theories and strategies

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018) defines translation as “a rendering from one language into another; also, the product of such a rendering.” Respecting idiom translation between two languages, the goal underscores a need to produce an appropriate expression that native speakers could recognize as such. Nugroho (2007) believes that “translation is an effort of finding the equivalent meaning of a text into the second language” (p. 66). That is, translation is aimed to convert an L1 message to an L2 message as close as possible. This advice was echoed with Nida’s (2003) dynamic equivalence approach, arguing that “[s]ince no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no fully exact translation” (p. 156). This indicates that “to some extent there is always some loss or skewing of meaning in interlingual communication,” and “[o]ne purpose of translating is to keep such disparities at a minimum” (Nida, 2001, p. 40). Idiom translation is even more complex since it uplifts the difficulty of the translation process that requires, apart from strong linguistic competence in both L1 and L2, aesthetic judgment and bi/cross-cultural awareness. As such, it is pivotal to restore the meaning of a source idiom as much as possible when it comes to idiom translation, despite the fact that the criteria of idiom translation are oftentimes complex, dynamic, and intersubjective.

Nida (2001) points out that “[i]dioms usually carry more impact than non-idiomatic expressions because of their close identification with a particular language and culture” (p. 28). Before English instructors teach students how to translate idioms between English and Chinese, it is vital to help students become cognizant of the cultural differences between Chinese and English idioms. This prerequisite resonates with Wang & Wang’s (2013) assertion that “idiom translation is not only a linguistic conversion, but also the transplantation of culture” (p.1694). More importantly, translators need to comply with Nida’s (1982) dynamic equivalence, which accentuates “the quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors” (p. 200). In addition, translators are expected to minimize the conflicting accounts of source and target idioms in structured styles and thematic images and present the translated idioms accurately and faithfully. To maintain the accuracy and faithfulness of the target idioms, translating should be aimed primarily to reproduce the message of the source idioms pragmatically as well as assure the syntactic structure via lexical and grammatical adjustments. For example, the British VP idiom “sending coals to Newcastle” cannot be literally rendered into Chinese if a student intends to convey the metaphorical/figurative meaning of this idiom. However, the student can endeavor to reveal the culture and background of this British idiom and find a meaningful Chinese idiom, 画蛇添

足, meaning ‘drawing feet on a snake,’ which reproduces the significance of this idiom by complying with both stylistic and cultural equivalence.

Nida (1964) further explains that there are two basic translation orientations: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. Specifically, formal equivalence “focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content,” and this type of translation “most completely typifies this structural equivalence,” in which “the translator attempts to reproduce as literally and meaningfully as possible” (p. 159). As formal equivalence seeks to render the source text literally, it then can be associated with a translation strategy, literal translation. According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), “a literal translation is a unique solution which is reversible and complete in itself” (p. 34). In other words, literal translation enables the message in the source language in the form of vocabulary, syntax, and figure of speech to be back translated to the message in the receptor language. For example, “knowledge is power,” translated literally, is 知识就是力量 in Chinese. Analytically, the word order of this English idiom is fully preserved, and its grammatical construction and syntactic structure are singly presented in the Chinese version.

In contrast to the formal equivalence, a translation that “aims at completing naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of [one’s] own culture” is called dynamic equivalence (Nida, 1964, p.159). That is, the dynamic equivalence translation underscores a dynamic relationship, which “between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message” (p.159). In terms of translation strategies, Nida’s dynamic equivalence is in line with the oblique translation in Vinay and Darbelnet’s (1995) model. Particularly, Nida’s dynamic equivalence resonates with the equivalence procedure and the adaptation procedure, which we will address as adaptation translation and equivalence translation respectively.

Adaptation translation presents its value as an alternative for “the cultural reference when a situation in the source culture does not exist in the target culture” (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995, p. 39). That is to say, translators, while restoring the meaning of the source text that embodies particular cultural reference(s), may utilize the culture-bound equivalents to stylistically and pragmatically manifest the target text. Taking “do not judge a book by its cover or you can never tell a book by its cover” as an example, Chinese people may easily associate this English idiom with the Chinese version, 不要以貌取人, meaning ‘do not judge a person by this person’s physical appearance,’ as both versions are considered historical allusions stemmed from ancient stories.

According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), equivalence translation is associated with “one and the same situation can be rendered by two texts using completely different stylistic and structural methods” and “the method of creating equivalence is also frequently applied to idioms” (p. 38). Some source texts, in particular highly culture-bound idioms like “cat got your tongue,” cannot be translated via the word-for-word strategy or literal translation. Nor can the sources texts achieve a sense of semantic equivalence by replacing cultural references in the target texts. In this light, equivalence translation allows the sources texts to be reproduced, recreated, and reformed to best maintain the flavor and image in the target texts. The Chinese idiom, 哑口无言, fulfills the function of “cat got your tongue” and delineates an instantaneous image of a person who is not saying anything in a conversation.

