

## **Decoding L2 Korean idioms: A review of research and pedagogical implications**

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### **Abstract**

The study of second-language (L2) idiom acquisition has held a significant place in both Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and foreign language education. While there is a wealth of research on L2 idiom learning, few studies published in English focus on the acquisition of L2 Korean idioms. This research seeks to fill this gap by reviewing and analyzing prior work on L2 Korean idioms. It offers a classification and categorization of Korean idioms, shedding light on the varying degrees of comprehension/acquisition difficulty for L2 learners. The study further delves into the pedagogical implications of teaching L2 Korean idioms including the efficacy of explicit instruction, the benefits of using authentic materials, the role of context in teaching idiomatic expressions, and suggested procedures.

**Keywords:** L2 idiom acquisition; Korean idioms; Teaching Korean as a Second/Foreign Language; Classification of Korean idioms

## **1. Introduction**

The learning of second language (L2) idioms has long been a topic of considerable interest in psycholinguistic studies (e.g., Abel, 2003; Cieslicka, 2006; Giora, 2002;) and pedagogical studies (e.g., Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers, 2007; Cooper, 1998; Irujo, 1986; Zyzik, 2011). Idioms are expressions or phrases that convey a figurative or metaphorical meaning, which cannot be easily deduced from their literal meanings. Extant research suggests that learning L2 idioms poses significant challenges for language learners, as it necessitates not only linguistic knowledge but also an understanding of cultural values and social norms (Cooper, 1999).

For native English speakers learning Korean as a second or foreign language, idioms present an additional cultural obstacle. East Asian languages, including Korean, are often considered “truly foreign languages” (Jordan & Walton, 1987, p.111) by many native English speakers due to substantial linguistic and cultural disparities. The degree of similarity between idioms in one’s mother tongue and the

target language influences the ease of learning: the more similar the idioms, the easier they are to learn, while greater differences yield increased difficulty (Irujo, 1986; Laufer, 2000; Türker, 2016).

In the early stages of L2 learning, learners tend to focus on the primary and surface meaning of words. As they progress, they must also comprehend cultural references, emotions of the target language speakers, and social or historical backgrounds of the target community, which is often the case in the acquisition of idiomatic expressions. In that regard, Y. S. Lee (1992) views idioms as mediators that convey culture and argues that L2 idiom learning requires a different approach from learning general vocabulary.

Despite the wealth of research on second language idiom acquisition, there remains a noticeable lack of studies published in English specifically addressing the teaching and learning of L2 Korean idioms. This study aims to bridge this gap by introducing and examining previous research on L2 Korean idioms. The primary focus of this investigation is the

classification and categorization of Korean idioms, with an emphasis on identifying information that can be beneficial for teaching and learning.

## **2. Definition of Korean idioms**

Idioms have been defined by numerous scholars, dictionaries, and reference works. For example, the Korean Learner's Dictionary for Foreigners written by Suh (2006) defines idioms as 'a phrase with a special meaning, used habitually for a long time.' Similarly, The Standard Dictionary of the Korean Language (National Institute of Korean Language, 1999) depicts idioms as phrases in which two or more words come together to express a unique and distinct meaning. In Korean, idioms are commonly referred to as '관용어 *gwan-yong-eo*'<sup>1</sup>, '관용구 *gwan-yong-gu*', '속어 *suk-eo*', '익힘말 *ik-him-mal*', and '익은말 *ig-eun-mal*'. They are generally regarded as phrases composed of two or more words where the overall meaning

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, Korean words are transcribed using the Revised Romanization of Korean, as disclosed by The National Institute of Korean Language.

cannot be deduced from the literal interpretation of the individual words.

Scholars have approached the definition of idioms from various perspectives, focusing either on their syntactic and grammatical characteristics or on their semantic and pragmatic functions. S.-E. Lee (1995) defines idioms as expressions consisting of two or more words in an essential co-occurrence relationship that has become fossilized. He emphasizes that the combined elements of idioms generate a meaning beyond the sum of their individual meanings, thereby classifying them as unique expressions. On the other hand, H.-S. Min (2003) focuses on the usage and frequency of idioms within language communities. According to Min, idioms are expressions that are persistently and repeatedly used in a language community over a period of time and encompass various types of expressions, such as old sayings, proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and popular sayings. This emphasis on persistent and repeated use is also echoed by H.-H. Kang (2022), who characterizes idioms as common

figurative expressions that have been customarily used by native speakers for an extended period. Y.-S. Park (1985) points out that some idioms are illogical and ungrammatical in their form or meaning but are still commonly used across linguistic and cultural communities, which reflects the power of social conventions and shared cultural understanding in shaping language use. J.-G. Shim (1986) offers a broad definition of idioms as groups of combined words that serve both pragmatic and syntactic functions as if they were a single word, even though they comprise two or more words or stem morphemes. Lastly, K. H. Moon (1998) defines idioms as expressions that are regularly used and familiar to Koreans, highlighting the importance of cultural and social contexts in comprehending idioms.

Drawing on these understandings, this study adopts a broad definition of idioms, as expressions that extend beyond the sum of their individual constituents and are commonly used in the Korean community. While this definition encompasses a range of figurative expressions, such as

proverbs, metaphors, and fixed phrases, it should be noted that four-lettered Sino-Korean idioms are not discussed in this study due to their broad scope and the limitations of space.

### 3. Classification and categorization of Korean idioms

Classification of idioms can be helpful for understanding the nature and functions of these linguistic expressions.. According to the Encyclopedia of Korean Culture provided by the Academy of Korean Studies (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0004952>), idioms can be classified based on their syntactic structures and/or semantic properties. For example, based on syntactic structures, they can be divided into **sentential** idioms (e.g., 간이 배 밖으로 나오다 *gani bae bakkeuro naoda* , literally meaning ‘One’s liver comes out of one’s belly’ and figuratively meaning ‘to be very bold/reckless’), **phrasal** idioms (e.g., 강 건너 불구경 하듯 *gang geonneo bulgugyeong hadent*, literally meaning ‘as if one looks at a fire across the river’ and figuratively meaning ‘to look on somebody’s trouble with



indifference’), and **lexical** idioms (e.g., 밀당 *mildang*<sup>2</sup>, literally meaning ‘pushing and pulling’ and figuratively meaning ‘love game’ or ‘power struggle’).

