

The relationship between Iranian EFL Learner's cultural knowledge and understanding metaphorical proverbs

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Abstract

In this study purpose is to show a distinction between the English and the Persian proverbs. It investigates that how far metaphors and representation of both languages can be compared with each other. This study examines to extent people's understanding of proverbs can be clarified in terms of cultural similarities or differences. The aim of this paper is to reflect culture, customs and traditions which are embedded in proverbs of language. This study is based on data obtained from objective questionnaire survives.

Introduction

With this study we want to show a distinction between the English and the Persian proverbs. It investigates in how far metaphors and representation of both languages can be compared with each other. This study examines to what extent people's understanding of proverbs can be clarified in terms of cultural similarities or differences. The goal of this paper is to reflect culture, customs and traditions which are embedded in proverbs of language. The comparison is based on data obtained from objective questionnaire surveys.

What is important to say is that in certain languages, cultural figures and aspects are more intensely mirrored in proverbs than in other languages.

Theoretical Framework

Consideration of how proverbs attain meaning will now be giving' this will be down by investigation both the literal and figurative proverb together. People generally use certain words for day figurative power rather than regular definition. The most artistic proverbs are those that arise from the metaphorical, illustrate one of the ways in which a proverb is developed, is the extensive of the meaning as a simple

Statement of the problem

One of the special features of proverbs is that there is no predetermined response. While they must relate to the topic of conversation, the preferred sequel would be a change of topic or a pre-closing sequence.

The intention made here is that their anaphoric function is to indicate that a topic is drawing to a close the subject through a shift in semantic focus from the particular topic to what can be learned from it in general terms. In this sense they serve a didactic purpose, and account for the semantic notion of "supposed truth or moral lesson" in the chambers definition given above.

The other difficulty in assessing proverb is, understanding from an interdisciplinary perspective. People may indeed automatically access preexisting patterns of metaphorical thought when proverbs are processed online.

At the same time, we believe that a psychological theory of proverb interpretation must explain aspects of how proverbs are created in cultural context from various pragmatic and conceptual necessities, how people make sense of why proverbs have the specific meaning they do, and how people immediately process proverbs in everyday discourse.

Research Question

What is the cultural knowledge status of Iranian EFL learners?

Is there any significant relationship between cultural knowledge and proverb understanding of Iranian EFL learners?

Role of metaphor in proverbs:

While most proverbial expressions are metaphorical in nature for an example, the fish rotes from the heat first, charity begins at home, some of them may be based on personification (misery loves company), hyperbole (it's easier for a camel to go through a needles eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of god), or paradox (the nearer the church, the farther from god), the presence of meter (as in the proverb you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink), rhyme (haste makes waste), slang rhyme (a stitch in time saves nine), alliteration (live and let live), assonance (a rolling stone gathers no moss), and parallelism (a penny saved is a penny earned). Kemper (1981) adds other important characteristics of proverbs, namely the fact that these expressions exhibit a general syntactic form, whereby the use of the imperative mood or the subjunctive present tense is very common.

Role of culture

We can see cultural differences that are expected, to the metaphorical position of certain states (like the intellect or the emotion) in the body, since some populations associate internal organs with specific faculties. Sometimes, different cultures do not share those associations (cf. Enfield and Wierzbicka, 2002), as we have just seen, and those differences are reflected on the language in a later stage.

Proverbs in Languages:

Proverbs play a very important role in the everyday language. Our languages have beautiful proverbs which cover all aspects of our life. They are drawn from careful observations of social events, the lives of people and animals.

Proverbs provide a strong context for studying the reality and natural environment, and provide insight into natural elements which hold symbolic value in a certain culture.

Proverbs are characterized as brief and pregnant in meaning (Firtt, 1926a: 136) they are often stated in a metaphorical form. Proverbs are appropriate in many contexts for nearly all speakers, specific norms for use and the effects of such factors as status and age, however are widely disparate from culture to culture.

As I studied in some articles, another function of proverbs is to signal in group membership and to stress shared identifications (Abrahams 1968: 59). ACCORDING TO Norrick (1985:

26), when a speaker uses a proverb he “quotes his own linguistic community” and communicates his desire for belonging in his culture.

