

# *Chinese English Learners' Understanding of English Animal Idioms*

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**Abstract:** Idioms are the essence of language culture, concise and comprehensive phrases or short sentences formed in the long term use of people. They are rich in national cultural characteristics. The purpose of this paper is to study Chinese English learners' understanding of English animal idioms. First of all, it introduces the characteristics of English idioms and the three problems that should be paid attention to in the translation of English idioms, and expounds the understanding of idioms and the translation of animal idioms. In this study, 60 English majors and 60 graduate students were chosen to investigate whether English proficiency affects their understanding of idioms. The experimental results show that the average scores of Senior English learners are 4.00, 2.73, 1.00 and 0.83, respectively. Among the four kinds of animal idioms, regardless of their English level, the average scores of class I, II, III and IV are 3.73, 2.52, 0.90 and 0.77 respectively. Among the four types of English Animal Idiom Comprehension, English learners' English proficiency affects the comprehension results of the first and second types of idioms. In type I, English proficiency has a significant effect on the understanding of animal idioms ( $t = -3.00$ ;  $P = 0.004 < 0.05$ ). That is to say, learners with high English proficiency perform better than those with low English proficiency in understanding animal idioms. In the second category, the influence of English level on the understanding of animal idioms is also significant ( $t = -2.33$ ;  $P = 0.023 < 0.05$ ).

## 1. Introduction

Language is the carrier of culture, so the teaching process of language, to a certain extent, also includes the teaching process of culture. Only from the contrast between Chinese and Western cultures, can cross-cultural communication be realized. There are great cultural differences between China and some western countries whose mother tongue is English. Idioms are the embodiment of

these differences in language and culture [1-2]. Idioms are an indispensable part of daily communication. In addition to providing objective information or describing objective things, idioms are also excellent in expressing personal emotions and attitudes. Animals play an extremely important role in human production and life. People often use animals to express all kinds of emotions, and animal idioms with animals as the metaphor come into being. Animal idioms refer to idioms including animal names, mainly including five categories: Proverbs, fixed phrases, slang, slang and idioms. Idioms are an important rhetorical device in the use of language. Many idioms are symmetrical and exquisite in form, harmonious in melody, meaningful and suggestive in meaning. In addition to these features, animal idioms also show a variety of features and interesting. Therefore, translators should try to keep these characteristics of animal idioms in translation.

As an aspect of measuring whether the language is authentic or not, the proper use of idioms has become one of the important indicators to reveal whether the learners are close to the level of native speakers, so it has become one of the goals that the learners pursue in learning and using foreign languages. However, idioms are one of the difficulties in foreign language learning. Generally, learners with good English proficiency are quite weak in mastering English idioms. Relevant studies show that animal idioms are a representative example of the cultural differences between English and Chinese. There are a lot of researches on L2 (Second Language) vocabulary acquisition at home and abroad, but there are few researches on idioms, especially in China.

Gareth Carrol disagreed with the view that people usually analyze the literal meaning of idioms in the process of understanding. A large number of empirical studies show that people do not calculate the literal interpretation of idioms before or at the same time when they understand the metaphorical meaning of idioms. This seems particularly true given the ambiguity of the literal meaning of many idioms. Finally, they believe that although idioms are directly understood as a word, it is too early to accept that all idioms have the same status in vocabulary. K.E first expounded the traditional concept of English idioms, and from the perspective of cognitive semantics, from the three cognitive mechanisms of metaphor and general knowledge, proposes that idioms are analyzable and motivated, and then expounds the Enlightenment of Idiom Teaching [3-4].

The purpose of this study is to understand Chinese English learners' understanding of English animal idioms. For example, what influences the understanding of English Animal Idioms: proficiency of Chinese English learners, different types of animal idioms or the first two factors affect each other. The purpose of this study is to investigate Chinese English learners' understanding of English animal idioms. There are two independent variables: the proficiency level of Chinese English learners - intermediate level and advanced level. According to the different matching of cultural connotation and language form, there are four types of English animal idioms. In other words, since one of the purposes of this study is to explore the influence of Animal Idiom types on the understanding of English animal idioms, the target idioms are divided into different types. After careful consideration and repeated discussion, an animal idiom recognition model is established. According to the matching of language form and cultural connotation.