According to their grammatical roles, idioms can be classified into four categories: **nominal** (e.g., 굴러온 호박 *gulleoon hobak*, literally meaning ‘a pumpkin that rolled over to me’ and figuratively meaning ‘an unexpected fortune or gain’), **predicative** (e.g., 긴가민가하다 *gingamingabada*, literally meaning ‘to think whether it is or is not so’ and figuratively meaning ‘to be unsure whether it is so’), **modifying** (e.g., 밑도 끝도 없이 *mitdo kkeutdo eopsi*, literally meaning ‘without the bottom or the end’ and figuratively meaning ‘out of the blue’), and **independent** (e.g., 가만히 있으면 중간이나

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<sup>2</sup> Whether compound words such as *mildang* should be categorized as idioms is a subject of ambiguity and controversy. In this study, the classification of compound words as idioms was determined by whether their meaning cannot be deduced from the individual words or morphemes comprising them. However, the extent to which the figurative meaning of compound words is deducible and predictable through literal interpretation can vary among different readers and speakers. Therefore, delineating clear boundaries between lexical idioms and compound words becomes challenging. Previous research on Korean idioms has exhibited little discussion and examples concerning compound words and their idiomatic nature. Further investigation and studies are warranted to explore the distinctions between lexical idioms and compound words, which remain unaddressed in this study.

가지 *gamanbi isseumyeon jungganina gaji*, literally meaning ‘If you stay still/silent, you can go as far as the middle’ and figuratively meaning ‘Fools are like other folks as long as they are silent’).<sup>3</sup>

Another way to categorize idioms is based on their theme or semantic content. Examples include idioms related to animals (e.g., *가재는 게 편 gajaeneun ge pyeon*, *개나 소나 gaena sona*), food (e.g., *그 나물에 그 밥 geu namure geu bap*, *뜨거운 감자 tteugeoun gamja*), parts of the body (e.g., *간에 기별도 안 가다 gane gibyeoldo an gada*, *얼굴이 두껍다 eolguri dukkeopda*), advice (e.g., *설마가 사람 잡는다 seolmaga saram jamneunda*, *하나를 보면 열을 안다 hanareul bomyeon yeoreul anda*), and character/personality (e.g., *그릇이 작다/크다 geureusi jakda/keuda*, *뒤끝이 없다 dwikkeuchi eopda*), among others.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The literal and figurative meanings of the idioms were taken from those provided by Pyun (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Their literal and figurative meanings are as follows (Pyun, 2018):

*가재는 게 편*: literally, ‘Crayfish is on crab’s side’; figuratively ‘People tend to stick with their own kind’

*개나 소나*: literally ‘whether it is a dog or a cow’; figuratively ‘everyone; so many people’

Other studies have proposed various classification systems for idioms based on different criteria, such as semantic transparency, figurativeness, and frequency of use. For example, Cacciari and Glucksberg (1991) suggest that an initial classification of idioms can be made into two general types: non-analyzable and analyzable idioms. Non-analyzable idioms are those in which there is no apparent relation between an idiom's individual elements and its meaning, while analyzable idioms are those in which such a relation exists.

In this study, we aim to examine ways of classifying Korean idioms based on the level of difficulty in

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그 나물에 그 밥: literally 'that rice to those vegetables'; figuratively 'to be no different from each other'

뜨거운 감자: literally 'a hot potato'; figuratively 'a controversial issue'

간에 기별도 안 가다: literally '(for food) to not even give a signal to one's liver'; figuratively 'the amount of food is far from filling one's stomach'

얼굴이 두껍다: literally 'one's face is thick'; figuratively 'to be thick-skinned'

설마가 사람 잡는다: literally 'the thought of 'It can't happen' catches you'; figuratively 'the worst could happen'

하나를 보면 열을 안다: literally 'if you see one, you can know then'; figuratively 'knowing just one detail about a person allows you to infer a lot about him or her'

그릇이 작다/크다: literally 'the bowl is small/big'; figuratively 'to be of small/large capacity'

뒤끝이 없다: literally 'to not have the end'; figuratively 'not to hold a grudge; to get over one's anger'

comprehension and acquisition from the perspective of L2 learners; that is, the likelihood and degree of ease with which L2 learners of Korean can predict the figurative meaning of the idioms. The difficulty level is discussed based on factors such as opacity, decomposability, frequency, and lexical difficulty. Classification based on these factors will subsequently inform more effective teaching and learning strategies for Korean idioms.

### **3.1.Opacity**

The degree of opacity can contribute to the difficulty level of learning L2 idioms. Idioms are considered opaque when the meanings of the individual elements contribute nothing to the idioms' figurative meaning (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991). When the figurative meaning of the idiom is unclear from the literal meaning, it is likely harder for L2 learners (Abel, 2003).

In the context of Korean idioms, opacity can be particularly challenging for L2 learners due to the cultural and historical elements embedded within the expressions. A substantial number of Korean idioms are based on traditional

proverbs, historical events, or cultural references that may not be familiar to L2 Korean learners. As a result, learners of Korean may struggle to comprehend and internalize the meanings of these idiomatic expressions without additional cultural and historical knowledge. For example, the Korean idiom ‘국수를 먹다 *gukseureul meokda*’ literally translated as ‘eat noodles’ might be challenging for L2 learners to understand, as it is not transparent and its figurative meaning (‘hold a wedding’) cannot be easily inferred from the individual words. The idiom’s figurative meaning originated from an old Korean tradition, where noodles were served at wedding banquets because long noodles were believed to symbolize the couple’s long, happy life together.

Moon (1998) defines opaque idioms as those with idiomatic meanings that are not associated with, and cannot be predicted from, their literal meanings, and whose origins are difficult to speculate. Semi-opaque idioms are those with idiomatic meanings that are somewhat associated with, and can be partially predicted from, their literal meanings, and for

which the speculation of their origin is not impossible. Semi-transparent idioms are those with idiomatic meanings that are strongly associated with, and easily predicted from, their literal meanings, and whose origins can be more readily speculated. Moon (1998) provided examples of opaque, semi-opaque, and semi-transparent idioms, as shown in Appendix A. Table 1 presents the literal and figurative meanings of select idioms from Moon (1998) to illustrate the disparity between their literal and figurative interpretations.

