

Reconstructing worldviews through idioms: Applying cognitive linguistic analysis in teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language

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Abstract: This article explores the cognitive and cultural foundations of Vietnamese idioms and their pedagogical implications for teaching Vietnamese as a Foreign Language (VFL). Utilizing conceptual metaphor theory, image schemas, and cultural models from cognitive linguistics, the study analyzed a corpus of 100 high-frequency idioms sourced from textbooks and instructional materials. The findings indicate that Vietnamese idioms are systematically motivated by embodied metaphors and culturally shaped worldviews, which reflect values such as the pursuit of emotional depth, expectations of social hierarchy, moral causality, and a cyclical perception of time. While idioms serve as valuable resources for understanding Vietnamese cognition, VFL learners often struggle to interpret them because the conceptual mappings and cultural assumptions embedded within these idioms are unfamiliar. The article proposes a pedagogical model that groups idioms based on their conceptual metaphors, including visual representations and intercultural comparisons. This approach shifts instruction from rote memorization to metaphor-oriented learning, enabling learners to internalize idioms as part of a broader cultural-linguistic system and to develop both linguistic fluency and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: Cognitive linguistics, Conceptual metaphor, Cultural worldview, VFL instruction, Vietnamese idioms.

1. Introduction

Idioms have become popular and exceedingly valuable aspects of language. Idioms are more than just ornamental expressions; idioms also represent a community's collective experience, social practices, and ways of thinking to distill thought and practices in terms of idiomatic expressions. Idioms are often expressions that contain culturally situated conceptualizations that capture how speakers of a language view, understand, and respond to the world. When considered in the light of cognitive linguistics, idioms are not merely eccentric or semantically opaque expressions; rather, idioms contain meaning based on underlying cognitive processes like conceptual metaphor, metonymy, image schemas, and embodiment [1-3]. Therefore, idioms can be seen as lenses into language, thought, and cultural relationships.

In the teaching of Vietnamese as a Foreign Language (VFL), idioms are usually presented with an emphasis on form over function and structure over conceptualization. Many teaching resources and practices continue to construe idioms as decontextualized and static lexicon units, often with literal translations or scope approximations to meaning. Though practical for short-term acquisition, these approaches tend to ignore the cognitive and cultural motivation behind idiomatic meaning. This means that learners are not only denied the chance to develop a nuanced understanding of the idiom, but can also misuse them, which conveys cultural incompetence.

The difficulties of idiom comprehension and production in VFL contexts are complicated by the great degree to which many idioms in Vietnamese stem from culturally specific schemas and value systems, such as collectivism, hierarchical social relations, filial piety, and naturalism. These cultural models are rarely made explicit in classroom teaching, leaving the learner to rely solely on the surface-level memorization of idioms, without understanding the worldview that lies behind the idioms.

This paper calls for a pedagogical shift based on cognitive linguistics, which posits that teaching idioms from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory and cultural conceptualisations can enhance the linguistic and intercultural competence of learners. Upon articulating the cognitive and cultural foundations of idiomatic meaning, teachers can deepen the experience of learning for learners, which can also be more transferable. This paper is intended to achieve two things. First, we will explore how Vietnamese idioms encode culturally situated worldviews by doing an analysis of their conceptual metaphors and cognitive structures. Second, it proposes some pedagogical possibilities for how cognitive linguistic insights into idioms can be used in the teaching of VFL classrooms. The work thus contributes to a valuable strand of research that highlights the centrality of language-cognition-culture integration in the language acquisition experience. Ultimately, it argues that idioms can be understood as ways to provide learners with greater access to a more culturally embedded understanding of Vietnamese society when they are approached through a cognitive lens.

2. Theoretical Framework

The current study is based on the interdisciplinary space of cognitive linguistics, idiom semantics, and intercultural communicative competence, to facilitate a strong conceptual framework to analyze idioms as cultural and linguistic artifacts. Using key constructs such as conceptual metaphor theory, image schemas, cultural models, and pedagogy linguistics, we establish a framework to explain the cognitive processes supporting idiomatic meaning, and to illustrate the pedagogical relevance of idioms to learners of Vietnamese as a Foreign Language (VFL).

2.1. Cognitive Linguistics and Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Cognitive linguistics has been articulated by researchers such as Lakoff and Johnson [1], Langacker [4] and Talmy [5] with the intention of demonstrating that language is not an independent abstract formal system, but is instead grounded in general cognitive capacity and experience. When we take this perspective as our guide, our calling becomes the understanding of linguistic meaning not as residing solely in words, and sentences; rather, meaning is dynamically constructed in the interaction between linguistic forms, perceptual experience, and cultural knowledge.

