

WHAT MOST STUDIES ON IDIOMS HAVE DISPENCED WITH: THE VARYING LEVELS OF PROFICIENCY

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Abstract

Most studies on idiom type have had as their subjects advanced EFL learners on the grounds that idioms constitute a part of language that is not easily processed and understood by language learners unless they have achieved a reasonably high level of language proficiency. Even though the studies that distinguish between different types of idioms with respect to their similarities to idioms in the learners' mother tongue have turned a blind eye to considering different levels of proficiency in their studies. It is, though, at least intuitively plausible to conceive of idioms similar, and at times identical, in both languages as imposing a less severe burden on students of less proficiency. This study is an attempt to add this missing part to the body of studies on idioms. Here, a line is drawn between three types of idioms, namely similar idioms, conceptually

familiar idioms, and conceptually unfamiliar idioms. Also, EFL learners at intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency were selected. The performances of these two groups of learners on different types of idioms were, then, compared and contrasted to see if the students' differing levels of proficiency have anything to do with their performances on these idiom types. It was revealed that intermediate students' performance on the test of similar idioms was substantially better than their performance on the test of conceptually familiar idioms which, in turn, exceeded their performance on the test of conceptually unfamiliar idioms. On the other hand, the difference between advanced students' test scores on the tests of similar idioms and conceptually familiar idioms were not statistically significant. Their performance on the test of conceptually unfamiliar idioms was far poorer than their performances on the other two tests.

Key Words: idiom type, level of proficiency

1-Introduction

Foreign language teachers are in a state of bewilderment regarding the application of research findings in their everyday classroom activities. Thus, one of the most fruitful techniques in research

is to investigate the issues, findings of which will have immediate application to the teaching community.

One research problem to be investigated, which has immediate application to teaching, is the complex nature of idioms in English. To put the problem in Collis's (1994) words "non-native speakers of English can reach a point in their knowledge of language where they feel comfortable with standard literary speech; however, they are liable to find themselves in hot water when confronted with idiomatic expressions." Iranian learners are not an exception. Even advanced learners of English lack the ability to use English idioms appropriately while speaking and writing in the target language (if they use them at all).

Due to the awkwardness emanating from the nature of idioms, English teachers do not take trouble to include them in their teaching materials. Nor do English students make time to learn them on their own. This awkwardness arises due to semantic, formal, and cultural differences existing between English and the students' mother tongue.

Up to here the term idioms has been used quite a lot without defining what is meant by idioms. An

introduction in the nature of idioms, I guess, is necessary here.

In everyday conversations speakers rely heavily on preformatted utterances. They talk about *the skeleton in their neighbor's closet*, about the new position they are *looking forward to*, and they *bet their shirt* that their colleague's new car *costs an arm and a leg*. Such utterances are not creations of the speakers themselves. Instead, these are idiomatic expressions that belong to the conversational repertoire of the native speakers of a language (Sprenger et al., 2006).

Numerous definitions have been proposed for idiomatic expression by different scholars. The following definition by Crystal (1983: 179), among all, seems to be a comprehensive one:

An idiom is “a term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which are semantically or syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit. From a semantic viewpoint, the

meaning of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole. From a syntactic viewpoint, the words do not often permit the usual variability they display in other contexts
....”

Having defined idioms, I should point out the studies on idioms and their limitations. Suzanne Irujo's *Don't put your leg in your mouth* (1986) cast considerable light on the sphere of idiom teaching. Her study was designed to assess the differential effects of language transfer on the comprehension and production of idioms. Irujo suggests that second language learners comprehend and produce identical idioms (in English and Spanish in her experiment) most easily, followed by similar idioms, and different idioms. If students are using their knowledge of idioms in the first language to comprehend and produce second language idioms, teachers should take advantage of this point. Overt comparisons can show students which idioms can be transferred positively from their first language

and which are likely to cause interference. That is, when the first and second language have identical idioms, the use of transfer can result in a correct idiom. A Persian example would be:

'gorg dar lebaase mish'

wolf in clothing sheep

(a wolf in sheep's clothing).

Introducing these types of idioms first seems to be most efficient cognitively. In the same study, Irujo delineated that within each idiom type (identical, similar, and different idioms), those idioms which were comprehended and produced more correctly were those which were frequently used (apparently in both cultures), those whose meanings were transparent, and those which had simple vocabulary and structure. Therefore, Irujo recommends avoiding infrequent, highly colloquial idioms with difficult vocabulary or structure.

