

Idioms and L2 Learners: The Effect of L1, Transparency and Frequency on Idiom
Comprehension by Finnish and Italian Learners of English

Tiina Majuri
Minor Subject Thesis
University of Turku
School of Languages and
Translation Studies
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Tämän sivuaineen tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, miten suomalaiset ja italialaiset englannin kielen opiskelijat tunnistavat englanninkielisten idiomien merkityksiä. Erityisesti opiskelijoiden oman äidinkielen vaikutusta idiomien ymmärtämiseen tutkitaan, kuin myös idiomien eri ominaisuuksien vaikutusta. Lisäksi tutkitaan, miten opiskelijat itse ajattelevat osaavansa käyttää idiomeja, ja pitävätkö he idiomien oppimista tärkeänä.

Tutkielmaan osallistui 35 suomalaista englannin kielen yliopisto-opiskelijaa ja 34 italialaista englannin kielen yliopisto-opiskelijaa. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin monivalintakyselyn avulla. Idiomit valittiin *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (2001) -sanakirjasta. Kysely sisälsi 36 idiomia, jotka valittiin kolmesta eri frekvenssiluokasta. Jokaisesta frekvenssiluokasta valittiin neljä idiomia, joille oli vastine sekä suomen että italian kielessä, neljä idiomia, joille oli vastine vain suomen kielessä ja neljä idiomia, joille oli vastine vain italian kielessä. Kullekin idiomille oli annettu neljä merkitysvaihtoehtoa, ja näistä yksi tai kaksi oli sanakirjojen mukaisia oikeita vastauksia.

Tutkimuksen tulokset näyttävät osoittavan, että sekä suomalaisilla että italialaisilla oli vaikeuksia idiomien merkitysten tunnistamisessa. Kuitenkin myös suomalaisten ja italialaisten välillä oli tilastollisesti merkittävä ero. Suomalaiset osasivat idiomit huomattavasti paremmin kuin italialaiset. Koehenkilöt ymmärsivät merkittävästi helpommin idiomit joille oli vastine heidän omassa äidinkielessään kuin idiomit joille ei ollut vastinetta. Lisäksi vastaajat näyttivät hyötyvän myös idiomien kuvainnollisen ja kirjaimellisen merkityksen läheisyydestä eli läpinäkyvyydestä. Idiomien frekvenssi sen sijaan ei näyttänyt vaikuttavan niiden ymmärtämiseen. Suomalaisten ja italialaisten englannin opiskelijoiden mukaan idiomien opiskelu on hyödyllistä ja tarpeellista.

Tulokset osoittavat, että idiomien ymmärtäminen on haastavaa jopa edistyneille oppijoille. Omalla äidinkielellä näyttää olevan suuri vaikutus idiomien ymmärtämiseen, ja nimenomaan samankaltaisuudesta on hyötyä. Äidinkielen merkitykseen vieraiden kielten oppimisessa ja sanaston oppimisessa täytyisi kiinnittää enemmän huomiota, ja idiomeja sekä muuta kuvainnollista kieltä täytyisi opettaa myös edistyneemmille oppijoille.

Asiasanat: idiomit, englannin kieli, toisen kielen oppiminen

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------|---------------------------------------|
| FEI | Fixed expressions and idioms |
| FIN | Finnish |
| fNOequiv | idioms with no equivalents in Finnish |
| fYSEquiv | idioms with equivalents in Finnish |
| iNOequiv | idioms with no equivalents in Italian |
| IT | Italian |
| iYSEquiv | idioms with equivalents in Italian |
| L1 | First language |
| L2 | Second language |
| MWU | Multi-word unit |
| SLA | Second language acquisition |

1 Introduction

In the past decades vocabulary studies have become an active field of research in second language acquisition (SLA), and also longer strings of language have been recognised as important parts of lexis since, as has been studied, much of vocabulary comprises of word strings that have a strong tendency to occur together (e.g. Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992, Wray 2002, Schmitt & Carter 2004, Carter 2012). These language chunks include phrases such as idioms, sayings and collocations, which are referred to collectively as, for instance, multi-word units, prefabricated units and formulaic sequences. Formulaic language is widespread in English and considered as an important element of language use; it contributes to the fluency of second language (L2) learners (e.g. Nation & Meara 2002), thus L2 learners of English should have some kind of knowledge of it.

Idioms have received a lot of attention in the formulaic language research since, even though they consist of multiple words, they function as single units at some level. Idioms are difficult to characterise exactly as they are ambiguous and there is no generally agreed definition; some scholars include similes and proverbs and even individual words in idioms, while other scholars are much stricter with the definition. In the course of decades, the basis of definition, and the feature that has been considered crucial in defining an idiom, has varied; also the relationship between idioms and other figurative expressions such as sayings, proverbs and metaphors has been a longstanding issue of debate. While scholars have different views about the definition and the characteristics of an idiom, they usually agree on that idioms carry figurative meanings and that the meaning of an idiom is different from the sum of the words it contains.

Although research on L2 vocabulary has expanded vastly during the last three decades, the issue of L2 idiom comprehension has failed to receive sufficient attention. L2 learners' knowledge of formulaic language is not equal to their knowledge of L2 vocabulary in general (Steinel, Hulstijn & Steinel 2007), and they differ from native speakers to a considerable degree (e.g. Arnaud & Savignon 1997, Mäntylä 2005). Idioms cause particular difficulties for non-native learners, but still most studies concerning idiom comprehension have focused on native speakers and children. L2 learners meet idioms in all forms of discourse and in all forms of print thus advanced level learners should be able to recognise various idiom meanings. This paper will investigate how advanced level Finnish and Italian university students of English recognise meanings of

idioms; Italian learners' comprehension of English idioms has not been studied earlier. In addition, this study will examine the Finnish and Italian students' perceptions of idiom knowledge.

Cross-linguistic knowledge is an extremely important factor affecting L2 acquisition, but it has not gained adequate attention in the field of SLA (Ringbom 2007). The first language (L1) influences L2 vocabulary use as learners already possess linguistic knowledge in their L1 and they try to connect the new things they learn to the linguistic knowledge they already have. The role of L1 in idiom recognition and comprehension has been a controversial subject within the field of SLA (see e.g. Kellerman 1987, Irujo 1993 and Mäntylä 2005), thus one of the aims of the present study is to examine how L1 affects idiom comprehension. There is a variety of strategies language learners use when trying to infer the meanings of idioms (see e.g. Cooper 1999, Irujo 1986b), thus it was also necessary to look at the characteristics which Finnish and Italian students of English rely on when interpreting English idioms. L2 learners may, for instance, use the literal meaning of an idiom, refer to an L1 idiom or even guess.

The definition of an idiom and the classifications of idioms are often based on what is considered the most significant feature of an idiom. Earlier idiom studies concentrated on the formal characteristics of idioms, and the traditional view in linguistics has been that idioms are dead metaphors that have lost their metaphoricity. Yet, more recent studies on idioms have demonstrated that idioms bear metaphorical relations to their idiomatic meanings (e.g. Gibbs 1992, Gibbs & Nayak 1989, Kövecses and Szabo 1996). In this study metaphoricity is seen as a fundamental characteristic of an idiom; it is true that contemporary speakers may sometimes find it difficult to detect the link between the origins of an idiom and its meaning, but still many idioms are very much alive metaphorically. For language learners it is easier to comprehend an idiom if the link between the literal and metaphorical meaning can be detected (Irujo 1986b, 1993; Mäntylä 2005), thus one of the aims of the present study is to investigate how semantic transparency affects the comprehension of idioms. In addition, as there is evidence that more frequently used idioms are easier to comprehend (Irujo 1986b), the effect of frequency on idiom comprehension will also be studied.

This paper has been organised in the following way. The first section will discuss L2 vocabulary learning and use in relation to formulaic language and idioms. Next, the issue

of idiom definition will be covered as well as the characteristics of idioms. Also various classifications of idioms will be discussed. This paper will also discuss the role of the L1 in idiom comprehension as well as idiom acquisition and comprehension in SLA, and then it will go on to the previous studies on idioms and L2 learners. The methods of the present study will be presented, and finally, the results of statistical analysis will be presented and discussed as well as the qualitative results.

2 L2 vocabulary

There was a time when research in the SLA domain concentrated primarily on syntax and phonology, but recently also vocabulary studies have become an active field of research. Traditionally, researchers have focused, for instance, on identifying the basic lexical unit and attempting to understand how the words are stored in mind (see e.g. Aitchison 1994, Nation 1990). In respect of language learning, the estimates of L2 vocabulary size have received particular attention as well as the quality of learners' vocabulary knowledge (e.g. Carter & McCarthy 1988, Nation 1990, Schmitt & McCarthy 1997, Carter 2012). Since the 1970s also longer strings of language have been recognised as important parts of vocabulary (e.g. Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992, Wray 2002, Schmitt & Carter 2004, Conklin & Schmitt 2012). Emphasis has shifted from a single word to groups of words as these language chunks have become a much more accepted aspect in vocabulary studies. Idioms have received a lot of attention in formulaic language research since they consist of more than one word and their meanings do not depend on the literal meanings of their parts. I shall now briefly discuss L2 vocabulary learning and then focus on formulaic language and idioms as they are the key issue of the present study.

2.1 Knowing a word

It is important to define a word when considering vocabulary learning as a whole. Words can be defined, for instance, on the basis of form or, as for learning, by looking for the underlying concept of the word that covers all its uses (Nation 1990: 29-30). However, defining a word in an exact formal way is not a simple task, and the existence of idioms makes it even more difficult (Carter 2012:22). Carter and McCarthy (1988:19) state that idioms behave mostly like single words for “the purposes of examining meaning-relations in the lexicon”. Also Nation and Meara (2002:36) suggest that multiword units (MWU) seem to be used like single words. Even though only a small number of MWUs would get within the most frequent 2,000 words and phrases of English, as Nation & Meara (2002:37) point out, they contribute to fluency and native-like competence of foreign language learners.

We are often interested in how much vocabulary and how many different words a second language learner needs to know. It is not simple to estimate vocabulary size since

language learners intend to use English for different purposes (Nation & Meara 2002: 37), and also different learners have different needs. Nevertheless, Nation & Waring (1997:11) estimate that a second language learner has to know 3,000 or so words of the language that occur frequently. On the other hand, learners can do a lot with a comparatively small amount of well-chosen vocabulary (Nation 2011:9); not all the words are equally useful, and if a learner knows a relatively small number of words of English that occur frequently, he or she is able to comprehend a great proportion of a text (Nation & Waring 1997:9). These estimates of vocabulary size are based on word frequency, but there is another way to estimate how many words a L2 learner needs to know: by looking at the vocabulary of native speakers of English and considering that as a goal for a L2 learner. One estimate is that a five year old will have a vocabulary of around 4,000 or 5,000 word families and a university graduate around 20,000 word families (Goulden, Nation & Read 1990). A word family includes a base word, its inflected forms and some regular derived forms (Nation & Waring 1997: 8). Nation (1990:12) suggests that the difference in size between a native speaker's vocabulary and a L2 learner's vocabulary is usually several thousand words.

Focusing on word frequency has led to the search for core vocabulary, which involves some basic structural properties of the lexicon (Carter 2012:47), and which might form the basis of lexis for language learning purposes (Carter 1988:171). Studies on core vocabulary have revealed that there are several core vocabularies rather than an entirely unitary and discrete core vocabulary, and advanced language users have sets of core vocabularies. Core vocabulary is generally seen to contain the most simple or basic items in the vocabulary (Carter 2012:47), but choosing the words is a demanding task influenced, for example, by frequency or collocability (Carter 2012, Carter & McCarthy 1988, Nation & Waring 1997). As Carter (2012:58) argues, the notion of core vocabulary needs to be examined with caution. Language users do not automatically perceive as core vocabulary items that may be 'core' in the internal structure of the language such as superordinates (e.g. in discourse superordinates such as *flower* are sometimes less 'core' than hyponyms *tulip* or *rose*). Similarly, frequency does not guarantee the coreness (*ibid.*). In addition, core vocabulary does not contain idioms or other lexical chunks which are, according to Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992: xv), a crucial part of vocabulary. As Nation & Meara (2002: 36) point out, MWUs contribute to fluency and native-like competence of foreign language learners; thus, while core vocabulary is important at least for beginners, for advanced learners it is important to master a more complex vocabulary.

The number of words known by the learner does not tell all about his/her vocabulary knowledge. We should also take into account the quality of learner's knowledge since there are "many things to know about any particular word and there are many degrees of knowing" (Nation 2011:23). According to Nation (*ibid.*), it is also important to make a distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge since knowing a word involves being able to recognise it and to use it correctly. Language learners have to know, for instance, the spoken and written form of the word, but also to connect the form of the word and its meaning. Moreover, language learners need to know the grammatical functions of the words, such as in what patterns the word occurs (Nation 2011). The Table 1 illustrates what is involved in knowing a word.

Knowing a word

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Meaning | | |
| form and meaning | R | What meaning does the word form signal? |
| | P | What word form can be used to express this meaning? |
| concept and referents | R | What is included in the concept? |
| | P | What items can the concept refer to? |
| associations | R | What other words does this word make us think of? |
| | P | What other words could we use instead of this one? |
| Use | | |
| grammatical functions | R | In what patterns does the word occur? |
| | P | In what patterns must we use the word? |
| collocations | R | What words or types of words occur with this one? |
| | P | What words or types of words must we use with this one? |
| Constraints on use (register, frequency...) | R | Where, when, and how often would we expect to meet this word? |
| | P | Where, when, and how often can we use this word? |

Note: In column 3, R = receptive knowledge, P = productive knowledge

Table 1. What is involved in knowing a word (Adapted from Nation 2011: 27)

As can be seen, the terms receptive and productive cover all the aspects of what is involved in knowing a word. Nevertheless, in this study only the recognition of vocabulary was studied. From the point of view of receptive knowledge, knowing a word includes, for instance, knowing its grammatical functions, knowing the meaning of the word in a particular context and knowing that there are related words (Nation 2011:26). Idioms are even more difficult to master since they are lexical chunks that consist of more than one word but seem to be used like single words. With respect to syntax, semantics

and association, as Mäntylä (2004:19) points out, recognising idioms requires knowing several literal and figurative meanings for expressions as well as being aware of figurativeness.

2.2 Formulaic language

Formulaic language is an important part of language use and it is an increasingly important issue in applied linguistics. According to Wray (2002:4), some modern theories of linguistics have denied the significance of formulaic language despite its widespread existence. Lexical patterning does exist in English and formulaic language is so prevalent in English discourse that proficient language users must have knowledge of it at least at some level (Schmitt & Carter 2004: 1). *Formulaic sequences* seem to be used like single words (Nation & Meara 2002: 36), and they exist somewhere between grammar and the lexicon (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992:1). As Schmitt and Carter (2004: 2) point out, idioms stand out from other formulaic sequences since, even though they consist of multiple units, they function as single units at some level. Nevertheless, lexical patterning is not restricted to idioms or other obvious multiword units such as sayings or proverbs, but formulaic language seems to exist in so many forms that it is impossible to define it comprehensively.

There is a variety of terminology that has been used to describe formulaic language. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), for instance, use the term *lexical phrases* to emphasise functional aspects of formulaic language, and Moon (1998) uses *fixed expressions* to cover several kinds of holistic units of two or more words. There are also other terms that describe the phenomenon of formulaic language such as multiword units, *chunks* and *formulaic speech*. Wray (2002) and Schmitt & Carter (2004) use the term formulaic sequence since, according to them, it covers a wide range of phraseology. Wray (2002:9) defines a formulaic sequence as follows: “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar”. In this study the terms are used interchangeably since it is not necessary to adopt a strict definition of this phenomenon. In addition, as Weinert (1995: 182) points out, scholars seem to have very much the same phenomenon in mind, even though they use various terms.

In the area of corpus linguistics, some often used criteria to identify this phenomenon are institutionalization, fixedness, non-compositionality and frequency of occurrence (see e.g. Moon 1998). Another way to view formulaic sequences is taken by, for example, psycholinguists who concentrate on criteria which “determine whether sequences are known by individual participants, and whether these sequences are formulaic and stored as wholes in the participant’s mental lexicon” (Schmitt & Carter 2004: 2). As Weinert (1995: 199) points out, criteria used to define formulaic language vary according to the focus of research (e.g. linguistic, psycholinguistic, SLA), but there is considerable overlap across studies. Also Schmitt and Carter (2004: 2) argue that one needs to rely on different perspectives in order to explore the characteristics of formulaic sequences.

As was mentioned earlier, formulaic sequences are so diverse that it is difficult to define them exactly; they can be long or short, and they are used for different purposes such as conveying a message or an idea (*the early bird gets the worm*), realizing functions (*[I’m] just looking [thanks]*), expressing social solidarity (*I know what you mean*) and signalling discourse organization (*on the other hand*) (Schmitt & Carter 2004:3). In fact, they can be used for most things society demands of communication through language; much of the communicative content of language is bound to these expressions (Conklin & Schmitt 2008: 73). In addition, as Conklin and Schmitt (2012: 46) point out, formulaic language helps language users be more fluent; it has been studied that formulaic sequences are processed more quickly and possibly differently from non-formulaic language.

In general it is agreed that people store representations of individual words in their mental lexicon. However, it is still an open question whether the lexicon contains formulaic language (Conklin & Schmitt 2012:45). Many theories suggest that vocabulary is stored also as longer memorised chunks of speech and, in fact, research evidence suggests that these word strings are stored and processed as holistic units (Schmitt & Carter 2004: 4). Idioms are one of the most obvious evidence since they are semantically opaque lexical chunks where the meaning cannot be predicted from the literal meanings of the components involved. The only way to learn the meanings of these expressions is to learn them as sequences (*ibid.*). According to Nattinger (1988: 75), this prefabricated speech allows more efficient retrieval of words from memory and permits speakers to focus on the larger structure of the discourse rather than individual words.

Learning to understand and produce a language denotes understanding how the parts of language function as parts of discourse; learners need to learn how to use words and sentences to create the flow of a conversation (Nattinger & De Carrico 1992:113). It is not meaningful to learn words and sentences as isolated units since, according to Nattinger (1988: 77), a large amount of conversational language seems to be “highly routinized as prefabricated utterances”. It is typical for speech to be composed of strings of language; for second language learners it is important to know these formulaic sequences since they will lead to fluency in speaking and writing. Formulaic sequences are common in English and thus “must have some consequences in terms of how English is acquired, processed and used” (Schmitt & Carter 2004:2). It has been studied that L2 learners rely heavily on formulaic language at the early stages of learning, while for L2 intermediate and advanced learners who are aiming to sound native-like formulaic language causes enormous problems (Wray 2002:ix). It is obvious that not all L2 learners aim at native-like proficiency, but the ability to use formulaic sequences helps L2 learners speak with fluency (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992: 32) and, as Wray (2002: 17) puts it, it seems to be in our interests to be fluent.

2.3 Idioms

Idioms have received a lot of attention in the formulaic language literature, and although some studies have focused on how idioms are mentally represented, understood and acquired, a considerable amount of the research has attempted to define idioms and to describe the characteristics of these formulaic sequences. Idioms are obscure thus it is difficult to characterise them exactly, and there is no generally agreed definition of an idiom; for some scholars the term covers metaphors, similes, proverbs (e.g. Cooper 1998) and even individual words (e.g. Hockett 1964, Katz and Postal 1963), while other scholars are much stricter with the definition. Traditionally, idioms have been seen as dead, frozen metaphors with a very restricted tolerance of variation and whose roots of figurativeness cannot be detected. Yet more recent studies and the results of psycholinguistic studies on idioms have refuted assertions that idioms are dead and frozen metaphors (e.g. Gibbs & Nayak 1989, Glucksberg 1993 and McGlone & Glucksberg & Cacciari 1994). Idioms have also been classified according to various idiom characteristics. The definition of an idiom will be discussed next as well as the characteristics of idioms that are considered fundamental in idiom studies. Finally, various classifications of idioms will be covered.

2.3.1 The definition of an idiom

The most often used criterion to define idioms is that the meaning cannot be predicted from the literal meanings of the components involved (e.g. Allan 2001:126, Cruse 1986: 37). According to this definition, for instance, *turn on* should be classified as an idiom since we do not get the meaning of it from a combination of the meanings of *turn* and *on* (Pulman 1993:249). However, as Pulman (1993: 250) points out, *non-compositionality* is not alone a sufficient feature for an idiom, nor is *multi-wordedness*. It is an essential feature of idioms that they consist of more than one word, but it is not that simple; not all multi-word expressions are idioms, such as *on top of* (Pulman 1993: 249). Although multi-wordedness and non-compositionality are not alone sufficient features of an idiom, they are essential and form the basis for the definition.