Chinese ELs in the U. S. cannot shy away from VP idioms, which are so much ingrained and rooted in American society. Capturing a deep layer of the English language and achieving the idiomatic competence require Chinese ELs to seek different stylistic and sociolinguistic means to decode VP idioms and ultimately acquire them for communicative and academic purposes. Informed by Nida's (1964) formal and dynamic equivalence principle, this article introduces three translation strategies, including literal translation, adaptation translation, and equivalence translation, to help Chinese ELs deal with three types of VP idioms, LL idioms, SLL idioms, and PLL idioms correspondingly.

Review of the Literature

Notwithstanding that idiom translation has been a challenging task requiring both professional experience and bi/cross-cultural awareness, many scholars have presented seminal works that provide insights into L2 idiomatic acquisition. In what follows next, we present and discuss idiom translation strategies introduced by both western and Chinese scholars. Then, we segue to elaborate on a systematic pedagogical approach that we believe will best help Chinese students acquire English idioms.

In the higher education system in the U.S., intercultural communication causes an obstruction for students of diverse backgrounds. Griffin (2004) argued that the challenges of intercultural communication are caused by the pitfalls of translation and a lack of attention to cultural knowledge. Despite the fact that English is the native language of the African American students in his marketing class, he points out that they still face challenges transmitting and interpreting idioms. Griffin encouraged his students to utilize the Back-Translation method between English and German on an online software. Back-translation, according to Brislin (1970), employs two bilinguals to investigate the equivalence of two translated versions, with one translating the source language to the target language and the other blindly translating back from the target language to the source language. In so doing, his students gradually realized the communicative gaps caused by cultural differences in international business while having fun with this creative tool.

Fotovatnia & Goudarzi's (2014) study deals with how analyzability can affect the processing of English idioms. Their study is based on the analyzability of English idioms, investigating thirty Persian undergraduate students who have limited English knowledge and aiming to measure the speed and accuracy with which the Persian students can categorize and translate the ninety English idioms selected from reliable English dictionaries. There were 90 English idioms selected and divided into three semantic domains of anger, secrecy, and revelation. Particularly, Fotovatnia and Goudarzi created three categories of idioms: normally analyzable, abnormally analyzable, and unanalyzable. The results showed that the Persian students were able to capture the meaning of normally analyzable idioms more accurately and much faster than abnormally analyzable idioms and unanalyzable idioms, which indicates that analyzability of idioms is a matter of familiarity with a foreign language. In other words, language learners tend to feel more challenged to process idioms that are abnormally analyzable or unanalyzable.

Informing ESL/EFL practitioners that how students' L1 can support their L2 idiom learning, Carrol & Conklin (2014) used a test involving 19 native speakers of English (with no experience of learning Mandarin) and 19 non-native speakers of English (having Chinese as their first language) at an English university. The results showed that non-native speakers tend to respond more quickly to idioms translated from their L1 than to control phrases in a lexical decision task requiring them to understand these phrases' figurative meanings (e.g., in a control phrase like flog a dead horse). In contrast, bilinguals, when confronted with English idioms

that are activated at a conceptual level, prefer to retrieve information from their known L1 lexical configuration, seeking a “known” phrase, which can help them translate the English idioms into their Chinese equivalents. Carrol & Conklin (2014) argued that a dual-route model can aid L2 idiom processing. The dual-route model, on the one hand, can allow bilinguals to attain “direct recognition and activation of the lexical-conceptual configuration of the idiom” (p. 786). In the same time, the dual-route model allows bilinguals to connect the complex lexical links and get access to the figurative meanings of idioms directly, unlocking “both their lexical components and the phrasal figurative meaning” (p. 785). This implies that bilinguals are able to associate the lexical level of L2 idioms with the subsequently activated known L1 lexical configuration, which aids the process of converting English idioms to their Chinese equivalents. With respect to non-native speakers, a dual route model will not apply to them “until a certain level of proficiency has been reached” (p. 786). That is, non-native speakers are inclined to process L2 formulaic language compositionally until they achieve an idiomatic competence to decipher opaque idioms.

Exploring the appropriateness and acceptability of idiom translation between English (the source language) and Hungarian (the target language), Kovács (2016) analyzed the idiom-translating solutions and strategies utilized in the novel *A Game of Thrones*, which is relatively rich in idioms. Kovács also examined the different typologies found in the specialized literature with respect to their semantic characteristics, fixedness, and constitution. From a semantic perspective, Kovacs classified the thirty extracted idioms from the novel into three categories: transparent idioms, semi-transparent idioms, and opaque idioms. Based on the idioms’ fixedness, Kovács complies with Kvetko’s (2009) typology and categorizes the elicited idioms into two types. The first type is unchangeable idioms— completely fixed and cannot undergo any modifications, whereas the second type is changeable idioms, in which grammatical, lexical, and orthographical changes should be examined (Kovács, 2016, p.97).