A quite similar study, inspired by Irujo's paper, was conducted in Iran by Sadighi and Fahandezh Sa'di (1999). They classified idioms into four types: (a) identical idioms: for which there is a word-for-word

translation in Farsi, (b) similar idioms: which are semantically and syntactically similar to their Persian equivalents, (c) different idioms: which are used to express the same ideas in the same situations in both languages, and (d) English idioms which have no equivalents in Farsi. They further investigated the role of transfer –positive, negative, and zero transfer– on reconstruction of these idioms. They found that the use of language transfer strategy plays a dominant role in the processing of these idioms positively/negatively. Their results also provided support for the claim that the employment of intralingual strategies account for some errors not attributable to negative transfer.

None of the aforementioned studies took trouble to deal with EFL students' varying levels of proficiency. The present study, as such, seems to be a right attempt to address the issue of language proficiency within an idiomatic framework. In the present study, three types of idioms were distinguished from each other. Three tests based on these three idiom types were developed by which the knowledge of EFL learners at two varying levels of proficiency was put to test. The idiom types are as follows:

1. Similar idioms (SIs): Similar idioms are idiomatic expressions whose propositional meaning is the same as their corresponding Persian idioms. These idioms are also semantically and/or socio-culturally the same as their Persian equivalents e. g. *a wolf in sheep's clothing* and *welcome someone with open arms* are similar (if not identical) to *gorg dar lebaase mish* and *baa aaghushe baaz az kasi esteghbaal kardan*, respectively.

2. Conceptually familiar idioms (CFIs): Conceptually familiar idioms are idiomatic expressions which carry the same idea in the same situation in both languages e. g. *the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence*, the Persian equivalent of which is *morghe hamsaaye ghaaze*.

3. Conceptually unfamiliar idioms (CUIs): Conceptually unfamiliar idioms are idiomatic expressions which are by no means similar to Persian idioms e. g. *to shoot the breeze* or *to get your claws into somebody*.

2-Research Questions and Hypotheses

In the present study, efforts have been made to find answers to the following questions:

1. Do intermediate students perform differently on different tests of idiom type? Which idiom type is more easily learned by intermediate students?

2. Does advanced students' performance vary on different tests of idiom type? Which idiom type is more easily learned by advanced students?
3. Do idiom type and the participants' level of proficiency influence their performance on different tests of idiom type?

Considering the aforementioned questions, three null hypotheses were put forward to be investigated. They are as follows:

H₁. The intermediate students' scores are not under the influence of idiom type.

H₂. There is no relationship between idiom type and advanced students' performance on different tests of idioms.

H₃. EFL learners on various levels of proficiency do not benefit differently from idiom type to answer different tests of idioms.

3-Methodology

3.1-Participants

The participants in this study included a total of 85 male and female students of roughly the same age (18-22), of whom 44 were intermediate and the remaining 41 advanced. They all attended English language courses in Jahade Daneshgahi, Shahrekord

branch. The intermediate students were randomly selected from a population of 97 learners. Also from among 63 advance students studying in the institute, our sample of advanced students was randomly selected.

3.2-Materials

The materials used in the study comprised three different tests, each of which aimed to assess the performance of the students on one idiom type. Each of these completion tests, which test the students' knowledge of idioms in meticulously constructed contexts, comprises one idiom type. That is, the first test is constructed solely to test similar idioms while the second test measures the students' performance on conceptually familiar idioms, and the third test addresses conceptually unfamiliar idioms.

3.2.1-Validity of the tests

These tests enjoy content validity by nature, since they test exclusively the idioms taught in the class sessions. To judge over the face validity of the tests, they were submitted to two testing experts and subsequently qualified as being valid.

3.2.2-Reliability of the tests

The internal consistency of the test was established by means of the Cronbach alpha coefficient. The

alpha coefficient for the test of SIs is 0.81, indicating a high and satisfactory internal consistency. For CFIs and CUIs, this value was 0.71 and 0.78, respectively. As a result, any uncertainty with regards to the internal validity of the tests was eradicated.