The fundamental aim of this approach is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), formally introduced in *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson [1] in that abstract domains of experience are systematically structured in terms of more concrete, experientially grounded domains, e.g., the metaphor *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*, allows for a variety of expressions such as "move forward in life," "reaching a crossroads," "taking a step back," etc. These are not random figurative expressions, but rather conceptual mappings that are becoming a salient part of the way spatial experience is organized if I imagine the world along the pathway of physical movement.

Kövecses [3] has described the cultural dimensions of metaphor based on this groundwork and has argued that while there may be many universal conceptual metaphors related to common bodily experience, how those conceptual metaphors are elaborated on, instantiated, and emphasized (or not) tend to be culturally defined. This is especially pertinent in relation to VFL instruction, where students need to not only decode the literal and figurative meaning within idiomatic expressions, but they must also engage with the culturally specific conceptualizations that govern their use.

Another important concept in cognitive linguistics is image schemas - recurring, embodied patterns of sensorimotor experience (e.g., CONTAINER, PATH, BALANCE, UP-DOWN), that act as a building block for the construction of meaning. The schemas, as more primitive enactments, are then layered with more complex metaphors and idiomatic expressions. For example, in Vietnamese, there are a number of idioms, such as "nước đến chân mới nhảy" ("only jump when water reaches your feet"). These idioms rely on the PAST and FORCE schemas, which express notions of urgency and reaction to events. The implication for teaching is that these cognitive structures can become more apparent in the classroom, to facilitate a better understanding by learners.

2.2. Idioms as Conceptualizations of Experience

Following the lead of Gibbs [2], idioms can be understood not just as frozen lexical items with opaque meanings, but rather as metaphorical condensations of culturally salient experiences. This perspective reorients the focus from a formalist treatment of idioms as exceptions to linguistic rules to a more dynamic treatment of idioms that reflect and reinforce culturally shared conceptions of the world. Idioms such as "nặng tình" ("heavy-hearted") or "nặng lòng với quê hương" ("to feel heavy-hearted for one's homeland") illustrate the metaphor EMOTIONS ARE WEIGHTY OBJECTS, which originates from bodily sensation and is recognized universally, but elaborated according to culturally specific perspectives.

In Vietnamese, idioms often express the central cultural values of family piety, communal obligation, face-saving, indirectness, and co-existence with nature. These idioms are not only shortcut language devices but also cultural models. For example, the idiom "ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây" (when eating fruit, remember the person who planted the tree) contains a wider moral model in Confucian ethics which embodies remembrance of others and their actions, respect for li and manners (intergenerational respect), and historicity. The idioms act as cognitive and moral compasses for Vietnamese speakers, and so are important for students who want to value the Vietnamese language and culture and its greater intimacies.

Viewing idioms as conceptualizations also offers a way to understand how language encodes thought and social structure. This is extremely relevant for learners of a second language, who may misinterpret or miss idiomatic meaning without being able to access the underlying cognitive structures and social norms.

2.3. Intercultural Communicative Competence and the Role of Idioms

The pedagogical benefit of idiomatic expressions goes beyond vocabulary enhancement; idioms are essential in developing intercultural communicative competence [6, 7]. Idioms are culturally grounded, often produced by and reinforcing culturally-bounded schemas; therefore, idioms act as linguistic entry points into the worldview of the target speech community. Therefore, learning idioms is a form of cultural decoding, opening learners' eyes to not only what they are saying but also to how it represents the underlying assumptions, values, and relational norms that regulate that speech.

Kramsch [7] argues that language learners need to be "symbolic mediators" who bridge cultural perspectives. With this in mind, idioms are essential, not secondary, to language instruction; They are crucial to the growth of the ability to think, feel, and act in a way that reflects the cultural norms associated with the target language community.

Byram [6] further elaborates this position by detailing the features of intercultural competence: attitudes of curiosity and openness, knowledge of social practices and products, and skills of interpreting and relating. Idioms are an excellent fit for developing these competencies as they are compact representations of culture-specific conceptualizations, and they encourage learners to investigate the semantic content of idiomatic expressions as well as the cultural logic behind idiomatic expressions.

2.4. Cognitive Approaches to Idiom Pedagogy

Non-idiomatic instruction often involves learners memorizing lists of idioms or disconnected definitions they are expected to reconstruct through repetition or context. In some cases, they may gain contextual recognition in the short run, but they seldom achieve the kind of semantic understanding or pragmatic competence necessary for fluent and culturally appropriate use.