In terms of constitution, Kovács adopted and synthesized Baker’s (1992) translation strategies, which are listed as: (1) using an idiom of approximately similar meaning and form; (2) using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form; (3) translation by paraphrase (Kovács, 2016, p. 97). Through the content analysis upon the extracted idioms from *A Game of Thrones*, Kovács found out that the strategy of translation by paraphrase was employed by the literary translator most frequently and Kovacs believed the novel “may be an appropriate source material for teaching purposes and translation practice in translator training” (p. 99). Kovács’ study informs ESL/EFL practitioners that the acquaintance of context and culture between source and target languages primes translators for appropriate and acceptable idiom translation.

Table 1 below summarizes the idiom learning strategies introduced above.

Table 1

L2 Idiom Learning Strategies Introduced by Western Scholars

Authors	L1 and L2	Idiom Learning Strategies/Suggestions
Griffin (2004)	L1: English L2: German	Back-translation: investigating the equivalence between L1-L2 version and L2-L1 version.
Fotovatnia and Goudarzi (2014)	L1: Persian L2: English	Being aware of a continuum of analyzability of L2 idioms: analyzable, abnormally analyzable, and unanalyzable.
Carrol and Conklin (2014)	Mandarin learners of native English speakers	A dual-route model (understanding both literal meaning and figurative meaning of an

	and ELs of native Mandarin speakers	L2 idiom) applies to bilinguals, but non-native speakers are less likely to use the dual route model to unlock the lexical configuration of an idiom and its underlying concept. Thus, a dual-route model is more likely to work for advanced L2 learners.
Kovács (2016)	L1: English L2: Hungarian	(1) using an idiom of approximately similar meaning and form; (2) using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form; (3) translation by paraphrase(Baker, 1992).

Translating idioms between Chinese and English is a complex and dynamic process as these two languages exclude each other in both form (lexical differences) and thinking mode (philosophical differences) (Wang & Chen, 2013). Despite cultural differences, there are many ways to support Chinese students as they learn idiom translation. One way for Chinese students to learn English idioms is through translating food names. Tang (2007) narrowed the range of idioms to food names and conducts an investigation of conceptual structures between English idioms with food names and the Chinese correspondents. By asking students to compare ten English idioms with the Mandarin Chinese correspondents, Tang revealed that habitual collocations are not semantically abstract if the conceptual structures of the metaphorical sources are presented clearly, and metaphorical expressions are deeply rooted in culture and history. Tang used the notion of metaphorical mapping (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and Lakoff and Johnson stated that “metaphors are matters of thoughts and not merely of the languages” (p. 84). Some examples are “hot potato” (烫手山芋 meaning hot sweet potato), “to cry over spilled milk” (覆水难收 meaning spilled water is hard to be gathered up), “easy as pie/piece of cake” (易如反掌 meaning as easy as turning one’s hand over), and “kill the goose that lays the golden eggs” (杀鸡取卵 meaning kill the chicken for taking its eggs). From comparisons of the ten pairs of English-Chinese idioms, it is easy to understand the names of the foods in English do not always share the same metaphorical meaning with Chinese because of the cultural and historical differences between Mandarin and English. However, Tang substantiated that “the figurative sources for the same target in the two languages are in the hyponymy relationship” (p. 92). Hence, in the translating process between Chinese and English, teachers need to underscore the connotations of the conceptual structures of the metaphorical sources and link them to culturally semantical interpretations.

Oftentimes, culture appears to be a protective screen that creates obstruction in the translation process. Zhao (2008) focused on the cultural differences between Chinese and English idioms and introduces some effective approaches in the translation of Chinese and English idioms. Zhao asserted that cultural diversities and traditional philosophical values are also essential factors people need to consider when translating idioms between Chinese and English. In order to deal with these cultural differences, Zhao(2008) argued four translation methods are recommended, such as literal translation, free translation, borrowing translation, and literal translation with annotation. In addition, translation principles, such as Yan Fu’s “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance,” Zhang Peiji’s “faithfulness and smoothness,” and Fu Lei’s “approximation in spirit,” and Eugene Nida’s (1982, 2001) “functional equivalence” or “dynamic equivalence,” can contribute to the success of translating idioms between Chinese and English.