3.3-Procedures

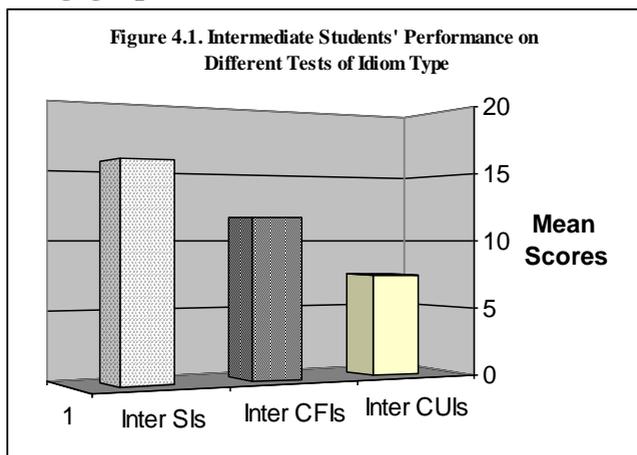
The English course the students took comprised twenty sessions. Each session they were taught three idioms: one similar, one conceptually familiar, and one conceptually unfamiliar. It is worth noting that the idioms were all taught in context and whenever possible, their equivalents in Persian would be presented. After the completion of the course, students were taught sixty idioms, twenty idioms each type. The idiom type tests were then administered along with their final examination. So, each group in the study took a total of three tests. The participants' productions were collected after a single administration of the completion tests. These productions which amounted to 258 pages were then carefully scored. Since the answers to the test items were included in the papers, and there were as many answers as there were test items, each blank could have only one correct answer. This gave rise to some kind of objectivity both on the part of the

participants who took the test and on the part of the rater who was about to rate them. This objectivity paved the way for us to score the papers. Each correct answer was given one point and incorrect answers were given zero, as such. The score of a participant on a test, therefore, could range from 0 to 20.

4-Findings

4.1-The first null hypothesis

The first null hypothesis was meant to see whether the intermediate students' performance varies on different tests of idiom type. To this end, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA was used. Obvious enough are the mean differences depicted in the following graph.



The differences are not, however, indicative of any significance. So, we should cast a look at the one-way ANOVA table. Here, the value for Wilk's Lambda is 0.48 with the probability value of 0.000 (which means $p < 0.05$). This means that our first null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 1. Multivariate Tests: One-Way Repeated Measures ANOVA on Intermediate Students' Performance on Different Tests of Idiom Type

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Idiom Type	Pillai's Trace	.952	420.610	2.000	42.000	.000	.599
	Wilks' Lambda	.048	420.610	2.000	42.000	.000	.599
	Hotelling's Trace	20.029	420.610	2.000	42.000	.000	.599
	Roy's Largest Root	20.029	420.610	2.000	42.000	.000	.599

a. Exact statistic

b.

Design: Intercept

Within Subjects Design: Idiom Type

Still, we do not know where the difference between our sets of scores lies. Hence, a Scheffe post hoc test is run. The second row of the table delineates that the difference between SIs and CFIs for intermediate students is significant ($0.012 < 0.05$). So is the difference between Sis and CUIs ($0.000 < 0.05$). In the third row, one can see that the difference between CFIs and CUIs is also significant.

Table 2. Scheffe Post-Hoc Test on the Intermediate Students' Performance on Different Tests of Idiom Type

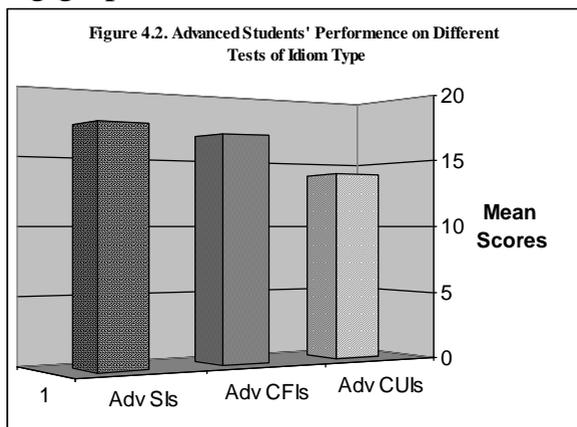
Dependent Variable: SCORE
 Scheffe

(I) LEVEL	(J) LEVEL	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
SIs	CFIs	3.8864 *	.62050	.012	2.3497	5.4230
	CUIs	8.1364 *	.62050	.000	6.5997	9.6730
CFIs	SIs	-3.8864 *	.62050	.012	-5.4230	-2.3497
	CUIs	4.2500 *	.62050	.009	2.7134	5.7866
CUIs	SIs	-8.1364 *	.62050	.000	-9.6730	-6.5997
	CFIs	-4.2500 *	.62050	.009	-5.7866	-2.7134

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

4.2-The second null hypothesis

Since the second null hypothesis resembled the first one in nature, again we fell back on a one-way repeated measures ANOVA in order to compare means of the advanced students' scores. The differences between their scores are in view in the following graph.