In contrast, a conceptually driven pedagogy is offered by cognitive linguistics, where idioms are taught according to their metaphorical structure and cultural motivations. The work of Boers and Demecheleer [8], Littlemore and Low [9] and Holme [10] shows that learners who are introduced to metaphor-based teaching retain, comprehend, and use idioms in production much better than other methods. In addition, these approaches help learners generalize less familiar metaphorical patterns,

which will allow at least some of the linguistic input onto which they have modeled/mapped to assess other less familiar idioms or expressions within the same conceptual family.

In terms of VFL instruction, this means that idioms can be continually organized and taught not just by grammatical category or topic, but by conceptual domain (e.g., body, space, emotion, agriculture) and underlying metaphor. This allows the learners to build semantic networks and come to understand cultural frames while being introduced to linguistic accuracy and intercultural sensitivity.

3. Methodology

This research utilizes the study's actual language via a qualitative corpus approach based in Cognitive Linguistics - specifically, it aims to examine how Vietnamese idioms are formatted and encoded to reflect culturally grounded worldviews through conceptual metaphors, image schemas, and cultural models. The approach of this research includes three interconnected components: (1) construction of a Vietnamese idiom corpus that is representative of the idiomatic domain, (2) cognitive-linguistic and cultural analysis of idiomatic structures, and (3) an optional learner-centred component to identify pedagogical implications of Vietnamese as a Foreign Language (VFL) instruction.

3.1. Corpus Construction and Selection Criteria

The primary data consist of a curated corpus of 100 high-frequency Vietnamese idioms. These idioms were selected based on their prevalence in everyday communication and their inclusion in materials used to teach Vietnamese to non-native speakers. Data sources (Table 1) included:

Table 1.

Data Sources for the Vietnamese Idiom Corpus

Source Type	Examples of Materials
VFL Textbooks & Teaching Resources	<i>Vietnamese 123, Hello</i> , university-developed VFL curricula
Idiom Dictionaries	<i>Dictionary of Vietnamese idioms and proverbs</i> Nguyen Lan [11] online Vietnamese idiom portals
Cultural & Educational Media	E-learning platforms, cultural stories, instructional videos, and language-learning websites

The idioms selected were evaluated against four criteria:

1. *Frequency of use in spoken and written Vietnamese;*
2. *Metaphorical or non-literal meaning (semantic opacity);*
3. *Cultural salience, particularly regarding values and norms;*
4. *Instructional relevance to VFL topics (e.g., family, morality, social behavior).*

This corpus thus captures idioms that are both linguistically representative and pedagogically significant.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The idioms were subjected to a three-stage analysis: (1) categorization by conceptual domains, (2) identification of underlying conceptual metaphors and image schemas, and (3) mapping of cultural schemas and value systems.

3.2.1. Categorization by Conceptual Domains

Each idiom was first categorized by its primary experiential source domain—the embodied, perceptual basis that structures its meaning (Table 2). These domains reflect common human experiences and are central to cognitive semantic theory.

Table 2.
Conceptual Domains and Representative Vietnamese Idioms.

Conceptual Domain	Vietnamese Idiom	Intended Meaning
Human Body	“hot face”	to become angry
Natural Elements	“only jump when water reaches your feet”	act only when a problem becomes urgent
Social Relationships	“tend the tree you eat from”	be loyal to the source of your benefits
Spatial Orientation	“step back once to move forward thrice”	strategic retreat for long-term gain
Agriculture & Labor	“sow what seed, reap that fruit”	you reap what you sow (moral causality)

3.2.2. Identification of Conceptual Metaphors and Image Schemas

Each idiom was examined to determine the conceptual metaphor(s) it instantiates through the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) [1, 3]. Many idioms were also realized using an image schema (basically embodied patterns) such as CONTAINER, BALANCE, or PATH (Table 3).

Table 3.
Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese Idioms.

Conceptual Metaphor	Vietnamese Idiom	Image Schema	Meaning / Cultural Logic
EMOTION IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT	“heavy heart,” “heavy affection”	WEIGHT	Deep emotional attachment or melancholy
LIFE IS A JOURNEY	“travel one day, learn a basket of wisdom”	PATH	Learning through life experience
SOCIAL LIFE IS A FAMILY STRUCTURE	“sister falls, younger sibling lifts”	BALANCE	Mutual support in close-knit relationships
DANGER IS RISING WATER	“jump when water reaches feet”	CONTAINER / FORCE	Crisis response; procrastination until pressured
MORALITY IS CLEANLINESS	“keep oneself clean”	PURITY / CONTAINER	Maintaining moral integrity and ethical behavior

This analysis reveals that idioms are not isolated figurative phrases but rather expressions of systematic metaphorical reasoning that is shaped by cultural experience.