In a similar vein, Mei (2012) elaborated that it is pivotal to know the cultural similarities and differences in custom-loaded idioms between Chinese and English because custom-loaded idioms will aid peoples' cross-cultural communication. Mei (2012) noted that a country's customs are reflected by its language and culture. The inability to understand custom-loaded idioms will lead to a failure of cross-cultural communication and moments of misunderstanding. As Mei (2012) put it, "[c]ulture includes and affects language; language is the mirror of the culture and can reflect the culture" (p. 109). Therefore, studying the differences and similarities in the Chinese and English custom-loaded idioms will smooth the translation process and promote the understanding of Western and Chinese cultures.

Advocating Nida's (1964) equivalent translation theory that focuses on the closest natural equivalent between source and target languages in both meaning and style, Zhang & Chen (2013) employ it as the major principle for translating four-character Chinese idioms, also known as Chengyu. Some features of Chengyu, as they explain, are (a) readily available and conventional, (b) having a strong rhetoric function, and (c) stereotyped. With the expansion of connections between China and the western world, idiom translation plays an important role in international communication. From a syntactic perspective, the Chinese language tends to use four-character idioms associated with myths, legends, or ancient stories, and these four-character idioms do not comply with the modern Chinese linguistic structure. Moreover, Zhang & Chen (2013) point out that the Chinese language is heavily idiomatic, thereby Chinese idioms are rich with national features, vivid cultural images, and ethnic characteristics. As such, Zhang & Chen (2013) asserted that it is important to seek a dynamic equivalence when translating the four-character idioms to English idioms. To attain this goal, Zhang and Chen recommended several translation methods such as literal translation, free translation, borrowing translation, a combination of literal and liberal translation, rhetorical translation, and literal translation with annotation. Since Chinese four-character idioms are fairly complex and rhetorical, translating them requires language learners to achieve a high linguistic level in both Chinese and English as well as be familiar with the cultural background and historical facts behind the idioms.

Using similar translation methods, Wang & Wang (2013) analyzed the characteristics and patterns of idioms and argue that idioms can be considered "a quintessence and treasury of a language" (p. 1691). They pointed out that idioms range in various forms, such as "slang, proverbs, figurative phrases, motto, sayings, quotation, jargon, colloquial, and two-part allegorical sayings" (p. 1691). Given the fact that idioms are highly tied to the human culture, idioms carry the cultural information and historical footprints of a country. For example, due to religious differences between China and the western world, religious idioms in Chinese tend to entail information pertaining to Buddhism and Taoism, such as 借花献佛 (to present Buddha with borrowed flowers), meaning to offer somebody favors at the expense of another. Another example is about the historical allusion differences. In Chinese, people say 四面楚歌 (a Chu Kingdom song played and heard on all sides) to express a person is besieged on all sides or a person is facing threats everywhere. In order to accurately translate English idioms to the Chinese versions, Wang and Wang noted that students need to be aware of the cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries and employ four translation methods listed as literal translation, free translation, abridged translation, and borrowed translation (pp. 1693-1695). Adopting Nida's dynamic equivalence and recommended principles to translate English idioms will not only benefit language learners' linguistic development, but will also promote language learners' bi/cross-cultural awareness.

From the perspective of cultural context, Ren & Yu (2013) presented some insights into English-Chinese idiom translation. They believe that idioms reflect culture, and culture in turn defines idioms. Thus, translation of idioms between languages may involve many distinctive aspects, such as classifications of English idioms, classification of context, and translation principles of idioms. Specifically, Ren & Yu asserted that English idioms are classified into three main groups: phrase idioms (e.g., *a bed of roses*), clause idioms (e.g., *eat one's words*), and sentence idioms (e.g., *give somebody an inch and he/she will take a mile*). Another important factor in idiom translation is the cultural context, which not only deals with “the outputs of the individual personal” (p. 79), but also links with societal factors like politics, economy, literacy, and religion art. In the process of idiom translation, Ren and Yu recommended translators to refer to Nida's (1964) “functional equivalence theory” as it leads translators to express the meaning of original texts faithfully and accurately. When it comes translation methods, Ren & Yu (2013) advocated four effective methods such as literal translation, adapted translation, free translation, and notation translation. In the end, Ren and Yu concluded that the English language is expressed with a wealth of idioms, and it is essential to account for culture when translating English idioms to Chinese equivalence theoretically and pedagogically.