Table 1. Examples of Korean idioms and their degree of opacity according to Moon (1998).

Opacity	Idioms	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
Opaque	시치미를 떼다 <i>sichimireul</i> <i>tteda</i>	to take off a falcon tag	to play innocent/dumb, to pretend not to know
	오지랖이 넓다 <i>ojirapi</i>	for the front side of one's hanbok jacket to be wide	to be nosy, to be meddlesome

	<i>neolda</i>		
Semi-opaque	그림의 떡 <i>geurimui tteok</i>	a rice cake in a picture	something that one cannot have
	수박 겉 핥기 <i>subak geot halgi</i>	licking the surface of a watermelon	doing something superficially; scratching the surface of something
Semi-transparent	발등의 불을 끄다 <i>baldeungui bureul kkeuda</i>	to extinguish fire on top of the foot	to take care of an urgent matter
	속이 타다 <i>sogi tada</i>	For one's inside to burn	to be anxious, to be extremely worried, to fret oneself

Within the category of opaque idioms, a substantial number of expressions encompass historical and cultural backgrounds. For instance, the idioms 시치미를 떼다 *sichimireul tteda* and 오지랖이 넓다 *ojirapi neolda* serve as relevant examples. The term 시치미 *sichimi* refers to a name tag attached to a falcon during an era when it was prevalent to use tamed falcons for hunting. The tag indicated the falcon's owner. There were people who would remove the tag from someone else's falcon and feign ownership. This idiom alludes to such acts of deceit. On the other hand, 오지랖 *ojirap* denotes one of the two front sides of a *banbok* jacket, which is traditional Korean attire. When the 오지랖 *ojirap* is wide, it excessively covers the other front side. This imagery is used to describe meddling excessively in others' affairs. Opaque idioms like these provide minimal clues for L2 learners to deduce their meaning and can be more challenging to recall once they have been learned. While Moon's (1998) suggestive classification of Korean idioms offers a useful framework for conceptualizing the perceived difficulty of comprehension,



Moon does not provide a rationale or criteria for this classification, rendering it somewhat arbitrary and lacking objectivity.

Another study that endeavored to categorize Korean idiomatic expressions according to their degree of opacity was conducted by B.-K. Kim and Chae (2013). In their research, B.-K. Kim and Chae proposed a list of Korean idioms specifically tailored for Chinese L2 Korean learners, taking into account factors such as frequency of use, idiomatic complexity, and the potential for translation into Chinese. The researchers classified Korean idioms into three distinct groups: near-transparent idioms, semi-opaque idioms, and opaque idioms, considering the nuances and intricacies associated with each category. Examples of idiomatic expressions from each of these three groups proposed by B.-K. Kim & Chae (2013) are presented in Appendix B.

While B.-K. Kim and Chae (2013) provided criteria for their classification, such as the frequency of its use, predictability of its figurative meaning, and ease of translating

it into Chinese, their classification still relied to a large extent on intuition rather than objective, quantifiable data. As shown in Appendix A and B, the same idiom, 국수를 먹다 *guksureul meokda*, is classified as semi-transparent by Moon (1998) while being classified as semi-opaque by B.-K. Kim and Chae (2013). This suggests that the perceived level of opacity not only varies among scholars but also according to the intended recipients of the idioms.

In terms of Korean idioms and their transparency, studies have also been conducted with native speakers as the target audience. For instance, S. Choi (2013) developed a list of educational idioms tailored for first-year middle school students whose native language is Korean, taking into account the transparency of the idiomatic meanings. Choi presented 61 Korean idioms along with their meanings to 100 first-year middle school students and assessed the participants' judgment of transparency. The idioms were classified into three categories: transparent, semi-opaque, and opaque, based on the interpretability and non-interpretability

of the meanings of the constituent words within the idioms, as presented in Appendix C. For example, 국수를 먹다 *guksureul meokda* and 말짱 도루묵 *maljjang dorumuk* were classified as opaque idioms, 간이 콩알만해지다 *gani kongalmanbaejida* and 입이 무겁다 *ibi mugeopda* as semi-opaque idioms and 발목을 잡히다 *balmogeul japida* and 코가 높다 *koga nopda* as semi-transparent idioms. Once again, one can see how the same idiom can be classified differently depending on whom it was judged by, as exemplified by 국수를 먹다 *guksureul meokda* being classified as opaque in S. Choi's study while being categorized as semi-transparent and semi-opaque in other studies.

S. Choi (2013) observed that idioms with historical backgrounds tend to be highly opaque, even to native Korean speakers. For instance, the idiom 말짱 도루묵 *maljjang dorumuk* translates to, 'It's all in vain; it all becomes of no use,' while its literal meaning is, 'It's completely sandfish back again.' This idiom has its origin in the Joseon Dynasty during the reign of King Sunjo (1567–1608). During the Japanese

invasion of Korea (1592–1598), King Sunjo fled to avoid the war and encountered a sandfish (목어 *mogeo*) which he found very tasty. He renamed it 은어 *euneo*, as he believed 목어 *mogeo* sounded too modest. However, upon returning to the palace and tasting the fish again, King Sunjo no longer found it appetizing and decreed that it should revert to its original name, 목어 *mogeo*. This narrative gave rise to the expression 도로 목 *doro mok*, meaning ‘back to *mok* again,’ which later evolved into 도루묵 *doro muk*. As a result, Korean native speakers also would perceive this idiom as opaque, as it necessitates an awareness of its historical context. Does this mean Korean native speakers would find it difficult to acquire such opaque idioms compared to more transparent idioms? An idiom like 말짱 도루묵 *maljjang dorumuk* is widely and frequently used and very familiar to most native speakers. This suggests that along with opacity, frequency and familiarity would also play a role in determining the idiom’s level of ease or difficulty. Thus, it can be speculated that while opaque idioms may overall be more difficult to comprehend

and retain than more transparent idioms, frequency and familiarity can also come into play, potentially mitigating the effect of opacity for users, whether they are native speakers or L2 learners.