3.2.3. Mapping Cultural Schemas and Values

The last stage of analysis was to connect idioms with overarching cultural schemas—collectively recognized knowledge structures that represent the values, norms, and social customs of the Vietnamese cultural context (Table 4). With reference to Sharifian [12] research on cultural conceptualizations, idioms were understood as manifestations of culturally situated conceptualizations.

Table 4.
Cultural Schemas and Values Encoded in Idioms.

Cultural Schema	Vietnamese Idiom	Cultural Value Encoded
Filial Piety and Gratitude	“Eat fruit, remember the tree planter.”	Remembering one's roots; intergenerational respect
Collectivism and Unity	“can't break a bundle of chopsticks”	Strength through group solidarity
Social Hierarchy	“above commands, below listens”	Respect for authority and vertical structure
Moral Restraint	“Guard your mouth.”	Control of speech; preserving harmony
Work Ethic and Labor Value	“Working hands eat, idle hands starve.”	Labor as a moral and survival imperative

These idioms serve as linguistic conduits through which core Vietnamese ethical and social values are transmitted—often implicitly—to both native speakers and language learners.

3.3. Optional Extension: Learner-Based Component

In order to complement the corpus-based cognitive and cultural analysis with empirical insights from learners, I undertook an optional exploratory phase. The purpose of this additional phase was to examine how non-native speakers (NNS) of Vietnamese understood idiomatic expressions and to identify the cognitive and cultural barriers to comprehension. While it was not the primary focus of the

study, this exploratory phase adds the learner's experience to the theoretical framework and has implications for future pedagogical practice.

Two complementary data collection methods were employed:

A formal survey was distributed to 25 intermediate to advanced VFL learners from Vietnamese language programs at two universities. Participants were instructed to interpret the meanings of 20 idioms selected from the corpus; they were also to describe their rationale for interpreting the idioms and indicate their prior knowledge of idiomatic expressions overall. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five learners from the same group. The interviews were meant to draw out more reflection on: Interpretive difficulties associated with unfamiliar or culturally opaque metaphors. Instances of misunderstanding or pragmatic misalignment are due to the learners' lack of access to relevant cultural schemas.

Learner preferences for instructional methods—specifically, for or against metaphor-based explanations as compared to simply translating and memorizing. Through this exploratory aspect, our preliminary findings identified several consistent patterns. Generally, learners demonstrated greater understanding of idioms based on embodied metaphors with clear source domains, especially those with the body as a source domain or emotions. For example, nóng mặt (“hot-faced,” to feel angry) was correctly understood by most respondents because of the metaphor EMOTION IS HEAT, which also exists in many Indo-European languages.

In the opposite direction, idioms that are tied to culturally bound schemas, like agrarian metaphors or Confucian moral values, were more challenging to interpret. Expressions such as ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây (“eat fruit, remember the person who planted the tree”), which invoke the cultural schema of gratitude and filial piety, were often misinterpreted or taken literally. Learners were unable to engage with the expression unless in context and without cultural elaboration when they were not versed in the Vietnamese social and historical contexts..

Our findings highlight the importance of cognitive-cultural mediation in idiom instruction. They suggest that adequate VFL pedagogy should not only focus on correct lexical definition but also entail explicit instruction of conceptual metaphors and the other culturally-structured models that underpin them. Employing explanations based on metaphors and engaging narratives embedded in cultural experiences in the classroom could greatly enhance the learners' idiomatic competence and intercultural understanding.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Idioms and Conceptual Mappings

The analysis of the selected Vietnamese idioms demonstrates a considerable level of systematic metaphorical structuring that is consistent with the main elements of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Many idioms are not semantically opaque or unique, as they rest on repeated bodily experiences and draw on conceptual domains that are shared across cultures (e.g., body, space, weight, temperature, and movement) and these domains are also source schemas for abstract target concepts, such as emotions, morality, autonomy, or social obligation.

4.1.1. Emotion as Physical Substance: Embodied Metaphors of Affective States

The corpus contains many idioms that show the metaphor EMOTION IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT, occurring specifically in terms of a physical object that is part of the body and has weight. These idioms use somatic experience to make a point about the psychological intensity of emotional states like love, nostalgia or sadness (Table 5).