Because of the intrinsic syntactic differences as well as cultural and semantic differences between languages, Ho, Kng, Wang, & Bond (2014) stated that translators tend to use a non-idiomatic synonym to present the idiomatic expressions if they cannot find the equivalent version in the target language. Chengyu is regarded as “Chinese idioms” with prototypical four characters and non-compositional phrases originating from “historical lore or classical literature” (p. 717). Ho, Kng, Wang, & Bond creating an annotated corpus, found out that Chengyu functions well in the translation of the English idioms that are culturally specific as both Chengyu and English idioms are considered “frozen” expressions and express a meaning not necessarily from literal constituents. Since both Chengyu and English idioms have fixed and distinct meanings, it is proven to be effective by creating an idiom database by pairing the English idioms with the equivalent Chengyus that evoke both senses and imagery. As an example in case, the English idiom “*a feast for the eyes*” can be paired with a hyperbolic Chengyu 琳琅满目 (full of beautiful jades in eyes), which derives from an ancient Chinese story. In this way, even though the information cannot be fully transmitted from one language to another, people can still obtain the evoked senses from this type of translation.

Table 2 below concludes the idiom learning strategies introduced above.

Table 2
English Idiom Learning Strategies Proposed by Chinese Scholars

Authors	Translation Foci	Idiom Learning Strategies
Tang (2007)	Food names	Conceptual metaphor mapping
Zhao (2008)	Cultural differences	literal translation, free translation, borrowing translation, and literal translation with annotation.
Mei (2012)	Custom-loaded idioms	Not fixed and should be used flexibly; be familiar with the cultural information and fully understand them.
Zhang and Chen (2013)	Four-character idioms (Chengyu)	Literal translation, free translation, borrowing translation, a

		combination of literal and liberal translation, rhetorical translation, and literal translation with annotation..
Wang and Wang (2013)	Cultural differences	Literal translation, free translation, abridged translation, and borrowed translation
Ren and Yu (2013)	Cultural context	Literal translation, adapted translation, free translation, and notation translation.
Ho, Kng, Wang, and Bond (2014)	Four-character idioms (Chengyu)	Creating a small lexicon of Chengyu and examining frequency patterns of Chengyu into English-to-Chinese translated texts of different genres (machine translation in the NTU multilingual corpus).

Pedagogical implications for idiom translation strategies

Wang & Wang (2013) asserted that idiom translation demonstrates its beauty “as a scientific and philosophical poetry with deep meaning, harmonic tone, and imaginative analogy” (p. 1694). Scientific and systematic translation strategies need to be introduced for Chinese students in the process of understanding English idioms as opposed to making students consider idioms as holistic lexical chunks and memorize them mechanically in a decontextualized environment. To aid the comprehension of VP idioms for Chinese students, a concept of equivalence is essential in the process of translation. Nida (1982) states when translating, it is important to “[reproduce] in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message” (p. 12). Thus, in the process of translating English idioms, in addition to translating word for word, students are expected to restore the original meaning from English to Chinese as much as possible and always maintain the cultural connotation of an expression.

As Cooper (1999) asserted, “L1 plays a role in L2 idiom processing even though L2 learners are less likely to transfer L1 knowledge when they perceive the meaning as figurative” (p. 238). To help Chinese students promote their idiomatic competence, ESOL teachers in the U.S. school system might consider Nida’s (1964) dynamic equivalence theory and utilize recommended translation strategies, such as literal translation, equivalence translation, and adaptation translation to teach VP idioms (LL, SLL, and PLL) (see Table 3). In addition, to support Chinese students’ understanding of VP idioms, teachers might help Chinese students recognize that “idioms can be considered a quintessence and treasury of a language” (Wang & Wang, 2013). In other words, idioms provide unique ways for all individuals to express themselves beyond literal meaning, as opposed to touting idioms as only belonging to native speakers and making students become “idiomphobia” (Irujo, 1986, p. 300). Teachers might also present rationales for making idiom learning a pivotal part of the L2 curriculum and using contexts to facilitate the translation process between L1 and L2 idiomatic expressions. One of the key rationales, as argued by Liontas (2017), is “[b]ecause learners can go beyond the literal meaning of idioms and see the pivotal role that context plays in the understanding of idiomatic expressions” (p.11). This rationale underlines both literal and conventional figurative meanings in idioms and suggests L2 learners need ample contexts and bi/cross-cultural awareness in order to produce an accurate translation.

Table 3
Translation Strategies to Cope with VP Idioms

Types of VP Idioms	Translation Strategies	Proficiency Level (Suggested)	Examples
Lexical Level (LL) idioms	Literal Translation	Beginner or Elementary	Knowledge is power: 知识就是力量
Semi-Lexical Level (SLL) idioms	Adaptation Translation	Intermediate	Great minds think alike: 英雄所见略同
Post-Lexical Level (PLL) idioms	Equivalence Translation	Upper Intermediate or above	Where there is a will, there is a way: 有志者事竟成

Note. VP Idioms= vivid phrasal idioms

In what follows next, we present a systematic pedagogical approach for English language teaching (ELT) practitioners who are willing to inform Chinese students studying in the U.S. about deciphering and acquiring English idioms by referring to Nida's dynamic equivalence theory.