## 2. Proposed Method

### 2.1. Characteristics of English Idioms

#### (1) Conventional fixity

English animal idioms have some unique ideographic features, such as fixed structure, "a black sheep" cannot be called "a dark sheep"; The slang "dark horse" (black horse) from the racetrack has also been used as a conventional expression, which means "the winner whose strength is difficult to predict in the race and who breaks out in the cold", which cannot be arbitrarily expressed as "black

horse" or any other "red horse".

(2) The integrity of semantic expression

We must learn idioms as a whole. The semantic expression of English idioms is a complete part, which can not be separated or changed, and can not be analyzed according to the general syntax. For example, "rain cats and dogs" means "it's raining cats and dogs". "We cannot go out because it is raining cats and dogs. S.". The expression in the sentence cannot be changed into the expression of "cats and dogs are being rained" or "cats and dogs are raining".

## 2.2. Problems in the Translation of English Idioms

(1) No meaning can be expected

For example, the expressions of various animal image idioms listed in the article, many of the meanings of expressions are not the combination of the surface words, so when translating, we should pay attention to the differences between English and Chinese cultures. Although some idioms have similar literal meanings, their practical meanings are different, especially the combination of some simpler words. For example, "fat cat" means "big money".

(2) No word for word translation

When translating English idioms, we should adjust the translation of idioms according to the context of the context and the expression habits of Chinese, and pay attention to the implication of idioms. For example, "the goose that lays golden eggs" can be translated as "cash cow"; "every dog is a lion at home" can be expressed as "arrogance"; as poor as a church mouse.

(3) Four character idioms can be used

Chinese emphasizes conciseness and clearness, and the choice of four character idioms is also a Chinese habitual way of expression, especially in the translation of English idioms, which makes the translation more dynamic and expressive. For example, "horse and foot" can be translated into "go all out"; and "he who keeps company with the wolf will learn to howl" can be translated into "near the red, near the black".

Therefore, when translating English idioms, we should be careful and flexible, so that the translation can be more authentic, so as to better express the characteristics of idioms.

## 2.3. Idioms and Idiom Understanding

(1) Definition and classification of English Idioms

English idioms are fixed word combinations with special meanings, which have the characteristics of semantic unity and structural fixity. From the semantic point of view, the whole meaning can not be constructed by the lexical meaning of the idioms, that is, from the surface meaning of the idioms, it is often impossible to guess the whole meaning. For example, to know the ropes, kick the bucket, beat the Bush, etc. In terms of structure, idioms are usually composed of a series of words, any of which can not be replaced at will, and the order of words is relatively fixed. According to the above characteristics, idioms are defined as "lexical strings composed of two or more words with relatively fixed syntactic, lexical and phonetic forms, relatively obscure semantics and relatively special pragmatic functions".

Language researchers and lexicographers hold different opinions on the classification of idioms. The traditional classification is from the perspective of grammatical function and structural components, according to which idioms can be divided into verb, noun, adjective, adverb idiom and proverb [5-6]. Idiom researchers also classify idioms from the perspectives of their decomposability, semantic transparency and so on, which are all classified from the relationship between literal meaning and figurative meaning of idiom components. From the perspective of L2 (Second Language) acquisition, L1 (mother tongue) and L2 idiom acquisition are compared to classify them.

According to the similarity degree of Spanish English idioms in form and meaning expression, English idioms are divided into three categories: equivalent idioms, similar idioms and different idioms. On the basis of classification, four types of idioms are proposed according to the semantics and forms of L1 and L2: idioms with complete semantic and formal equivalence, idioms with partial semantic and formal equivalence, idioms with different semantics and forms but the same conceptual metaphor, and L2 idioms with no semantics and forms in L1 idioms. The division of Idioms from the perspective of semantics and form enables us to better compare the literal and metaphorical meanings of L1 and L2 idioms, which is of great significance for understanding L2 idioms [7-8].

#### (2) Factors influencing idiom understanding

All kinds of languages have their own colorful idioms, which are the language wealth created by all nationalities in the process of using language for a long time and with strong national, historical and local color. Idioms are generally concise, vivid and interesting [9]. Accurate and proficient understanding and use of idioms is an important standard to measure a person's language level, but it is a major difficulty in foreign language learning. The understanding of idioms is influenced by many factors, such as familiarity, transparency, context and language level of foreign language learners. In this study, the level of English learners is taken as one of the research contents [10].