In the course of decades, the basis of definition and the characteristic that has been considered crucial in defining an idiom has varied according to emphasis (Nenonen 2002: 7). For instance, Katz and Postal (1963), Hockett (1964) and Makkai (1972) have defined an idiom in accordance with the formal characteristics of idioms. According to Hockett (1964: 172), any grammatical form whose meaning cannot be concluded from its structure is an idiom. For him morphemes (e.g. *new*) are idioms, but idioms can also be much larger than single words (e.g. *Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party*). Katz and Postal (1963) have taken a bit different view from Hockett's since for them an individual word consisting of two or more morphemes (e.g. *telephone*) and whose meaning is not the compositional meaning of its constituents is a "lexical idiom", whereas "phrasal idioms" consist of multiple words. According to them, lexical idioms are stored in a speaker's lexicon, while phrasal idioms are stored differently since they may have two possible meanings: the literal meaning of its constituents and the idiomatic meaning (Katz & Postal 1963: 276). Makkai (1972) proposed a structural framework for idioms which is based on a stratified view of language. He employed very formal approach in his study of idioms and calls *lexemic idioms* expressions that consist of at least two words (Makkai 1972: 122). According to Makkai (1972:118), the basic meaning of idioms cannot be predictable from its parts. With respect to this study, these views are problematic since they focus on the form and structure, and there are too many expressions that would be named idioms.

Apart from Katz and Postal, also Weinreich (1969) and Fraser (1970) employed the generative-transformational approach in their study of idioms. Weinreich's (1969: 68) definition of an idiom, though, is much narrower since, according to him, only expressions that have both a literal and an idiomatic meaning and that are potentially ambiguous are idioms (e.g. *pull someone's leg*). This view is rather strict since idioms such as *by and large* would be excluded from idioms. Fraser's view differs from those discussed earlier in that he considers the tolerance of variance one of the most significant features of idioms. Fraser (1970: 39) came up with a scale that illustrates the degrees of variation that idioms may be able to undergo. Also Fernando (1996) classifies idioms on the basis of their degree of variance, but she also categorises idioms according to their degree of transparency in meaning. According to Fernando, for instance, *smell a rat* is a "pure" idiom because its meaning is opaque and it is invariant (1996:31). Both Fraser and Fernando focus on the formal characteristics of idioms, and thus their definitions cannot serve as such as the basis of the idiom definition of this study.

Wood's (1986) definition of an idiom is a lot narrower than, for instance, Fernando's and close to Weinreich's. He proposes that an idiom is "a complex expression which is wholly non-compositional in meaning and wholly non-productive in form" (Wood 1986: 95). According to Wood, for instance, *shoot the bull* is a wholly non-compositional metaphor, but not an idiom as it tolerates variation in vocabulary (*shoot the breeze*), whereas *fly off the handle* does not allow changes and any change would alter the original idiomatic meaning. According to Wood's definition, Finnish phrases such as *mukkelis makkelis* and *nipin napin* would be named as idioms (Nenonen 2002: 3). However, as Liu (2008: 9) points out, Wood's definition is problematic since it is not always easy to determine whether an expression is an idiom or a collocation, because it is not easy to know if an expression is "wholly" or "partially" non-compositional or non-productive.

Also Moon's (1998) definition of an idiom is very narrow as she distinguishes idioms from fixed expressions and defines an idiom as a "semi-transparent and opaque metaphorical expression" that has both literal and figurative meanings such as *spill the beans* (Moon 1998:5). Moon identifies idioms by relying solely on transparency of the meaning of an expression. Although transparency is considered to be one of the most fundamental characteristics of idioms, Moon's definition is a "rather subjective undertaking" as Liu (2008:11) puts it. However, Moon understands the difficulty in separating fixed expressions and idioms in practice, and therefore in general contexts she

refers to fixed expressions that include idioms as FEIs (Moon 1998:5). Since it is not easy to distinguish idioms from other fixed expressions, the term FEI is usable in practice but it does not solve the problem of idiom definition.

Grant and Bauer's (2004) definition is very restrictive since they exclude metaphorical or figurative idiomatic expressions from the concept of an idiom. They define MWUs as "a fixed and recurrent pattern of lexical material sanctioned by usage" (Grant & Bauer 2004: 38), and the most limited MWUs Grant and Bauer call 'core idioms' that are non-compositional and also non-figurative such as *by and large* and *so long*. According to Grant and Bauer (2004: 52), non-compositionality denotes that the meaning of an expression is not derived transparently from the meanings of its individual elements. An expression is non-figurative if it cannot be reinterpreted "by use of an image or other means to deduce the intended truth" or if the figure does not provide the correct meaning (e.g. *shoot the breeze*) (Grant & Bauer 2004: 51). Grant and Bauer's view is very restricted and only few expressions would be named idioms thus it cannot serve as the basis of the idiom definition in the present study.

As can be seen, idiom is an equivocal term that is used in contradictory ways. For such a complicated term it is difficult or even impossible to find an infallible definition. The border between idioms and non-idioms is blurred, and it is not always clear which side of the border expressions should be placed. As Mäntylä (2004:37) suggests, one should focus on the meaning of an expression and on its metaphoricity, and not on the form and structure. Idioms can vary and any rules concerning the formal characteristics of idioms cannot be invoked (*ibid.*). While scholars have different views about the definition and the characteristics of an idiom, they usually agree on that idioms carry metaphorical meanings and that the meaning of an idiom is different from the sum of the words it contains.

For the purposes of the present study, an idiom is an expression that consists of at least two words and whose meaning cannot be predicted from the literal meanings of the components involved. However, as in Mäntylä's study (2004), figurative expressions such as proverbs, sayings and conversational phrases are excluded since they have their own functions and they each form a category of their own. Proverbs (e.g. *an apple a day keeps the doctor away*) carry some kind of aphoristic truth (Carter 2012:75) and they are more firmly connected with cultural discourse. Sayings (e.g. *honesty is the best policy*)

are close to idioms, but they are usually not figurative, and conversational phrases (e.g. *how are you*) have a special function in interaction and they are often literal rather than metaphorical (Mäntylä 2004: 37). Phrasal verbs such as *give up* are also excluded even though many of them are idiomatic because, as Grant & Bauer (2004:39) put it, they are such a large group that they deserve research of their own. The distinction between idioms and collocations is also quite clear since, according to Cruse (1986: 40), collocations are semantically fully transparent such as *torrential rain*. The relationship between idioms and metaphors is more complicated. It has been demonstrated that idioms are not dead metaphors (e.g. Gibbs 1993), but as Cruse (1986:44) admits idioms and dead metaphors have certain characteristics in common, and the majority of idioms were originally metaphors. According to Mäntylä (2005: 36), distinguishing metaphors from idioms may not be necessary or even possible.

2.3.2 The characteristics of idioms

As has been discussed above, the characteristics that have been considered essential in defining an idiom have varied. Scholars have approached idioms from different perspectives; some of them have focused on the formal characteristics and others, for instance, on the degree of metaphoricity. L2 vocabulary studies have concentrated on the degree of metaphoricity and variability of idioms rather than on their formal characteristics such as multi-wordedness.

Many studies (e.g. Gibbs 1980, McGlone, Glucksberg & Cacciari Cristina 1994, Nippold & Martin 1989) treat metaphoricity as a fundamental characteristic of an idiom, and one of the most tenacious ideas of idioms in linguistics is that idioms are dead metaphors. It has been generally presumed that idioms were originally metaphorical (i.e. the relationship between the literal and figurative meanings can be detected), but have lost their figurativeness and are now dead metaphors, but this view has been challenged during the past decades (e.g. Lakoff 1987, Gibbs 1992, Gibbs & Nayak 1989, Kövecses & Szabo 1996). As Gibbs (1992: 486) proposes, many idioms are not ‘dead’ metaphors, but they in actual fact “retain a good deal of their metaphoricity”. For instance, *spill the beans* bears somewhat metaphorical relation to its idiomatic meaning (Glucksberg 1993: 4) as does *flip your lid*. Its figurative meaning (in this study figurative and metaphorical are used as synonyms) can be “motivated by two conceptual mappings” (Gibbs 1992: 486): the conceptualization of the mind as a “container”, and that of ideas as “physical entities”.

Those conceptual mappings link the single words of idioms to their metaphorical meanings.

According to Gibbs (1993: 58), many scholars have mistakenly assumed that idioms are dead metaphors since the arbitrary conventions of usage might determine their meaning. For instance, *break a leg* (to wish a good luck before a performance) stems from the old superstition that wishing good luck to someone would be bad luck, hence in the course of time people started to use it and now it has become fixed as a convention. Contemporary speakers may now comprehend what *break a leg* means, but simply because it is a convention, not that they would know why this phrase means what it does. Mäntylä (2004: 29) argues that the link between the origins of an idiom and its meaning has become weaker which makes detecting the link very difficult. It could also be the case that language users are not able to recognize words that belong to some special field (e.g. *from stem to stern*).

An expression may carry its literal meaning instead of the figurative one thus comprehending and recognising idioms is very demanding (Cacciari 1993: 27). As Mäntylä (2004:29) illustrates, a bucket can be kicked literally, whereas it is difficult to find any literal meanings in *footing the bill*. This type of idiom is often characterised as a frozen or dead metaphor, but its meaning is not completely lexicalized since someone not familiar with the idiom can discover an appropriate meaning for it by processing it as a metaphor (Pulman 1993: 250). On the other hand, a language user may treat an idiom as a metaphor and arrive “at rational interpretations that are nevertheless not that of the idiom” (*ibid.*). For example, a language user might think that *cat among the pigeons* carries a connotation of cruelty, even though there is no such connotation. Moon (1998:179) points out that the literal meaning is not likely, even though it is sometimes possible. For instance, idioms such as *upset the apple cart* can be understood literally, but it is not likely in today's world. Literal decoding of an idiom is possible but not probable; idioms have a potential of being disinformative and even misunderstood, but this does not apply to all of the idioms (Mäntylä 2004: 52). Also corpus studies (e.g. Moon 1998) show that literal meanings occur relatively infrequently.

According to Makkai (1972:118), idioms can mislead or disinform a listener or reader, which may lead to “erroneous decoding” (Makkai 1972: 122). This has been criticised, for instance, by Fernando (1996: 6) who argues that situational and textual context often

reduces the possibility for disinformation as well as “situational improbability”, like in *rain cats and dogs*. According to Moon (1998: 178), idioms are ambiguous when separated from the context, but the context resolves any ambiguity. It is true that the context often helps to comprehend an idiom, but not always. Moon (1998: 185) adds that idioms are potentially ambiguous in isolation or if unknown. Nevertheless, in the case of an unfamiliar idiom, the context will usually help non-native speakers in working out the meaning of an idiom. It is also true that different people interpret idioms in different ways, as for instance, idioms referring to God may be interpreted differently by religious people than people with a different world view (Moon 1998:179). Furthermore, non-native speakers often interpret idioms in a different way than native speakers do. Idioms also vary in the degree of their metaphoricity (e.g. Nunberg, Sag & Wasow 1994, Cacciari & Glucksberg 1993); some idioms such as *see the light of day* are semantically transparent (i.e. the image the literal meaning creates is clearly connected to the figurative meaning), whereas idioms such as *break the ice* are semi-transparent (i.e. there is a component that links the literal and figurative meanings yet the link is not as obvious as with transparent idioms). Some idioms are opaque like *kick the bucket* (i.e. the literal meaning and the figurative meaning of an idiom are completely different from each other).

Some scholars define the degree of metaphoricity of idioms not so much in terms of transparency of the relation between the meanings of individual words and the meaning of an idiom, but rather in terms of the mapping between elements in the idiom and elements in the denotation (Vega Moreno 2007: 166). This approach is typical of psycholinguistic research on idiom comprehension. The traditional view in psycholinguistics has been that idioms are essentially *nondecomposable*, that is, the literal meanings of the individual words do not contribute to the meaning of the idiom itself (e.g. Fraser 1970, Katz & Postal 1963). For instance, the words in *bite the bullet* do not seem to contribute to the metaphorical meaning of this expression, “to be brave in a difficult situation”. However, research has shown that in many idioms the individual words consistently contribute to the overall metaphorical interpretations of idioms (e.g. Gibbs & Nayak 1989, Lakoff 1987, Gibbs 1992). Vega Moreno (2007: 168) distinguishes between *decomposition* and transparency since there are idioms (she calls them *abnormally decomposable idioms*) that can be perceived as transparent but cannot be perceived as decomposable. For instance, the constituent elements of the idiom *bury the hatchet* do not map onto elements in the idiom's denotation (e.g. we cannot say that the hatchet refers to the argument and burying it to the end of the argument), while knowing

that the burying of a hatchet can be seen as the end of the fight may help us to perceive the idiom at least as semi-transparent. In addition, certain contribution of the meanings of words to idiom meaning occurs in spite of whether or not the idiom is perceived as decomposable (*ibid.*).

Since the purpose of the present study is to examine L2 learners' comprehension of idiom meanings, the notion of *decompositionality* (the term is applied to idioms that consist of words that contribute to idioms' overall metaphorical interpretation) is discussed only briefly. *Decompositionality* or *analysability* (the terms are used as synonyms) is connected to figurativeness and also variation (e.g. Gibbs 1993, Pulman 1993). According to Gibbs (1993:63), people's instincts about the analysability of idioms play an essential role in defining idioms' ability to tolerate lexical and syntactic variance, but also how easily they are comprehended and learnt. For language learners it is easier to comprehend an idiom if he or she can see some motivation behind its form. Several studies (e.g. Gibbs & Nayak 1989, Gibbs *et al.* 1989) have also shown that normally decompositional idioms (e.g. *pop the question*) are much more likely to tolerate variance than semantically nondecompositional idioms (e.g. *chew the fat*). As Gibbs *et al.* (1989: 58) argue, also the lexical flexibility of some idioms can be explained in terms of semantic analysability. As far as lexical substitution is concerned, decompositional idioms, such as *pop the question*, were found to better retain their figurative meanings than non-decompositional idioms, such as *kick the bucket*.

As it has been shown by several studies, people cannot ignore word meanings or the meanings of phrases when involved in a conversation. It also seems that word meanings are "routinely activated" (McGlone, Glucksberg & Cacciari 1994: 185) even in the case of opaque idioms, such as *kick the bucket*. Additionally, people reckon on familiar, memorised expressions "whose meanings derive both from the language itself and from their roles in everyday experience" (*ibid.*). Good examples are book and movie titles and song lyrics which have literal meanings and also other meanings. Fluent speakers must be able to deal concurrently with the meanings that derive from the language itself and with the use of the language in that culture. Like sequences of words such as movie titles, idioms have their own meanings, but at the same time they are "treated as linguistic entities and analyzed as such" (McGlone, Glucksberg & Cacciari 1994: 185).

Earlier studies (e.g. Weinreich 1969, Fraser 1970) determined also frozenness or invariance one of the basic features of idioms, but some more recent studies (Fernando 1996, Moon 1998) have shown that many idioms do show some variations. Idioms can undergo lexical substitutions (e.g. crack the ice/break the ice) and syntactic transformations (e.g. breaking the ice/broke the ice) and still have the same meaning (Gibbs *et al.* 1989:58). Although Cruse (1991: 38) argues that idioms typically resist interruption and re-ordering of its parts, Moon's corpus study shows that around 40% of FEIs contain lexical variations or strongly institutionalised transformations. *Kick the bucket* is often considered an idiom that does not allow any changes in vocabulary (e.g. Newmeyer 1972: 297), but Moon (1998:123) suggests that also *kick the pail* and *kick the can* are possible. Nevertheless, Moon (1998: 120) admits that some FEIs are more fixed than others and some do not vary at all.

While Moon's corpus study shows that variation is frequent among FEIs, strong arguments have been presented that variance in lexis is still quite rare. Cowie (1988: 138) suggests that idioms are either quite stable or tolerate only minor variation. Glucksberg (1993:7) argues that substituting the word *crack* for *break* in *break the ice* is comparatively acceptable, but the range of substitutions is limited. For instance, the words *crush* or *grind* would not be acceptable although they are appropriate to the object, *ice*. Lexical substitution is occasionally possible, not the rule (Stock, Slack & Ortony 1993: 233-234), but it does exist. As McGlone, Glucksberg & Cacciari (1994:169) argue, we can replace words in idioms and create new idiomatic meanings (e.g. *crack the ice* for *break the ice*), and this is not only lexical flexibility, but also an example of semantic productivity. Such variants of idioms occur in everyday discourse, but also in the media. A minimalist writer's title of an essay on contemporary literature denotes semantic productivity and is perfectly comprehensible: *Convicted minimalist spills bean* (*ibid.*). The link between the singular form of the noun *bean* and the idea of minimalism can be easily seen. It has also been studied that familiar idiom variants are understood quite easily (McGlone, Glucksberg & Cacciari 1994: 180). In addition, Gibbs *et al.* (1989) have found that idioms whose individual words contribute to their figurative meanings, such as *go out on a limb*, are more easily comprehended than nondecomposable idioms, such as *kick the bucket*.

According to Fernando (1996: 53), there are four kinds of lexical transformations idioms can undergo: substitution, addition, permutation and deletion. However, as discussed

above, not all idioms allow transformations. For instance, *pins and needles* does not allow any additions or deletions even in the form of inflectional variations for number. In addition, such transformations may change the meaning of an idiom or, as Fernando (1996:53) notes, “reduce idiom’s status as a composite unit”. These variations suit language users’ communicative purposes and enable them to show their skills in handling the vocabulary (Fernando 1996: 54), but for second language learners this complexity can cause problems. While changes in tense and number may not confuse a second language learner, for instance, lexical substitutions can cause trouble in understanding idioms. As several studies have shown (e.g. Arnaud & Savignon 1997), even for the most advanced non-native speakers idioms pose particular difficulties.

None of the characteristics is sufficient alone but rather several features are needed for an expression to be identified as an idiom. Moreover, it ought to be borne in mind that idioms are heterogeneous so that it can be very problematic to generalize one feature (e.g. metaphoricity or decompositionality) to the entire class of idioms (Cacciari 1993:27-55). Nevertheless, metaphoricity is one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of idioms and it is the feature that most likely helps L2 learners to comprehend idioms (e.g. Irujo 1993, Mäntylä 2005). Although many idioms show variations, it does not seem to have an effect on the recognition of idiom meanings (see e.g. Mäntylä 2005).

2.3.3 Semantic classification of idioms

As has been shown in the above discussion, idioms vary, for instance, in terms of their degree of metaphoricity, structural variability and analysability. Idioms are ambiguous, they do not form a homogeneous group and idioms have also been classified in different ways. Since metaphoricity is considered to be one of the most important features of idioms, semantic classifications of idioms will be discussed. Moon (1998) and Yorio (1980) have attempted to classify idioms primarily semantically, while Fernando (1996) has categorised idioms not only semantically, but also formally. Grant and Bauer’s (2004) view is theoretically and pedagogically motivated.

Fernando (1996: 35) classifies idioms into three categories: *pure*, *semi-literal* and *literal* idioms. Pure idioms are “conventionalized”, non-literal expressions, such as *smell a rat*, while semi-literal idioms involve at least one word that carries its literal meaning, like *drop names*. According to Fernando (1996: 36), phrases or expressions, such as *dark and*

handsome and *Merry Christmas and a happy New Year*, are literal idioms. Fernando's lexicogrammatical categorisation divides pure, semi-literal and literal idioms into twelve classes according to their variability and figurativeness (Fernando 1996: 71). However, since there are multiple categories and they overlap with each other, it is neither necessary nor possible to follow this classification. In addition to this kind of categorisation, Fernando classifies idioms by their structure or form. Idioms may be categorised as idioms of *invariance* and those of *restricted variance* according to their degree of fixedness in form. In the present study variation is not considered to be the most fundamental feature of an idiom thus transformations in the structure or form of idioms has not been taken into account.

Moon (1998: 19) has divided idioms, or as she calls FEIs, into three classes: *anomalous collocations*, *formulae* and *metaphors*, each of which consist of various subcategories. Anomalous collocations are strings classified in lexicogrammatical terms, formulae are specialized pragmatically and metaphors relate to semantics (Moon 1998: 20-23). With respect to this study, the most central category is metaphors because it includes idioms. Moon has divided metaphors into the following subcategories: *transparent metaphors*, *semi-transparent metaphors* and *opaque metaphors*. They are all non-compositional but they differ in degrees of transparency. When the image the literal meaning creates is such that the hearer or reader can easily discover the figurative meaning (e.g. *pack one's bags*), an idiom is *transparent*, while *semi-transparent* idioms are expressions where the link between the literal meaning and the figurative meaning is not as clear as with fully transparent idioms. Furthermore, in order to be able to understand a semi-transparent idiom (e.g. *grasp the nettle*) specialist knowledge is required. *Opaque* idioms are idioms where comprehension and interpretation of the image is impossible without knowing the etymology (e.g. *red herring*). This classification will be useful when examining the degree of transparency of idioms in the present study.

Moon's division is adequate since it is important to recognise and discern various stages of metaphoricity but it is not justifiable to try to make more than three categories because they overlap and the borders between them can be blurred (Mäntylä 2004: 28). Also Moon (1998: 22) points out that such classification "represents a continuum rather than discrete categories", and around 25% of fixed expressions in her data have been assigned to two classes. In Moon's data, 33.4 % of all fixed expressions were metaphors and of these 37% were transparent, 51% semi-transparent and only 12% opaque. According to Moon (1998:

64), most expressions in her data can be comprehended by real-world knowledge, but adds that the data of her study is not perfect, and that there are differences between corpora.