In previous studies, there is variation in the terminology used to describe the spectrum of opacity of idioms, as well as their resulting classification, particularly between ‘semi-opaque’ and ‘semi-transparent.’ Therefore, it is suggested that future studies on idiom classification should provide a clearer operationalized definition regarding the spectrum of opacity. For instance, the predictability of an idiom’s meaning, which refers to the degree to which its literal meaning contributes to its figurative meaning, should be operationalized by specifying how and by whom it was judged and quantified. In addition, when considering the frequency of use in determining the degree of opacity, objective data or references should be used as a basis. While it is understandable and natural for classifications based on opacity to vary (although there are also considerable

similarities) depending on the perspectives of perceivers and target users, offering clearer operationalized definitions can reduce confusion and ambiguity.

As can be seen in Appendices A, B, and C, it is crucial to acknowledge that the perceived degree of opacity may vary among different language groups, as well as among individuals within the same language group, depending on personal experience, knowledge, and perception. For instance, idioms considered relatively transparent by native Korean speakers might be perceived as opaque by L2 Korean learners. Furthermore, within the L2 Korean learner population, perceptions regarding degrees of transparency and opacity can be subjective and may differ substantially. As a result, while the degree of opacity serves as a factor influencing the complexity of idiom comprehension, it is important to recognize the potential for subjective variations among individuals. Despite these variations, the level of opacity can provide valuable information for estimating students' comprehension of idioms and determining effective

approaches to introduce and instruct L2 idioms.

### **3.2.Decomposability**

Decomposability is another factor related to opacity that can affect the difficulty level of learning L2 idioms. Decomposability concerns the degree to which individual meanings of the idiom contribute to the interpretation of its figurative meaning (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989). A non-decomposable idiom whose meaning is unrelated to the meanings of its constituents can be slower to process than a decomposable idiom whose individual words' meanings correspond to the idiom's overall meaning (Gibbs et al., 1989). For example, the English idiom 'spill the beans' is a decomposable idiom in that its figurative meaning can be inferred from the literal meanings of 'spill' and 'beans,' which convey the idea of revealing.

In their analysis of the mental processing of various types of idioms, Chung and J.-B. Kim (2007) provided examples of non-decomposable and decomposable idioms. For instance, 물 찬 제비 *mul chan jebi*, which literally

translates to ‘a swallow that kicks water’ and figuratively signifies ‘a very neat, swift, or slim-looking appearance’ (Chung & J.-B. Kim, 2007: 420), is classified as a non-decomposable idiom. In contrast, *간이 크다 gani keuda*, which literally means ‘have a big liver’ and figuratively conveys ‘being very confident or brave’ (Chung & J.-B. Kim, 2007: 422), is considered a decomposable idiom. Chung and J.-B. Kim (2007) noted that non-decomposable idioms typically feature fixed components and lack syntactic variations. As a result, they are stored as frozen units in the mental lexicon, paired with their idiomatic meanings. Conversely, decomposable idioms often permit their constituents, particularly nominal parts, to undergo a certain degree of syntactic processes and modifications (e.g., *간 크다 gan keuda*, *간이 크다 gani keuda*, *간도 크다 gando keuda*, *간만 크다 ganman keuda*). The authors further highlighted that while some decomposable idioms exhibit less flexibility in syntactic modifications, each component still carries a meaning that contributes to the overall idiomatic interpretation.



While opacity focuses on the overall transparency or obscurity of an idiom's meaning, decomposability pertains to the degree to which the individual words or elements of an idiomatic expression can be decomposed and can contribute to its overall meaning. It is generally true that most opaque idioms tend to be non-decomposable, as analyzing the literal meanings of their words does not offer significant insights into the intended figurative interpretation. However, not all opaque idioms are necessarily non-decomposable. There can be instances where an opaque idiom has some degree of decomposability, allowing for partial analysis of the constituent words' contributions to the overall meaning. A Korean idiom that can be considered both opaque and decomposable is *한 우물을 파다* *han umureul pada*. The literal translation is 'to dig one well,' which may not make immediate sense. However, when broken down, the idiom means to focus on and become skilled in one particular area or field, rather than having superficial knowledge in many areas. In this sense, the idiom is decomposable, as

understanding the individual components can help reveal its intended meaning.

Research has shown that decomposable idiomatic expressions are generally easier for L2 learners to acquire and use compared to non-decomposable expressions (Cieślicka, 2006). When L2 learners can understand the meaning of an idiom by breaking it down into its constituent parts, they are more likely to be able to infer the overall meaning, even if they are not familiar with the specific idiomatic expression.

### **3.3. Frequency and lexical difficulty**

Several scholars have advocated for classifying Korean idioms based on their usage frequency in everyday life or the degree to which they reflect cultural aspects. B.-K. Kim (2005) proposed that idioms with high usage frequency and significant cultural representation should be prioritized in teaching and learning. Moreover, these idioms should be presented according to the learner's proficiency level (beginner, intermediate, or advanced). Similarly, Moon (1998) argued that the list of idiomatic expressions for foreign

learners should emphasize idioms commonly used by native Korean speakers. Based on a survey conducted among 400 contemporary native Korean speakers regarding the usage frequency of Korean idioms, she compiled a list comprising (1) 30 idioms rated as having high frequency and (2) 30 idioms rated as having medium frequency, as illustrated in Appendix D.

Moreover, Moon (1998) emphasized that factors such as usage frequency by native Korean speakers, idiom difficulty levels, L2 learners' perceptions, and distinctions between spoken and written language should be considered when introducing idioms at various learning stages. Moon (1998) conducted a survey on idiom recognition among 126 L2 Korean learners and found that many highly recognized and familiar idioms were related to body parts. In contrast, idioms that L2 learners identified as unfamiliar were predominantly colloquial buzzwords, slang expressions, and written expressions frequently used in newspaper articles.

S.-J. Kim and Kang (2006) initially selected 127 Korean idioms for their study, drawing from those featured in *100 Korean Proverbs and 100 Korean Idioms*, published by the National Institute of International Education, and *The final report on the development of Korean language teaching methods* (Korean Globalization Foundation, 2002). They further refined this list to 60 idioms, using Moon's (1998) survey results on idiom usage frequency as a reference. Subsequently, they categorized these 60 idioms based on their level of difficulty, as determined by the degree of opacity. The resulting classifications included 10 beginner-level idioms, 30 intermediate-level idioms, and 20 advanced-level idioms, as displayed in Appendix E.