Numerous empirical studies have confirmed that there is a certain relationship between foreign language learners' language proficiency and idiom understanding. In the process of idiom understanding, compared with the low-level learners, the high-level learners tend to use more strategies and achieve better comprehension. In idiom understanding, the degree of native language transfer is different among subjects at different levels, and there are significant differences in the use of strategies [11]. The group with the highest level of language has the best performance in idiom understanding, using the most strategies when using the native language; the group with the lowest level of language has the worst performance in idiom understanding, and using the least strategies in the process of native language transfer.

#### (3) Animal Idioms

Idioms are closely related to culture, which is a special culture. The cultural connotation in idioms is often a stumbling block for idiom understanding. Idioms of animal words contain rich animal images, which are special parts of vocabulary and are widely used in every language. Natural environment, custom, religion, history and other factors often lead to different cultural connotations and symbolic meanings of the same animal image in idioms of different languages. For example, dogs always remind people of derogatory images in Chinese culture, while in western culture, the commendatory color is strong, which is reflected in many idioms, such as love me, love my dog, lucky dog, etc. The same or different information conveyed by animal images in Chinese and Western cultures has a positive or negative effect on the understanding of English animal idioms. Because of its rich cultural connotation, animal words and idioms can trigger various associative meanings and attract more and more researchers' attention [12]. The current research mainly explores animal idioms from the perspective of cross-cultural research. It is of theoretical and practical value to study animal idioms from the perspective of L2 acquisition. However, so far, there are few studies on the relationship between Chinese learners' foreign language proficiency and their understanding of English animal word idioms, and there is almost no research on the relationship between different animal word idiom types and understanding in China [13].

## 2.4. Translation of English and Chinese Animal Idioms

#### (1) Literal translation

Literal translation refers to the method of retaining the figurative image of English idioms and

their unique national and local colors in the translation without violating the translation language norms and causing wrong associations [14-16]. For the idioms with the same animal and cultural connotation, or the connotation of animal idioms has been accepted by the Chinese readers. For example, the meaning of wolf and sheep in "wolves in the sheep's clothing" is the same for the readers of the two countries, and the readers are very familiar with it. We can translate it into "wolf in sheep's clothing" and "dark horse". In translation, English animal idioms are directly transplanted into Chinese, which can not only be faithful to the original text, but also enrich the language content and form of Chinese. For example:

- 1) A barley corn is better than a diamond to a cock.
- 2) That old man is as fat as a pig.
- 3) My neighbor is a beautiful girl, what's more, she is as gentle as a lamb.

Literal translation can retain the figurative image, structure and artistic conception of English animal idioms, so as to make the translation retain the original flavor, form and spirit of the original text to the maximum extent, so the preferred translation method of idioms is literal translation.

#### (2) Set translation method

When the image and metaphor of the original text do not conform to Chinese customs, literal translation will be puzzling or even misleading, affecting the accurate expression of the original text, so literal translation cannot be used. If the metaphorical meanings of animal words in Chinese are similar to or similar to those in English, or even if the metaphorical images of the two kinds of animal idioms in English and Chinese are different, but the meanings expressed are the same or similar, we can use the set translation method to translate them by borrowing the existing idioms in Chinese. For example, "to fish in the troubled water" has the same meaning with "fishing in the troubled water" in Chinese, and the set translation method can be directly used in translation. Similarly, "as timid as a hare" is translated as "timid as a mouse" and "a rat in a hole" is translated as "a turtle in a jar". In addition, some Chinese proverbs and English animal idioms have similar or different forms, but they have the same metaphorical meaning or connotation, which can be directly replaced by Chinese idioms in translation. For example:

- 1) Better be the head of a dog than a tail of a lion.
- 2) Many straws may bind an elephant.
- 3) Take not a musket to kill a butterfly.

Due to the similarity of metaphorical meanings of animal words in English and Chinese, Chinese readers will not have problems in understanding them in the process of reading. Therefore, set translation is also a common method of idiom translation.