Yorio (1980: 434) distinguishes between two types of conventionalised language: idioms and *routine formulas* (i.e. highly conventionalised fixed expression whose occurrence is tied to a standardised communication situation). These expressions are classified according to structural, syntactic and semantic criteria, but only the semantic classification will be discussed. From the semantic point of view, expressions can be *transparent* (i.e. formulaic expressions that are not idiomatic), such as *your face looks familiar*, *semi-transparent* (i.e. formulaic expressions or idioms that are somewhat metaphorical), such as *to shake hands* or *skyscraper*, and *opaque* (i.e. idioms or expressions whose meanings are not interpretable from their morphemes), such as *to knock on wood*. Yorio's categorisation is quite similar to Fernando's and Moon's, but he does not consider transparent expressions to be idioms at all, thus, with respect to the present study, this classification cannot be used.

As discussed in section 2.3.1, Grant and Bauer (2004) call the most limited MWUs core idioms. Core idioms are largely semantically defined and cover only a very small group of idioms. This concept excludes literal but also figurative idioms, which is interesting since most scholars consider that large group of expressions idioms. According to Grant and Bauer (2004: 53), the following groups are excluded from the 'core idiom' category: compositional or literal expressions (e.g. *gathering dust*), figurative expressions (e.g. *hit the nail on the head*) and expressions that Grant and Bauer term *ONCE* (i.e. only one word of the MWU is non-compositional or non-literal – for example in *a curly issue*, *curly* is the only non-literal word). However, collocational fixed phrases such as *of course* meet their criteria, even though they would not normally be included in any idiom category (*ibid.*). According to Grant and Bauer (2004: 58), this classification (core idioms, figurative expressions and ONCE) helps teachers and even learners to deal with idioms. Their aim was to provide a more restrictive definition of an idiom and to allow “a learner to verify whether something is or is not an idiom by getting the ‘core’ or the heart of what an idiom is” (Grant & Bauer 2004: 59). However, for the purpose of the present study their definition of idiom is too restrictive and the classification is not applicable; it is not the aim of this study to provide tools for L2 teachers.

| Fernando (1996) | Moon (1998) | Yorio (1980) | Grant & Bauer (2004) |
|---|---|--|---|
| Literal idioms: <i>dark and handsome, for example</i> | Transparent idioms: <i>pack one's bags, alarm bells ring</i> | Transparent (not idioms): <i>your face looks familiar, let me be the first to congratulate you</i> | ONCE (not idioms): <i>a curly issue, the dog days</i> |
| Semi-literal idioms: <i>drop names, kith and kin</i> | Semi-transparent idioms: <i>the pecking order, grasp the nettle</i> | Semi-transparent (expressions or idioms): <i>shake hands, bumper to bumper</i> | Figurative expressions (not idioms): <i>be like a dog with two tails, pay dividends</i> |
| Pure idioms: <i>spill the beans, smell a rat</i> | Opaque idioms: <i>red herring, kick the bucket</i> | Opaque/True idioms: <i>by and large, take a leak</i> | Core idioms: <i>by and large, so long</i> |

Table 2. Semantic classification of idioms

Table 2 provides an overview of the semantic classifications discussed in this section. As also Grant & Bauer (2004: 44) point out, there are several problems in classifying idioms. There is a lot of disagreement, for instance, on the degree of transparency of certain idioms (e.g. *spill the beans*), and the terminology is also variable. However, with respect to this study, some of these classifications are useful and they may also be useful for L2 learners who benefit from knowing the structural and semantic features of idioms in order to be able to use idioms more accurately.

3 Idioms in SLA

Idioms cause particular difficulties for non-native learners of English because they are restricted collocations whose figurative meanings cannot be derived from the sum of the literal meanings of the constituent words. For instance, Laufer (1989:12) found that the students translated idioms such as *hit and miss* and *sit on the fence* literally, word by word. Nevertheless, L2 idiom comprehension and the learning of idioms have not been widely studied. L2 learners will meet idioms in all written and spoken language, and, as Cooper (1999:234) argues, learners' mastery in L2 may depend partly on how well they understand and produce the idioms encountered in everyday language. The role of the L1 in L2 vocabulary learning has not been widely studied, yet some studies concerning idioms and L2 learners exist. This section begins by discussing the role of L1 in L2 vocabulary acquisition and use, and then moves on to L2 idiom acquisition and comprehension. Finally, earlier studies on idioms and L2 learners will be covered.

3.1 Role of L1 in L2 vocabulary acquisition and use

The role of L1 in foreign language learning has been studied during the past decades (e.g. Ringbom 1987 and 2007, Kellerman 1987). Language learning, as any kind of learning, is based on prior knowledge; foreign language learners try to connect the new elements they learn to the linguistic knowledge they already have. According to Laufer and Shmueli (1997:89), it is essential to relate the newly learnt vocabulary to the first language. Cross-linguistic knowledge is relevant when learning foreign languages, and Ringbom (2007:1) argues that its importance primarily depends on how closely related the learner's L1 and L2 are. If L1 and L2 are closely related, prior linguistic knowledge will be useful, but if the languages are very distant, prior knowledge is not that relevant. However, Ringbom (2007: 8) also points out that even totally unrelated languages share some grammatical features. For instance, some English idioms have direct equivalents in Finnish, even though the languages are not typologically closely related. Full-scale cross-linguistic similarity in both form and function is rare, but when these similarities can be established, positive transfer may occur (Ringbom 2007: 10).

As Ringbom (2007:31) argues, vocabulary needs to be considered for a more complete picture of how L1 influences the language learning process. Actually, L1 influence is

constantly present in L2 vocabulary use. L2 learners have already learnt how their “world and culture is reflected through language, but they need new labels to relate the new language to prior knowledge” (Ringbom 2007:71). With respect to L1 effect on vocabulary, the emphasis has been on the errors that result from L1 influence. According to Martin (1984: 130), advanced students make more vocabulary errors as the proficiency increases. She suggests that the majority of these errors are interlingual, but some of them are the result of L1 transfer. Ringbom (1987:116) illustrates how semantic discrepancy between L1 and L2 can lead to a lexical error; a Finnish learner may use a previously known word in an extended sense, which leads to an error (e.g. *He bit himself in the language*, as in Finnish *kieli* means both “language” and “tongue”).

However, the effect of L1 may also be positive¹ and L1 knowledge may facilitate learning, which is obviously more difficult to notice than spotting learners’ errors that result from L1 (Ringbom 2007:2). According to Singleton (1999: 49), the effects of cross-linguistic influence on the development of L2 lexis may be quite dramatic. For instance, French learners of English will quickly learn that most English words ending in *-ation* have French counterparts, which means that French learners of English are able to make “a considerable developmental leap at relatively little cost” (*ibid.*). Also James (1998: 179) argues that elements that are similar in the L1 and L2 are easier to learn than those that are different. Ringbom (2007: 71) points out that learners at the early stages of learning and when faced with a receptive task tend to apply lexical item transfer trying to associate new words with primary counterparts in their L1. If formal cross-linguistic similarity of items can be perceived, item transfer is likely. In related languages many words with almost the same meanings are easily guessed and the primary counterparts are more easily found if there is semantic equivalence, which mostly depends on underlying cultural correspondences.

There have been a few studies on the role of prior linguistic knowledge in understanding an unfamiliar language that focus on vocabulary (e.g. Gibson & Hufeisen 2003). In the study by Gibson and Hufeisen (2003), students with English or especially German as their L1 performed a lot better in understanding Swedish than, for instance, students with Hungarian, Portuguese or the Slavic languages as their mother tongue. These studies

¹ Although the use of adjectives *positive* and *negative* when discussing transfer has been criticised (e.g. Sajavaara & Lehtonen 1989), it is important to notice that the effect of prior linguistic knowledge may be “facilitative or inhibiting”(Ringbom 2007:30), and these are also relevant with respect to comprehension.

confirm that wherever possible learners seek for facilitating cross-linguistic similarities, and that a learner with L1 that is closely related to the target language already has a substantial potential vocabulary in that language (Ringbom 2007:11). In addition, receptive mastery of a basic vocabulary in a closely related L2 can be attained without much learning effort. However, as Singleton (1999: 48) points out, even though the languages may be typologically distant, there will always be some cultural overlap between the L1 and the L2, which means that “at least some of the concepts which have been lexicalized during L1 acquisition will have the capacity to facilitate entry into the classification of reality offered by the L2”.

James (1998:180) argues that there are occasions where learners have L1 patterns that could be transferred to the L2 but they do not take advantage of this potential. It has also been argued that some L1 items are less likely to be transferred to L2 than others. This may be the case even with the languages that are typologically close. As the findings of the Kellerman’s study (1987) suggest, idioms are generally not transferred, even though it would be possible to do so. Even advanced learners treated L1 idioms as untransferable, while less proficient learners were ready to allow L1 idioms in L2 (Kellerman 1987:120). This may be true in production, but if there is an equivalent in L1 for a L2 idiom, it obviously helps in comprehension and interpretation, as has been shown, for instance, by Irujo (1986b) and Mäntylä (2004). It is also to be borne in mind that comprehension precedes learning and production, that is, before items of a new language can be produced, the learner first has to comprehend them.

Related languages share a number of cognates, which in two languages can be defined as “historically related, formally similar words, whose meanings may be identical, similar, partly different or, occasionally, even wholly different” (Ringbom 2007:73). In related languages cognates are facilitative, at least in comprehension, even though learners may overuse them. For instance, Italian and English share a common source in Latin and thus share a number of cognates, whereas Finnish and English are not related languages and thus do not share cognates but only some loanwords. There are also deceptive cognates, *false friends*, which are formally similar but have little or no semantic similarity (Ringbom 2007: 75). However, the good cognates easily outnumber the deceptive ones (*ibid.*). In idiom comprehension cognates may also play a role since individual words often contribute to the overall metaphorical meanings of idioms. It could be argued that Italian learners of English benefit from the cognates Italian shares with English.

The knowledge of L1 is undoubtedly useful when learning foreign language vocabulary. Several studies have shown that cross-linguistic similarities facilitate vocabulary learning and the receptive mastery of vocabulary is quite easy to achieve in a typologically close L2. However, we need to be aware of the fact that there are many learners who are acquiring a third language and the influence on the acquisition of a new language may originate also from learner's second language (Odlin & Jarvis 2004:123). Transfer studies in SLA concentrate nowadays also on the effects that the L2 shows on the L1 (Jessner 2003: 46). Nevertheless, I will not discuss these issues more in detail since the aim of the present study is to investigate the role of the L1 in idiom comprehension.

3.2 L2 idiom acquisition and comprehension

The acquisition and comprehension of formulaic language in a foreign language has not been widely investigated, although it constitutes a crucial part of vocabulary and can be found everywhere in the human life in various communication situations (see e.g. Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992, Schmitt & Carter 2004, Wray 2002). Schmitt and Carter (2004: 13) point out that it is not easy to chart the course of formulaic language development in L2 learners, but it tends to lag behind other linguistic aspects (see e.g. Schmitt & Carter 2004, Steinel, Hulstijn & Steinel 2007). This may stem from the lack of rich input, as Irujo (1986a: 236) proposes that idioms are frequently left out of speech directed to L2 learners; native speakers tend to use simple and concrete vocabulary. In addition, L2 learners' exposure to idioms seems to occur mainly in non-interactive situations where negotiation for meaning is not possible.

Levorato (1993) has studied the development of *figurative competence* (i.e. an ability to deal with figurative language) of L1 children and argues that the acquisition of figurative language, including idioms, is tied to the development of other linguistic skills. Idioms are acquired together with skills that provide children with the ability to understand language as a whole. According to Levorato (1993: 104), such skills include, for instance, coding, making inferences, activating world knowledge, using imagination and creativity and activating metalinguistic knowledge. Consequently, we could assume that L2 learners possess such linguistic skills in their L1, but comprehending idioms in a foreign language is far from simple. L2 learners should know what the logic behind figurative language is and understand that the meaning can be inferred in various ways (Mäntylä 2004: 78). As

Cooper (1999:234) proposes, models of L1 idiom acquisition serve as a starting point for studying the L2 idiom acquisition, but I shall not discuss those models as such in this study.

According to the common view, idioms are difficult for L2 learners and particularly difficult for lower level learners. Levorato (1993: 104) argues that figurative competence, and idioms too, are acquired gradually, in the course of the linguistic development, and can be acquired completely only by a truly competent speaker. Cooper (1999: 233) questions this view and proposes that it may be even impossible to master idioms completely, yet language learners must be ready to face the challenge since idioms are frequent in spoken and written language. The results of the study by Arnaud and Savignon (1997) support Cooper's view in that even the most advanced non-native speakers are not able to achieve the native-like level in the case of idioms. Nevertheless, idioms contribute to fluency and native-like competence of L2 learners, and advanced learners can be assumed to be able to recognise, interpret and produce idioms in L2 at least to some degree.

As discussed in section 2.3.2, idioms have various characteristics that have an effect on their comprehension and interpretation (see e.g. McGlone, Glucksberg & Cacciari 1994). Although idioms are often seen as figurative and non-compositional, their meaning can also be derived, for instance, from their elements and with help of the image they create (e.g. Gibbs 1992, Cacciari & Tabossi 1988, McGlone, Glucksberg & Cacciari 1994). This complexity of idioms may cause difficulties even for native speakers, but idioms are especially troublesome for L2 learners. Since L2 learners do not possess the same degree of linguistic competence as native speakers do, they must go through various possible meanings in order to get the probable one (Cooper 1999:254). In addition, L2 learners need to take into account the context and the literal meanings of expressions, and even the learner's own experience in the target culture affects the comprehension (*ibid.*). Also Carter (2012:212) points out that there might be difficulties in comprehension as in some idioms (e.g. *my Sunday best*) "cultural opacity" is embedded.

L2 learners use a variety of strategies in order to access the meaning of an idiom. As Cooper's (1999) study has shown, L2 learners may, for example, guess from the context, use the literal meaning of an idiom, refer to an L1 idiom and use background knowledge. However, as mentioned earlier in this study, the context does not always resolve the

ambiguity, and the literal meaning may lead to a wrong track. It is also possible that L2 learners do not recognize literal meanings, and guessing the origins of an idiom may lead to misinterpretation (Mäntylä 2004:79). Sometimes the relationship between literal and figurative meanings of an idiom is unclear and distant (e.g. *to let the cat out of the bag*) and that causes problems for L2 learners in comprehension (Cooper 1999: 244). Although the literal meanings usually help enormously, some idioms may still remain ambiguous (e.g. *kick something into the touch*) while referring to some specialised area such as sports.

Idioms are not only used in the language of popular culture, but can be found everywhere in the human life and communication. As Levorato (1993: 126) points out, it is fascinating to use idioms because they involve the imagination, make abstract meanings more concrete, add a wealth of meaning to simple concepts and make the commonplace conversation more interesting. Like poetic language, idioms express in a few words what would require many more words to express in literal terms, but given their conventional nature they do not require complex creative strategies, such as those needed for poetic language. Idioms allow language learners to communicate in more than an appropriate way; they may also make further language learning easier (Schmitt & Carter 2004: 12).

As discussed earlier, L2 learner's mother tongue may help in trying to access the meaning of an idiom, but it can sometimes be more of a hindrance than a help. Laufer (1997:21-22) found that there are words that are often miscomprehended because they look familiar although they are unknown. This may be a problem with the idioms as well since there are idioms, for instance, in English that can be easily misinterpreted by Finnish learners of English (e.g. *blue-eyed boy*, a boy or a man who is liked very much - *sinisilmäinen*, gullible or naïve). An idiom may seem to have a direct equivalent in learners' L1 when it might only have a false friend that carries a totally different meaning. As Mäntylä (2004: 79) points out, to comprehend and interpret idioms is not an easy task and there are no guaranteed ways of doing it, but it is always worth trying and if a learner is familiar with suitable strategies it does assist in idiom comprehension.

3.3 Previous studies on idioms and L2 learners

As discussed in section 2, during the last three decades there has been a rise in vocabulary studies; also formulaic language and idioms have been studied, but mainly in relation to

native speakers and children. Language studies in the former Soviet Union and other countries of Eastern Europe have traditionally focused on phraseology and idioms (Cowie 1998:1), but very few of these studies have been translated into western languages. In the West, the approach to idioms in lexicon studies has changed during the course of time and different features have been highlighted. The issue of L2 idiom acquisition and comprehension has failed to receive adequate attention; there are only a few studies that have focused on English idioms and L2 learners. Irujo (1986b, 1993) investigated Spanish speakers' idiom comprehension and production, while Kellerman's (1987) study concentrated on Dutch speakers' recognition of English idioms. Arnaud and Savignon (1997) studied advanced learners' knowledge of rare words and idioms, and Mäntylä (2004) examined how Finnish learners of English understood and interpreted English idioms. To our knowledge, there are no studies on Italian learners' recognition and comprehension of English idioms.

Many of these studies have concentrated on the influence of L1 transfer (Irujo 1986b, Kellerman 1987, Mäntylä 2004). The results of the studies are contradictory; Irujo's and Mäntylä's results show that the knowledge of L1 helps second language learners to comprehend and produce idioms in L2. Both studies found that L1 plays a role in the comprehension of L2 idioms, although when perceiving the meaning as figurative, L2 learners were less likely to transfer the knowledge of L1. However, Kellerman's findings suggest that learners are reluctant to transfer idioms that have L1 equivalents to L2. Thus, it is not clear what kind of a role L1 plays in the acquisition of L2 idioms, and more studies are needed to better understand the whole process of L2 idiom acquisition. In this section the previous studies on idioms and L2 learners will be discussed.

3.3.1 Suzanne Irujo

Suzanne Irujo has conducted two studies on Spanish speakers' comprehension and production of English idioms. In her first study (1986b) Irujo investigated whether L2 learners benefit from the knowledge of their L1 when they understand and produce idioms in English. The subjects were twelve advanced learners of English studying in an American university. Production and comprehension of 45 idioms was tested; one third of the idioms were such that their form and meaning were identical to their Spanish equivalents, one third had equivalents that were formally very similar, and one third had totally different forms in English and Spanish. The results indicate that identical idioms

were the easiest to understand and produce, whereas similar idioms showed interference from subjects' mother tongue, but were understood almost as well. Idioms with no equivalents in learners' L1 were the most difficult but were less distracting than similar idioms. Irujo also found that the subjects produced and comprehended most correctly the idioms that were frequently used and transparent with easy structure and vocabulary (Irujo 1986b: 287). In addition, Irujo (1986b: 296) reports that learners used both L1 and L2 strategies in producing idioms and they did not seem to fear to rely on their L1.

In 1993 Irujo carried out another study on non-native speakers' idiom production in English. The aim of her study was to test the presumption that even very fluent and advanced speakers of a second language avoid using idioms. In addition, Irujo wanted to find out what kind of idioms second language learners use the most. The subjects were twelve native speakers of Spanish who had learnt English as adults and were very fluent, living and working in an English-speaking environment. The subjects were asked to translate 45 paragraphs, each containing an idiom, from Spanish into English. As in the study reported above, one third of the idioms had identical counterparts, one third had counterparts that were formally very similar, and one third had totally different forms in English and Spanish. The results of the study show that subjects were not avoiding idioms but tried to use an idiom in two thirds of the translations. Moreover, the subjects produced a correct idiom in 59% of the cases. Another interesting finding was that identical idioms were much easier to produce than similar or different idioms. However, it could be argued that this type of translation task cannot be referred to as a production task.

3.3.2 Eric Kellerman

Eric Kellerman (1987) has investigated the role of L1 in SLA, and has conducted a study on Dutch speakers' recognition of English idioms. The subjects of his study were Dutch university students (first, second and third-year) and first-year College of Education students. They were given a list of sentences in English and were asked to judge whether they were correct or not thus only recognition was studied. Half of the expressions were "idiomatic", while the other half were "non-idiomatic". There were sentences containing Dutch-like idioms which were correct also in English, sentences including Dutch-like idioms which could not be transferred to English, sentences containing idioms that were not possible in Dutch and sentences including idioms that were not possible either in Dutch or English.

The study found that College of Education students and first-year students tended to reject Dutch-like idioms whether correct in English or not, while third-year students made the fewest rejections. Kellerman (1987: 114) points out that College of Education and first-year students are linguistically naïve and that the emphasis in school is not on “grammatically perfect production”, but in communication. He adds that the idioms do not play a big part in the school curriculum, thus students have to rely on their own feelings. Another interesting finding of his study was that even advanced learners of English treated Dutch-like idioms as untransferable. However, third-year students were more successful at distinguishing correct English idioms similar to Dutch ones from Dutch-based erroneous idioms. According to Kellerman (1987:118), this results from their increasing awareness of the similarities that exist between the two languages. In addition, there seemed to be a correlation between opacity and rejection. Semantically opaque idioms were almost totally rejected by all students while semantically more transparent idioms were generally accepted.