Proverbs are an important part of cultural references, figurative and functional language and hence, are vital for the development of communicative competence.

As Littlemore and Low (2006a, 2006b) discuss in their article and book, figurative language particularly metaphors and metonyms seem to play an important role not only in “the ability to interpret cultural references and figures of speech” but also in each of the components in Bachman’s framework.

Proverbs in teaching:

In teaching English proverbs and their various aspects is important to train prospective teachers and design instructional material in a way that makes them competent to teach those aspects of English proverbs that can contribute to the development of learners’ metaphoric, intercultural, pragmatic and organizational competences and eventually, their communicative competence.

As well as language competence, student teachers should have language awareness to be competent language teachers because they are going to teach not only in the target language but also about target language. Then this is very important that language teachers need to know about the target language and culture.

Duration of teachers’ training to develop language competence, proverbs as a vital component of the target language and culture can be correlated and incorporated in the teacher training programs to contribute to prospective teachers’ improvement of both organizational and pragmatic competence.

About metaphors, we can see hundreds of books, articles that have been published about metaphors since 1980, and they say that metaphors are in fact important for human life and culture. Metaphors function as a one particular device in communication, making people think outside the box of the target domain and review that from another box inside some source domain.

In foreign language, proverbs play a role in the teaching as a part of cultural and metaphorical learning. Mieder claims that the use of proverbs in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language are important for the learner’s ability to communicate effectively. Then proverbs are important for English language education and effective communication in general. Necessity of knowing and using English proverbs outside the classroom and role of culture to learning them is another focus as well.

It is important that knowledge in proverbs is an important aid in understanding cultural differences or similarities. Teaching of proverbs is also as a tool to encourage students in improving cultural awareness and to influence their behavior towards other cultures.

Then cultural knowledge and understanding of proverbs is very essential and teachers should integrate intercultural awareness into the language curriculum. Engaging students with foreign culture through proverbs will be positively accepted by students and prove to be a powerful educational technique for enhancing the development of intercultural competence.

The main target is to find the function of proverbs and Iranian sociocultural use. Function of proverbs points that they are used to convince one's communication, get the attention of addressee, content human cognitive economy refresh human thought, give a sign to one's speaking and bring about a common understanding among the people who take a certain social event, specially decision.

Studying of the proverb:

The training function of the proverbs that the researcher recognized in this study is that proverbs can teach ethical, attention, pureness. Then proverbs play the major role in consolidation social conventionality and creating public responses to social, l cultural.

One role of studying of the proverbs is that it will force the researcher to stay in a society for an appreciable term of time. It requests him to closely observe the social function of proverbs in day to day communication of study. Assembling and analyzing proverbs of a society make the proverbs help and support others to know what the society looks in terms of its tradition, culture, philosophy and other ways of life.

Then study will be the great benefit to students and researchers in the field of literature. Also this study will give the chance of preserving proverbs for both future generation and younger generation. With this study researchers have a chance for distinguish the gap between theory and practice about the culture in proverbs.

The first MA thesis interesting proverbs is Berhanu (1986). It is dedicated to the analysis of Kambata proverbs with main emphasis on their content, occasions and function and forms and styles. The thesis says that Kambata people are rich in proverbs and illustrate the social experience of the people. It considers the real daily life of the people relates content, Function and other features of proverbs to the cultural, social and economic realities of the people. This thesis is an important work that clearly indicates how people's different life could be reflected in proverbs.

Mieder (1993) presents the following commonly quoted definition: A proverb is a short , generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorized form and which is handed down from generation to generation.

Proverbs play important role among people of Africa. Africans proverbs are common ways of stating of their religious ideas and feelings. "it is in proverbs they find the remains of the oldest forms of African religion and philosophical wisdom."Mieder (2004:28).

We can see to various beliefs concerning how the traditional of communicating in proverbs started. One attitude is that proverbs come from many sources, the greater part of which are nameless and therefore, may never be known because their origins are difficult to detect. There is the pensive role of proverbs involves the functions proverbs play in illustrating cultural elements of the society and explain its cultural practices and foundation. It refers to the proverbs to reflect the common way of life, customs and beliefs of the society.