#### (3) Free translation

Free translation means that when English and Chinese social cultures have different metaphorical or cultural connotations for the same animal, the translator must abandon the literal meaning of the original, so that the content of the translation and the original is consistent and the main language functions are similar. That is to say, when the understanding and views of the animal are different in the cultural background of the original text and the translation, or when there is no corresponding cultural connotation between the two idioms, or some metaphors with animal words and idioms have lost their original association, free translation with similar meaning can be adopted. For example, if the literal translation of "white elephant" is "white elephant", the cultural connotation of English is not expressed at all, which will cause ambiguity. It should be interpreted as "waste, big and useless thing", rather than "white elephant". Do the donkey work. To rain cats and dogs. No matter in English or Chinese, these animal metaphors can not arouse or seldom arouse the imagination of Chinese readers.

- 1) Mother teachers me do not be a person who comes like a dog at a who.
- 2) He kissed the hare's foot.

3) I have other fish to fry tomorrow.

In fact, free translation is of little significance to Chinese readers in understanding English culture. Therefore, free translation can not be used as a common method for translators to translate animal idioms.

#### (4) Filling method

The cultural atmosphere is created by the clear image expression in the article. The reason why the figurative image of animal idioms is more distinct is because of its strong national characteristics. Therefore, in translation, we should not simply apply Chinese images or ignore the images in English idioms, but try to reproduce the metaphorical images in English idioms as much as possible. The effective way to deal with this situation is filling method. Annotation refers to the method of adding some words after the idioms in literal or free translation to further explain and explain the background knowledge of the original text and present the image and imagination of the original author in front of the readers. For example:

1) This bus was packed like sardines., the bus was jammed like sardine canned - crowded. (Note: sardine cans can fill up cans and bottles without leaving a little space, so they usually compare canned sardine to crowded places or spaces. )

2) Sometimes it happens that a dark horse candidate gets selected in the election. (Note: the black horse originally refers to the horse that is not favored in the racetrack, and finally wins unexpectedly in the race. Now it's mainly used to describe people or things that are not favored, but the result is unexpectedly good. )

3) He always takes an ostrich policy to face the difficulties. (Note: when an ostrich is in danger, it puts its head in the sand and its butt is exposed. It thinks it can't see anything and it will be safe. Nowadays, ostrich policy is often used as a metaphor for the negative policy that dare not face up to the reality and evade the struggle. ) The method of annotation can reproduce the image of metaphor in English idioms and enrich the cultural knowledge of the target readers.

#### (5) Literal translation plus Italian translation

Some animal idioms are easy to be ambiguous if they are translated by literal translation alone, and they will lose their original quality if they are translated by free translation alone. In this case, it is necessary to adopt the method of combination of literal translation and free translation. Literal translation can keep the metaphor image of the original text completely, and then supplement the translation content through free translation. The implied meaning and English culture of the original text can also be more clearly expressed. For example:

1) All asses wag their ears.

2) The best fish swim (or are) near the bottom.

3) Don't set the cat among the pigeons.

### 3. Experiments

#### 3.1. Research Object

This paper takes 60 undergraduate and graduate students of English major in the Department of foreign languages and the College of foreign languages of Polytechnic University as the research objects. According to the purpose of this study, it is divided into intermediate group and advanced group. The intermediate group consists of 30 third year English majors with about 8 years of English learning experience, all of whom have passed the CET-4. The high level group consists of 30 second year English majors with about 12-15 years of English learning experience. All 30 graduate students who have been selected as high-level learners have passed CET-8.

### 3.2. Test Tools

In order to classify the selected English animal idioms more objectively and powerfully, several college English teachers were invited to help after the purpose of this study was clarified. After repeated discussion and argumentation, 20 of the 50 English animal idioms are selected and divided into four categories. At the same time, in order to ensure that the subjects are not familiar with all the target languages in this study, the researcher gave 30 postgraduates and 30 undergraduates, whose English level is the same as the subjects. It turns out that most of these students are not familiar with 20 English animal idioms.

The criteria for selecting 20 English animal idioms are as follows. First of all, the 20 animal idioms used in this study have typical animal images and rich Chinese and English cultural connotations. Secondly, previous interviews with EFL learners who are similar to the participants in this study show that most of the students are not familiar with or know nothing about the 20 selected English animal idioms. Therefore, the choice of 20 English animal idioms may be a favorable condition for the study of idiom understanding.