3.3.3 Pierre Arnaud and Sandra Savignon

Pierre Arnaud and Sandra Savignon (1997) have studied idioms from a different viewpoint. They investigated if advanced learners’ knowledge of rare words and idioms increases when they advance in their studies (the rareness of words was determined by means of frequency lists and when it comes to idioms, only opaque idioms were included). Moreover, they wanted to find out whether advanced learners manage to gain native-like proficiency. Arnaud and Savignon chose rare words and idioms since, according to them, infrequent words carry the highest information load and thus cause problems in comprehension when unknown (Arnaud & Savignon 1997: 158). They emphasised that the knowledge of rare words allows an L2 reader to comprehend the utterances easily and quickly (Arnaud & Savignon 1997: 159).

The subjects of the study were 236 native speakers of French, either students or teacher trainees or secondary school teachers. A group of 57 English-speaking students served as native controls. The results show that learners’ knowledge of rare words and idioms does increase during their studies, and that native-like proficiency is achievable in the case of rare words, but not in that of idioms. Not even the teachers, the most advanced non-native speakers, attained native-like performance even though they had all spent some time in

English-speaking countries. According to Arnaud & Savignon (1997: 167), it could be that continuous exposure to the language is necessary for native-like performance in the case of idioms. However, it should be noted that only opaque idioms were included and, as they are idioms where the literal meaning and the figurative meaning are completely different from each other, they are particularly difficult to comprehend for L2 learners.

3.3.4 Katja Mäntylä

Katja Mäntylä (2005) studied in her doctoral thesis how Finnish students of English understand and interpret English idioms and to what extent their interpretations agree with those of native speakers and dictionaries. In addition, Mäntylä wanted to find out how different characteristics of idioms affect idiom recognition. The subjects of the study were 144 Finnish university students of English and 36 British university students. The data were gathered through a multiple-choice questionnaire consisting of 65 idioms.

The results of her study suggest that idioms are fairly difficult for Finnish students of English, and the easiest to comprehend were idioms that had an equivalent in Finnish. The students were not able to take advantage of the link between figurative and literal meanings of idioms when trying to understand unfamiliar idioms thus they failed to recognise idioms as wholes (Mäntylä 2005:175). The students also sought assistance in their L1, which led to erroneous interpretations. The results of the study show that also native speakers frequently disagreed on meanings of idioms. The characteristics of idioms did not seem to affect their recognition or interpretation, only transparency was found to help somewhat, but its effect was not as great as that of L1 (Mäntylä 2005: 179). Frequency did not seem to play a big role in idiom comprehension of non-native speakers, whereas native speakers quite often agreed on the meanings of more frequent idioms and their interpretations of less frequent idioms were diverse.

4 Methods

This section will begin with the discussion of the research questions. Then the subjects of the study will be presented as well as the design of the questionnaire. Next the procedure of conducting the study will be described and, finally, the statistical procedures that were used to analyse the results of the questionnaires.

4.1 Research questions

The aim of the present study was to investigate Finnish and Italian students' recognition of the meanings of English idioms and to examine the role of L1 in idiom comprehension. In addition, the effect of frequency and transparency on idiom comprehension was studied as well as student perceptions of idiom knowledge. Thus, the research questions were as follows:

1. How do advanced Finnish and Italian students of English recognise the meanings of English idioms?

It could be assumed that advanced level learners of English would be able to recognise several idiom meanings, but, as research evidence presented in the theory part of the study has shown, even for advanced learners of English idioms pose enormous problems. It has been studied (e.g. Arnaud & Savignon 1997) that even advanced level learners are not able to achieve native-like level in the case of idioms. Based on earlier research, the hypothesis was that the Finnish and Italian learners of English would encounter problems in recognising idiom meanings.

2. How does students' L1 (Finnish or Italian) affect the comprehension of idioms?

The second question concentrated on the role of L1 in idiom comprehension. Some previous studies have shown that the idioms that have equivalents in learners' L1 are the easiest to comprehend. On the other hand, the results of Kellerman's (1987) study suggest that L1 idioms are generally not transferred to L2. Thus, the aim was to see how L1 affects idiom comprehension and to what extent the students rely on their L1 when comprehending idioms.

3. How do frequency and semantic transparency affect the comprehension of idioms?

There have been studies showing that semantically transparent idioms are at least slightly easier to comprehend for L2 learners. Frequency is a controversial issue since there is evidence that more frequent idioms are easier to comprehend (Irujo 1986b), but some other studies (e.g. Mäntylä 2004) have shown that frequency does not seem to have an effect on non-native speakers' idiom comprehension, thus it was useful to investigate these issues.

4. How do Finnish and Italian students of English perceive their ability to use idioms and the necessity of learning idioms?

As the performance of the Finnish and Italian students on an idiom comprehension task was studied, it was also interesting to look at how the learners themselves perceive their ability to use idioms. In addition, as discussed in the theory section, idioms are considered to be an essential part of vocabulary, and they contribute to fluency of L2 learners. Thus, students' perceptions of the necessity of learning idioms were also investigated.

4.2 Subjects

The subjects of the present study were university students at Finnish and Italian universities. All of them had English either as a major or minor subject. The aim of this study was to find out how Finnish and Italian students of English comprehend English idioms. Some earlier research has shown that idioms cause particular difficulties even for advanced learners of English; the subjects of this study were English university students thus it was presumed that the students were advanced learners of English. There were 35 Finnish subjects whose L1 was Finnish and who studied English at the University of Turku and 34 Italian subjects whose L1 was Italian and who studied English at the University of Milan. Most of the Finnish subjects were aged between 19 and 25 years although four of the subjects were older than that, the oldest being 48 years old. Nine of them were males and 23 were females; three of the subjects did not answer the question at all. Most of the Finnish subjects had begun learning English at the age of nine; five subjects had begun learning English a year or two later, and ten subjects had begun

learning English earlier than at the age of nine. The majority of the Finnish subjects considered themselves fluent or very fluent in English.

Out of 34 Italian subjects there were 21 females and 10 males. Three did not answer the question at all. Most of the Italian subjects were aged 18 to 22 years with the exception of two subjects who were 28 and 35 years old. The age at which the Italian subjects had begun learning English varied; three subjects had begun their English studies at the age of four and three at the age of five, while 12 subjects were six years old and three were aged seven years when they began learning English. Eight of the subjects had started learning English at the age of eight and four had begun learning English at the age of 11 and one at the age of 15. The Italian subjects described their current level of English mostly as advanced or intermediate.

4.3 Questionnaire

I followed Mäntylä (2004) in designing the questionnaire as in her study the questionnaire proved to serve its purpose. The purpose of this study was to investigate how Finnish and Italian students recognise idiom meanings and comprehend English idioms. It was assumed that the subjects of the study would comprehend idioms in different ways since even native speakers disagree on the meanings of idioms. Also the effect of L1 on idiom comprehension was investigated; it was presumed that Finnish and Italian learners of English rely heavily on their L1 when interpreting idioms, as previous studies have demonstrated (see Irujo 1986b & 1993, Mäntylä 2004). One of the objectives was also to find out how the characteristics of frequency and semantic transparency influence the comprehension of idioms. Irujo's (1986b) findings suggest that frequent idioms are easier to comprehend. It has also been suggested (Irujo 1993, Mäntylä 2004) that transparency is of assistance to non-native speakers.

The idioms of the present study were chosen from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (2001) because it was the only one based on frequencies. The questionnaire consisted of 36 idioms presented in random order, and each idiom was given four alternatives from which the subjects had to choose the correct meanings. A set of alternatives contained one or two correct answers since there were idioms with multiple meanings; if *Longman Dictionary of Idioms* (1986) gave a different definition than *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*

of Idioms, it was given as an alternative as it would have been impossible to decide which meaning to choose to represent the whole idiom. Additionally, the subjects were given a chance to write their own comments if they thought that a possible meaning was lacking from the given alternatives. The subjects were also asked whether they had been taught English idioms, whether they know how to use them and whether it is necessary to learn idioms.

As was mentioned earlier, the idioms were chosen from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms*, but only idioms that were marked for their frequency were included since the idioms that were amongst the rarest (i.e. without any mark in the dictionary) were considered too infrequent for non-native learners. To investigate how the frequency of idioms and how L1 affects their comprehension and interpretation, from each frequency band (marked with three, two and one triangles) four idioms with equivalents both in Finnish and in Italian, four idioms with equivalents only in Italian and four with equivalents only in Finnish were picked out making 36 altogether. Idioms with equivalents were idioms that were either identical in form and meaning or similar to their Finnish or Italian equivalents. Idioms with no equivalents signified idioms that were different from the corresponding Finnish or Italian expressions, or that had no equivalents at all. To ensure that the idioms were randomly chosen I tried to count, for instance, the total number of the most frequent idioms (marked with three triangles) and to pick out every 46th idiom, but it was not easy to find idioms with equivalents either in Italian or in Finnish or in both languages; thus I went through quite a great deal of idioms in each frequency band and picked out the ones that met the requirements.

One objective of this study was to see how the relationship of idioms to their Finnish and Italian equivalents affects their comprehension, thus there were also distractors among the options. It was assumed that distractors would more precisely show the possible effect of L1. Sometimes there was, for instance, a similar Finnish expression, but the meaning was different from the English version (e.g. *a big fish* – in Finnish *iso kala* denotes a person who has committed a serious crime and is arrested, and there is also an expression *kertoa kalavalheita*, which means that people tell lies about catching big fish and exaggerate the size of the catches). Sometimes the literal translation of an English idiom resembled an Italian expression but the meaning was totally different (e.g. *bitten by the bug* – Italian *essere morsi da un serpente*, to be criticized in an unfair way or for something that is not your fault.). The literal meaning of the idiom was in some cases

used as a distractor (e.g. *in inverted commas* – repeat the exact words that another person has said or written). Sometimes the meaning of another similar-looking idiom was used as a distractor (e.g. *make your blood boil* – make you feel distress or fear, cf. *make your blood run cold*). In some cases the distractor carried a connotation to the literal meaning of an idiom (e.g. *tighten your belt* – lose weight). The list of distractors with their explanations is given in the Appendix.

Since Finnish is my L1, creating the distractors that would show the possible influence of Finnish was quite easy. The Finnish idiom dictionary *Naulan Kantaan: nykysuomen idiomisanakirja* (1993) assisted in the task. With respect to distractors that would show the effect of Italian I had to rely on Italian dictionaries of idioms: *Dizionario dei modi di dire della lingua italiana* (1993) and *Dizionario dei modi di dire* (2009). All the idioms were presented without a context to allow various possible interpretations. Excluding the context was reasonable since the aim of this study was to investigate non-native speakers' comprehension of English idioms. The aim was to allow as many interpretations as the subjects knew or could think of for each idiom in various possible contexts. Furthermore, as has been discussed earlier, although the context often helps to comprehend an idiom (see e.g. Moon 1998, Cooper 1999), it is not always the case. The context does not always resolve the ambiguity and can actually mislead non-native speakers. Non-native speakers may interpret and comprehend idioms in ways which native speakers do not, and they may see idioms as compositional (Moon 1998: 185). Moon (1998: 186) gives an example of asking people about an unfamiliar idiom without a context and argues that people's responses suggest "their use of analogizing skills", lexical knowledge (e.g. metaphorical or non-literal meanings of a word or its cognates) and their real-world knowledge of the physical properties of the content words that exist in an idiom. It has also been studied that for adults the role of the linguistic convention, that is, the relationship between literal meanings and idiomatic meanings, is stronger than the role of context when interpreting the meaning of an idiom (Laval 2003:736).

The objectives of the study and the characteristics of idioms play a significant role when assessing the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Calculating internal consistency reliability was not possible since the objective of this study was to investigate not only the effect of L1 but also the effect of frequency and semantic transparency of idioms on their comprehension. For some idioms there were also several correct answers. It was also impossible to check how consistently the subjects comprehended the idioms since there

were several features affecting their comprehension. However, it could be expected that the reanalysis of the data of this study would produce consistent results. The idioms that were correctly comprehended most often and idioms that were incorrectly comprehended most often by the Finnish and Italian subjects were also examined more closely in order to shed light on this controversial issue of idiom comprehension.

In order to guarantee internal validity of the questionnaire, following characteristics of idioms were taken into account in the design of the questionnaire: frequency and the relationship of the idioms to Finnish and Italian. Also the distribution of transparent, semi-transparent and opaque idioms in the questionnaire was calculated; it was in accordance with Moon's (1998) data. As the object of the present study was neither to develop a new tool to measure idiom comprehension nor investigate the role of context in idiom comprehension, this kind of a questionnaire seemed necessary and reasonable. It should be borne in mind that although the results show some tendencies among the Finnish and Italian subjects, they cannot be generalised to concern all university students of English in Finland and in Italy. However, the number is large enough to make statistical comparisons.

4.4 Procedure and statistical analysis

The Finnish subjects filled in the questionnaires during a lecture, and they were given around 20 minutes to fill it in. All other instructions were included in the questionnaire, and the questionnaires were identical for both groups except that the Italian subjects were asked if they were English major or minor students (since there were also other than English students in the lecture). The Italian subjects filled in the questionnaires also during a lecture and they were instructed to fill it in uninterrupted and independently as if it was an exam. They were not allowed to discuss their answers with other people or consult dictionaries.

For the statistical analysis, SPSS 21 was used. In the first part of the study, the subjects were given one point for each correct answer. The total score of the Finnish and Italian subjects was counted as well as the mean scores and standard deviations. *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* and *Shapiro-Wilk* tests were used to assess if the data were normally distributed and homogeneity of variance was assessed by *Levene's Test for Equality of Variances*.

An independent-samples t-test was run on the data for the mean difference. *Cohen's d* was used to calculate an effect size. In the next part of the study the aim was to investigate the effect of L1 on idiom comprehension thus the subjects were given one point if they had chosen at least one correct answer. The two groups were analysed separately. The mean percentages for the correct answers of idioms that had equivalents in Finnish and idioms that had no equivalents in Finnish were calculated as well as standard deviations. Again Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were used to assess if the data followed the normal distribution. Since the data did not satisfy the assumptions of parametric tests (see Larson-Hall 2009: 381), a *Wilcoxon signed-rank* test was conducted to compare the mean percentages of the correct answers of idioms with equivalents and idioms with no equivalents. In addition, the effect size was also calculated. The procedure was similar to the Italian group.

To see whether there were differences between the scores for transparent, semi-transparent and opaque idioms and for frequently used, fairly frequently used and rarely used idioms a Friedman non-parametric test was used since the data were not normally distributed and there was only one independent variable (Larson-Hall 2009:383). Again the subjects were given one point if they had chosen at least one correct answer and the groups were analysed separately.

5 Results of statistical analysis

The results of statistical analysis will be presented in this section. The section begins by presenting the results on Finnish and Italian learners' recognition of idiom meanings. It will then go on to the findings on the role of L1 in idiom comprehension. Finally, the results on the effect of transparency and frequency will be presented.

5.1 Finnish and Italian subjects' comprehension of English idioms

One of the purposes of the present study was to examine how Finnish (FIN) and Italian (IT) students of English recognise the meanings of English idioms. The participants had to choose correct meanings for 36 idioms, and for some of the idioms the set of alternatives contained one or two correct answers since there were idioms with multiple meanings. Since the recognition of idiom meanings was studied, in this part of the study the subjects were given one point for each correct answer. The total score for each subject was counted, the maximum being 56 points. The mean was used as the measure of central tendency; for the Finnish subjects it was 34.8 and for the Italian subjects 25.3. The highest score among the Finnish subjects was 46 and the Italian subjects 43 while the lowest score being 23 for the Finnish subjects and 7 for the Italian subjects. It is interesting to note that the Finnish learners of English recognised on average only 62.1% of the correct meanings of idioms and the Italian learners only 45.2% of the correct meanings.

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|-------------------------|----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| Finnish subjects | 35 | 34.8 | 6.530 | 1.104 |
| Italian subjects | 34 | 25.3 | 7.775 | 1.333 |

Table 3. General data on the Finnish and Italian subjects' scores

The difference between the Italian and Finnish students was notable. As could be seen in Table 3, the Finnish subjects' mean score was a lot higher than the Italian subjects' mean score and, in addition, the standard deviation shows more variation among the Italian subjects.

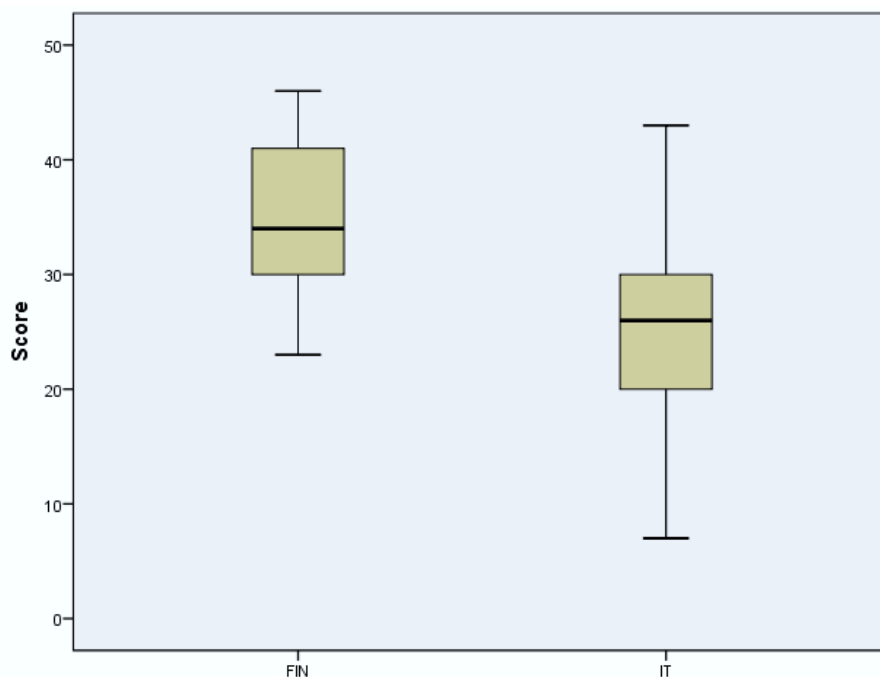


Figure 1. Boxplot indicating median, quartiles and extreme values for the Finnish and Italian subjects' test scores

Figure 1 shows the boxplot for the scores on the idiom comprehension task. The boxplot illustrates that the median scores were different between Finnish and Italian subjects while the distributions were normal, though in both groups the median line is not that symmetric in relation to the box. The data were normally distributed and there was homogeneity of variance as assessed by *Levene's Test for Equality of Variances*; therefore an independent-samples t-test was run on the data to see if the means of these two groups were different from each other. A significant difference was found between Finnish and Italian subjects; $t(67) = 5.51, p = 0.00$. In conjunction with the t-test, Cohen's d can be used to calculate the effect size (Muijs 2004: 136). The Cohen's d was 1.32, which suggests that the effect was strong as it was >1.00 (Muijs 2004: 139).

| | Finnish subjects (%) | | | Italian subjects (%) | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|------|------|----------------------|-----|------|
| | 1p | 2p | 0p | 1p | 2p | 0p |
| Idioms with two correct meanings | 62.7 | 23.9 | 13.4 | 60.4 | 9.8 | 29.7 |
| Idioms with one correct meaning | 75.7 | - | 24.3 | 55.3 | - | 44.7 |

Table 4. Mean percentages of the Finnish and Italian subjects for idioms with two correct meanings and idioms with one correct meaning

As there were idioms with multiple meanings, it was interesting to see whether the Finnish and Italian subjects were able to recognise all the correct meanings. Table 4 shows the

mean percentages of the Finnish and Italian subjects for idioms with two correct meanings and idioms with one correct meaning. The Finnish subjects (23.9%) more often than the Italian subjects (9.8%) recognised two correct meanings of idioms, and only 13.4% of the Finnish subjects failed to recognise any of the intended answers while almost one third of the Italian subjects could not recognise any of the correct idiom meanings. The meanings of idioms that had only one meaning were recognised by 75.7% of the Finnish subjects but only 55.3% of the Italian subjects. The mean percentage of the Italians that could not recognise the meanings of idioms with only one correct meaning was noticeable (44.7%).

5.2 The effect of L1 on idiom comprehension

One of the aims of this study was to investigate the role of L1 in comprehending English idioms. It was presumed that the Finnish and Italian learners of English would rely on their L1 when interpreting idioms (see e.g. Irujo 1986b, Mäntylä 2005), and that they will perform better in comprehending idioms that have equivalents in their L1. In the idiom comprehension task there were altogether 24 idioms with equivalents and 12 idioms with no equivalents in Finnish and in Italian. Since the aim was to investigate the effect of L1 on idiom comprehension, in this part of the study the subjects were given one point if they knew at least one correct answer.

5.2.1 Finnish subjects

The mean percentages for the correct answers of idioms that had equivalents in Finnish (fYSEquiv) and idioms that had no equivalents in Finnish (fNOequiv) are reported in Table 5. It shows that fYSEquiv idioms were easier to comprehend than fNOequiv idioms. The mean percentage of fYSEquiv idioms was higher (85.0) than the mean percentage of fNOequiv idioms (76.4). Also the standard deviations of fYSEquiv idioms and fNOequiv idioms seem to differ; there was a lot more variation among the idioms that had no equivalents in Finnish.