Proverbs have an important function in traditional communities. They could serve as a total symbol for establishing standards in ethical and moral behavior. A learned person must understand proverbs and be able to use them to solve some of the difficult issues of life.

The investigation use of multicultural proverbs in cross_ cultural form through the language arts, history and social sciences is the purpose that educators can use proverbs to engage students in learning, improve their understanding of other cultures and languages.

Proverbs as the cultural inheritance of native speakers are important and critical to save the culture. The relation between culture and proverb is very strong and can not be disregarded as Francis Boston states that “the genius, wit and spirit of a nation are discovered in it’s proverbs”.

The emphasis on proverbs as cultural elements of a society are also revealed by Hirsch (1987) and Hirsh, Kett and Trefil (2002).According Hirsch, Kett and Trefil (2002), elements that are part of cultural literacy involve information that is neither specialized and thus, known only by experts nor too basic and generally known. They are known by the majority of literate native speakers for example, if a newspaper includes a proverb without defining it, then the proverb can be considered as part of common knowledge and cultural literacy.

Apart from Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005) , Littlemore and Low (2006a:96) assert that “if abstract concepts emerge metaphorically from basic human experience then differences in human experience are likely to lead to variation in conceptual metaphors” and they classify these differences as the differences in history and behavior, in social organization and in the physical characteristics of the landscape. It short , it can be said that these differences and the types of culture-based knowledge mentioned above make proverbs and proverbial expressions culturally rich expressions and for these reasons, there are many proverbs which mean the same across different languages but which have different structures, expressions and metaphors and hence, have different origins (Mieder,2007).

Proverbs that explains every day experience might have emerged without a single person such as Make hay while the sun shines which might have been expressed by many farmers and eventually, has found its memorable form .In contrast to this, the proverb The wish is father to the thought was first expressed by a single person who was Julius Caesar (Ridout and Witting, 1969).

The metaphorical nature of proverbs makes the proverbs culturally loaded since metaphors are structures that “culturally specific mental representations of aspects of the world” (Kovecses, 2006:126) and “... metaphor is not merely a part of language, but reflects a fundamental part of the way people think, reason, and imagine” (Gibbs, 2006:1). Metaphors originate not only from the similarities between entities but also from the particular communicative, cultural, and historical situations that lead people to have experiences unique to them (Kovecses, 2006).

According to Mieder and Lewandowska (2008), proverbs, just like metaphors, make cultural knowledge linguistically visible (p. 153). This idea can also be seen in the following Dari proverb, Hazararakeroydadiboyedamadimeayad, translated in English as, “If you give a Hazara an opportunity, you will smell the bridegroom inside him”. This proverb is again culturally related to Afghanistan and transmits knowledge of a different culture and its inhabitants. The word ‘Hazara’ refers to the third largest ethnic group of Afghanistan. Hazaras represent a minority group and are associated with people, who are oppressed by other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The group is associated with poverty and belongs to the lower social class of Afghanistan. The word ‘opportunity’ in this context refers to financial help or support. This proverb means that if you give someone something, he or she will probably overact and will take advantage of that person’s good will and intention. The

comparison with 'bridegroom' is used in this proverb to indicate that a Hazara, like a bridegroom, will even dare to ask for the hand of someone's daughter.

Lakoff/Johnson (1980: 3) claim that: The experience that leads to the formation of our metaphorical concepts can be different in nature. They either relate to our physical or to our cultural environment. The physical environment refers to all static things around us (object) as well as to living things (animals) and most of all to our own body. The cultural environment, however includes various kinds of interaction between human being and more importantly our personal philosophy of life. It is, above all, tradition and customs that control these ways of interacting and thinking.

Participants

My participants of this study were 60 male and female EFL students in the level of BA and MA of proficiency. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 35. They selected from Safir Institute and Azad university of Takestan.