Based on the equivalence / similarity and difference between the surface language form and the bottom cultural connotation, a contrastive model of English and Chinese animal idioms is established, which distinguishes four possible combinations: the first type (the same / similar type as Chinese expression in terms of language form and cultural connotation); the second type (the same / similar type as Chinese expression in terms of cultural connotation, but different English in terms of language form) Animal idioms); the third category (English Animal Idioms with different cultural connotations have the same / similar linguistic forms with Chinese expressions); the fourth category (English animal idioms have totally different linguistic forms and cultural connotations with Chinese expressions).

### 3.3. Test Steps

Before the test of English animal idioms, we choose 20 idioms, which are divided into four categories, for the students with similar English level as the participants of this study. After scoring and interviewing, the subjects were not familiar with the 20 selected English animal idioms. Completed one week before the English Animal Idiom Comprehension Test. Next, participants were asked to take a vocabulary test. In this task, students are encouraged to give 40 English words Chinese equivalent in blankets. Not more than 20 minutes. After the vocabulary test, participants were asked to complete the English Animal Idiom Comprehension Test. After carefully reading the instructions, participants were asked to translate them into Chinese. It is not allowed to mention any materials and discussions in class, and they are not encouraged to translate word for word into Chinese.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Two Way ANOVA of Repeated Measurement

According to the research design, two-way ANOVA was conducted by using 2 (level: high and medium)  $\times$  4 (Animal Idiom Type: I, II, III, IV) mixed design repeated measurement.

A general description of the English animal idiom comprehension test is shown in Figure 1. In type I, type II, type III and type IV, the average scores of intermediate English learners are 3.47, 2.30, 80 and 0.70 respectively, while the average scores of advanced English learners are 4.00, 2.73, 1.00 and 0.83 respectively. Among the four kinds of animal idioms, regardless of their English level, the average scores of class I, II, III and IV are 3.73, 2.52, 0.90 and 0.77 respectively.

Table 1. Descriptive data on the understanding of four English animal idioms by two English proficiency groups

	Items	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV	Total
Intermediate-level	Sum of score	104	69	24	21	218
	Mean	3.47	2.30	0.80	0.70	1.82
	Std. Deviation	0.33	0.42	0.37	0.22	1.65
High-level	Sum of score	120	82	30	25	257
	Mean	4.00	2.73	1.00	0.83	2.14
	Std.Deviation	0.62	0.62	0.21	0.14	2.11

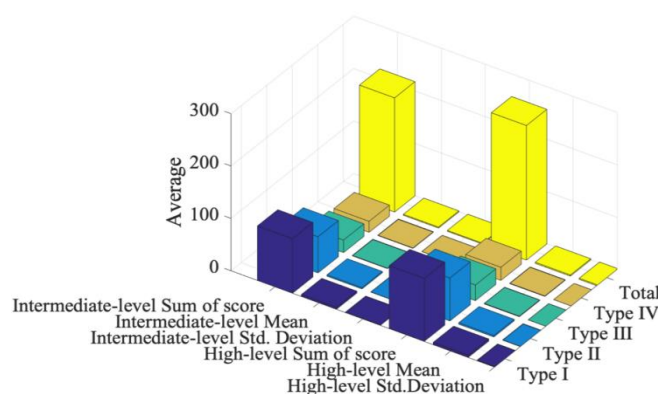


Figure 1. Descriptive data on the understanding of four English animal idioms by two English proficiency groups

The results of two-way ANOVA are shown in Figure 2. It enables us to have a more detailed understanding of the influence of idiom types and English proficiency on the understanding of animal idioms. The analysis shows that English proficiency has a significant impact on the understanding of English Animal Idioms ( $F = 17.320$ ;  $P = 0.000 < 0.0001$ ). In addition, the analysis also found that animal idiom types have significant main effect on idiom understanding ( $F = 323.202$ ;  $P = 0.000 < 0.0001$ ). In other words, in addition to the influence of language level, the types of idioms distinguished according to different matching of surface language forms and implied cultural connotation also affect the understanding of animal idioms. At the same time, English level  $\times$  Animal Idiom Type was close to the significant level ( $F = 6.267$ ;  $P = 0.000 < 0.0001$ ). In other words, the influence of idiom types on idiom understanding is related to the English level of Animal Idiom understanding.