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation |
|----------------------------|---------|----|----------------|
| Idioms with equivalents | 85.0011 | 35 | 9.54094 |
| Idioms with no equivalents | 76.4314 | 35 | 15.45125 |

Table 5. Mean percentages of correct answers for fYSEquiv idioms and fNOequiv idioms

The boxplot in Figure 2 shows the distribution of the percentages of correct answers of idioms with equivalents in Finnish and with no equivalents in Finnish. Both are fairly normally distributed, though in fYSEquiv group the median line is not that symmetric in relation to the box. The median was definitely higher for the idioms that had equivalents in Finnish than that of the idioms with no equivalents in Finnish. Also the range of distribution for YSEquiv group was smaller. There were two outliers in the data as assessed by inspection of the boxplot. The outliers were left in the data since it is not objective to remove them (Larson-Hall 2009: 60).

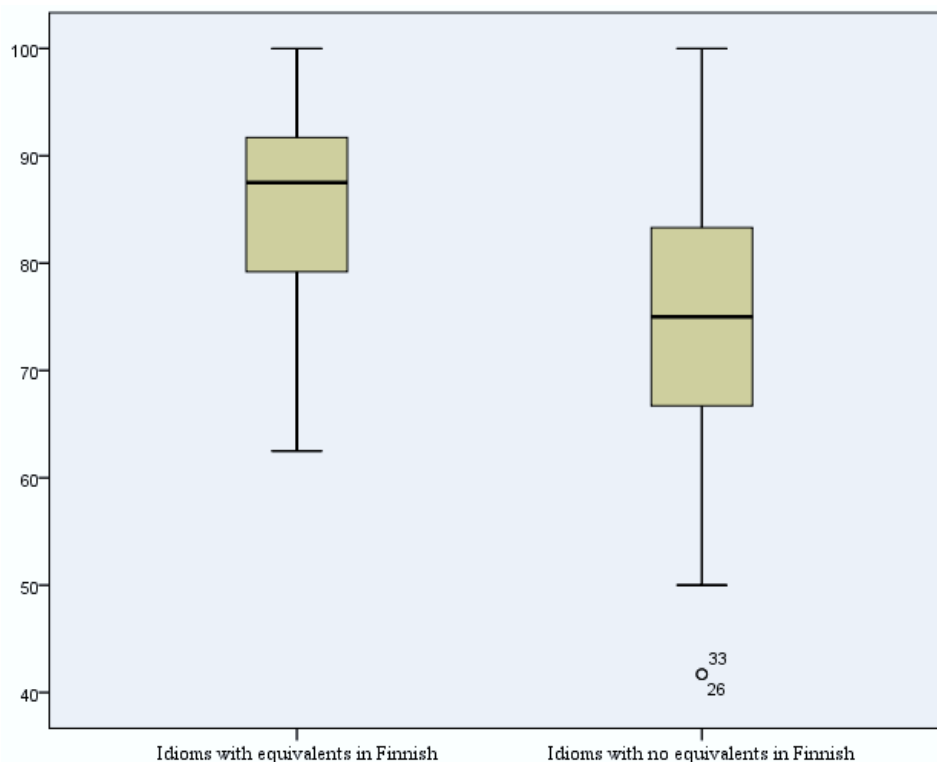


Figure 2. Boxplot indicating median, quartiles and extreme values for the percentages of correctly answered fYSEquiv idioms and fNOequiv idioms

Since the scores of the idioms with no equivalents in Finnish were not normally distributed (assessed by Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, $p < 0.05$), a

Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted (Larson-Hall 2009: 381) to compare the mean percentages of the correct answers of idioms that had equivalents in Finnish and idioms that had no equivalents in Finnish. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test revealed that there was a significant difference between idioms that had equivalent in Finnish and idioms that had no equivalent in Finnish ($Z = -3.04$, $p = 0.00$). The effect size was also calculated and it was quite large as it was $r = 0.4$.

5.2.2 Italian subjects

The results of the Italian subjects are consistent with those of the Finnish subjects. Idioms with equivalents in L1 were significantly easier to comprehend than idioms with no equivalents in L1. As Table 6 shows, the mean percentage of the correct answers of idioms that had equivalents in Italian (iYSEquiv) was notably higher (69.1) than the mean percentage of the idioms that had no equivalents in Italian (iNOequiv) (54.9). The standard deviations show more variation among the idioms that had no equivalent in Italian.

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation |
|-----------------------------------|---------|----|----------------|
| Idioms with equivalents | 69.1118 | 34 | 15.42504 |
| Idioms with no equivalents | 54.9029 | 34 | 18.81680 |

Table 6. Mean percentages of correct answers for iYSEquiv idioms and iNOequiv idioms

The boxplot in Figure 3 shows the distribution of the percentages of correct answers of idioms with equivalents in Italian and idioms with no equivalents in Italian. The boxplot illustrates that the median percentages of the correct answers were different between iYSEquiv idioms and iNOequiv idioms. The distributions were quite normal though in iYSEquiv group the median line is not that symmetric in relation to the box. There were outliers in both groups; one in iYSEquiv group and two in iNOequiv group.

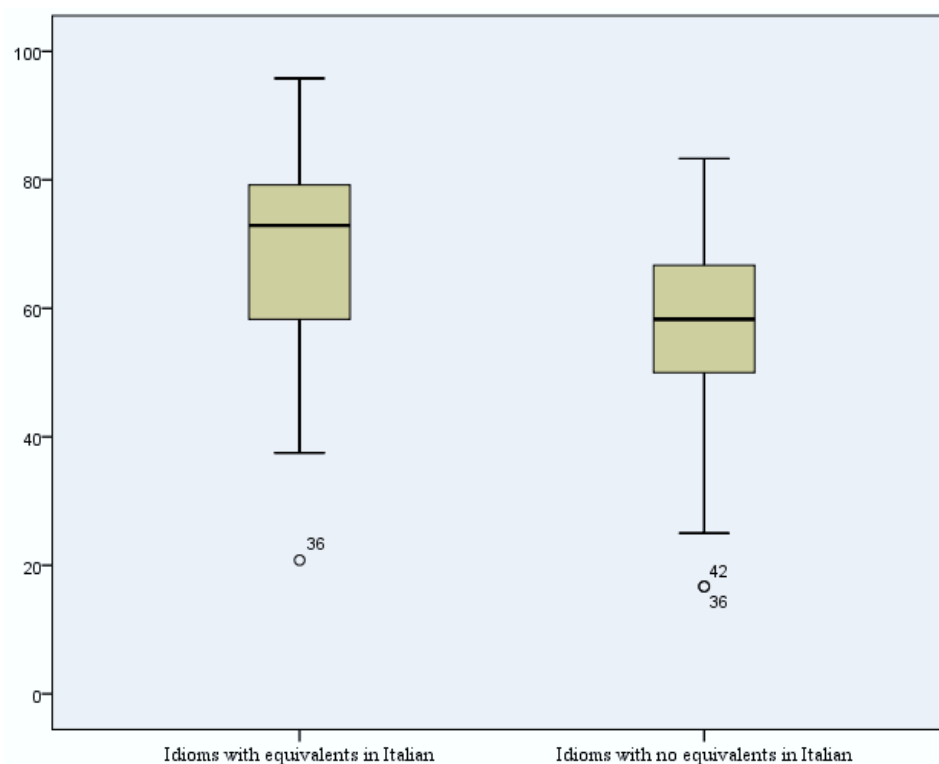


Figure 3. Boxplot indicating median, quartiles and extreme values for the percentages of correctly answered iYEsquiv idioms and iNOequiv idioms

Since the data were not normally distributed (assessed by Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, $p < 0.05$), a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted to compare the mean percentages of the correct answers of idioms that had equivalents in Italian and idioms that had no equivalents in Italian. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test revealed a significant difference between the scores ($Z = -4.51$, $p = 0.00$). The effect size was strong as it was $r = 0.6$.

5.3 The effect of transparency and frequency on idiom comprehension

A Friedman test was conducted to see whether there were differences between the scores for transparent, semi-transparent and opaque idioms and for frequently used, fairly frequently used and rarely used idioms. Frequency of use was determined by *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (scale of 1-3, from rarely used to frequently used). In the task there were 12 frequently used idioms, 12 fairly frequently used idioms and 12 rarely used idioms. Also a 1-3 scale was used for semantic transparency, with 1 signifying that an idiom is *opaque* (the literal meaning and the figurative meaning of an idiom are completely different from each other), 2 signifying that an idiom is *semi-transparent*

(there is a component that links the literal and figurative meanings yet the link is not as obvious as with transparent idioms), and 3 signifying that an idiom is *transparent* (the literal and figurative meanings of an idiom are closely linked to each other). The task included six opaque idioms, 19 semi-transparent idioms and 11 transparent idioms. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the categories overlap and such classification is more a continuum than separate categories (Moon 1998: 22). The classification made here has been checked by a native speaker of Finnish, but it should be borne in mind that assessing semantic transparency of idioms is bound to be subjective.

5.3.1 Finnish subjects

The Friedman non-parametric test was used to compare the mean percentages of opaque, semi-transparent and transparent idioms. As the Table 7 illustrates, the mean was 76.56 for opaque idioms, 89.14 for semi-transparent idioms and 89.12 for transparent idioms. The learners were able to comprehend better idioms that were semi-transparent or transparent than opaque, although the difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 1.2, p = 0.55$). The same test was conducted to compare the mean percentages of rarely used, fairly frequently used and frequently used idioms since the data were non-normally distributed (Larson-Hall 2009:383). The Friedman test revealed that there was no significant difference between the different groups ($\chi^2(2) = 0.83, p = 0.66$), with mean of 85.71 for rarely used idioms, 80.69 for fairly frequently used idioms and 80.22 for frequently used idioms, as can be seen from Table 7.

| | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-------------|
| Transparency | transparent | semi-transparent | opaque |
| Finnish subjects | 89.12 | 89.14 | 76.56 |
| Frequency | frequently used | fairly frequently used | rarely used |
| Finnish subjects | 80.22 | 80.69 | 85.71 |

Table 7. The mean percentages of different types of idioms for the Finnish subjects

Finnish subjects performed better in comprehending transparent and semi-transparent than opaque idioms and rarely used idioms than fairly frequently used or frequently used idioms. It could be argued that transparency was of assistance while frequency did not seem to have an effect on idiom comprehension.

5.3.2 Italian subjects

The Friedman non-parametric test was also conducted to compare the mean percentages of opaque, semi-transparent and transparent idioms of the Italian subjects. The Friedman test revealed that there were no significant differences between opaque, semi-transparent and transparent idioms ($\chi^2(2) = 0.40, p = 0.82$), with mean of 58.22 for opaque idioms, 69.42 for semi-transparent idioms and 69.38 for transparent idioms (as shown in Table 8). Also the Italians comprehended better idioms that were semi-transparent and transparent than opaque, even though no significant differences were found. The same test was conducted to compare the Italian subjects' mean percentages of rarely used, fairly frequently used and frequently used idioms since the data were non-normally distributed. The Friedman test revealed that there was no significant difference between the groups ($\chi^2(2) = 0.89, p = 0.64$); Table 8 presents the mean percentages for rarely used idioms, fairly frequently used idioms and frequently used idioms.

| | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-------------|
| Transparency | transparent | semi-transparent | opaque |
| Italian subjects | 69.38 | 69.42 | 58.22 |
| Frequency | frequently used | fairly frequently used | rarely used |
| Italian subjects | 61.27 | 67.15 | 64.71 |

Table 8. The mean percentages of different types of idioms for the Italian subjects

The Italians were able to comprehend better fairly frequently used idioms than rarely used or frequently used idioms thus frequency did not seem to affect idiom comprehension. With respect to transparency, the results of the Italian subjects seem to be consistent with the results of the Finnish subjects; opaque idioms were more difficult to comprehend than transparent or semi-transparent idioms.

6 Qualitative results

In this section idioms that were easy and idioms that were difficult for the Finnish and Italian subjects to comprehend are examined more closely taking into consideration the role of L1 and the characteristics of transparency and frequency. Since focusing on errors is out-dated and insufficient, this section will concentrate more on idioms that were correctly comprehended most often. However, it was also important to consider idioms that were difficult for L2 learners of English since these characteristics may also hinder idiom comprehension, and there were distractors among the options that may have misled the subjects. Out of 36 idioms 10 idioms that were the easiest for the Finnish and Italian learners to comprehend and six idioms that were the most difficult for the Finns and Italians to comprehend will be discussed. The fourth research question examined how the Finnish and Italian students of English perceive their ability to use idioms and the necessity of learning idioms. Thus, in this section the findings on the responses of the Finnish and Italian students will also be discussed.

6.1 Idioms that were correctly comprehended most often

As was shown by the statistical analysis, idioms that had equivalents in learners' L1 were easier to comprehend than idioms with no equivalents. Another feature that may have facilitated idiom comprehension was transparency since transparent and semi-transparent idioms were easier to understand than opaque idioms. Frequency did not seem to have an effect on comprehension, yet it will be discussed along with the other characteristics. Frequency of the Finnish expressions was determined by two native speakers of Finnish, and the frequency of the Italian expressions was determined by two native speakers of Italian.

6.1.1 Finnish subjects

The idioms that were correctly comprehended most often by the Finnish students of English were mostly idioms that either had an equivalent in Finnish or were similar to their Finnish equivalents. Only one of these idioms had no equivalent at all in Finnish. Seven idioms were transparent and three semi-transparent. The easiest idioms to comprehend were *lick someone's arse*, *bite off more than you can chew* and *the early bird*

catches the worm, as alone hundred per cent of the Finns chose at least one correct answer. As much as 60% of the Finnish subjects chose two correct meanings and 40% recognised one of the meanings for *lick someone's arse*. The most popular alternative (B *do anything to please someone who is influential*) was chosen by 85.7% of the Finns, while 71.4% chose the alternative D *behave in a slavish manner to please someone who is powerful*. The idiom itself is fully transparent and there is an equivalent in Finnish *nuolla jonkun persettä*, whose meaning is close to both alternatives B and D. Even though it is among the rarely used idioms in English, it is frequently used in Finnish.

Another idiom that did not cause any difficulties to the Finnish subjects was *bite off more than you can chew*. As was the previous idiom, this is also fully transparent and has a direct equivalent in Finnish *haukata liian iso pala*. Even 60% of the Finnish subjects knew both meanings of the idiom, and 40% were able to choose one correct meaning. As much as 80% of the Finnish subjects chose the alternative B *try to do something that is far too difficult*, and the same percentage of the Finnish subjects chose the other alternative D *try to do too much*. This idiom is rarely used in English but frequently used in Finnish. Another rarely used idiom in English, but fairly frequently used in Finnish is *the early bird catches the worm*. It is transparent and there is a Finnish equivalent *aikainen lintu madon nappaa* with exactly the same meaning. Of the Finnish subjects 57.1% recognised one correct answer and 42.9% were able to recognise two correct answers. All subjects chose the correct alternative A *a person who starts to do something as soon as possible will be successful*, while the other correct alternative D *a person who gets up early to work will be successful* was chosen by 45.7% of the Finnish subjects. As all these three idioms had a direct equivalent in Finnish and were transparent, it could be argued that L1 and transparency have assisted in comprehension.

Seven idioms were also easy to comprehend for the Finnish subjects since 97.1% of the Finns recognised at least one of the correct answers. Three of them were transparent and had a direct equivalent in Finnish. A Finnish equivalent for *feel something in your bones* is *tuntea luissaan*. Exactly 80% of the Finns chose the alternative A *have a suspicion that is based on feelings*, and 57.1% chose the other correct alternative D *feel strongly that you are right about something*. Both meanings are closely related to the meaning of the Finnish equivalent. This idiom is rarely used in English but fairly frequently used in Finnish. *Bear fruit* differs from those discussed earlier since it is frequently used both in English and in Finnish. Even 97.1% of the Finnish subjects chose the intended answer B

produce good results, which is also the exact meaning of the Finnish equivalent *kantaa hedelmää*.

Play with fire is a semi-transparent idiom with an equivalent in Finnish, *leikkiä tulella*. It is fairly frequently used in English and frequently used in Finnish. Both correct alternatives B *behave in a very risky way and be likely to have problems* and D *take risks, especially when these are foolish and unnecessary* were chosen by 80% of the Finnish subjects. Another fairly frequently used idiom in English is *Make your blood boil*; its Finnish equivalent *veri kiehahtaa/saada veri kiehumaan* is also fairly frequently used. Among the options there was only one correct alternative (A *make you very angry*), and for Finns it was easy to recognise the correct meaning as 97.1% of the Finns chose that alternative and were not allured by other alternatives.

The upper hand differs from all the other idioms that were easy to recognise for the Finnish subjects since there is no equivalent in Finnish. However, it is frequent and fully transparent, which probably helped the Finns to choose the intended answers. While 62.9% of the Finnish subjects were able to recognise one correct meaning, only 34.3% recognised two correct meanings. Both alternatives were equally popular; the alternative C *have the advantage over someone* was chosen by 68.6% of the Finns and alternative A *have more power than someone and control things* by 62.9% of the Finnish subjects. This suggests that the Finns were able to use the literal meaning of the idiom to get the correct meaning. It is also interesting that 22.9% chose the distractor B, *have a chance to win*, which refers to the idea of winning card games.

Like a headless chicken is a semi-transparent idiom, fairly frequently used and has a direct equivalent in Finnish, *(juosta) kuin päätön kana*. Although 97.1% of the Finns chose the correct answer B *behave in an uncontrolled way and not think calmly or logically*, still 31.4% of the Finnish subjects chose the incorrect alternative D *walk around aimlessly or without direction*. This meaning is related to the literal meaning of the idiom, which may be the reason why the Finnish subjects were attracted by this distractor. Another semi-transparent idiom is *the eleventh hour*; it has a direct equivalent in Finnish *yhdennellätoista hetkellä*, and it is frequent both in English and Finnish. It is interesting that 91.4% of the Finnish subjects chose the alternative D *the last possible moment*, while the other correct alternative A *very late* was chosen only by 14.3% of the Finns. The meaning of the Finnish expression is more closely related to the meaning of the alternative

D, which may explain why the Finns preferred that alternative. 85.7% of the Finns recognised one of the correct meanings, while only 11.4% of the Finnish subjects recognised both meanings.

6.1.2 Italian subjects

The idioms that were correctly comprehended most often by the Italian learners of English were mostly idioms that either had an equivalent in Italian or were similar to their Italian equivalents, which supports the results of the statistical analysis. Only two of these idioms had no equivalent at all in Italian. Six idioms were transparent, three semi-transparent and one was opaque. The easiest to comprehend for the Italian students of English was *lose your head* as 97.1% of them recognised at least one of the correct alternatives. It is a semi-transparent idiom with an Italian equivalent *perdere la testa*, which has exactly the same meaning as the alternative C, *lose control of yourself*. This alternative was chosen by 91.2% of the Italian subjects, while the other correct alternative B *panic in a difficult situation* was chosen only by 29.4% of the Italians.

Slip on a banana skin was understood by 94.1% of the Italian subjects. It has an equivalent in Italian *scivolare su una buccia di banana* with the same meaning as the alternative C *fail or make an embarrassing mistake*. This alternative was chosen by 94.1% of the Italians, while only 17.6% of the Italian subjects chose the other correct alternative A *say something that makes you look stupid and causes you problems*. This idiom is fairly frequently used in English and in Italian, but it is opaque. However, maybe because there is an Italian equivalent, the Italians were able to recognise the correct meaning. When comprehending idioms the Italians clearly preferred the alternatives that were close to the meanings of the L1 expressions.

Play with fire is a semi-transparent and fairly frequently used idiom both in English and in Italian, and there is a direct equivalent in Italian *scherzare col fuoco*. 94.1% of the Italians recognised at least one of the correct alternatives; the alternative B *behave in a very risky way and be likely to have problems* was chosen by 67.6% of the Italian subjects and the alternative D *take risks, especially when these are foolish and unnecessary* was chosen by half of the Italians. The meaning of the Italian expression is close to both meanings of the alternatives B and D. *Feel something in your bones* is a rarely used idiom in English, and there is no equivalent in Italian. However, it is transparent, which may

have assisted the Italian subjects to recognise at least one of the correct meanings (88.2%). 70.6% of the Italians recognised one correct meaning and only 23.5% of the Italian subjects were able to recognise two correct meanings. 79.4% of the Italians chose the alternative A *have a suspicion that is based on feelings* and 35.3% of the Italians chose the alternative D *feel very strongly that you are right about something*.

Tighten your belt is a semi-transparent idiom, frequently used in both English and Italian, and it has an Italian equivalent *stringere la cinghia*. 88.2% of the Italian subjects chose one of the correct alternatives. The meaning of the Italian equivalent is more close to the meaning of the alternative C *spend less and live more carefully*, which was chosen by 76.5% of the Italians, while only 17.6% chose the alternative D *demand less material goods*. Yet again the Italians favoured the alternative that was more close to the meaning of the L1 expression. *Bite off more than you can chew* is rarely used in English, but a fully transparent idiom, which may be the reason that even though there is no equivalent in Italian, 85.3% of the Italians recognised one of the correct meanings. 67.6% chose the alternative D *try to do too much* while the alternative B *try to do something that is far too difficult* was chosen by 35.3% of the Italians. Noticeably, 14.7% of the Italians did not choose any of the alternatives.