Materials and Instrumentation

My data collection process was to be done in two stages. The first stage was to serve as a questionnaire about cultural knowledge that consists of 20 questions (multiple question) about cultural knowledge and 50 metaphorical proverbs statements that the students should answer them based on their conception.

The important point that was mentioned while evaluating the test run concerned the time it took to conduct the interviews. Some interviews lasted about two hours. Another point was needed to improve on was that the interviewer needed more examples to illustrate and explain the individual items.

Several cultural aspects came out in the analysis of the proverbs and the people's belief system is brought out. Metaphorical proverbs used concepts that are familiar to the people for example money, child and names of animals.

Procedures

To carry out the study, the following steps will be followed:

- 1- About 60 students from university will be selected for the purpose of the study.
- 2- The questionnaire is to indicate relation between cultural knowledge and English metaphorical proverbs will be administered first.
- 3- The outcomes of the questionnaire will be studied.

Methods of analyzing data

Descriptive statistics will be used to analyze the data.

The data collection procedure was carefully performed and the raw data was submitted to SPSS (version 19.0) to calculate the required statistical analyses in order to address the research question and hypothesis of this study.

Reliability Statistics

The reliability indices for the three tests (Nelson proficiency test, proverb test, & cultural questionnaire) that were used in this study were computed in order to ensure that they have acceptable reliability value. As Table 4.1 indicates, the reliability indices for Nelson test consisted of 50 items and proverb test compose of 35 items were estimated as 0.90 and 0.83 using KR-21. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha reliability value for cultural questionnaire turned out to be 0.81. Considering that the recommended reliability is 0.80 and more (Bryman and Cramer, 2009), all instruments of this study have good indicators of reliability.

Table 4.1. Reliability Statistics for the Instruments

Test	No. of Items	Method	Reliability Index
1. Nelson Proficiency Test	50	KR-21	0.90
2. Proverb Test	35	KR-21	0.83
3. Cultural Questionnaire	20	Cronbach's Alpha	0.81

Nelson Proficiency Test Results

Nelson proficiency test was given to 91 MA university students at advanced level of English proficiency to select homogeneity participants. The descriptive statistics, as shown in Table 4.2, indicates that the mean, median and mode of the Nelson scores are 30.14, 29, and 23 respectively. Also Table 4.2 shows that the Nelson test scores have normal distribution as the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors are not beyond the ranges of +/- 1.96.

Table 4.2. Descriptive Statistics for Nelson Proficiency Test

<i>N</i>	Mean	Median	Mode	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
91	30.14	29.00	23	7.529	.229	-.938

Based on Nelson test results, those 62 students who scored one standard deviation, 7.52 plus and minus the mean, 30.14, (scores between 22 and 37) were selected as the main population

of the study. Figure 4.1 below displays the distribution of the Nelson test scores on a normal curve.