Table 5.
Emotion as a Physical Object in the Body.

Idiom	Interpretation	Underlying Metaphor
“heavy affection”	deep, inescapable emotional attachment	Emotion is weight in the body
“heavy-hearted”	sorrowful or emotionally burdened	Emotion is a physical object contained within
“viscera weighed down”	consumed by grief, compassion, or remorse	An intense feeling is an internal weight

These phrases are not just metaphorical but are also culturally stronger in Vietnamese, a language and society that often reinforces emotional depth and relational commitment over expressive explicitness. The metaphorical usefulness of this emotionality is representative of a collectivist tendency, in which emotional obligations and commitments to others are felt to be fundamentally visceral, enduring, and moral.

4.1.2. *Social Individualism vs. Communal Responsibility*

Other idioms speak to tensions between agency and communal responsibility, capturing an evolving understanding of social relations in Vietnam as it moves between traditional collectivism and an emerging individualism. These idioms also use spatial distance and self-referential action as metaphors for disregard and self-care (Table 6).

Table 6.
Conceptual Mapping of Social Autonomy and Withdrawal.

Idiom	Interpretation	Conceptual Mapping
“Each person takes care of themselves.”	Individuals prioritize personal over communal needs	Social life is a balanced System of responsibility
“Each household’s lamp lights its own space.”	Everyone is responsible for their own affairs	Community is a network of autonomous units
“each survives on their own strength”	Survival is individual rather than cooperative	Survival is an individual effort

These idioms might appear to be economic in nature, but they have implicit cultural assessments—a deviation from a norm of shared interdependence. Most of the idioms have moral implications, indicating a decay or loss of social friendship. Substantively, many of these idioms were put in contexts where social values are assumed to be held, but rule-broken, therefore reinstating a cultural baseline of collectivism despite acknowledged competing individualism.

4.1.3. *Cross-Domain Coherence and Cultural Implications*

The conceptual mappings discussed above illustrate inter-domain coherence: idioms of emotion, social obligation, and moral orientation are supported by embodied source domains like weight, containers, and spatial orientations. They are also, importantly, not value-neutral; they embody and thus imply situated moral and social regimes.

For the case of the learners of Vietnamese as L2, comprehension of these idioms requires metaphorical competence as well as the understanding of cultural logic. An idiom like *nặng tình* makes little sense without identifying the cultural values associated with emotional loyalty, also *bodacious* as *thân ai nấy lo* exists in the tension of moral ideals compared with the pragmatic way.

4.2. *Reconstructing the Vietnamese Worldview*

The systematic metaphorical motifs from the Vietnamese idioms corpus provide an important perspective for reconstructing elements of the Vietnamese cultural worldview. Importantly, idioms are much more than mere linguistic embellishments. Idioms reflect cultural models that are entrenched in culture and represent shared understandings of emotion, morality, social structure, experience of time, and the human-nature relationship. Idioms are illustrations of conceptual metaphors and image schemas

and express a form of cultural cognition; meaning, idioms provide a lens into how Vietnamese speakers experience their world and the categories for organizing it.

4.2.1. Emotional Depth and Moral Sentiment

An accepted element across the expressions reviewed is their focus on emotion and moral awareness. Emotions are frequently understood as heavy, lasting and intrinsic, suggesting affective states are deep-seated experiences that are not simply impulses of attunement but morally-weighted encounters that are bodily and relational (Table 7).

Table 7.
Idioms Reflecting Emotion as Moral Weight.

Idiom	Cultural Implication
"heavy affection"	Emotional commitment is a moral obligation, not a casual sentiment.
"heavy-hearted"	Emotions are internalized and carried like burdens.

Such idioms reflect a worldview that prioritizes emotional sincerity, loyalty in relationships, and a sense of moral responsibility for others' well-being—values that are central in Vietnamese familial and communal life.

4.2.2. Social Harmony, Hierarchy, and Communal Ethos

Like Vietnamese proverbs, Vietnamese idioms also represent a deep concern for social order, respect for hierarchy, and the preservation of communal harmony. These values are grounded and founded in Confucian ethical philosophy, which continues to shape interpersonal relationships and public morality in Vietnamese society.

Idioms such as in Table 8:

Table 8.
Idioms Expressing Hierarchical Structure and Communal Responsibility.