Make your blood boil is a transparent idiom and fairly frequently used in English, but rarely used in Italian. It has an equivalent in Italian *sangue bollente*, which may explain why 82.4% of the Italians were able to pick out the correct answer A *make you very angry*. However, 14.7% of the Italians chose the distractors B *make you passionate* and D *make you feel indignant or resentful*. The Italian expression *sangue bollente* has other meanings that are close to the alternatives B and D, which may explain the Italian subjects' answers. *Cut to the bone* is an opaque and fairly frequent idiom in English and in Italian. It has an equivalent in Italian though with a slightly different wording, *ridotto all'osso*. 82.4% chose one of the correct alternatives; in fact, 70.6% chose the alternative B, *reduce resources and costs as much as possible*, while only 11.8% chose the other correct answer A *offend a person deeply*. The meaning of an Italian equivalent is very similar to the alternative B, which may have affected the interpretation. The Italians knew only one correct answer; no one was able to recognise both correct answers.

Lick someone's arse was comprehended by 79.4% of the Italian subjects. It is a transparent idiom and has an equivalent in Italian, *leccare il culo*. This idiom is rarely

used in English but frequently used in Italian. From the Italian subjects 47.1% chose the alternative B *do anything to please someone* and 55.9% chose the other alternative D *behave in a slavish manner to please someone who is powerful*; both alternatives are close to the meaning of the Italian equivalent. *The early bird catches the worm* is a fully transparent idiom with an equivalent in Italian *uccello mattutino prende il verme*, but it is rarely used in both languages. However, the L1 expression and transparency may have assisted in the comprehension since 79.4% of the Italians recognised one of the correct answers. Of the Italians 70.6% chose the alternative A *a person who starts to do something as soon as possible will be successful* while only 14.7% of the Italians chose the alternative D *a person who gets up early to work will be successful*.

6.2 Idioms that were incorrectly comprehended most often

Out of 36 idioms six idioms that caused most often difficulties to the Finnish subjects and Italian subjects will now be examined. These idioms will be considered in an attempt to find possible reasons for the subjects' incorrect answers. As discussed earlier, there are 'false friends' between Finnish and English and Italian and English, which may have affected the comprehension.

6.2.1 Finnish subjects

The idioms that caused most often difficulties to the Finnish subjects were either idioms that did not have equivalents in Finnish or idioms that were similar to their Finnish equivalents. One idiom was opaque, three were semi-transparent and one was transparent. It was important to look at these idioms more closely to see what kind of distractors attracted the subjects. *A big fish* was one of the most difficult idioms for the Finnish subjects. Only 37.1 % of the Finnish subjects chose the intended answer D (*a person who is important and powerful*), whereas 74.3% chose the incorrect answer A (*a lie or an exaggeration*). The idiom is semi-transparent, but there is no equivalent in Finnish. The distractor *a lie or an exaggeration* (A) was very attractive to the Finnish subjects, which may show the effect of their L1. There is a Finnish expression *kertoa kalavalheita*, which means to tell big lies about catching big fish or exaggerate the size of the catches.

One of the idioms that posed difficulties to the Finnish subjects was *go into overdrive*. It is a semi-transparent idiom, frequently used in English and in Finnish, and has a Finnish equivalent *käydä ylikierroksilla* though with a slightly different meaning. While 40% of the subjects chose the correct answer *begin to work very hard or perform very well* (A), 8.6% did not answer at all, and the alternative B *show great excitement or interest in something* was favoured by 60% of the Finnish subjects. The meaning of the Finnish equivalent is also connected to the meaning of the alternative B, which may be the reason why the Finnish subjects preferred the alternative B. This would suggest that the Finnish subjects relied on their L1 when choosing the correct answer.

Go into the red is an opaque idiom that has no equivalent in Finnish. The correct alternative B *owe money to the bank* was recognised by 40 % of the Finnish subjects, but 14.3% did not answer at all, and 34.3% considered the distractor *become very angry* (A) to be the correct interpretation. This would suggest that the Finnish subjects either confused the idiom with *go/turn red* or looked for an expression in Finnish that shared some words with the idiom in question. The Finnish expression *nähdä punaista* and the English expression *go/turn red* carry the same meaning *become very angry*. This again indicates the uncertainty of the Finnish subjects when choosing the meaning of an idiom. As this idiom was opaque, from the image the literal meaning created it was impossible for the Finnish subjects to find out the correct meaning.

Have blood on your hands is a transparent idiom that has an equivalent in Finnish, *tahrata kätensä vereen*. The correct answer C, *be responsible for someone's death*, was recognised by 65.7% of Finnish subjects, but still 71.4% chose the alternative A, *be involved in something unfair or dishonest*. This alternative is undoubtedly related to the correct meaning of an idiom, but it was expected that advanced learners of English would distinguish between the exact meanings of two different idioms, *have blood on your hands* and *dirty hands*, whose meaning is close to the alternative A. There is also an expression in Finnish, *liata kätensä*, whose meaning is close to A, which may have misled the Finnish subjects. This expression is frequently used in Finnish, while the Finnish equivalent is rarely used as well as the English idiom.

Sweep the board is a semi-transparent idiom and it has an equivalent in Finnish with a slightly different wording, *putsata pöytä/palkintopöytä*. However, only 51.4 % of the Finnish subjects chose at least one of the correct alternatives *gain the greatest amount of*

success (B) or *win all the prizes* (C), but the most popular alternative of the Finnish subjects was *forget past mistakes or arguments* (D) (54.3%). The Finnish equivalent *putsata pöytä* may sometimes carry the same meaning as the alternative D, but there is also another Finnish expression, *aloittaa puhtaalta pöydältä*, which may have been misleading. Its meaning is similar to that of the English idiom *wipe the slate clean*.

Another opaque idiom that had no equivalent in Finnish was *a carbon copy*. In this case it was difficult to decide whether the idiom was opaque or semi-transparent since the link between the literal and the figurative meanings of the idiom could be found out. In the past carbon paper was placed between blank sheets of paper in a typewriter to make carbon copies. However, contemporary speakers may not be able to discover the link. Still considering the literal meaning of *copy*, the expression as a whole was classified as semi-transparent. The majority of the Finnish subjects (65.7%) chose at least one of the correct answers, *a complete or close copy* (A) or *a person who is like another person in many ways* (C). However, 8.6% did not answer the question at all and the alternative B *cheaply made or done, of inferior quality* was chosen by 25.7% of the Finnish subjects. It was a distractor since the Finnish expression *halpa kopio* carries the same meaning as the alternative B. The subjects found a link between the literal and the figurative meaning of the idiom, but many of them were still attracted by the Finnish false friend.

6.2.2 Italian subjects

The most of the idioms that caused difficulties to the Italian learners of English were idioms that had no equivalents in Italian (4), and only two were similar to their Italian equivalents. Two of the idioms were opaque, four semi-transparent and one was transparent. *A dark horse* is an opaque idiom since the figurative interpretation of the idiom does not reflect the literal one. There is no equivalent in Italian and only 29.4 % of the Italian learners recognised at least one of the correct meanings of the idiom, *a person whose true character is unknown but who may be better than is thought* (A) or *a person about whom very little is known but may be about to have success* (C). 23.5% of the Italian subjects did not answer the question at all and as much as 50% of the Italians chose the alternative D *a person who is very different from the other people and is considered bad by them*. It could be suggested that the Italians preferred this alternative since there is an Italian expression *essere la pecora nera*, whose meaning is very close to D. Since the

idiom was opaque and lacking an equivalent, the Italian subjects looked for an Italian idiom and saw the link between black sheep and dark horse, favouring the alternative D.

Sweep the board is another idiom that caused difficulties for both subject groups. It is semi-transparent and there is no equivalent in Italian. At least one of the correct answers, *gain the greatest amount of success* (B) or *win all the prizes* (C), was chosen by 47.1 % of the Italian subjects but 41.2% were attracted by the alternative D, *forget past mistakes or arguments*. Also 14.7% of the Italians did not answer the question at all. It seems that the Italian subjects attempted to find a link between the image the idiom created and its meaning. There is also an Italian expression *sedersi intorno a un tavolo* which means to gather around a table to discuss problems thoroughly. These two things together may have misled the Italian subjects.

Open your heart is a semi-transparent idiom that had no equivalent in Italian. The Italian subjects preferred the incorrect answers A, *be completely honest and sincere* (73.5%) and D *display your feelings openly* (47.1%) and only 41.2% chose the correct answer B, *tell someone your most private thoughts or feelings*. The Italian expression *a cuore aperto*, whose meaning is close to both A and D, may have distracted the Italian subjects. It is obvious that the alternatives A and D are closely linked to the correct meaning of the idiom, but as it was the case with *have blood on your hands*, it was assumed that advanced learners of English would be able to distinguish between the exact meanings of idioms.

This idiom caused difficulties for both subject groups. *Have blood on your hands* is semantically transparent and there is an equivalent in Italian, *sparger sangue*, though it is not identical to the English idiom. This idiom is rarely used in English and in Italian. Only 26.5% of the Italian subjects chose the correct answer *be responsible for someone's death* (C) while 73.5% of the Italians fell for the same false friend as the Finnish subjects, *be involved in something unfair or dishonest* (A). As was the case with the Finns, there is an expression in Italian whose meaning is close to A, *avere le mani sporche*, thus when choosing the correct answer for the idiom the Italians seemed to have relied on their L1. In addition, this expression is frequently used in Italian. All alternatives were semantically closely linked to each other, and thus the Italians clearly had trouble choosing the correct answer.

Up to your neck is fairly frequently used in English and in Italian; it is a semi-transparent idiom that has an equivalent in Italian. Nevertheless, only 44.1% of the Italian subjects were able to recognise the correct meaning of the idiom, *very deeply involved in something, especially something bad as debt or corruption* (D). There is an expression in Italian, *essere nei guai fino al collo*, whose meaning is close to D. However, 14.7% of the Italians did not answer the question at all, and the preferred answer of the Italian subjects was *having a great deal of work to do or having more work to do than one can handle* (A) as 47.1% of the Italian chose this alternative. There is an Italian expression *preso fino al collo* whose meaning is close to A, thus it could be the reason why the Italian subjects were attracted by that alternative.

Another idiom that caused difficulties for both subject groups was *go into overdrive*. This idiom is semi-transparent, and there is no equivalent in Italian. 26.5% of the Italian subjects did not answer the question at all, and most Italians failed to recognise the correct meaning of the idiom, *begin to work very hard or perform very well*, as only 26.5% chose the correct alternative A. The most common answer of the Italian subjects was B, *show great excitement or interest in something* (35.3%). There is no Italian expression that could have misled the Italian subjects, but perhaps they tried to find a link between the image the idiom creates and its meaning. It could also be the case that they confused the idiom with another English idiom, *go overboard for*, whose meaning is close to B.

6.3 Student perceptions of idiom knowledge

The fourth research question in this study was designed to examine how the students perceive their ability to use idioms and whether they consider necessary to learn idioms. The subjects were asked to respond to the following questions: Do you know how to use idioms? Is it necessary to learn idioms? The majority of the subjects responded to these questions; only one Finnish subject and one Italian subject did not respond at all. In this section the findings on the responses of the Finnish and the Italian students will be discussed in relation to the results of the statistical analysis.

6.3.1 Ability to use idioms

As discussed in section 2.2, when learning to comprehend and produce a language, learners need to understand how the parts of language function as parts of conversation. In addition, language learners have to understand how to use words and sentences to keep conversation flowing. The most of the Finnish subjects felt that they know how to use English idioms. Nevertheless, it seems that the Finnish students' knowledge of English idioms is somehow limited; the subjects commented that they know and use only the most common English idioms or the ones they are familiar with. Some Finnish subjects even felt that the idioms in the questionnaire were difficult or even "completely strange"². However, it should be noted that only one Finnish subject felt that her knowledge of English idioms is inadequate: "I have been taught very little only in secondary school and thus have very little knowledge of how to use them and of what they mean". These findings support the results of the statistical analysis that the Finnish students' knowledge of idioms is somewhat lacking; only a few Finnish subjects commented that they know well how to use idioms or at least most of them.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the Italians felt that they do not know how to use English idioms. Nevertheless, these findings are consistent with the results of the statistical analysis and support the idea that, even though also the Finnish students lack knowledge of idioms to some degree, they are still more capable to use various linguistic skills in order to get the meaning of an idiom than the Italian students of English. The Italians seem to be aware of their poor knowledge of English idioms; they commented that they do not know how to use idioms properly, and that they are uncertain in which context idioms can be used. It should be noted that only a few Italian subjects had been taught English idioms, which may explain why the Italians lack the knowledge of idioms. However, many of them were willing to learn idioms, as an Italian subject put it: "I've never been taught idioms, but I think it would be nice to know some idioms". It should also be pointed out that some Italian subjects responded that they know how to use idioms; these subjects also performed well in the idiom comprehension test. As the Italians rarely had been taught English idioms, they had learnt idioms on their own, by watching English films and TV series or by reading English books. Also some Finnish subjects mentioned

² The quotations are reproduced verbatim, errors included.

that they had learnt idioms, for instance, from TV shows and movies, but also from native speakers of English in real life settings.

As studying the role of L1 in idiom comprehension is one of the main aims of the present study, it is interesting to note that one Finnish subject highlighted the fact that some English idioms are “almost the same in Finnish as well”. The Italians more often mentioned the similarities between English and their L1, but they also commented on the differences between these two languages. The Italian subjects felt that since English idioms are often different from the Italian ones, it is difficult to comprehend them. One Italian subject pointed out that idioms are “difficult to use because sometimes they’re distant from Italian idioms”. Many Italian subjects had noticed that the knowledge of L1 facilitates the comprehension of English idioms: “I know some of them by reading and thanks to their similarities to some of the Italian idioms”. These findings suggest that L2 learners are aware of cross-linguistic similarities and differences, and understand that L1 may facilitate L2 vocabulary learning; as the results of the statistical analysis showed, for both subject groups idioms with equivalents in their L1 were easier to comprehend than idioms with no equivalents. The Italian subjects more often commented on the differences and similarities between English idioms and L1 idioms, thus it could be argued that when trying to comprehend English idioms, the Italian subjects more often looked for similar looking expressions in their L1 than the Finnish subjects, or at least the Italians seem to have done it consciously. However, it should be borne in mind that the subjects of the study were not asked about their views on the differences or similarities between English and their L1, thus firm conclusions cannot be drawn.

6.3.2 Attitudes towards the necessity of learning idioms

As was pointed out in section 3.2, idioms are widespread in English and L2 learners should have some kind of knowledge of them as they contribute to fluency and native-like competence of L2 learners. In this study the subjects were asked if they thought that it is necessary to learn idioms. The overall response to this question was positive as the majority of both Finnish and Italian subjects indicated that it is necessary and useful to learn them. One Italian subject even commented that it is “strictly necessary to learn English idioms”. As discussed earlier, L2 learners encounter idioms in everyday language and comprehending them is often crucial. Also the Finnish subjects pointed out that it is necessary to learn idioms to avoid misunderstandings: “Of course it is necessary to learn

them because they are part of everyday communication and if you don't understand the meaning of idioms you may encounter problems in communication". According to another Finnish subject, since native speakers of English use idioms all the time, not knowing them might lead to confusion. Also the Italian subjects mentioned that knowing idioms helps understanding a foreign language: "it's necessary to learn them to have a full comprehension of the language". These findings suggest that the Finnish and Italian students of English consider idioms to be a crucial part of vocabulary.

Some Finnish and Italian subjects emphasised the role of idioms in communication as idioms allow language learners to express in a few words what would require many words to express in literal terms. One Finnish subject stated that idioms are "necessary in order to communicate and use language in the best possible manner", and an Italian individual commented that "often you use idioms for tell something that you can't describe with other words". It was also pointed out by a Finnish subject that using idioms makes your language more interesting, colourful and rich. Interestingly, L2 culture was mentioned by both the Finnish and the Italian subjects; one Finnish subject noted that idioms help "to understand the language and the culture better". As was pointed out earlier, culture is reflected through language, and the meanings of idioms are often linked to the use of language in a particular culture. Also an Italian individual commented that it is important to learn idioms, "because they allow us [...] to understand better the English culture and world".

Another point that was mentioned by both subject groups was that idioms contribute to L2 learners' fluency. One Finnish subject stated that the use of idioms distinguishes advanced learners from lower level language learners and makes L2 speakers more fluent. According to some other Finnish subjects, it is necessary to learn idioms in order to attain native-like competence and "to master a language". Also the Italians perceived learners who use idioms to be fluent. According to the Italian subjects it is necessary to learn idioms "in order to speak fluently", and since "[t]hey can help us to go straight out the point of what we want to say". The Italian subjects also said that it is essential to learn idioms in order to expand vocabulary and "improve our knowledge of the language". According to the Italians, learning idioms makes L2 speakers' vocabulary richer. It was pointed out by several subjects of the study that for advanced level learners it is necessary to know idioms since they are used in everyday language and they contribute to the fluency.

Only a small number of respondents indicated that it is not necessary to learn idioms. Five Finnish students thought that it is not necessary to learn idioms, but still useful: “I would not say that it is vital to learn idioms but learning them would definitely be beneficial since they are used quite often”. Four Italian subjects stated that it is not necessary or important to learn idioms, but only one subject validated his argument: “The main important thing it’s to learn the language in order to understand it and to be understood. The idioms come after all of this.” Although some Italian subjects did not consider learning idioms necessary, they also emphasised that it is useful. Another subject added that whether it is necessary or not to learn idioms depends “on the field of study and/or work/use of the language”. Interestingly, only one Finnish subject indicated that it is not necessary to learn idioms at all: “it would be better to try and avoid them as much as possible, as they often don’t work cross-culturally”. It could be argued that this Finnish student was aware of the false friends and even treated L1 idioms as untransferable; he performed poorly in the idiom comprehension test. There were L1 idioms that could have been transferred to L2, but this Finnish subject did not take advantage of this potential.

7 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how the Finnish and Italian learners of English recognise English idioms and how L1 affects idiom comprehension. Also the effect of frequency and semantic transparency on idiom comprehension was studied. In addition, the students' perceptions of idiom knowledge were investigated. In this section, the results of the study will be discussed.

7.1 Finnish and Italian students' knowledge of English idioms

The first research question focused on the recognition of idiom meanings. The results of the statistical analysis suggest that idioms pose particular difficulties for non-native speakers; the Finnish students of English recognised on average 62.1% of the correct meanings of idioms and the Italian students only 45.2% of the correct meanings. Also the findings on the responses of the Finnish and Italian students support this view; the Finnish subjects commented that they know only the most common English idioms or the ones they are familiar with, and most of the Italians felt that they lack the knowledge of English idioms. Obviously, it was not assumed that L2 learners of English would be familiar with all the meanings of idioms since the complexity of idioms causes difficulties even for native speakers (see e.g. Mäntylä 2004). Instead, it was hypothesised that Finnish and Italian students would encounter problems when attempting to recognise idiom meanings. The findings of this study are in agreement with Arnaud and Savignon's (1997) results and supports Cooper's (1999) view in that even for intermediate and advanced level L2 learners idioms pose particular difficulties. Comprehending idioms requires knowing several literal and figurative meanings of idioms, thus it is challenging even for native speakers, and L2 learners do not possess the same degree of linguistic competence as native speakers do.

Although the difference between the Finnish and Italian learners of English was not a major issue, it was important to look at it as it was notable. A comparison between the performance scores of the two groups of learners showed that the Finnish subjects performed significantly better than the Italian subjects. Also the Finnish and Italian students' perceptions of their ability to use idioms support these results; even though the Finnish students' idiom knowledge seems to be somewhat lacking, they felt that they

know how to use at least some English idioms, while the majority of the Italians commented that they do not know how to use idioms.

This finding is interesting, but it is difficult to explain. However, the Finns are well-known for being good at foreign languages, while the reputation of the Italians is the opposite. The reasons for the Italians' reputation can be found in the sociolinguistic and educational situation of Italy (Pulcini 1997: 82). The level of literacy has been low until the middle of the last century and the wide use of dialects has demanded a greater emphasis on the teaching of Italian than on the teaching of foreign languages. In addition, Pulcini (*ibid.*) argues that foreign language teaching is inadequate in Italy; the humanistic tradition of Italian education has used models of language teaching that are based on those traditionally used for classical languages, such as translation of written texts and little use of spoken language.

The Finns' skills in English have also been studied (Leppänen *et al.* 2011), and the findings show that English has a strong presence in Finland and it is the most widely studied and most commonly used foreign language in Finland. Finns also evaluate their own skills in English as relatively good. According to Leppänen *et al.* (2011: 20), the reasons for this are multiple: Finns study many languages, since, as speakers of two relatively small languages, they need foreign languages to be able to communicate internationally. Also foreign language teaching has a long history in Finland. With respect to studying English at the university, in Italy students who wish to study English do not necessarily have to pass a language skills test, while in Finland, in order to be able to study English at the university, an entrance exam must be passed as all applicants are expected to have excellent language skills in English. However, it should be noticed that not all Italians performed poorly in idiom comprehension test; the best score of the Italian subjects was only three points less than that of the Finns.