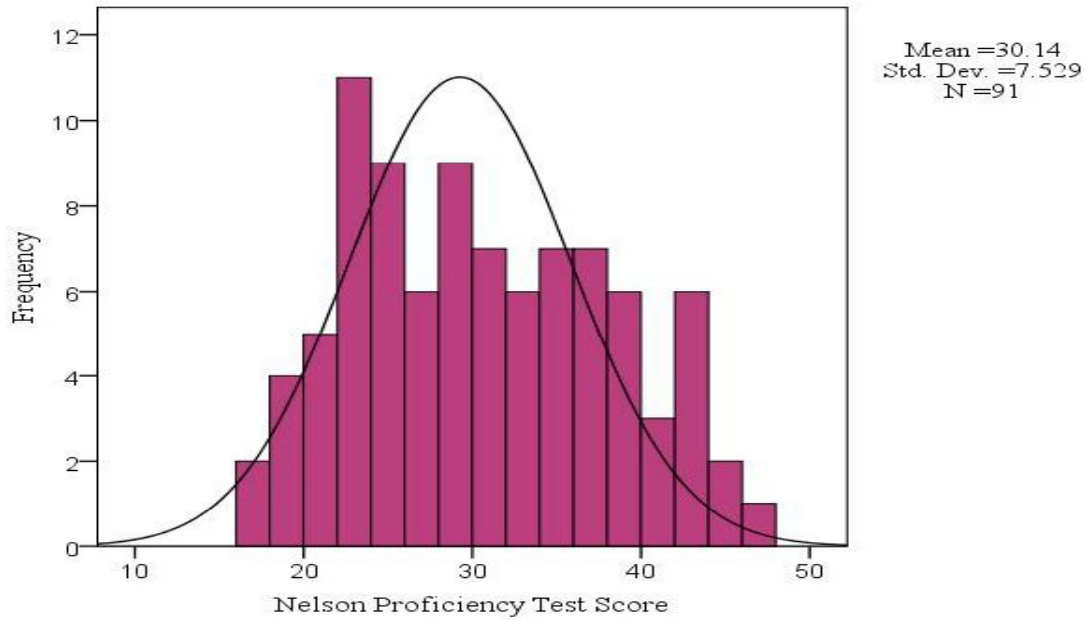


Figure 4.1 Distribution of Nelson test scores

Analysis of Research Question 1

The first research question was concerned with the cultural knowledge status of Iranian EFL learners. To do so, the descriptive statistics for participants’ performances on the cultural knowledge questionnaire were calculated (Table 4.3). Table 4.3 shows that the mean score on cultural knowledge is 2.73 with the standard deviation of .66. The mean score is less than 3 (representing *Neutral* choice of the questionnaire) revealing lack of cultural knowledge of the participants.

Table 4.3. Descriptive Statistics for Cultural Knowledge

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cultural knowledge	62	2.737	.669

Figure 4.2 below shows the distribution of the cultural knowledge scores. As obvious in the figure, a bell shape of the scores is formed. That means that the scores are normally distributed around the mean, 2.73. The minimum score is 1.15 and the maximum score is 4.20 acquired by one student each. Besides, as it is evident from Figure 4.2, most of the

scores are between 2 (representing *Disagree*) and 3 (representing *Neutral*) scores. That means the majority of the participants do not know the culture of English speaking countries.