Idiom	Cultural Schema
"above commands, below obeys"	Vertical authority structure; respect for rank
"sister falls, younger sibling lifts"	Mutual support within kinship and community

These expressions represent an ideal way to envision a social fabric in which every member has a known position, and relationships are modelled by deference, reciprocity, and obligation. Likewise, any sort of deviation from this model is often marked linguistically, demonstrating both normative ideals and current conflicts.

4.2.3. The Agrarian Imagination and Cyclical Temporality

A clear feature of idioms in the Vietnamese language is the many references to farming metaphors, which stem from the rural nature of Vietnamese society and the moral ways of life associated with farming life. Farming metaphors not only depict the activities of farming, but they also encode moral lessons, cause and effect relationships, and time orientation (Table 9).

Table 9.
Agricultural Metaphors and Moral Reasoning.

Idiom	Conceptual Metaphor	Cultural Implication
"sow what seed, reap that fruit"	ACTIONS ARE SEEDS	Moral causality; karma-like worldview
"drink water, remember the source"	LIFE SUPPORT IS A NATURAL CYCLE	Gratitude; respect for origins and ancestry

These idioms convey a cyclical way of thinking about time—actions return to their starting point, and the past always exists. This perspective goes against the linear, progressive focus common in

Western thinking. It also emphasizes a moral framework in which natural metaphors provide justification for ethical expectations, with the implication that good or bad consequences result from the seeds one sows.

4.2.4. *Life as Spatial Navigation: The Journey Metaphor*

Spatial orientation is also prominent in Vietnamese idioms, particularly in the metaphorical use of expressions relating to movement, direction, and position. The specific expressions can be said to metaphorically describe life as a journey in space in which acts are expressed in relation to moving or directed motion (Table 10).

Table 10.
Idioms Structured by Spatial Metaphors.

Idiom	Conceptual Metaphor	Meaning
"move forward"	Life is a journey	Progress or advancement
"Step back once, move forward thrice."	Strategic retreat is a Movement	Patience and prudence in decision-making
"turn onto one's own path"	Autonomy is a path choice	Individual decision-making within social norms

These expressions are path schemas that structure social mobility, personal development, and strategic behaviour. They express a view of agency not being exercised against the system, but rather calculated within the system, which suggests an ideological position prioritizing indirectness, flexibility, and calculation over the short term.

4.2.5. *Summary: A Cultural Logic of Interdependence and Balance*

The previous discussion of Vietnamese idioms illustrates a coherent and culturally deep logic, where language serves as both a communication medium and a tool for passing along values, norms, and collective memory. In this way, idioms viewed in the theoretical modality of cognitive linguistics are not utilized independently, but as a communication medium, reflect and contribute to a network of connected conceptual foundations that shape Vietnamese cultural cognition..

At the top of the list is the stressing of emotional interiority based in moral responsibility. Emotional states are not presented as ephemeral or individualistic, but as lasting and socially meaningful experiences. Emotions and idioms such as *nặng tình* ("heavy affection") and *nặng lòng* ("heavy-hearted") highlight this perspective, emphasizing emotion as something internal, weighty, and moral. This orientation highlights an underlying cultural model in which emotional ties are impossible to separate from ethical obligations, particularly within kin and community.

Likewise, the cultural commitment to social interdependence is regulated by the constructs of hierarchy, reciprocity, and support. Expressions like *chị ngã em nâng* ("if a sister tumbles, a younger sibling must catch") and *trên bảo dưới nghe* ("those above issue commands, while those below heed") make explicit an imagined social world, where social roles are specified clearly and subordinated to social harmony. These expressions encode a social world where collective well-being carries more weight than individual independence and where keeping that relational balance is both a personal and collective responsibility.

A third foundational element is the conception of time as cyclical and rooted in nature, based on agrarian metaphors and ancestral consciousness. Expressions such as *gieo nhân nào, gặt quả ấy* ("sow what seed, reap that fruit") and *uống nước nhớ nguồn* ("drink water, remember the source") suggest that moral causality and temporal experience are patterned after natural rhythms and cyclical returns. This cyclical temporality undergirds a worldview where present actions are deeply rooted in past generations and the ecological order, leading to appreciation, continuity, and (moral) responsibility.

Lastly, the idiomatic expressions of Vietnamese cultures also display a wide-ranging dependency of space pivot games as a metaphor for agency and navigation through life. The idioms such as *lùi một bước, tiến ba bước* ("step back once to move forward three steps") and *tiến lên* ("move forward")

highlight a very pragmatic spirit of thinking strategically, being patient, and knowing direction. The metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, which is represented in a variety of idioms, demonstrates a culture that prefers calculated moves that avoid conflict and aim for collective movement in a socially flexible environment.