The replies of the subjects showed that for most Finnish subjects at least some English idioms had been taught, while it seems that idioms do not play a big part in the school curriculum in Italy since only a few Italian subjects had been taught idioms. As the time spent in English-speaking countries was thought to have an effect on the comprehension of idioms, subjects were asked whether they had lived in an English-speaking country and for how long. With respect to this, the subjects shared much the same background as only four of the Finnish subjects and two of Italian subjects had lived in an English-

speaking country. This may be one of the reasons why the Finnish and Italian subjects had problems in recognising the meanings of English idioms. It is important to note that in some idioms "cultural opacity" is embedded, and learners' own experience in the target culture affects the comprehension (see Cooper 1999). Schmitt and Carter (2004) propose that learners often lack sufficient input when it comes to idioms, which may be the case with the subjects of this study. Also Arnaud & Savignon (1997: 167) have pointed out that it could be that continuous exposure to the language is necessary for native-like performance in the case of idioms. According to Irujo (1993), to learn idioms students need to be exposed to them as much as possible, and as the Italian subjects had not been taught idioms, their poor performance was not a surprise. Finnish L2 learners may encounter idioms, for instance, in American and British films, but for Italians it is not that easy since in Italy dubbing of foreign films continues even to this day. However, some Italian students commented that they had learnt idioms by watching English films and TV series. Nevertheless, it is also true that when encountering idioms in films learners' exposure to idioms occurs in non-interactive situation where negotiation for meaning is not possible (see e.g. Irujo 1986b).

The Italian learners' strategy for unfamiliar idioms seemed to be skipping them as they produced a larger percentage of missing answers (9.2%) compared to the Finnish learners (2.1%). One or more answers were missing only from nine Finnish subjects while one or more answers were missing altogether from 16 Italian subjects. It seems that the Italian subjects were not willing to try to work out the meanings of idioms on the basis of the literal meaning or to guess, while the Finnish learners preferred to somehow find out the answer. Additionally, the subjects were given a chance to write their own comments if they thought that a possible meaning was lacking from the given alternatives. Only a few subjects had offered other meanings, and actually they had mostly explained the same meanings that were given but in their own words.

The subjects of the study were asked about the necessity of learning idioms. The majority of both Finnish and Italian students responded that it is necessary and useful to learn idioms. The Finnish and Italian students pointed out that learning idioms is useful in order to be able to communicate in a foreign language and to avoid misunderstandings. According to the subjects of this study, idioms make L2 learners' vocabulary richer and more colourful, and they contribute to L2 learners' fluency. Thus, the subjects' attitudes towards idioms and learning them were very positive, and idioms were considered to be

a crucial part of vocabulary. Only a small number of respondents commented that learning idioms is not necessary.

7.2 The role of L1 in idiom comprehension

Investigating the role of L1 in comprehending English idioms was one of the main aims of this study. The results support the notion that advanced learners of L2 use their knowledge of idioms in their L1 to comprehend idioms in L2. Both Finnish and Italian learners of English relied on their L1 when comprehending idioms, even though Finnish learners' L1 is typologically different from English. These results corroborate the findings of earlier studies on idioms and non-native learners (Irujo 1986b & 1993, Mäntylä 2005) in that idioms that have equivalents in the learners' L1 are the easier to comprehend than idioms with no equivalents in learners' L1. The results also support Ringbom's (2007) view in that when formal and functional similarities can be established, positive transfer is likely to occur.

Since in this part of the study, the effect of L1 on idiom comprehension was studied and not how many idiom meanings the subjects knew, the subjects were given one point if they recognised at least one of the correct meanings. A comparison between the percentages of correct answers of two types of idioms showed that Italian and Finnish students of English performed significantly better in comprehending idioms that had equivalents in their L1 than idioms that had no equivalents in their L1. In both groups, the mean percentages of correct answers of idioms that had equivalents in subjects' L1 were significantly higher than the mean of idioms that had no equivalents, in the Italian group the means differing even more than in the Finnish group. The subjects also commented on the similarities and differences between English and their L1; the Italian subjects felt that those English idioms that are similar to the Italian ones, are easy to comprehend. On the other hand, the Italian students also pointed out that different idioms are difficult to understand.

Kellerman studied (1987) that Dutch advanced learners of English treated Dutch-like idioms as untransferable. However, the results of the present study showed quite the opposite; similar idioms provided the most opportunity for interference from L1. The idioms that were easiest to comprehend for the Finnish and Italian learners of English

were examined more closely to see which idiom features may have facilitated idiom comprehension and what kind of strategies the students may have used in order to get the correct meanings of idioms. As discussed in the theory part, L2 learners employ a variety of strategies to comprehend idioms (e.g. Cooper 1999); it seems that Finnish and Italian learners' main strategy was to look for the similarities between English idioms and L1 expressions. If the learners did not know the correct meaning, they turned to their L1 and chose from the alternatives an L1 expression that shared at least some words with the English idiom. This was the case not only with opaque idioms but with semi-transparent and transparent idioms as well, where the meaning could have been worked out quite easily. Another strategy, although not as used as relying on L1 by any means, seemed to be relying on the literal meaning of an idiom. If an idiom had no equivalent in learners' L1, but it was fully transparent, the Finnish and Italian learners were able to recognise the correct meaning.

Sometimes learners relied too much on their L1 which resulted in errors thus it was useful also to take a closer look at the idioms that were incorrectly comprehended most often. The findings are consistent with those of Mäntylä (2004) who found that students' resort to L1 may lead to erroneous interpretations. There were distractors among the options and they were created with close Finnish and Italian expressions or idioms in mind. The Italian and Finnish students were mostly led astray by the distractors that were somehow similar to L1 expressions. Sometimes there was no equivalent in Finnish or in Italian to an English idiom, but there was a false friend among the options that shared, for instance, one word with the English idiom, and Finnish and Italian learners were misled by that. Some Finnish and Italian equivalents had several meanings and some of the meanings were not close to the correct meaning of an English idiom. It was interesting to see that learners preferred the meaning that was more common in their L1, even though that was not the correct meaning of an English idiom. The subjects' performance reveals that idioms are complicated lexical units, and that relying on L1 when comprehending them is not always wise. However, looking for the cross-linguistic similarities when comprehending idioms was undoubtedly more of a help than a hindrance.

7.3 The effect of transparency and frequency on idiom comprehension

One of the aims of the present study was also to investigate differences in the comprehension of idioms depending on their characteristics. According to the definition of an idiom adopted in this study, one of the most significant features of idioms is semantic transparency thus this study investigated whether it affected the Finnish and Italian learners' performance in an idiom comprehension task. Earlier research has shown that transparency is a characteristic that most likely helps L2 learners when trying to figure out the meaning of an idiom (Irujo 1993, Mäntylä 2004), thus one of the hypotheses of the study was that a greater overlap between literal and figurative meanings would produce better results in L2 idiom comprehension.

As has been discussed in section 2, idioms can be classified according to their degree of transparency. In this study, Moon's (1998) classification of idioms into transparent, semi-transparent and opaque idioms was followed since it was important to identify various stages of metaphoricity, but these categories were enough since the borders between them may be blurry. In the present study, 30.6% of the idioms were transparent, 55.6% of the idioms were semi-transparent and 13.9% of the idioms were opaque. This is in agreement with Moon's (1998) data, where 37% of idioms were transparent, 51% semi-transparent and only 12% opaque. The results of the present study revealed that for the Finnish group the means for semi-transparent and transparent idioms was higher than the mean for opaque idioms, although the differences were not statistically significant. Previous research (Irujo 1986b, Mäntylä 2004) has shown that higher transparency facilitates comprehension and, even though there were no significant differences between transparent, semi-transparent and opaque idioms, judging from the means it could be argued that L2 learners can more easily understand the metaphorical meanings of idioms by using the hints that the literal meanings offer. The idea that transparency assists in idiom comprehension was supported by closer analysis of the easiest idioms; they were all transparent or semi-transparent. In addition, among those idioms there was an idiom that had no equivalent in Finnish, and the subjects were still able to recognise the correct meaning. The idiom was fully transparent, thus it could be argued that the Finnish students benefited from transparency.

Also for the Italian group the means for transparent and semi-transparent idioms were higher than the mean for opaque idioms, although no significant differences were found.

However, when examining closely the idioms that were the easiest to comprehend for the Italians, it was found that they were all transparent or semi-transparent and there were two idioms among the easiest ones that had no equivalent in Italian, but were still well understood. They were both fully transparent, which may explain why the Italians did not struggle with the idioms. However, this study has been unable to provide adequate evidence on this issue. This may stem from the fact that the subjects relied mostly on their L1 and thus were attracted by the distractors. The sample size was also small as well as the number of opaque idioms included in the questionnaire, which may explain this result.

In addition to transparency, it has been suggested that frequency affects the comprehension of idioms. Irujo's (1986b) study found that more frequent idioms are easier to comprehend than rarer idioms. However, in this study, frequency did not seem to have a large effect on the Finnish and Italian learners thus the findings accords with Mäntylä's (2004) observations. Finnish and Italian learners were able to recognise idiom meanings even if an idiom was rarely used in English. It is interesting to note that the Finnish subjects performed better in comprehending rarely used idioms than fairly frequently used or frequently used idioms, while the Italians were able to comprehend better fairly frequently used idioms than rarely used or frequently used idioms. More determining than the effect of frequency was if there was an equivalent in learners' L1 and if an idiom was frequent in their L1.

7.4 Evaluation of the study

There is always something to improve in every study. Although the questionnaire seemed to work out quite well as per the plan and expectations, there were some problems. Idioms were chosen from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* thus they obviously did not represent all the English idioms. Furthermore, some of the idioms were mainly used in British English, thus if there were those among the subjects who had been exposed more to American English or some other variety of English, they might have been at a disadvantage. However, *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* was the most suitable for the purposes of this study as it listed the idioms according to their frequency. It should also be borne in mind that the idioms chosen for this study may have more meanings than the ones presented in the questionnaire. The meaning alternatives were based on two English-English idiom dictionaries, and as Gibbs (1992: 485) proposes, "dictionary definitions do not necessarily reflect the complexity in people's mental representations

for words and phrases”. However, it would have been impossible to cover all the possible meanings of the idioms, thus these dictionaries still offered the most reliable sources for the idiom meanings offered in the questionnaire.

It was also problematic to decide on the relationship between the Finnish and English and Italian and English expressions. People have different opinions and views about the meanings of idioms even in their L1, and the situation with L2 idioms is even more challenging. An English idiom and a Finnish or an Italian expression may be, for instance, similar in form but slightly different in meaning or different in form but identical in meaning, thus it was not always easy to decide whether an idiom had an equivalent in learners’ L1 or not. Some earlier idiom studies have divided idioms into three categories (e.g. Irujo 1986b, 1993): idioms that have identical equivalents in L1, idioms that have equivalents very similar in form, and idioms that are totally different in form in L1, but have equivalent meanings. However, in this study idioms were divided into two categories: idioms that had equivalents in Finnish and in Italian (i.e. idioms that were either identical or somehow similar in form and meaning) and idioms that had no equivalents in Finnish or Italian at all or that were similar in form but had different meanings. This classification was adequate and there was no need to distinguish between identical and similar idioms since both types of idioms may show the effect of L1. Furthermore, as the results showed, L2 learners considered it as sufficient if a figurative expression in Finnish/Italian shared one word with the English idiom. It could be argued that identical idioms are easier to comprehend than similar idioms, but as the results of the present study showed, among the idioms that were easiest to comprehend, there were also idioms that were similar to their L1 equivalents and not only idioms that were identical.

Finding idioms that had equivalents and idioms that had no equivalents in Italian was a complex task. I had to rely on Italian-Italian idiom dictionaries, even though it is unrealistic to assume that the dictionaries would be omniscient. The same problem arose when creating distractors as I am not a native speaker of Italian. Also categorising idioms according to their transparency was not an easy task. The boundaries between transparent, semi-transparent and opaque idioms overlap thus it was sometimes difficult to say which category an idiom belongs to. Classifying idioms according to their transparency is subjective, but, as semantic transparency was considered to be one of the most essential features of idioms, it was necessary in order to be able to analyse idioms according to

their transparency. However, creating the distractors, the assessment of the characteristics of idioms and the classifications were carried out systematically.

Judging from the mean score and the percentage of missing answers, the idiom comprehension task was especially difficult for the Italian learners of English. As their answers to the background questions revealed, some of the Italian learners considered their current level of English as intermediate and not as advanced as was assumed since they study English at the university. However, the Finnish subjects performed a lot better in the idiom comprehension task, and, as it was assumed that they would be advanced level learners of English, the questionnaire could not be too easy. It was maybe an inconsiderate decision that there were distractors among the options since, as the findings suggest, the L1 played the biggest role in the idiom comprehension and the students were misled by the distractors, thus the effect of other idiom characteristics (transparency and frequency) remained unclear. However, since the main aim of the study was to investigate the role of the L1, it was necessary to include distractors; the distractors showed even more clearly that the subjects relied on their L1 when comprehending idioms.

Also a multiple-choice questionnaire has its limitations since they do not usually allow the subjects to give their own answers. However, the subjects of the present study were offered the possibility to give their own meanings for the idioms. In addition, multiple-choice questionnaires are easy to mark, thus there is no possibility for disagreement of assessment. The comprehension of idioms could have been tested by asking the subjects to write the definitions of idioms in either Finnish/Italian or English. However, it would have been even more difficult for non-native speakers. All things considered, a multiple-choice questionnaire seemed to work out quite well. Only the comprehension of idioms was tested and not production, thus the questionnaire served its purpose quite well.

The effect of the characteristics of idioms was also investigated in this study. Transparency was chosen as it is one the most important feature of idioms and previous studies have shown (Irujo 1986b, Mäntylä 2005) that it facilitates idiom comprehension. The effect of the frequency of idioms on idiom comprehension was also studied since earlier studies (Irujo 1986b) have suggested that more frequent idioms are easier to understand. It would have been possible to investigate also other idiom characteristics, but since the main focus was on the role of the L1, no other characteristics were taken into account.

8 Conclusion

Idioms are considered to be an important part of language use as they can be found everywhere in written and spoken language. While idioms appear to be well known to native speakers, non-native speakers struggle with idioms since they do not usually mean what they literally state. Idioms are very complex in nature since they can have a literal meaning but their figurative meaning must be understood metaphorically. Furthermore, the degree of metaphoricity may vary, and idioms may vary in form and carry several meanings, which makes them difficult for L2 learners. L2 learners encounter idioms, for instance, in conversations, newspaper titles, TV series and even political debates, and understanding them is often crucial. Lacking the ability to understand these tortuous formulaic sequences may have an effect on the proficiency of L2 learners. Idioms are acquired gradually, in the course of the linguistic development, and in order to be able to comprehend idioms, language learners have to possess various linguistic skills; learners should be able to make inferences, use their imagination and activate metalinguistic knowledge, for instance. However, L2 learners do not possess the same degree of linguistic knowledge as native speakers do, which makes the issue of L2 idiom comprehension even more intriguing.

The present paper has given an account of the complex world of idioms and shed light on L2 learners' knowledge of idioms. The recognition of idiom meanings of the Finnish and Italian advanced level university students of English was investigated, and one of the main purposes of this study was to examine the role of L1 in idiom comprehension. As idioms have various characteristics, this study attempted also to find out how frequency and semantic transparency affect the comprehension and recognition of idiom meanings. In addition, it was important to investigate whether the students know how to use idioms and whether they consider learning idioms necessary.

As could be seen from the results, it was not easy for the Finnish and Italian students of English to recognise the meanings of idioms. Idioms are challenging since they often carry several meanings and their meanings cannot be predicted from the literal meanings of the components involved. The results suggest that both Finnish and Italian university students of English lack figurative competence to some degree, even though they would otherwise be proficient in English. However, the Finnish students performed significantly better in idiom comprehension task than the Italian students of English. This might

indicate that, even though also Finnish students' knowledge of idioms is somewhat lacking, they are still more able to use various linguistic skills and strategies in order to get the meaning of an idiom than the Italian students of English. The Finnish students also felt that they know how to use at least the most common English idioms, while the Italian students commented that their knowledge of English idioms is lacking.

However, it should be pointed out that naturally not all idioms presented students with problems. Mostly L1 offered help to the Finnish and Italian learners, but sometimes an unfamiliar idiom made sense to them, in spite of the fact that there was no equivalent in their L1. In those cases, transparency was of assistance for non-native speakers. One of the main focuses of the present study was on L1 transfer, and the results provide additional evidence with respect to the role of L1 in idiom comprehension; idioms with equivalents in students' L1 were easier to comprehend than idioms with no equivalents. The students seemed to rely on their L1, which is in accordance with the earlier studies (Irujo 1986b, 1993; Mäntylä 2004). When trying to find out the meaning of an unfamiliar idiom, the students looked for similar looking expressions in their L1. Both Finnish and Italian students' strategy was mainly to rely on their native language. The results showed that while students' L1 had a big role in comprehending idioms, the characteristics of transparency and frequency did not seem to affect that much. Sometimes learners succeeded in getting the correct meaning of an idiom by linking its literal and figurative meanings; fully transparent idioms were easily comprehended even if the idiom had no equivalent in learners' L1. Frequency, on the other hand, did not seem to play a big role in idiom comprehension; L2 speakers were able to comprehend idioms that were rarely used in English if they had an equivalent in their L1, and frequently used idioms in English were not easy to comprehend if they had no equivalent in students' L1.

A number of caveats need to be noted regarding the present study. With such a small sample size, the findings are not transferable to concern all Finnish and Italian university students of English. Also, the current study has only examined L2 learners' receptive knowledge of idioms while productive knowledge should also be investigated in order to get a more complete picture of the complex nature of idioms and L2 idiom comprehension. Comprehension of idioms is estimated to be easier than production, and advanced learners of English should also be able to produce idioms. However, Yorio (1980: 440) argues that there are very few idioms that L2 learners should be able to produce; recognising and understanding idioms is more important than production.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the current findings add to our understanding of L2 learners' ability to recognise idiom meanings and of the role of L1 in idiom comprehension. This study also focused more on cross-linguistic similarities than differences; as Ringbom (2007) argues, transfer studies should concentrate on how cross-linguistic similarities affect learning. By investigating idiom comprehension of L2 learners the present study has offered some insight into the role of L1 knowledge in foreign language vocabulary learning.

Further research regarding the role of L1 in idiom comprehension and vocabulary learning in general is needed. It would also be interesting to investigate the effect of L1 on idiom comprehension by lower level L2 learners, since, as it has been suggested (see e.g. Ringbom 2007), learners rely on their L1 especially at early stages of learning. L1 can provide an essential aid for learning a new language and, as Ringbom (2007: 2) points out, use of cross-linguistic similarities is central when learning foreign languages. While transfer studies have mainly concentrated on errors, the focus should be on the perception of similarities that facilitate language learning. Cross-linguistic similarity is very important factor affecting L2 acquisition, but it has not gained adequate attention in the field of SLA. It would also be interesting to study the effect of L2 on the acquisition of a third language. In L2 learning, non-native speakers should be made more aware of possible cross-linguistic similarities also at the advanced level. In addition, L2 learners should be exposed more to idioms and figurative language, since, as it has been shown, even advanced L2 learners struggle with idioms. Also the subjects of the present study commented that learning idioms is necessary and useful.

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APPENDIX 1. Questionnaire

Please fill in the blank or circle the appropriate answer:

Gender: **male** / **female**

Age: _____

First language / mother tongue: _____

What is your highest level of education completed? _____

At what age did you begin learning English? _____

Have you lived in an English-speaking country? **yes** / **no**

If **yes**.. What country, when and for how long?

Please describe your current level of English:

Please choose from the given alternatives the correct meaning(s) for each idiom. You should think of all potential contexts in which the idioms may appear. Notice that a set of alternatives may contain more than one correct answer. If you think that some meaning is missing from the alternatives, please write your comment on line e).