H.-J. Kim (2015) observed that the idiom lists, learning quantities, and learning stages vary across textbooks, leading to inconsistent approaches for selecting and organizing idioms for educational purposes. Drawing from previous research by N. H. Cho (2003), Kang et al. (2012, 2013), J. S. Kim et al. (2010), and Moon (1999), H.-J. Kim

examined factors such as lexical difficulty, usage frequency, and opacity of meaning. Based on these factors, H.-J. Kim proposed a categorization of 152 idioms according to their level of difficulty (See Appendix F).

In summary, the aforementioned studies suggest that when selecting and presenting idioms for L2 Korean learners, it is crucial to take into account a variety of factors. These factors include opacity, decomposability, usage frequency, lexical difficulty, register (distinguishing between spoken and written language), and the degree to which the idioms reflect cultural information. By considering these aspects, educators can provide a more comprehensive and effective approach to teaching idioms, which will enhance students' comprehension, acquisition, and retention of Korean idioms.

#### **4. Pedagogical strategies for teaching Korean idioms**

Drawing on existing L2 idiom studies, this section presents and summarizes effective pedagogical strategies for teaching Korean idioms in a foreign or second language context.

#### **4.1.Introducing idioms within contexts**

Teaching idiomatic expressions within context is particularly important, as it helps L2 learners better understand the figurative meanings and appropriate usage of idioms, while also allowing them to develop a greater awareness of the social and cultural aspects of the target language (Nippold & Martin, 1989; Kecskes, 2006; Liontas, 2002; Türker, 2016; Türker, 2019). For instance, Türker (2019) conducted a study on idiom acquisition among native English speakers learning Korean as a second language. She discovered that when idioms in the second language are taught within a rich and meaningful context, this supportive context can diminish the influence of the learners' native language. Consequently, learners are less likely to depend on their semantic knowledge from their first language. She further added that a contextual approach enhances the capacity of L2 learners to deduce meaning directly from the second language, instead of resorting to their native language.

Moon (1998) emphasized the importance of presenting various examples of idioms in both formal and informal situations when introducing their meanings to learners. To enable learners to use idioms appropriately according to context, it is essential to differentiate between formal and informal settings, spoken and written language, the degree of colloquialism, and whether the idioms can be used with seniors, equals, or juniors. By learning idioms in conjunction with information on suitable situations or contexts, learners can avoid errors and refrain from using them indiscriminately across various situations.

Recognizing the importance of understanding context, settings, and the relationship between the speaker and listener, Pyun (2018) utilized categories for presenting Korean idioms. These categories included the degree of formality and informality, colloquial usage, slang usage, vulgarity, and derogatory language, as illustrated in Appendix G.

H.-H. Kang (2022) also emphasized the importance of teaching idioms within the context of their usage. When used appropriately, idioms can foster a sense of connection with the listener and showcase the speaker's fluency in the Korean language. However, when misused or applied in an unsuitable context, idioms can create awkwardness or even offense. For instance, the idiom 미역국을 먹다 *miyeokgugeul meokda*, which literally translates to 'to eat seaweed soup,' figuratively means 'to fail at something.' The slippery texture of 미역 *miyeok* (a type of sea vegetable) is associated with slipping or failing, such as during an exam or job interview. In casual settings, as illustrated in example (1), the idiom can be used when conversing with a close friend. However, as demonstrated in example (2), employing this idiom with a senior or distant acquaintance can be perceived as rude or awkward.



(1) 야, 시험 어떻게 되었어? 너 또 미역국 먹은 거냐?

(between close friends)

*ya, sibeom eotteoke doeesseo? neo tto miyeokguk meogeun geonya?*

Hey, what happened with your exam? Did you fail again?

(2) ??따님이 대학 입시에서 미역국을 먹었다면서요?

(to one's senior)

*ttanimi daebak ipsiseo miyeokgugeul meogeotdamyeonseoyo?*

I heard that your daughter failed the college entrance exam.

Moreover, idioms are often employed in specific and fixed contexts. For instance, the idiom 비행기를 태우다 *bibaenggireul taenda*, which figuratively means ‘to flatter,’ is typically used in a negative form as a humble response to demonstrate modesty when receiving a compliment, as illustrated in example (3). Utilizing this idiom while giving or seeking compliments may result in awkwardness (H.-H. Kang, 2022).

(3) A: 역시 김 대리는 대단해.

*Yeoksi gim daerineun daedanbae.*

As expected, Assistant Manager Kim is amazing.

B: 아닙니다. 자꾸 비행기를 태우지 마세요.

*Animmida. jakku bibaenggireul taenji maseyo.*

Not at all. Please don't flatter me.

(4) A: ?? 이번에 1등 했으니 비행기 태워 줄게.

*Ibeone 1deung haesseuni bibaenggj taewo julge.*

I'll praise you since you won first place this time.

B: ?? 저 잘 했지요? 어서 비행기를 태워 주세요.

*Jeo jal haetjiyo? eoseo bibaenggireul taewo juseyo.*

I did a good job, right? Hurry up and compliment me.

In these examples, the appropriate usage of the idiom 비행기를 태우다 *bibaenggireul taenda* becomes evident, highlighting the importance of understanding idiomatic expressions within their intended contexts.

The contextual factors and relationships between communicators play a pivotal role in the appropriate

utilization of idiomatic expressions, as they determine the necessary degree of politeness, familiarity, and shared cultural knowledge for successful communication. Consequently, contextualized L2 idiom learning bolsters learners' pragmatic competence, empowering them to communicate more effectively and authentically in the target language.

#### **4.2.Suggested methods and procedures**

H.-H. Kang (2022) states that idiomatic expressions are typically introduced in earnest at the intermediate level, given that their mastery often necessitates knowledge and comprehension of discourse-pragmatic competence, including honorifics, varying speech levels, and sociocultural references. Nevertheless, she contends that idioms can be incrementally introduced even at the beginner level to engage students and foster motivation.

One way to effectively teach and learn idioms is to integrate them into thematic or task-based units, which allows learners to encounter and practice idiomatic expressions within a coherent and meaningful framework. By organizing

instruction around pertinent topics or tasks, teachers can help learners develop a more systematic understanding of the idiomatic expressions related to specific themes, domains, or communicative functions (Laufer, 2000). Consistent with this approach, H.-H. Kang (2022) recommends incorporating idiomatic expressions in a manner that connects to the unit and theme being discussed, thereby promoting contextualized learning. S.-J. Kim and Kang (2006) provide specific examples of unit themes in which certain idioms can be introduced. A few of their examples are presented in Appendix H.