Likewise, the following table shows the differences over the tests of idiom type for advanced students. The value for Wilk's Lambda is 0.129 with the probability value of 0.002. This indicates that the difference between our sets of scores is statistically significant.

Table 3. Multivariate Tests: One-Way Repeated Measures ANOVA on Advanced Students' Performance on Different Tests of Idiom Type

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Idiom Type	Pillai's Trace	.871	132.141 ^a	2.000	39.000	.002	.417
	Wilks' Lambda	.129	132.141 ^a	2.000	39.000	.002	.417
	Hotelling's Trace	6.776	132.141 ^a	2.000	39.000	.002	.417
	Roy's Largest Root	6.776	132.141 ^a	2.000	39.000	.002	.417

a. Exact statistic
 b.
 Design: Intercept
 Within Subjects Design: Idiom Type

To find the exact location of the difference, however, taking a second look at the Scheffe table is necessary. The absence of asterisk in the first row of the table indicates that the difference between SIs and CFIs is not a significant one. On the other hand, the difference between CFIs and CUIs and also the difference between SIs and CUIs are statistically significant.

Table 4. Scheffe Post-Hoc Test on Advanced Students' Performance on Different Tests of Idiom Type

Dependent Variable: SCORE
 Scheffe

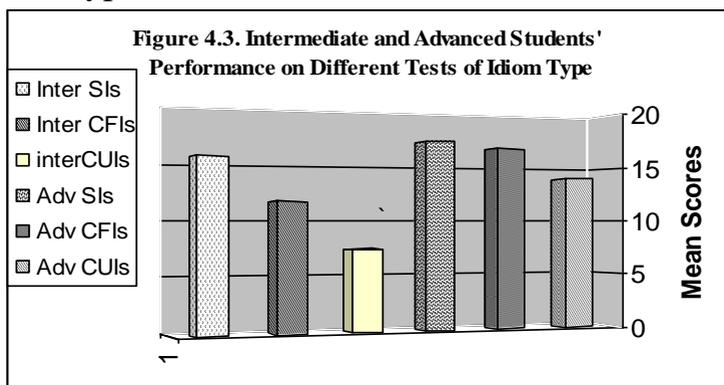
(I) LEVEL	(J) LEVEL	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
SIs	CFIs	.5610	.48395	.513	-.6385	1.7605
	CUIs	3.2883*	.48395	.000	2.0888	4.4678
CFIs	SIs	-.5610	.48395	.513	-1.7605	.6385
	CUIs	2.7073*	.48395	.018	1.5078	3.9068
CUIs	SIs	-3.2883*	.48395	.000	-4.4678	-2.0888
	CFIs	-2.7073*	.48395	.018	-3.9068	-1.5078

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

In sum, the difference between advanced students' performance on SIs and CFIs tests is insignificant. Yet, the difference came out to be significant for their performance on CFIs and CUIs tests. So was the case for SIs and CUIs.

4.3-The third null hypothesis

The third null hypothesis was an attempt to unearth the relationship between idiom type, language proficiency, and the students' performances on idiom type tests.



This figure is quite informative in that it shows that advanced learners have outperformed the intermediate ones. It further reveals that in each group, the mean score for SIs exceeds the one for CFIs, which in turn, outstrips the mean score of CUIs. What is unknown is whether intermediate and advanced students performed equally well on each

test of idiom type. In other words, we want to see if language proficiency had a role in the students' performances on the tests. For this purpose, a two-way ANOVA was run.