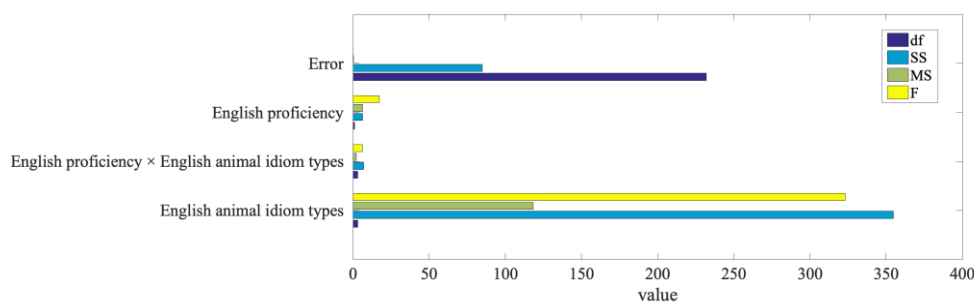


Figure 2. Two-way ANOVA Test: Impact of animal idiom types and English proficiency levels on idiom comprehension

Since the two-way ANOVA of repeated measurements has a significant impact on two main factors, an independent sample t-test was conducted to provide detailed information on the differences between groups.

## 4.2. Pairwise Comparison

The paired comparison results of four animal idioms are shown in Figure 3. First of all, the average score of type I is the highest, significantly higher than that of type II, type III and type IV, reaching a significant level of 0.000 respectively. Second, there was a significant difference in the average score of type II and type IV ( $P = 0.000 < 0.05$ ). Third, there was no significant difference between type III and type IV ( $P = 0.692 > 0.05$ ). It can be seen that among the four types of animal idioms, type I group scored the highest, type II group scored the second highest, type III group and type III group scored the same, while type III group and type IV group had no significant difference. Therefore, type III and type IV are the most challenging tasks for participants.

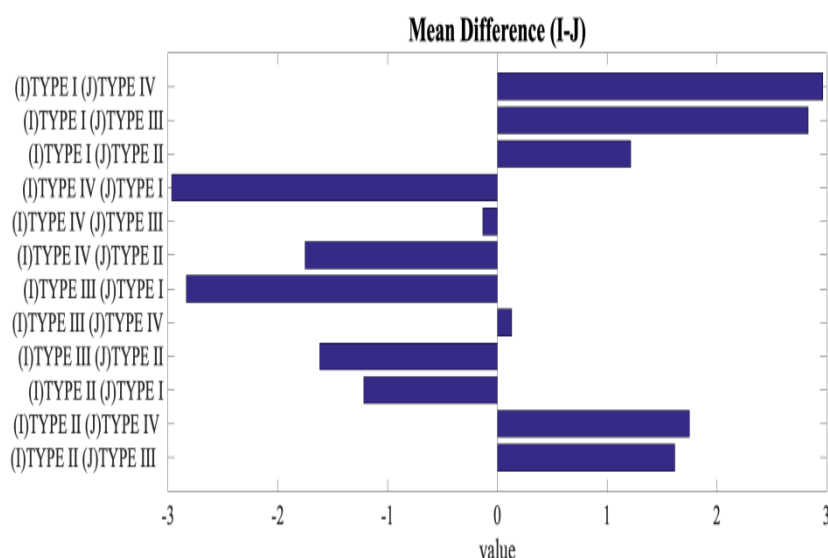


Figure 3. Mean difference (I-J)

## 4.3. Results of Independent Sample T-test

The results of two-way ANOVA show that both English proficiency and Animal Idiom types affect idiom understanding, and these two factors interact in the process of idiom understanding. The results of two-way ANOVA showed that English proficiency had a significant effect on the understanding of English Animal Idioms ( $F = 17.320$ ;  $P = .000 < 0.0001$ ). In addition, the analysis also found that animal idiom types have significant main effect on idiom understanding ( $F = 323.202$ ;  $P = 0.000 < 0.0001$ ). In other words, in addition to the influence of language proficiency, the types of idioms will also affect the understanding of animal idioms, and idiom types are distinguished according to the different matching of their surface language forms and implied cultural connotations. At the same time, English level  $\times$  animal idiom type is close to significance ( $F = 6.267$ ;  $P = 0.000 < 0.0001$ ), that is, the influence of idiom type on idiom understanding is related to the role of English level in Animal Idiom understanding. In order to further explain the interaction between them, independent sample t-test is carried out, and the results are shown in Figure 4.