Ultimately, Vietnamese idioms convey a cultural logic grounded in interdependence, emotional depth, moral continuity, and spatial pragmatism. These are not simply stylistic elements of the language but instinctive cognitive-cultural frames of reference that determine the ways in which speakers of Vietnamese interpret the world surrounding them. For learners of Vietnamese as a foreign language, learning idioms is more than just learning the lexicon; it is learning to enter a worldview wherein language, behavior, and moral significance are joined. Teaching idioms in this way allows learners not just to comprehend the word itself, but to enter the cultural imagination from which it derived.

4.3. Challenges for Foreign Learners

In addition to idioms being a memorable way to explore the conceptual and cultural landscape of Vietnam, they also create a considerable amount of interpretive difficulties for foreign language learners. These difficulties are far from purely lexical or syntactic in nature and relate more to epistemic problems around metaphorical thinking, cultural knowledge, and pragmatic appropriateness. Foreign learners are often left without access to the cognitive and cultural models that underlie idioms and must rely on passing clues that risk misunderstanding or misapplication as well as generalizing to unwarranted contexts.

Perhaps the most persistent challenge is the issue of understanding that arises from the façade of idiom recognizability. Learners may understand the literal translation of an idiom, especially if it uses obviously recognizable vocabulary or resembles idioms from their native language. However, this superficial understanding is seldom enough to constitute understanding from a cultural standpoint. For example, a learner may come to understand the idiom *nặng tình* ("heavy affection") as simply being a strong feeling without understanding that this can also imply cultural connotations of moral obligation, restraint of emotion, and long-term relational commitments. In this way an idiom is understood from a linguistic view but not from a cultural view.

Another common challenge involves not having a conceptual framing of idioms. Idioms that are not overtly taught through metaphor may be especially vulnerable to error, either because they are translated literally or misapplied pragmatically. Idioms based on agricultural metaphors- such as *gieo nhân nào, gặt quả ấy* (sow in, reap the fruit)- may also be misconceived as quaint or overly figurative rather than recognized as a culturally salient expression of moral causality. Likewise, idioms reflecting Confucian ethics or conferring hierarchical rankings may also be misconceived as formal and outdated or simply irrelevant if the cultural context is omitted from instruction.

As well, foreign learners seem to be uninformed about the culturally specific metaphorical logic that informs idioms. Although many of the metaphors used are, generally speaking, of a universal origin (e.g., emotions as heat or weight), they are culturally specific in what they entail, as well as how much they are used. For instance, learners who might come from an individualist culture may have difficulties in interpreting idioms based on collectivist norm values, like the use of *thân ai nấy lo* ("each person takes care of themselves"). *Thân ai nấy lo* does not typically mean that "each person takes of themselves" in Vietnamese; it comes across as a critique of social disengagement, rather than a neutral description of autonomy. Thus, unless students receive explicit instruction on linking idioms to cultural scripts and pragmatic contexts, students will likely be learning to see (and therefore sometimes be using) these idioms based on their own assumptions, leading to some potentially unclear or inappropriate usages.

These issues underscore the need for teaching idioms as more than "remembering" or direct translations. Culturally situated, cognizant teaching methods are necessary; teaching students the conceptual metaphors, image schemas, and value systems of idiomatic meaning, and in a way that allows

students to understand and use idioms, means that students can participate in Vietnamese discourse in a more culturally situated, communicatively competent way.

5. Pedagogical Implications

Based on the results of this study, we have clear pedagogical implications for teaching Vietnamese idioms in Vietnamese as a Foreign Language (VFL) programs. Considering idioms as surface manifestations of deeper conceptual metaphors and cultural models necessitates moving away from traditional memorization and towards a cognitively informed, culturally grounded teaching model. It is critical that our idiom instruction connects learners to the cognitive structures and cultural scripts of figurative language in order to further their language and intercultural competence.

First, there is a strong need to organize idioms instructionally based on conceptual metaphor families, rather than only on topical themes (for example, "idioms about family" and "idioms about food"). Categorizing idioms according to the underlying metaphorical structure, EMOTION IS WEIGHT, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, or ACTIONS ARE SEEDS, allows students to see recurring conceptual patterns that cut across idiomatic expressions. This approach enhances developing metaphorical awareness and promotes transference, allowing students to make meaning from idioms they are less familiar with, based on their prior understanding of shared metaphorical mapping.