Explicit and systematic instruction can be particularly beneficial in idiom instruction as it helps learners develop a more in-depth understanding of the meaning, structure, and usage of idioms, which may not be readily apparent due to their figurative nature (Folse, 2004). Clear explanations and definitions of the targeted idioms can be accompanied by examples of their usage in context (Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers, 2007). Teachers can also provide information about the cultural and historical background of the idioms, which

can enhance learners' comprehension of their meaning and promote a deeper appreciation of the target language and culture (Grant & Bauer, 2004). In offering explicit cultural interpretations and background information, H.-H. Kang (2022) advises teachers to utilize any corresponding idioms in learners' L1, which facilitates effective retention of the idiomatic expressions.

Teachers can integrate diverse activities that encourage active engagement with the target idiomatic expressions. For example, Jeong (1999) advocates for task-based idiom instruction and proposes a plan to structure an instructional unit comprising four stages: task introduction, task preparation, task performance, and task wrap-up. This approach sequentially introduces idiomatic expressions while ensuring that learners progressively develop a more comprehensive understanding of their meaning, usage, and context, thus fostering effective idiom acquisition.

S.-J. Kim and H.-J. Kang (2006) suggested structuring idiom instruction using a six-step process that includes (1)

introduction, (2) presentation, (3) explanation and supplement, (4) application, (5) practice, and (6) utilization. For instance, during the introductory stage, situations are presented through visual aids to assist students in inferring the meaning of idioms. In the presentation stage, idioms are introduced through a main text, enabling students to contextualize their usage. Subsequently, in the explanation and supplementary stage, representative situations are demonstrated through examples, accompanied by explicit explanations of the idioms' meanings. During the application stage, students' understanding of the learned idioms is reinforced through various activities such as reading, games, and discussions. In the practice stage, learners produce idioms by providing appropriate idioms for given situations or creating scenarios in which idioms can be employed. Finally, in the utilization stage, students narrate stories using the learned idioms. These types of steps help maintain students' engagement by offering a variety of activities, presenting ample opportunities for input and output, and

effectively reinforcing their learning.

Similar steps were proposed by K.-J. Choi and H.-R. Jeong (2010) for teaching Korean idioms using multi- and mass media, consisting of (1) introduction, (2) presentation, (3) practice, and (4) production. On the other hand, K.-W. Park (2019) provided an idiom instruction framework for foreign workers that encompassed three stages: (1) introduction and planning, (2) execution, and (3) review. This plan employed practical oral materials, such as videos, to expose learners to idioms and encouraged continuous interaction among them, facilitating their recognition of idiomatic meanings and usage contexts. In addition, Park recommended role-playing activities in authentic situations wherein learners can enact scenarios using appropriate idioms.

One way to present the context of an idiom more clearly is to use authentic materials. For example, H. I. Cho (2011) analyzed and cataloged Korean idioms using data from the ‘Sejong Spoken Language Corpus’, emphasizing the

importance of presenting and learning idioms through actual speech data. Similarly, Hong (2020) stressed the significance of utilizing a list of Korean idioms based on authentic utterance data. He analyzed TV entertainment programs to compile a list of Korean idioms and argued that learning through real-life examples is more effective than relying solely on textbook materials. Real-world materials with aural and/or visual cues, such as images, audio, or video, can be especially effective. Learners can grasp the nuances and pragmatic functions of idioms by being exposed to contexts in which the idiomatic expressions occur in natural, authentic discourse. In particular, multimedia resources will help learners build mental associations between visual images and expressions, promoting retention of the idioms.



### **5. Closing remarks**

This study provided a review of research on the classification of L2 Korean idioms and pedagogical strategies for effective instruction. These studies suggest that L2 Korean idioms can be selected and presented according to their frequency of use and levels of difficulty, thus providing scaffolded activities. Also recommended is fostering cultural and pragmatic awareness by exploring the social, historical, and cultural background of idiomatic expressions, as well as their communicative functions and contextual appropriateness. Such approaches will, in turn, enhance learners' overall ability to use idiomatic expressions appropriately and sensitively, resulting in greater language proficiency, cultural understanding, and effective communication in Korean.

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**Appendix A** Moon (1998)'s classification of Korean idioms according to opacity

The degree of opacity		Idioms
불투명 (Opaque)		구들장군, 빛 좋은 개살구, 변죽을 울리다, 산통을 깨다, 시치미를 떼다, 오지랖이 넓다
반불투명 (Semi-opaque)		개밥에 도토리, 그림의 떡, 수박 겉 핥기, 우물 안 개구리, 미역국을 먹다, 바가지를 긁다, 바람을 맞다, 비행기를 태우다, 오리발을 내밀다, 김이 새다, 배가 아프다, 제 발이 저리다
반투명 (Semi-transparent)	Related to historical and cultural backgrounds	국수를 먹다, 깡통을 차다, 시집을 가다, 장가를 가다
	Related to associated images and situations	이미 엷지른 물, 불난 데 부채질하기, 울며 겨자 먹기, 하늘의 별따기, 도마에 오르다, 못을 박다, 발등의 불을 끄다, 파리를 날리다, 허리띠를 졸라매다, 금이 가다, 물이 들다, 닭 쫓던 개 지붕 쳐다보다, 원수를 외나무 다리에서 만나다

	Related to body parts and behaviors	눈에 들다, 눈을 감아주다, 눈을 감다, 양다리를 걸치다, 등을 돌리다, 머리를 들다, 무릎을 꿇다, 발뺌을 하다, 발을 꿇다, 발을 빼다, 손을 내밀다, 손을 놓다, 손을 대다, 손을 들다, 손을 떼다, 손을 벌리다, 손을 쓰다, 손을 씻다, 이를 갈다, 입을 떼다, 눈이 어둡다, 눈이 멀다, 발목이 잡히다, 손발이 맞다
	Related to emotions	애간장을 녹이다, 기가 막히다, 속이 타다, 신물이 나다, 애가 타다

**Appendix B** Examples of Korean Idioms for Chinese L2 Korean Learners based on the degree of opacity (from B.-K. Kim & Chae, 2013)