Table 6. Two-way ANOVA Tables on Language Proficiency, Idiom Type, and the Participants' Performance on the Tests of Idioms

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	43875.689	1	43875.689	86033.115	.000
Idiom Type	1044.573	2	522.286	94.736	.000
LP	868.050	1	868.050	78.684	.000
Idiom Type * LP	155.412	2	77.706	10.427	.021
Error	1016.644	498	2.041		
Total	47132.550	505			
Corrected Total	8663.824	504			

a. R Squared = .441 (Adjusted R Squared = .432)

In this table, LP stands for language proficiency. The great value of F ratio in the penultimate column and the significant value displayed in the last column signify that language proficiency is a determinant factor. So is idiom type. Besides, the interaction between these two is also significant.

To recap, both idiom type and the participants' levels of proficiency proved to play a part in their obtained scores. Furthermore, their scores have undergone an influence emanating from the interaction between idiom type and language proficiency.

5-Discussion

A number of conclusions can be drawn out of the analysis of the results. First, idiom type is crucial when we go about to teach idioms to EFL learners at different levels of proficiency. This is to mean

that intermediate students do better on similar idioms than they do on conceptually familiar idioms. Likewise, their performance on conceptually familiar idioms is significantly better than their performance on conceptually unfamiliar idioms. The story for advanced students, however, is a bit different. They do almost equally well on similar idioms and conceptually familiar idioms. Yet, their performance on conceptually unfamiliar idioms is poor. So, it can be construed that intermediate students are more at ease with similar idioms than they are with conceptually familiar/unfamiliar idioms. In a careful presentation of idioms for intermediate students, therefore, priority is given to similar idioms, followed by familiar and unfamiliar idioms, respectively. In the case of advanced students, nonetheless, there is no difference in the order of presenting similar and conceptually familiar idioms. But, teaching conceptually unfamiliar idioms should not take place sooner than teaching the first two types of idioms.

Second, level of proficiency affects the students' performance on the idiom type tests since more proficient learners have got better scores on each

and every test of idiom type than intermediate students did.

Finally, here are many factors at work when a student is taking a test of idioms. To clarify the point, we can say that advanced learners have an advantage over intermediate ones on answering the tests of idiom type, but their advantage may not be solely attributed to their level of proficiency. As it was pointed out above, the type of idiom is also a determinant factor. In addition, the interaction between the above two factors proved to play a part.

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Appendix 1

Test of Conceptually Unfamiliar Idioms

Name

Score

=====

=====

=====

Directions: Fill in the blanks with the correct idiomatic expression from the list below. Use each expression only once.

Put on airs – drag one's feet – break the ice – not hold water – at large – ring a bell – shoot the breeze – Never darken my door again – right off the bat – feel like a million dollars – to be in the dark – straight from the horse's mouth – in the doghouse – not have a leg to stand on – lay an egg – a feather in one's cap – get the ball rolling – lay one's cards on the table – pull strings – drive someone up the wall

Note that in order to have grammatically correct sentences, sometimes you have to change an element in the idiom. Look at the following example:

Don't listen to him. He is not serious. He is just

.....

You want to complete the sentence by the idiom 'to pull someone's leg'. You have to change *pull* to *pulling* and replace *someone* with *his* in this specific sentence and write it as:

Don't listen to him. He is not serious. He is just *pulling your leg*.

Now you should answer the questions.

1- She suddenly stood up and shouted: "Get out of my house and"

....."

2- I about the test.

Nobody told me about it before.

3- I have never met him before, but his face

.....

4- You may not believe what I am telling you, but I heard it

5- Cut the noise, boys! You are

..... by what you do.

6- If you want to have the project finished on time, you have to

7- He knew he was in trouble, so he

..... and asked for help.

8- If she could win the Nobel Prize, it would have been another

9- Your argument Whatever you have been saying is illogical.

10- If you don't have a witness, you actually

.....