Firstly, most of the time, the cultural and national characteristics of the idioms between a student's L1 and L2 are similar, so the translation process requires little or no contextual support. To tackle LL idioms that involve a one-to-one match between the L2 and L1 idiomatic expressions, teachers might introduce a literal translation strategy. The literal translation of idioms complies with the original meaning of the expressions and maintains the syntactic structure, the metaphorical meaning, and the imaginative analogy of English idioms. This translation process creates correct associations and students can focus on a word-for-word translation process that transfers an L2 text to an L1 text grammatically and idiomatically. These are some examples of this type of idioms: "blood is thicker than water" (血浓于水), "it's never too late than never" (迟做总比不做好), "curiosity killed the cat" (好奇害死猫), "actions speak louder than words" (行动胜于言语), "don't put all your eggs in one basket" (不要把鸡蛋放到一个篮子里). It is interesting to note that many idioms and proverbs in English can be traced to their analogous Chinese forms of expression and meaning exactly. In this way, Chinese ELs in the U. S., when learning English idioms, can retrieve information through their L1 databases and comprehend these idioms effectively.

ELs with the beginner or elementary level are suggested to approach LL idioms by adopting the literal translation strategy since their strong L1 competence may allow them to have positive transfers. Newmark (1991) noted that, during the elementary stages, "[l]iteral translation of occasional L2 idioms may also be useful as a pathway to comprehension and memorization" (p. 61). That is, ELs with limited (meta)linguistic knowledge of English may utilize the idiom translation opportunities from L1 to L2 to consolidate their grammars and vocabulary as well as to internalize the target L2 idioms by building visual mental pictures in their mind. For instance, before Chinese students transition to the regular subject-oriented classes of either high-school level or college level in the U. S., the instructors in the intensive English program may prepare some commonly practiced LL idioms that can easily activate students' prior idiomatic knowledge in Chinese. Via the literal translation strategy, students are expected to interpret the English version comprehensively and internalize the idiom with a mental image while mapping the vocabulary or phrase into Chinese one by one.

Secondly, translating SLL idioms is in conjunction with the adaptation translation as SLL idioms may require L2 learners to undergo an extra process in deciphering and replacing one or more lexical or pictorial items between their L1 and L2. Though people from different countries may have different cultures and beliefs, humanistic values prevail universally. The internet ensures that people are now all connected to share their personal feelings and social experiences across distances. Hence, Chinese idioms and English idioms may still share a commonality regardless of language differences. On some occasions, expressions in different languages may contain not only similar thoughts and mental images, but also present identical connotations. In other words, idioms from different languages may overlap in sociocultural heritage and pragmatic conventions that convey the same cultural information. For example, Chinese students may use the adaptation translation strategies to fulfill the purpose of mutual translation in such idioms. A case in point is that the English idiom “great minds think alike” can be converted to a Chinese proverb 英雄所见略同, which literally means ‘heroes think alike.’ Both the Chinese and English idioms herein mean that one thought or idea is agreed upon by two people, but the Chinese version uses “heroes” emanated from a legendary story. What is more, the English idiom “wolf down” can be translated as 狼吞虎咽, meaning ‘eat one’s food like wolves and tigers literally, which originates from a novel in China’s Ming Dynasty. Therefore, both the English version and the corresponding Chinese translation refer to a person’s devouring food. Therefore, by using the adaptation translation, Chinese students can still faithfully express the meaning of the original English idioms by identifying the matching Chinese idioms that can maintain the mental image, the rhetorical effect, and the cultural conceptualization in their mind.

Having harnessed the switch of lexical items and syntactic structures, ELs with the intermediate English proficiency level can deal with culturally idiomatic expressions like SLL idioms via adaptation translation. English instructors may guide them to seek appropriate cultural references to present the target texts while preserving the syntactic structure and semantic connotation. In the middle stages of language teaching, as Newmark (1991) explained, translation from L2 to L1 may also create opportunities for L2 learners to expand their vocabulary. For example, Chinese students may promptly capture the meaning of one English idiom, “eyes are bigger than one’s stomach” as this considered SLL idiom has a similar version in Chinese, 眼大肚子小, indicating that ‘eyes are bigger than one’s belly/tummy. ‘ While undergoing this introspective process using the adaptation translation, students have opportunities to articulate the difference between the two versions and the cultural story of the Chinese idiom as well as to internalize the relevant vocabulary subconsciously, such as stomach, belly, and tummy.