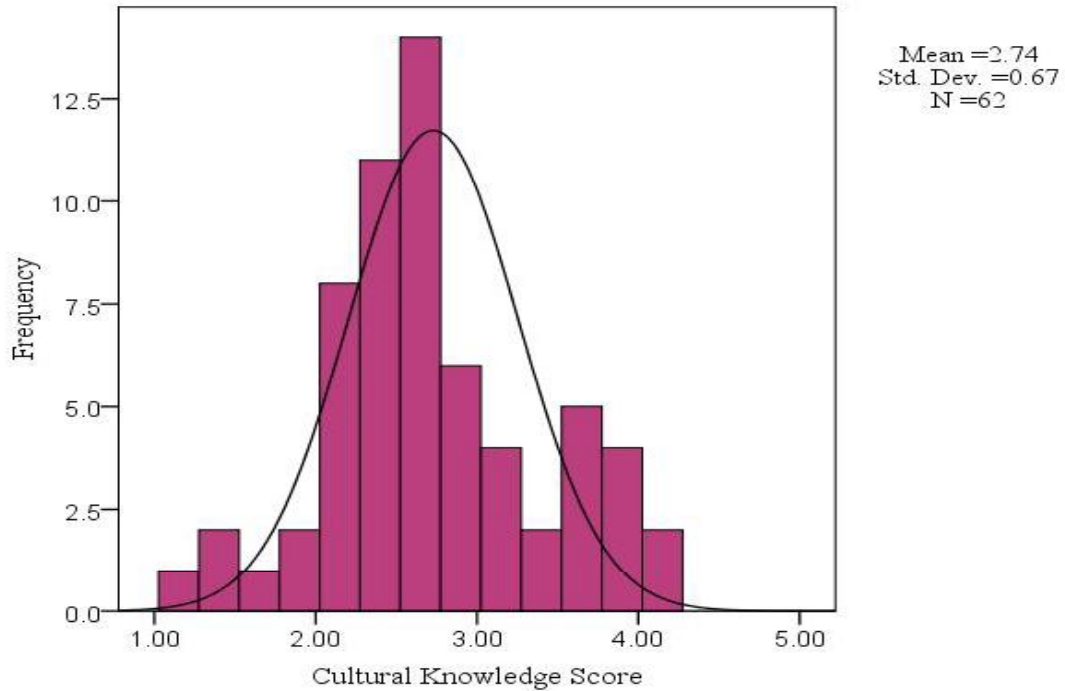


Figure 4.2. Distribution of cultural knowledge scores on the normal curve

Further, the frequency and percentage of the students’ responses to all 20 items of the cultural questionnaire are provided in Table 4.4 below. As can be seen in Table 4.4, the item that received the most agreed responses {(*Agree* = 25.8%), (*Strongly agree* = 14.5%)} of the participants was *Item 5*: “We have lots of English books at home.” However, the table indicates that the item that most of the students disagreed with {(*D*=58.10%) and *SD*= 8.10%)} was *Item 13*: “I usually travel abroad on my long holidays.”

Table 4.4. Frequency and Percentage of Students’ Responses to Cultural Questionnaire

Items	SD		D		N		A		SA	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1. I enjoy listening to English classical music.	6	9.7%	29	46.8%	6	9.7%	6	9.7%	15	24.2%
2. I enjoy reading English literature.	5	8.1%	28	45.2%	7	11.3%	18	29.0%	4	6.5%

3. I am a cultured person.	4	6.5%	35	56.5%	5	8.1%	13	21.0%	5	8.1%
4. I know all famous English music composers.	5	8.1%	36	58.1%	5	8.1%	11	17.7%	5	8.1%
5. I have lots of English books at home.	4	6.5%	25	40.3%	8	12.9%	16	25.8%	9	14.5%
6. I know a lot about English literature.	6	9.7%	25	40.3%	7	11.3%	15	24.2%	9	14.5%
7. I frequently visit museums, theaters, or attend at concerts.	5	8.1%	34	54.8%	7	11.3%	11	17.7%	5	8.1%
8. I frequently buy/borrow English books.	5	8.1%	30	48.4%	12	19.4%	12	19.4%	3	4.8%
9. I like to attend symphony concerts.	6	9.7%	34	54.8%	5	8.1%	14	22.6%	3	4.8%
10. I enjoy reading in English.	7	11.3%	26	41.9%	7	11.3%	15	24.2%	7	11.3%
11. When a child, my parents regularly encouraged me to read.	4	6.5%	35	56.5%	9	14.5%	6	9.7%	8	12.9%
12. I used to take art or music classes outside of school.	7	11.3%	33	53.2%	2	3.2%	14	22.6%	6	9.7%
13. I usually travel abroad on my long holidays.	5	8.1%	34	54.8%	11	17.7%	10	16.1%	2	3.2%
14. I frequently listen to English music.	3	4.8%	32	51.6%	5	8.1%	16	25.8%	6	9.7%
15. I like to watch films in English.	6	9.7%	22	35.5%	13	21.0%	13	21.0%	8	12.9%
16. I chat with people whose first language is English.	7	11.3%	29	46.8%	8	12.9%	12	19.4%	6	9.7%
17. I have some friends who have lived in countries with English language.	7	11.3%	30	48.4%	10	16.1%	7	11.3%	8	12.9%
18. Some of my relatives are living in English language countries.	12	19.4%	25	40.3%	10	16.1%	9	14.5%	6	9.7%
19. My parents are acquainted with English language countries.	7	11.3%	26	41.9%	13	21.0%	9	14.5%	7	11.3%
20. I read English novels and know the customs and beliefs of foreigners.	3	4.8%	30	48.4%	5	8.1%	19	30.6%	5	8.1%

Analysis of the Research Question 2

The second research question of this study aimed at investigating whether there is a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' cultural knowledge and understanding of English metaphorical proverb. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was performed to answer this research question. In order to conduct Pearson product-moment correlation, four assumptions of interval data, normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity must be met (Field, 2009). The first assumption is met because the present data are measured on an interval scale. The second assumption deals with the normality of the data which is tested via one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Table 4.5 indicates that the two sets of scores are normally distributed since the significance level for cultural knowledge and proverb understanding scores are .20 and .81 respectively which are both higher than .05.