- 11- The police arrested the criminal and locked him up in jail
- 12- We didn't know each other before. But today, in our first meeting, we
..... for hours.
- 13- It is not possible to get your work done in this office unless you
- 14- We sat there without saying a word until I finally by telling a joke.
- 15- If you keep on, you will miss the train.
- 16- I hope I won't when it is my turn to sing.
- 17- I hate being all the time. I don't know why I can't stay out of trouble.
- 18- I
whenever I'm out with my friends.
- 19- Stop You're just human like the rest of us.
- 20- Two days after the robbery the criminals were still
-

Appendix 2

Test of Conceptually Familiar Idioms

Name

همایش موضوعات نو در مطالعات و تحقیقات زبان انگلیسی
دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی واحد خوراسگان (اصفهان)

Score

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Directions: Fill in the blanks with the correct idiomatic expression from the list below. Use each expression only once. Note that in some sentences you have to change an element of the idiom in order to have grammatically correct sentences.

to have the cake and eat it too – to be wet behind ears – the party is over – too many cooks spoil the soup – birds of a feather flock together – get out of the wrong side of the bed – hit the ceiling – to play with fire – barking dogs never bite – the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence – money does not grow on trees – practice makes perfect – beauty is in the eye of the beholder – all that glitters is not gold – charity begins at home – make a mountain out of a molehill – one swallow does not make a summer – bite off more than one can chew – strike while the iron is hot – in unity is strength

1- John didn't even greet me today. I think he He is so bad-tempered.

- 2- Jim always thinks that
..... . He
believes that Alex's job is better than his own job.
- 3- Marry is in the habit of
..... . She always
exaggerates in what she says.
- 4- It'd be better if I had done the job alone. You
know,
-
- 5- You are so simple. This calculator is not genuine.
I have told you several times that ..
.....
- 6- Policeman: "Try not to resist.
..... . You are under arrest."
- 7- When I heard the news, I
first, but I calmed down after a couple of minutes.
- 8- That novice wanted to enter the horse race and
compete with more than ten professional horse
riders, but every one knew that he
..... .
- 9- Pat, he is making a fool of you. Go and show him
who you are. Never fear,
-
- 10- I don't care what my friends say about my date's
sight.

11- Rita wants to study for the test and go to a picnic at the same time. She cannot

.....

12- I won't talk to Bob the way you talked to him. Did you like

13- Father: "This should be the last time you spend money on these junk foods.

.....

14- Chelsea scored a goal in the first half of the game. But everything may change in the second half.

15- It was obvious that you couldn't finish the work before dark. You

.....

16- You can be the best student in the class if you study hard.

17- If all the students come to the professor's office, he will change his mind about the class hours.

.....

18- I never forget the old days of my childhood. My cousins and I often played in the yard. Girls were always outsiders and kept on saying

.....

19- Iran insists on helping such countries as Afghanistan and Iraq while there are many poor people in Iran.

20- He does not often accept such offers. I would
..... if I were you.

Appendix 3

Test of Similar Idioms

Name

Score

=====

=====

=====
=====
Directions: Fill in the blanks with the correct idiomatic expression from the list below. Use each expression only once. Note that in some sentences you have to change an element of the idiom in order to have grammatically correct sentences.

hold one's tongue – over my dead body – open one's mouth – not worth the trouble – behind bars – the penny dropped – the apple of one's eye – welcome someone with open arms – stab in the back – wet one's pants – God rest his soul – have the heart to do something – the donkey-work – shed crocodile tears – all skin and bones – cat got your tongue? – as far as the eye could see – stand on one's own feet – heart of stone – fight like cat and dog

1- I wanted to tell him exactly what I thought of him, but I had to in order not to irritate his sister.

2- My grandfather was one of a kind. He passed away eight months ago. May

.....
3- Why don't you speak? What's the matter?
.....

- 4- Although I didn't treat them well last week, they when I went to their office today.
- 5- She will have to get a job and learn to sooner or later. She has been dependent on her family for more than 23 years.
- 6- Why should I do all the while you sit around doing nothing?
- 7- My brother says he will play computer games all day. He does not intend to help with the housework.
- 8- I swear by God I didn't annoy her. She just keeps on to make you blame me. It is her trick.
- 9- Don't worry! I'll keep your secret. I won't
- 10- Bill has lost so much weight. Now he is
- 11- He likes his youngest daughter the best. In fact, she is
- 12- He told us a lie and while we thought he was a friend.
- 13- It is applying for the job. You have no chance of getting it.

14- He has just been set free. He has spent most of his life

15- The children are driving their mother crazy. They never agree on a matter and soon start to

16. She asked me to go with her and I didn't to refuse.

17- The road stretched into the desert

18- Tilly had, so her mother had to look for somewhere to change her.

19- She didn't get what I said and looked confused for a moment, then suddenly

20- Pat didn't forgive her and asked for revenge. He has a

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