Lastly, when taking cultural differences into consideration in the process of translating English idioms, students may become confused when they are not able to find corresponding idioms in Chinese. Due to the semantic opaqueness of PLL idioms, the equivalence translation is believed to solidify the interpretation(s) of L2 idiomatic expressions mentally and contextually. However, not all English idioms have Chinese equivalents. Thus, the strategy of the literal translation may not work to present an accurate meaning of the English idioms. Sometimes, “rigid literal translation will violate the readability of the translation, leading to the monotony of reading as well as the ineffective cultural transfer” (Chen, 2010, p. 228). What is even more challenging is that some anecdotes or legends in English idioms may elude Chinese ELs’ understanding (Wang & Wang, 2013, p. 1695). In this situation, the equivalence translation can be implemented in an ESL/EFL class and help reinforce students’ understanding, especially when the Chinese students can associate with similar Chinese idioms. For example, the Chinese idiom 梁山伯与祝英台, meaning ‘Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai’ literally, can only be

comprehended through the equivalence translation as this idiom consists of two Chinese names associated with a Chinese legend of a tragic love story of a pair of lovers. The corresponding idiom in English should be “Romeo and Juliet,” since these two names appeared in William Shakespeare’s tragedy. Hence, it is the same with English idioms, such as “where there is a will, there is a way,” while the literal translation may fail to convey the exact idea accurately and thus should be translated with an equivalence to 有志者事竟成, which means ‘a determined man will find his success’ literally. In addition, English idioms like “*Achilles’ heel*” (fatal weakness) and “*it’s all Greek to me*” (it’s not understandable to me) may not be understood if translated literally. However, with the equivalence translation strategy, students will endeavor to open the “sesame” to find the hidden “treasure” willingly and retain the original flavor and mental image of English idioms.

To reproduce the “message” of PLL idioms from L1 to L2 and L1 to L2 requires L2 learners to think beyond the semantic domain and constantly (re)examine the appropriateness, faithfulness, and expressiveness of the translated “message.” As such, ELs with an upper-intermediate level or above of English proficiency, demonstrating a good knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, may apply the equivalence translation fairly effectively and skillfully. Newmark (1991) considered this advanced or final stage of language teaching rather critical because translation from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 is a fluid and dynamic bi-directional process that greatly cultivates ELs’ social skills, expands their language knowledge, and promotes cultural awareness. To illustrate this fluid and dynamic bi-directional process, some colloquial SLL idioms from American TV shows or movies can be introduced to Chinese ELs of the advanced English level. Taking the idiom, “*cut to the chase*” from the Big Bang Theory as an example, Chinese ELs, despite their advanced English level, may find it difficult to decode the meaning if this idiom is given separately from any contextual support or Chinese translation. However, the English instructor may help Chinese ELs decompose this English idiom by providing the original context along with the English meaning and encouraging them to seek the equivalent version in Chinese. Once understanding the original dialogue, “What are you talking about? I didn’t get your point. Cut to the chase, Sheldon!” from the Big Bang Theory and tying the dialogue to Sheldon’s nerdy and highly idiosyncratic personality, Chinese ELs will automatically retrieve the Chinese version, 直截了当, in their mind, which means “being straightforward with your point” involving an interlocutor.

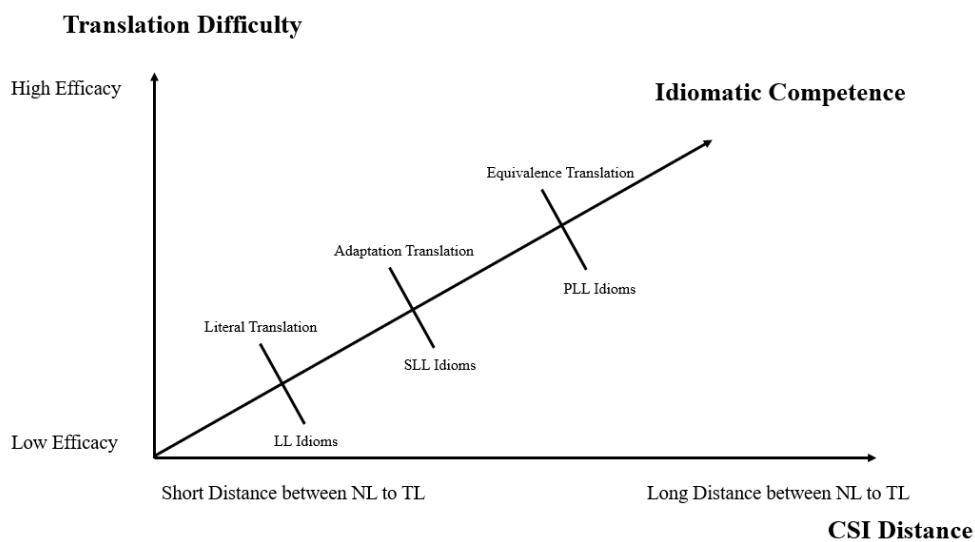
It bears repeating that appropriate translation strategies prime Chinese students studying in the U.S. with English idiom learning. A bi-cultural awareness in both Chinese and English is central to the translation process, which resonates with Ivir’s (1987) statement that “language is a part of the culture and, therefore, translation from one language to another cannot be done adequately without knowledge of the two cultures as well as the two languages structures” (p. 208). Equivalence translation allows the Chinese students to make the translating process more culturally and conceptually oriented, and it is also a helpful method for them to expand their cross-cultural knowledge and elevate their ability to appreciate ancient literature of both languages. As Chinese ELs’ cognition and linguistic ability develop, they will be able to utilize the equivalence translation to help them translate English idioms more faithfully and accurately; meanwhile, the equivalence translation will guarantee the comprehension of the idioms and lead Chinese students to foster bi/cross-cultural awareness and appreciation of western culture and the English language.