Table 4.5. Normality Tests for Cultural Knowledge and Proverb Understanding

Variable	N	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig.
Cultural knowledge	62	1.063	.209
Proverb understanding	62	.632	.819

The scatter plot of the correlation between cultural knowledge and proverb understanding was drawn before running correlation (Figure 4.3). As it is evident in the scatter plots, we can draw a straight line through the main cluster of the points signifying a linear relationship. Thus, the linearity assumption of the two pairs is not violated for conducting Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient.

Further, the shapes of the cluster are even from one end to the other in the scatter plot. Consequently, our data met the homoscedasticity assumption.

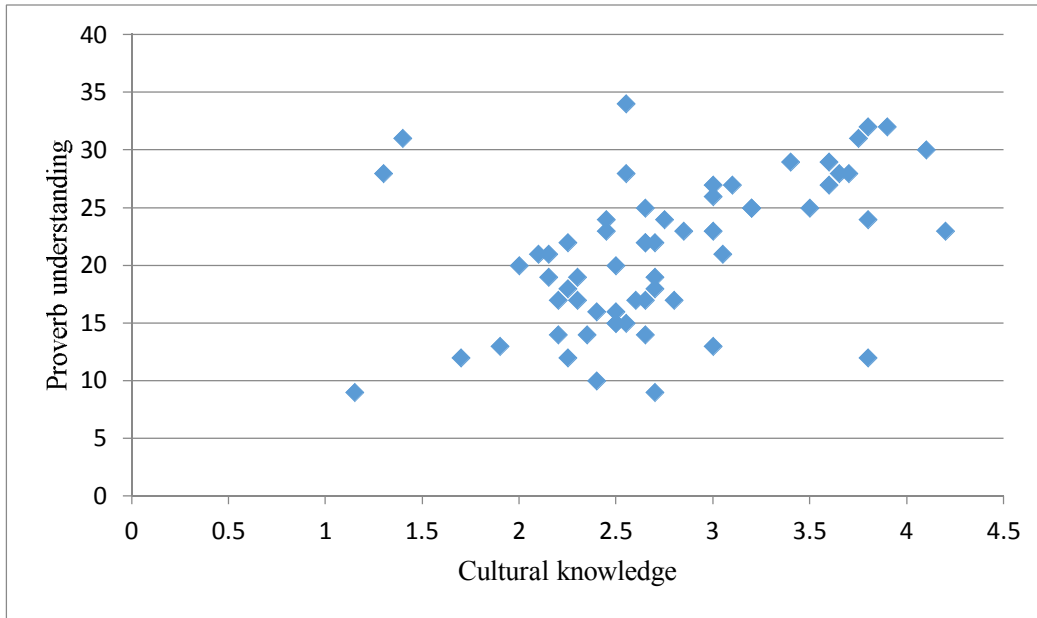


Figure 4.3. Scatter plot of the correlation between cultural knowledge and proverb understanding

In addition, the scatter plot (Figure 4.3) can tell us if the relationship between the two variables is positive or negative. In the scatter plot above, the direction of the line that is drawn through the points, point from left to right upward in the scatter plot. This left to right upward trend implies a positive relationship; high scores on X, cultural knowledge correlates with high scores on Y, proverb understanding.

Table 4.6 contains the descriptive statistics for participants' performances on the metaphorical proverb understanding test. Table 4.6 shows that the mean score on proverb understanding is 21.11 with the standard deviation of 6.34.

Table 4.6. Descriptive Statistics for Proverb Understanding

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Proverb understanding	62	21.11	6.346

The distribution of the proverb understanding results on a normal curve is shown in Figure 4.4 below. As clear from in the figure, a bell shape of the scores is formed implying that the scores are almost normally distributed around the mean, 21.11. The minimum score is 9 obtained by two students and the maximum score is 34 gained by one student.