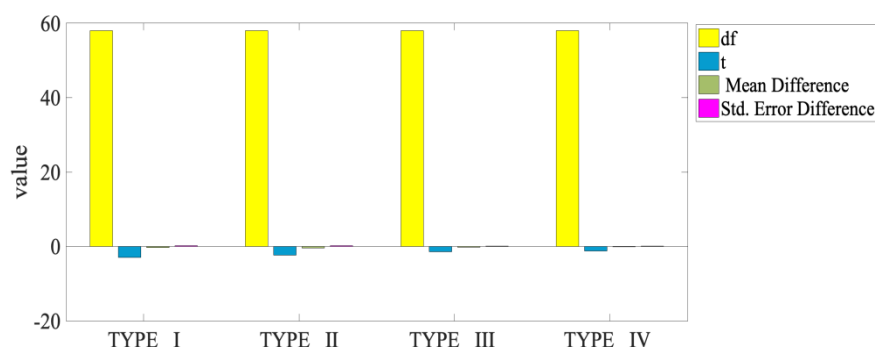


Figure 4. Independent sample *t* test for the interaction between English proficiency and animal idiom types

Among the four types of English animal idioms, English proficiency has an impact on the understanding of type I and type II, but has no impact on the understanding of type III ( $t = -1.44$ ;  $P = 0.155 > 0.05$ ) and type IV ( $t = -1.22$ ;  $P = 0.229 > 0.05$ ). In other words, in the understanding of the third and fourth categories, the high-level learners did not show a better understanding than the middle level learners.

In this study, English learners with higher proficiency do not perform better than those with lower proficiency in the four kinds of animal idioms. There are only significant differences in type I and type II, while there are no significant differences in the understanding of type III and type IV in both groups. It can be seen that in idiom understanding, learners' language level and types of animal idioms interact.

Through the above analysis, we understand the influence of English Animal Idiom types and English proficiency on the understanding of English animal idioms. The results show that the types of animal idioms and English proficiency have a significant impact on Chinese English learners' understanding of animal idioms. At the same time, in the understanding of English animal idioms, the influence of idiom types on idiom understanding is also related to learners' English level. In comparison, of the four kinds of animal idioms, the two groups scored the highest in type I idioms, followed by type II idioms. Compared with type I and type II, type III and type IV are more difficult to master. Finally, there was a significant difference between the two proficiency groups in the understanding of type I and type II. On the understanding of type III and type IV, there is no significant difference between the two groups in terms of English proficiency, that is to say, the performance of the high level group is not significantly better than that of the middle level group.

## 5. Conclusion

English idioms are an important part of English vocabulary and one of the difficulties in foreign language learning. This paper chooses animal idioms in English as the reference point of research, and explores the acquisition of animal idioms by Chinese English learners by establishing a cross-cultural contrastive model of English and Chinese idioms. Through the analysis of the results of the understanding of animal words and idioms, it is found that the types of English animal words and idioms and the learners' foreign language level have a significant impact on the understanding of English animal words and idioms, and they interact in the process of understanding animal words and idioms.

English animal idioms are a difficulty for Chinese English learners. In order to study Chinese English learners' understanding of animal idioms, we chose 20 English animal idioms as test tools. According to the different matching of similarities, similarities and differences between English and

Chinese animal idioms in surface language form and bottom cultural connotation, a contrastive model of English and Chinese animal idioms is established, which distinguishes four possible combinations.

In this study, 30 Chinese high-level and 30 middle-level English learners' understanding of animal idioms is influenced by English proficiency and four types of idioms. The first one is English animal idioms, which have the same / similar language form and cultural connotation with Chinese animal idioms; the second one is English animal idioms, which have the same / similar cultural connotation with Chinese animal idioms, but have different language form with Chinese animal idioms; the third one is English animal idioms, which have different cultural connotation, but have the same or similar language form with Chinese idioms; the fourth Class is an English Animal Idiom, which has different cultural connotation and language form from Chinese idioms. The results of two-way variance, paired comparison and independent sample t-test were analyzed.

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## Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Conflict of Interest

The author states that this article has no conflict of interest.

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