Conclusion

Critically speaking, teachers must recognize Chinese students’ English proficiency level (Guo, 2014, p. 433), and scaffold their reconceptualization of the acquired English idioms

methodically and pragmatically. That is, the effect of using cultural contexts and translation methods in English idiom learning is highly determined by the English proficiency level and linguistic ability of Chinese learners. In this light, we can hardly present a hasty conclusion that learning English idioms through the discussed translation strategies will apply to all Chinese students, let alone account for other variables like teachers' qualifications, teaching methodology, and learning environments. Nevertheless, we think teaching English idioms of different categories through systematic translation strategies will endow Chinese ELs with the desired communicative and idiomatic competence that ensures their academic success and consolidate their interpersonal communication skills when they are placed into mainstream classes with American students (See Figure 1). To further develop Chinese students' idiomatic competence, teachers might align the syllabus and the content with mainstream subjects, such as literature, science, and math, and encourage Chinese students to interact with American students academically and socially in authentic settings. In so doing, Chinese students, through daily interaction and collaboration with American students in the U.S. school system, will have opportunities to contextualize the target English idioms and connect them productively with the English language, literature, and culture that they attempt to master.

Figure 1
Idiomatic Competence Affected by Translation Difficulty and CSI Distance



This figure is refined based on the “CSI Distance” by J. Liantas (2002). CSI Distance = Conceptual-Semantic Image distance; LL=Lexical Level; SLL=Semi-Lexical Level; PLL=Post-Lexical Level; TL=Target Language; NL=Native Language.

Those wishing to apply the recommended translation strategies aligned with Liantas' VP idioms to Chinese students are encouraged to further investigate assessment methods of English idiomatic proficiency to ensure their optimal development of idiomatic competence. Teachers may utilize many informal assessments, such as pair dialogue practices, mix-and-match idioms (see Liantas, 2015), translation exercises, and quizzes to reflect the learning progress. Nonetheless, when it comes to the formal assessment of idiomatic proficiency, much needs to be negotiated between school stakeholders, such as course instructors, the school/college principal/president, and the academic director.

In closing, to attain proficiency in English idiom usage among Chinese students studying in the U.S. is not to build castles in the sky—to use idiomatic expressions like native-English speakers in authentic daily life situations is feasible. But there should be definitely appropriate

translation strategies introduced to help Chinese students decipher and acquire English idioms. Translation strategies such as literal translation, adaptation translation, and equivalence translation are pedagogically presented to decode VP idioms, which fall into three subcategories: LL idioms, SLL idioms, and PLL idioms, respectively (Liontas, 2002). It is hoped this paper might provide insights into how translation strategies can benefit English idiom teaching for ESL/EFL practitioners across the curriculum in the U.S. In addition to asking Chinese students to “read ten thousand books” in class, it is also paramount to guide them to “travel ten thousand miles.” Teachers should encourage them to apply the acquired English idioms in class to real-life experiences, which are broadened naturally through daily interactions with American students, teachers, and friends, which will, ultimately, promote their idiomatic competence and help them regain their voices in mainstream American classes.

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Zhengjie Li is an English instructor at the School of Foreign Language Studies at Guangzhou College of Technology and Business. He obtained his doctoral degree at the University of South Florida. His research interests include cross-cultural translation, instructional technologies in foreign language education, and TESOL/TEFL education.

Hui Long is a full-time teacher serving in Guangzhou College of Technology and Business. His main areas of research include translation, business English, and international trade.

Wei Lou is a full-time teacher serving in Guangzhou College of Technology and Business. She received her Master degree in English Studies (TESL) in English Department from City University of Hong Kong. Her main areas of research include promoting English proficiency of ESL/EFL students, discourse analysis, pedagogy.