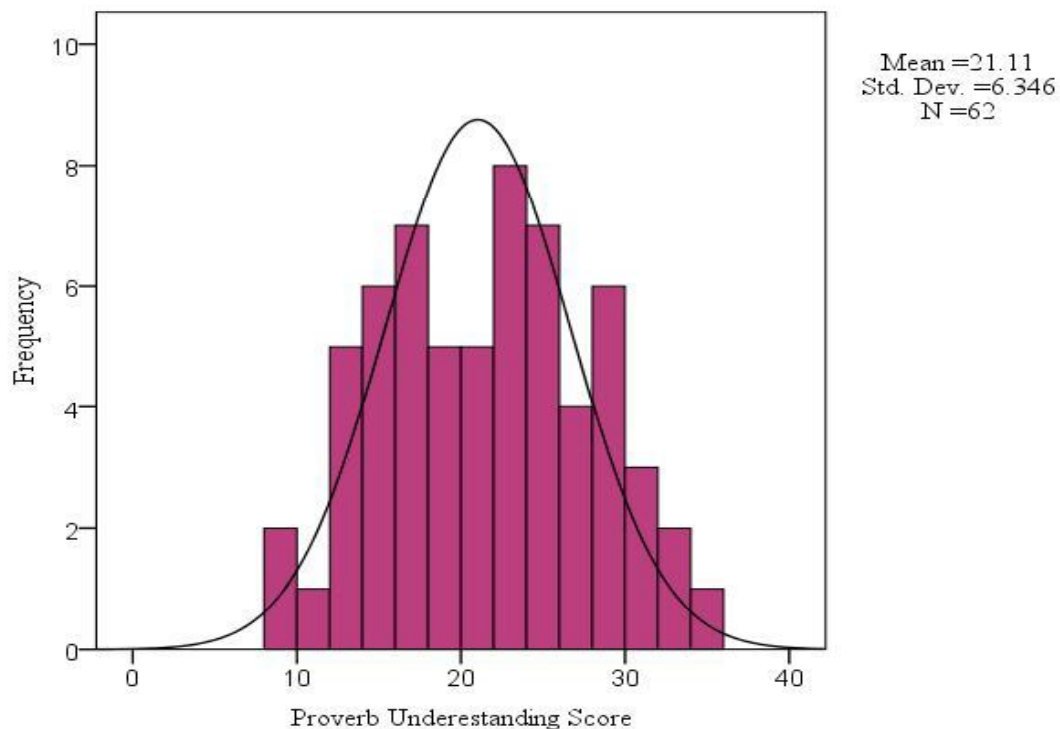


Figure 4.4. Distribution of proverb understanding on the normal curve

Table 4.7 represents the results of Pearson product-moment correlation between the two variables.

Table 4.7. Pearson Correlation between Cultural Knowledge and Proverb Understanding

		Proverb understanding
Cultural knowledge	Pearson Correlation	.463**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	62

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As it is evident from the Table 4.7 above, Pearson correlation found a significant positive relationship between cultural knowledge and proverb understanding ($r = .46$, $n = 62$) at the significance level of $.000 < .05$, with high levels of cultural knowledge associated with high levels of metaphorical proverb understanding. In fact, the correlation coefficient ($r = .46$, $n =$

62) was above the Critical values of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient ($r = .25$). As a result, the null hypothesis of the study that states there is not any significant relationship between cultural knowledge and proverb understanding of Iranian EFL learners, could be rejected, and it was claimed that there is a significant relationship between cultural knowledge and proverb understanding of Iranian EFL learners. In fact this relationship is positive.

General Discussion

This study wants to show relationship between proverbs and cultural background that needed to better understanding of them. It is clear that for one to understand a proverbs, his or her cognitive environment must have the background knowledge.

Furthermore, the study will serve as a guide to students to research about culture and study of English lexicon semantic to be near and apprehension of their proverbs.

Proverbs instructs us on how to handle the everyday situations and encounters of life in a way that contributes to our spiritual formation. As such, it concerns itself with positive instruction in the areas of wisdom and integrity, generosity and humility, forgiveness and justice

Implication of the study

With this study we try to find that proverbs that are the important means to achieve belief system proverb and proverb interpretation provides some important way of thinking about something on the ways in which people of mentioned culture express the feeling with proverbs.

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