Next, idiom instruction should use a variety of visual and schematic representations to enhance conceptual clarity. Visualizations through metaphor maps, conceptual diagrams, and image-schema representations may assist students in understanding the abstract links between both source and target domains. For example, when working with the idiom *lùi một bước, tiến ba bước* ("step back once, move forward thrice"), you could present the phrase with a visual representation of the PATH schema to expand students' understanding of strategically moving and the metaphor of projected benefit within life contexts. Also, narrative forms based on schemata—contextualizing idioms through rich, culturally inclusive stories—can deepen learners' situational and emotional understanding of figurative language.

Third, instruction should directly contribute to intercultural reflection by encouraging learners to compare Vietnamese idioms to idioms in their native languages. This form of contrastive analysis will shine a light on metaphorical thought that is universal as well as culturally situated within a culture of use. For example, although English, Vietnamese, and Mandarin create metaphors from the same conceptual metaphor ANGER IS HEAT, the Vietnamese idiom *nóng mặt* (hot-faced) likely interacts with different pragmatic features than these languages. This type of comparison induces translinguistic metalinguistic awareness across two culture-languages, encourages learners to question their cultural assumptions, enhances both idiomatic competence while increasing levels of intercultural communicative sensitivity.

At last, effective idiom pedagogy must encourage cognitive noticing (the intentional awareness made by the learner regarding metaphorical structures and underlying cultural conceptualizations). This means that we plan learning sequences that promote explicit rather than implicit metaphorical structures and encourage learners to identify, apply, and analyze metaphorical patterns across contexts. Activities such as identifying metaphors, clustering idioms using possible schemas, and analyzing guided metaphors would start to develop this noticing element. Eventually, the learner becomes cognitively flexible in their use of unfamiliar idioms as well as the cultural literacy needed to use them authentically and appropriately.

In conclusion, teaching Vietnamese idioms from a cognitive linguistics standpoint allows teachers to reformulate their instructional lenses away from simply translating and memorizing idioms. Through conceptual metaphor, visual schematization, intercultural comparison, and cognitive noticing, teachers are able to create a deeper and lasting learning experience for their students. Moreover, teaching idioms in knowledge form will allow learners to see idioms as more than pieces of language and access idiosyncrasies in the Vietnamese worldview, allowing them to understand idiomatic thought processes, which provide both linguistic fluency and cultural fluency at the same time.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that Vietnamese idioms are not just fixed expressions or linguistic flourishes; they are compact vessels of cultural worldview, moral reasoning, and collective cognition. That's how they constitute socio-cultural knowledge and stereotypes, grounded worldviews. These idioms do this by providing insight into deeply rooted conceptual metaphors and cultural schemas, revealing how Vietnamese speakers conceptualize and verbalize relationships, emotions and morality, and the self in society. Accordingly, idiomatic language provides insight into the cognitive framework and value-laden discourse, in which Vietnamese cultural identity is constructed and sustained.

Utilizing the theoretical resources of cognitive linguistics (conceptual metaphor theory, image schema study, and cultural conceptualizations), this paper has demonstrated the cognitive, conceptual metaphors available in Vietnamese idioms that dictate the form and meaning. In this perspective, idioms are not viewed as semantically opaque or arbitrary. Rather, they are positioned as motivated instantiations of embodied experience and culturally grounded thought. The idioms *nặng tình*, *gieo nhân gặt quả*, and *lùi một bước, tiến ba bước* exemplify how linguistic forms cannot be disentangled from the moral logics, spatial reasoning, and temporal cycles in Vietnamese society.

For learners of Vietnamese as a Foreign Language (VFL), this recognition has important pedagogical implications. A cognitive linguistic perspective allows learners to go beyond simple rote memorization or surface-level grammatical translation, where idioms can be thought of as a part of an overall cultural-linguistic system. Once idioms are taught using conceptual mappings and cultural stories, they can be incorporated into fluency and also into assuming the culture and implicitly integrating cultural aspects of communication and individuals' interpretive frameworks. This means that learners can not simply capture how idioms are used, but understand why these idioms are used as they are, and what the relevance of the idioms reveals about Vietnamese ways of thinking and being relational.

In this regard, the study proposes a shift in VFL idiom teaching away from an emphasis on phrase lists and literal explanations, toward a metaphorical structure and cultural logic model. This shift aligns language teaching with how language is viewed today — as a cognitive and cultural phenomenon that binds linguistic form with conceptual meaning. Overall, by situating idiomatic instruction within cognitive linguistics, teachers can provide learners with a better opportunity to grapple with Vietnamese as a cognitive world, wherein meaning, culture, and communication are intimately connected.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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