		근접투명 (near-transparent)	반불투명 (semi-opaque)	불투명 성 (opaque)
초급 Beginner Level	Level 1	마음에 들다, 마음이 넓다, 돌아가시다, 문을 달다		
	Level 2	눈이 낮다, 눈이 높다, 마음이 가볍다, 마음이 무겁다, 손을		

		대다, 손을 떼다, 손을 씻다, 입이 가뻐다, 입이 무겁다		
중급 Interme diate Level	Level 3	귀가 얇다, 눈이 멀다, 말이 많다, 마음을 놓다, 마음을 먹다, 마음을 잡다, 손을 보다, 손이 가다, 손이 모자라다, 한잔하다, 한턱내다	그림의 떡, 누워서 떡 먹기, 식은 죽 먹기, 우물 안 개구리	
	Level 4	낮(이) 익다/낮설다, 낮이 두껍다, 머리를 맞대다, 머리를 쓰다, 머리를 짜다, 발을 꿇다, 발을 빼다, 발이 넓다, 손발이 맞다, 애가 타다, 애를 먹다, 애를 쓰다	국물도 없다, 국수를 먹다, 마당발, 미역국 먹다, 시집가다, 장가가다	

<p>고급 Advance d Level</p>	<p>Level 5</p>	<p>눈감아 주다, 눈이 빠지도록, 눈코 뜰 사이 없다, 목이 빠지도록, 비위가 상하다, 손쉽다, 입에 맞는 떡, 코웃음을 치다, 콧대가 높다, 콧대를 세우다, 풀이 죽다</p>	<p>땀을 흘이다, 바가지를 굶다, 바가지를 쓰다, 바람나다, 바람을 맞다, 바람을 피우다, 웬 떡이냐, 제 눈에 안경, 취구멍에 들어가다, 취뿔도 없다, 콩으로 메주를 썩어도, 하늘에 별따기</p>	
	<p>Level 6</p>	<p>간담이 서늘하다, 간이 콩알만 하다, 골머리[골치]를 앓다, 골탕을 먹다, 기가 막히다, 눈앞이 찢하다, 눈앞이 깜깜하다, 눈이 오나 비가 오나, 발등에 불을 끄다, 발등에</p>	<p>감투를 쓰다, 김칫국(부터) 마시다, 개가 쏟아지다, 꼬리가 (길면) 잡히다[밟히다], 꼬리가 길다, 꼬리에 꼬리를 물다, 비행기를 태우다, 오리발을 내밀다, 쥐꼬리만하다</p>	<p>시치미 를 떤다, 오지랖 이 넓다, (야단)법 석을 떨다, 야단(법 석)이다</p>

		불이 떨어지다, 발등을 찍다, 코가 납작해지다, 코끝이 찡하다		
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**Appendix C** Idioms for first-year middle school students in  
Korea (S. Choi, 2013)

Opacity	Idioms
Opaque idioms	국수를 먹다, 김치국을 마시다, 머리를 올리다, 말짱 도루묵, 미역국을 먹다, 바가지를 쓰다, 시치미를 떼다, 산통을 깨다, 한 우물을 파다
Semi-opaque idioms	간이 콩알만해지다, 간이 크다, 귀에 못이 박히다, 그림의 떡, 내코가 석자, 눈 밖에 나다, 눈에 넣어도 아프지 않다, 눈에 밟히다, 눈에 불을 켜다, 눈이 높다, 목이 빠지게 기다리다, 바람을 일으키다, 발 벗고 나서다, 손을 꿩다, 손이 맵다, 식은 죽 먹기, 애간장이 타다, 옹지른 물, 입이 가볍다, 입이 무겁다, 입이 짧다, 제 눈에 안경, 죽을 쑤다, 찬물을 끼얹다, 파리를 날리다
Semi-transparent Idioms	귀가 얇다, 등골이 오싹하다, 땀을 흘리다, 무릎을 맞대다, 무릎을 치다, 발 뺀고 자다, 발로 차다, 발목을 잡히다, 발을 구르다, 발이 묶이다,

	배가 아프다, 사람이 되다, 손에 땀을 쥐다, 손을 내밀다, 손을 씻다, 손이 크다, 입을 모으다, 입이 벌어지다, 어깨가 무겁다, 얼굴을 맞대다, 코가 납작해지다, 코가 높다
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**Appendix D** Idioms mostly frequently used by Korean native speakers (Moon, 1998: 218)

Level of frequency	Idioms arranged in ranked order from 1st to 30th.
Idioms rated as having high frequency (1st to 30th)	열을 받다, 기가 막히다, 마음에 들다, 한턱 내다, 마음을 먹다, 한 잔하다, 골때린다, 속을 썩이다, 바가지 쓰다, 기를 쓰다, 시집을 가다, 애를 먹다, 눈을 감아주다, 애가 타다, 오리발을 내밀다, 애를 쓰다, 장가를 가다, 시치미를 떼다, 뺑소니를 치다, 속이 타다, 김이 새다, 도둑이 제 발 저리다, 손을 떼다, 불난 데 부채질하다, 들통이 나다, 눈 하나 깜짝하지 않다, 눈독을 들이다, 눈이 빠지게, 바가지를 굶다, 하늘의 별따기
Idioms rated as having medium frequency (1st to 30th)	꼬리를 물다, 그림의 떡, 불을 보듯 뻔하다, 한 술 더 뜨다, 들통이 나다, 손발이 맞다, 이미 옳지른 물, 뿌리를 뽑다, 발을 벗고 나서다, 속이 타다, 눈독을 들이다, 옳친 데 덮친 격, 불난 데

	부채질하다, 진땀을 빼다, 바가지를 굶다, 발목을 잡다, 신물이 나다, 눈이 빠지도록, 눈 하나 깜짝하지 않다, 입에 침이 마르도록, 오리발을 내밀다, 뒤통수를 치다, 도둑이 제 발 저리다, 눈을 감아주다, 김이 새다, 하늘의 별 따기, 속을 썩이다, 애를 쓰다, 장가를 들다, 손을 떼다
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**Appendix E.** L2 Korean idioms with suggested levels of difficulty (S.-J. Kim and Kang, 2006)

Level	Idioms
Beginner level	귀가 얇다, 입이 가볍다, 눈이 높다, 마음을 먹다, 마음에 들다, 입에 맞다, 발이 넓다, 손이 크다, 한잔 하다, 한턱 내다
Intermediate level	가슴이 쩡하다, 발벗고 나서다, 골치가 아프다, 굴뚝같다, 국수를 먹다, 배가 아프다, 귀가 가렵다, 얼굴이 두껍다, 기가 막히다, 바람을 피우다, 낮 뜨겁다, 진땀을 흘리다, 내코가 석자, 어깨가 무겁다, 눈을 감아주다, 눈에 불을 켜다, 눈이 빠지다, 바람을 맞다, 눈코 뜰 새 없다, 발등에 불이 떨어지다, 바가지를 쓰다, 비행기를 태우다, 발목을 잡다, 애를 먹다, 손발이 맞다, 쥐도 새도 모르게, 손을 보다, 한눈을 팔다, 제 눈에



	안경이다, 콧대가 높다
Advanced level	가슴이 뜨끔하다, 간이 콩알 만해지다, 가시방석에 앉다, 입에 침이 마르다, 귀에 못이 박히다, 눈도 깜짝 안 하다, 날개가 돋치다, 담을 쌓다, 눈독을 들이다, 땀 들이다, 다리를 뻗고 자다, 파김치가 되다, 물불 가리지 않다, 손에 땀을 쥐다, 코가 납작해지다, 시치미를 떼다, 허리띠를 졸라매다

**Appendix F** L2 Korean idioms with suggested levels of difficulty (H.-J. Kim, 2015)

Level	Idioms
Beginner level	말이 넓다, 배가 아프다, 속이 타다, 손을 넣다, 입이 짧다, 제 눈에 안경, 귀에 들어가다, 눈이 높다, 입을 맞추다, 말이 많다, 머리를 쓰다, 문을 닫다, 손이 크다, 얼굴이 두껍다, 주머니가 가볍다, 문을 열다, 손이 작다, 귀가 얇다, 눈코 뜰 사이 없다, 보는 눈이 있다, 어깨가 무겁다, 말 그대로
Intermediate level	말이 아니다, 열이 오르다, 피를 보다, 하늘이 노래지다, 한배를 타다, 입만 살다, 그림의 떡, 밀도 끝도 없다, 부르는 게 값이다, 입만 아프다, 말을 듣다, 하늘과 땅, 눈에 불을 켜다,

	<p>소설을 쓰다, 눈이 맞다, 등을 돌리다, 못을 박다, 발등에 불이 떨어지다, 발목을 잡다, 귀를 기울이다, 꼬리를 내리다, 꼬리를 잡다, 꼬리에 꼬리를 물다, 눈 깜짝할 사이, 눈물이 앞을 가리다, 눈앞이 캄캄하다, 눈치가 보인다, 눈치를 보다, 발걸음이 떨어지지 않다, 발 벗고 나서다, 밥 먹듯 하다, 빼도 박도 못하다, 뼈 빠지게, 속을 썩이다, 손발이 맞다, 손에 땀을 쥐다, 손을 떼다, 신경을 쓰다, 앞뒤가 맞다, 양다리를 걸치다, 열을 올리다, 입을 다물다, 입이 딱 벌어지다, 정신을 차리다, 주머니가 넉넉하다, 주머니를 털다, 콧대가 높다, 피부로 느끼다, 못이 박히다, 발목을 잡히다, 속을 태우다, 한턱내다, 더위를 먹다, 눈치를 살피다, 숨이 막히다, 호흡을 맞추다, 호흡이 맞다, 눈 하나 깜짝 안하다, 귀에 못이 박히다, 다리를 뻗고 자다, 눈이[목이] 빠지게 기다리다, 말꼬리를 잡다, 머리가 굳다, 비행기를 태우다, 손에 잡히다</p>
Advanced level	<p>배꼽을 쥐다, 인상을 쓰다, 국수를 먹다, 떡이 되다, 깨가 쏟아지다, 덕을 보다, 귀가 가렵다, 무덤을 파다, 바가지를 쓰다, 입에 침이 마르다, 풀이 죽다, 애먹다, 인심을 쓰다, 바람피우다, 한 우물을 파다, 바가지를 굶다, 밥맛이 떨어지다, 간이 크다</p>

**Appendix G** Contexts and relationships between speakers to consider when presenting Korean Idioms (Pyun, 2018):

- **Informal:** Informal idioms are typically used in casual settings. Learners should avoid using such idioms in formal or professional contexts.
- **Colloquial:** Colloquial expressions are primarily used in everyday spoken conversations and less frequently in formal speech or writing.
- **Slang:** When using slang idioms, learners should be particularly mindful of context and appropriateness. Slang usage is often limited to people of equal or younger age, close acquaintances, and highly casual settings. It is worth noting that some slang expressions may be short-lived, gaining popularity for a period before eventually falling out of use.
- **Proverb:** A proverb is a popular saying that typically conveys the speaker's experience or the wisdom or lessons derived from that experience. Some proverbs,

having been passed down over time, may include archaic or obsolete words that are rarely used in modern Korean.

- **Vulgar:** Vulgar expressions are unrefined, crude, and indecent, characterized by poor taste. While learners may not use vulgar words, it is necessary to understand them, as they frequently appear in movies, dramas, and casual conversations.
- **Derogatory:** Certain idiomatic expressions convey disdain or demeaning attitudes, lacking respect towards someone or something. These expressions should be used with caution.

**Appendix H** Idioms and unit/task themes by S.-J. Kim and Kang (2006)

Idioms and their meanings		Themes
마음을 먹다	To make up one's mind, to decide to do something.	방학계획 Vacation Plan
입에 맞다	To suit one's taste, usually referring to food or drink.	좋아하는 한국음식 Favorite Korean Food
기가 막히다	To be amazed, to be astonished, to be dumbfounded by something	건망증 Forgetfulness
진땀을 흘리다	To break into a cold sweat, often due to intense effort or nervousness	취직 면접 Job Interview
바람을 맞다	To be stood up or left waiting by someone who does not show up	약속 Appointment
비행기를 태우다	To flatter someone	칭찬 Compliment
눈도 깜짝 안 하다	To not even blink an eye, meaning to	거짓말 Lie

	remain calm, composed, or unaffected in a challenging situation	
허리띠를 줄라매다	To tighten one's belt, signifying the act of economizing or being frugal during difficult times	내집 마련 Preparing One's Own Home