1. in front of your eyes

- a) directly in front of you
- b) close at hand, nearby
- c) in your presence
- d) in your imagination or memory
- e) _____

2. slip on a banana skin

- a) say something that makes you look stupid and causes you problems
- b) die very suddenly and accidentally
- c) fail or make an embarrassing mistake
- d) stop trying to do something because you no longer believe that you can succeed
- e) _____

3. battle of wills

- a) an argument in which the opposing people refuse to give in to each other's demands
- b) an argument or disagreement that goes on for a long time
- c) a disagreement in which the people involved use their intelligence to beat their opponents
- d) a small or minor disagreement that is easily or quickly resolved
- e) _____

4. lose your head

- a) be unable to remember things correctly
- b) panic in a difficult situation
- c) lose control of yourself
- d) be responsible for your actions
- e) _____

5. blow up in your face

- a) cause someone to become aware of things for the first time
- b) something completely changing a situation or plan
- c) fail to be successful or amuse others
- d) something going wrong and destroying your plans or chances of something
- e) _____

6. over my dead body

- a) think that something you have just heard is silly and will never happen
- b) think that something will happen only far in the future
- c) let someone do something only after your death
- d) dislike something and do everything you can to prevent it
- e) _____

7. a dark horse

- a) a person whose true character is unknown but who may be better than is thought
- b) a person who seems harmless but is likely to damage something important
- c) a person about whom very little is known but may be about to have success
- d) a person who is very different from the other people and is considered bad by them
- e) _____

8. see the light of day

- a) be made generally known, especially a secret
- b) come into existence or be born
- c) become known by or available to a large number of people
- d) come to understand or agree with something
- e) _____

9. off your head

- a) unconscious
- b) very strange, foolish or dangerous
- c) shocked or upset
- d) mad, out of your senses
- e) _____

10. the rest is history

- a) something that will be remembered in the future
- b) something totally different or irrelevant
- c) something that has happened a long time ago
- d) something that everyone is familiar with
- e) _____

11. a big fish

- a) a lie or an exaggeration
- b) a selfish person who cares only for one's own pleasures
- c) a person who has committed a serious crime and is arrested
- d) a person who is important and powerful
- e) _____

12. feel something in your bones

- a) have a suspicion that is based on feelings
- b) feel tired and exhausted after a long workday
- c) predict the weather for the next day
- d) feel very strongly that you are right about something
- e) _____

13. bear fruit

- a) be pregnant
- b) produce good results
- c) take advantage of something
- d) do something forbidden
- e) _____

14. play with fire

- a) suffer risks or danger willingly because one is so determined to do something
- b) behave in a very risky way and be likely to have problems
- c) say or do something that causes disagreement or trouble
- d) take risks, especially when these are foolish and unnecessary
- e) _____

15. lick someone's arse

- a) treat someone with dignity and respect
- b) do anything to please someone who is influential
- c) try to avoid provoking someone who is powerful
- d) behave in a slavish manner to please someone who is powerful
- e) _____

16. the upper hand

- a) have more power than someone and control things
- b) have a chance to win
- c) have the advantage over someone
- d) have the freedom to make your own decisions
- e) _____

17. cut to the bone

- a) offend a person deeply
- b) reduce resources or costs as much as possible
- c) suspect something strongly
- d) attack someone physically, hit many times
- e) _____

18. bite off more than you can chew

- a) try to accept a difficult situation
- b) try to do something that is far too difficult
- c) try to control other people but without succeeding
- d) try to do too much
- e) _____

19. not worth the candle

- a) not worth buying because of poor quality
- b) not worth the trouble or effort which is needed in order to achieve something
- c) not worth doing something, completely useless
- d) not worth the effort, money, or time spent on something
- e) _____

20. make your blood boil

- a) make you very angry
- b) make you passionate
- c) make you feel distress or fear
- d) make you feel indignant or resentful
- e) _____

21. bite your tongue

- a) accept a difficult or unpleasant situation
- b) keep something a secret
- c) remain silent, even though you would want to say something
- d) be immediately sorry for what you have said
- e) _____

22. tighten your belt

- a) lose weight
- b) run very fast
- c) spend less and live more carefully
- d) demand less material goods
- e) _____

23. sweep the board

- a) set a table for dinner
- b) gain the greatest amount of success
- c) win all the prizes
- d) forget past mistakes or arguments
- e) _____

24. open your heart

- a) be completely honest and sincere
- b) tell someone your most private thoughts or feelings
- c) fall in love with someone
- d) display your feelings openly
- e) _____

25. in inverted commas

- a) suggest that a word is being used with almost the opposite meaning to its normal meaning
- b) repeat the exact words that another person has said or written
- c) show that it is not an accurate way to describe the situation you are referring to
- d) say or write something that is not true
- e) _____

26. have blood on your hands

- a) be involved in something unfair or dishonest
- b) work very hard to achieve something important
- c) be responsible for someone's death
- d) treat someone badly without any reason
- e) _____

27. go into the red

- a) become very angry
- b) owe money to the bank
- c) become red in the face because you are ashamed
- d) become red in the face because you are hot
- e) _____

28. up to your neck

- a) having a great deal of work to do or having more work to do than one can handle
- b) concentrating and working hard at something
- c) losing courage and becoming too afraid to do something
- d) very deeply involved in something, especially something bad as debt or corruption
- e) _____

29. like a headless chicken

- a) be always late and do things at the very last moment
- b) behave in an uncontrolled way and not think calmly or logically
- c) be very drunk and act in a stupid manner
- d) walk around aimlessly or without direction
- e) _____

30. put the cart before the horse

- a) begin a journey
- b) begin planning something, e.g. a project
- c) understand how something works
- d) do or say things in the wrong order
- e) _____

31. go into overdrive

- a) begin to work very hard or perform very well
- b) show great excitement or interest in something
- c) start thinking clearly about something
- d) have more abilities than the others and start to utilize them
- e) _____

32. at your fingertips

- a) know thoroughly facts or information and be able to refer to them quickly
- b) have something in your possession or under your control
- c) be responsible for something or someone
- d) have something readily available for you to use or reach
- e) _____

33. the eleventh hour

- a) very late
- b) the moment of death
- c) the right moment
- d) the last possible moment
- e) _____

34. a carbon copy

- a) a complete or close copy
- b) cheaply made or done, of inferior quality
- c) a person who is like another person in many ways
- d) a person who is apathetic and weak
- e) _____

35. bitten by the bug

- a) become very enthusiastic about something and start doing it a lot
- b) be criticized in an unfair way or for something that is not your fault
- c) be annoyed or impatient
- d) fall ill suddenly
- e) _____

36. the early bird catches the worm

- a) a person who starts to do something as soon as possible will be successful
- b) a person who is very fast and effective will be successful
- c) a person who does not worry about the little things in life will be successful
- d) a person who gets up early to work will be successful
- e) _____

Have you been taught English idioms (e.g. the expressions in this questionnaire are idioms)? Do you know how to use them? Is it necessary to learn idioms?

Thank you!

APPENDIX 2. Background information on the idioms

| IDIOM | freq | MEANING | TRANS-PARENCY | FINNISH EQUIVALENT | ITALIAN EQUIVALENT |
|--------------------------|------|---|------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. in front of your eyes | *** | directly in front of you (COLLINS) in your presence (LONGMAN) | transparent | aivan silmiäni alla | avere sott'occhio |
| 2. slip on a banana skin | ** | say something that makes you look stupid and causes you problems (COLLINS) fail or make an embarrassing mistake | opaque | - | scivolare su una buccia di banana |
| 3. battle of wills | * | an argument in which the opposing people refuse to give in to each other's demands (COLLINS) | semi-transparent | tahtojen taisto | - |
| 4. lose your head | *** | panic in a difficult situation (COLLINS) lose control of yourself (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | - | perdere la testa |
| 5. blow up in your face | ** | something going wrong and destroying your plans or chances of something (COLLINS) something completely changing a situation or a plan (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | räjähtää kasvoille | - |
| 6. over my dead body | * | dislike something and do everything you can to prevent it (COLLINS/ LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | vain kuolleen ruumini yli | passare sul mio cadavere |
| 7. a dark horse | *** | a person about whom very little is known but may be to have success (COLLINS) a person whose true character is unknown but who may be better than is thought (LONGMAN) | opaque | musta hevonen | - |
| 8. see the light of day | ** | become known by or available to a large number of people (COLLINS) come into existence or be born (LONGMAN) | transparent | nähdä päivänvalo | vedere la luce (del giorno) |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|--|------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 9. off your head | * | very strange, foolish or dangerous (COLLINS) mad, out of your senses (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | - | essere fuori di testa |
| 10. the rest is history | *** | something that everyone is familiar with (COLLINS) | semi-transparent | loppu on historiaa | passare alla storia |
| 11. a big fish | ** | a person who is important and powerful (COLLINS) | semi-transparent | - | pesce grosso |
| 12. feel something in your bones | * | feel very strongly that you are right about something (COLLINS) have a suspicion that is based on feelings (LONGMAN) | transparent | tuntea luissaan | - |
| 13. bear fruit | *** | produce good results (COLLINS) | transparent | kantaa hedelmää | dar buoni frutti |
| 14. play with fire | ** | behave in a very risky way and be likely to have problems (COLLINS) take risks, especially when these are foolish and unnecessary (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | leikkiä tulella | scherzare col fuoco |
| 15. lick someone's arse | * | do anything to please someone who is influential (COLLINS) behave in a slavish manner to please someone who is powerful (LONGMAN) | transparent | nuolla jonkun persettä | leccare il culo |
| 16. the upper hand | *** | have more power than someone and control things (COLLINS) have the advantage over someone (LONGMAN) | transparent | - | il braccio |
| 17. cut to the bone | ** | reduce resources or costs as much as possible (COLLINS) offend a person deeply (LONGMAN) | opaque | - | ridotto all'osso |
| 18. bite off more than you can chew | * | try to do something that is far too difficult (COLLINS) try to do too much (LONGMAN) | transparent | haukata liian iso pala | - |

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----|--|------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 19. not worth the candle | * | not worth the trouble or effort which is needed in order to achieve something (COLLINS) not worth the effort, money, or time spent on something (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | - | non valere la candela |
| 20. make your blood boil | ** | make you very angry (COLLINS/ LONGMAN) | transparent | veri kiehahtaa / saada veri kiehumaan | sangue bollente |
| 21. bite your tongue | *** | remain silent, even though you would want to say something (COLLINS) | transparent | - | mordersi la lingua |
| 22. tighten your belt | *** | spend less and live more carefully (COLLINS) demand less material goods (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | kiristää vyötä | stringere la cinghia |
| 23. sweep the board | * | win all the prizes (COLLINS) gain the greatest amount of success (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | putsata (palkinto)pöytä | - |
| 24. open your heart | *** | tell someone your most private thoughts or feelings (COLLINS) | semi-transparent | avata sydämensä | - |
| 25. in inverted commas | ** | show that it is not an accurate way to describe the situation you are referring to (COLLINS) suggest that a word is being used with almost the opposite meaning to its normal meaning (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | lainausmerkeissä | - |
| 26. have blood in your hands | * | be responsible for someone's death (COLLINS/ LONGMAN) | transparent | tahrata kätensä vereen | sparger sangue |
| 27. go into the red | *** | owe money to the bank (COLLINS) | opaque | - | andare in rosso |
| 28. up to your neck | ** | very deeply involved in something, especially something bad as debt or corruption (COLLINS) | semi-transparent | kaulaansa myöten suossa | essere nei guai fino al collo |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|--|------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 29. like a headless chicken | ** | behave in an uncontrolled way and not think calmly or logically (COLLINS) | semi-transparent | kuin päätön kana | - |
| 30. put the cart before the horse | * | do or say thing in the wrong order (COLLINS/ LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | - | mettere il carro davanti ai buoi |
| 31. go into overdrive | *** | begin to work very hard or perform very well (COLLINS) | semi-transparent | käydä ylikierroksilla | - |
| 32. at your fingertips | ** | have something readily available for you to use or reach (COLLINS) know thoroughly facts or information and be able to refer to them quickly (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | - | avere sulla punta delle dita |
| 33. the eleventh hour | *** | very late (COLLINS) the last possible moment (COLLINS/ LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | yhdennellätoista hetkellä | - |
| 34. a carbon copy | ** | a person who is like another person in many ways (COLLINS/ LONGMAN) a complete or close copy (LONGMAN) | semi-transparent | - | essere la copia carbone |
| 35. bitten by the bug | ** | become very enthusiastic about something and start doing it a lot (COLLINS/ LONGMAN) | opaque | kärpäsen puraisema | - |
| 36. the early bird catches the worm | * | a person who starts to do something as soon as possible will be successful (COLLINS) a person who gets up early to work will be successful (LONGMAN) | transparent | aikainen lintu madon nappaa | uccello mattutino prende il verme |

APPENDIX 3. The distractors

| Idioms and meaning alternatives (correct alternatives are given in bold letters) | The bases for distractors |
|---|---|
| <p>1. in front of your eyes</p> <p>a) directly in front of you</p> <p>b) close at hand, nearby</p> <p>c) in your presence</p> <p>d) in your imagination or memory</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>käden ulottuvilla</i>, linked to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> <p>one of the meanings of the Italian equivalent <i>avere sott'occhio</i></p> |
| <p>2. slip on a banana skin</p> <p>a) say something that makes you look stupid and causes you problems</p> <p>b) die very suddenly and accidentally</p> <p>c) fail or make an embarrassing mistake</p> <p>d) stop trying to do something because you no longer believe that you can succeed</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>liukastua/astua banaanin kuoreen</i> denotes an unfortunate incident</p> <p>connected to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> |
| <p>3. battle of wills</p> <p>a) an argument in which the opposing people refuse to give in to each other's demands</p> <p>b) an argument or disagreement that goes on for a long time</p> <p>c) a disagreement in which the people involved use their intelligence to beat their opponents</p> <p>d) a small or minor disagreement that is easily or quickly resolved</p> | <p>English idiom <i>a running battle</i></p> <p>English idiom <i>a battle of wits</i></p> <p>opposite to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> |
| <p>4. lose your head</p> <p>a) be unable to remember things correctly</p> <p>b) panic in a difficult situation</p> <p>c) lose control of yourself</p> <p>d) be responsible for your actions</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>menettää muisti</i></p> <p>Finnish expression <i>pää pölkylle</i></p> |

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>5. blow up in your face</p> <p>a) cause someone to become aware of things for the first time</p> <p>b) something completely changing a situation or plan</p> <p>c) fail to be successful or amuse others</p> <p>d) something going wrong and destroying your plans or chances of something</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>räjähtää silmille</i></p> <p>English idiom <i>fall flat</i></p> |
| <p>6. over my dead body</p> <p>a) think that something you have just heard is silly and will never happen</p> <p>b) think that something will happen only far in the future</p> <p>c) let someone do something only after your death</p> <p>d) dislike something and do everything you can to prevent it</p> | <p>linked to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> <p>linked to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> <p>refers to the literal meaning of the idiom</p> |
| <p>7. a dark horse</p> <p>a) a person whose true character is unknown but who may be better than is thought</p> <p>b) a person who seems harmless but is likely to damage something important</p> <p>c) a person about whom very little is known but may be about to have success</p> <p>d) a person who is very different from the other people and is considered bad by them</p> | <p>English expression <i>a Trojan horse</i>/Italian expression <i>cavallo di Troia</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>essere la pecora nera</i></p> |
| <p>8. see the light of day</p> <p>a) be made generally known, especially a secret</p> <p>b) come into existence or be born</p> <p>c) become known by or available to a large number of people</p> <p>d) come to understand or agree with something</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>tulla päivänvaloon</i>/ English idiom <i>come to light</i>/ Italian expression <i>venire alla luce</i></p> <p>English idiom <i>see the light</i></p> |

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| <p>9. off your head</p> <p>a) unconscious</p> <p>b) very strange, foolish or dangerous</p> <p>c) shocked or upset</p> <p>d) mad, out of your senses</p> | <p>linked to the literal meaning of the idiom</p> <p>connected to the meaning of the Finnish expression <i>olla pyörällä päästään</i></p> |
| <p>10. the rest is history</p> <p>a) something that will be remembered in the future</p> <p>b) something totally different or irrelevant</p> <p>c) something that has happened a long time ago</p> <p>d) something that everyone is familiar with</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>tehdä historiaa</i>/ English idiom <i>make history</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>tutta un'altra storia</i></p> <p>English idiom <i>ancient history</i></p> |
| <p>11. a big fish</p> <p>a) a lie or an exaggeration</p> <p>b) a selfish person who cares only for one's own pleasures</p> <p>c) a person who has committed a serious crime and is arrested</p> <p>d) a person who is important and powerful</p> | <p>linked to the meaning of the Finnish expression <i>kertoa kalavalheita</i></p> <p>connected to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> <p>Finnish expression <i>iso kala</i>, the other meaning of the Italian equivalent</p> |
| <p>12. feel something in your bones</p> <p>a) have a suspicion that is based on feelings</p> <p>b) feel tired and exhausted after a long workday</p> <p>c) predict the weather for the next day</p> <p>d) feel very strongly that you are right about something</p> | <p>refers to the literal meaning and the image it creates</p> <p>Finnish expression <i>luissa ja ytimissä / luihin ja ytimiin</i></p> |
| <p>13. bear fruit</p> <p>a) be pregnant</p> <p>b) produce good results</p> <p>c) take advantage of something</p> <p>d) do something forbidden</p> | <p>Italian expression <i>frutto dell'amore</i>/ Finnish expression <i>rakkauden hedelmä</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>cogliere il frutto quando è maturo</i></p> <p>Finnish expression <i>kielletty hedelmä</i>/Italian expression <i>frutto proibito</i></p> |

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| <p>14. play with fire</p> <p>a) suffer risks or danger willingly because one is so determined to do something</p> <p>b) behave in a very risky way and be likely to have problems</p> <p>c) say or do something that causes disagreement or trouble</p> <p>d) take risks, especially when these are foolish and unnecessary</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>mennä tulen ja veden läpi</i>/ English idiom <i>go through fire</i></p> <p>Finnish expression <i>bensaa liekkeihin</i>/ Italian expression <i>aprire il fuoco</i></p> |
| <p>15. lick someone's arse</p> <p>a) treat someone with dignity and respect</p> <p>b) do anything to please someone who is influential</p> <p>c) try to avoid provoking someone who is powerful</p> <p>d) behave in a slavish manner to please someone who is powerful</p> | <p>linked to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> <p>connected to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> |
| <p>16. the upper hand</p> <p>a) have more power than someone and control things</p> <p>b) have a chance to win</p> <p>c) have the advantage over someone</p> <p>d) have the freedom to make your own decisions</p> | <p>connected to the idea of winning card games</p> <p>Finnish expression <i>vapaat kädet</i>/ English expression <i>a free hand</i></p> |
| <p>17. cut to the bone</p> <p>a) offend a person deeply</p> <p>b) reduce resources or costs as much as possible</p> <p>c) suspect something strongly</p> <p>d) attack someone physically, hit many times</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>tuntea luissa ja ytimissä</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>rompere le ossa a qualcuno</i></p> |
| <p>18. bite off more than you can chew</p> <p>a) try to accept a difficult situation</p> <p>b) try to do something that is far too difficult</p> <p>c) try to control other people but without succeeding</p> <p>d) try to do too much</p> | <p>Finnish expressions <i>purra huultaan/riittää pureskelemista</i></p> <p>linked to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> |

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|---|--|
| <p>19. not worth the candle</p> <p>a) not worth buying because of poor quality</p> <p>b) not worth the trouble or effort which is needed in order to achieve something</p> <p>c) not worth doing something, completely useless</p> <p>d) not worth the effort, money, or time spent on something</p> | <p>connected to the literal meaning of the idiom</p> <p>linked to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> |
| <p>20. make your blood boil</p> <p>a) make you very angry</p> <p>b) make you passionate</p> <p>c) make you feel distress or fear</p> <p>d) make you feel indignant or resentful</p> | <p>Italian expression <i>sangue caldo</i></p> <p>English idiom <i>make your blood run cold/freeze</i></p> <p>Finnish expression <i>herättää pahaan verta</i></p> |
| <p>21. bite your tongue</p> <p>a) accept a difficult or unpleasant situation</p> <p>b) keep something a secret</p> <p>c) remain silent, even though you would want to say something</p> <p>d) be immediately sorry for what you have said</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>purra huultaan</i></p> <p>Finnish expression <i>pitää kieltä kurissa</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>sentirsi bruciare le labbra</i></p> |
| <p>22. tighten your belt</p> <p>a) lose weight</p> <p>b) run very fast</p> <p>c) spend less and live more carefully</p> <p>d) demand less material goods</p> | <p>connected to the literal meaning of the idiom</p> <p>Finnish expression <i>juosta kieli vyön alla</i></p> |
| <p>23. sweep the board</p> <p>a) set a table for dinner</p> <p>b) gain the greatest amount of success</p> <p>c) win all the prizes</p> <p>d) forget past mistakes or arguments</p> | <p>linked to the literal meaning of the idiom</p> <p>Finnish expression <i>puhtaalta pöydältä</i>/ Italian expression <i>sedersi intorno a un tavolo</i></p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>24. open your heart</p> <p>a) be completely honest and sincere</p> <p>b) tell someone your most private thoughts or feelings</p> <p>c) fall in love with someone</p> <p>d) display your feelings openly</p> | <p>Italian expression <i>a cuore aperto</i>/ Finnish expression <i>avoimin sydämin</i></p> <p>English idiom <i>steal someone's heart</i>/ Italian expression <i>rubare il cuore</i></p> <p>English idiom <i>wear one's heart</i></p> |
| <p>25. in inverted commas</p> <p>a) suggest that a word is being used with almost the opposite meaning to its normal meaning</p> <p>b) repeat the exact words that another person has said or written</p> <p>c) show that it is not an accurate way to describe the situation you are referring to</p> <p>d) say or write something that is not true</p> | <p>connected to the literal meaning of the idiom</p> <p>linked to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> |
| <p>26. have blood on your hands</p> <p>a) be involved in something unfair or dishonest</p> <p>b) work very hard to achieve something important</p> <p>c) be responsible for someone's death</p> <p>d) treat someone badly without any reason</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>liata kätensä</i>/ Italian expression <i>avere le mani sporche</i>/ English idiom <i>dirty hands</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>sputar sangue</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>avere la mano pesante</i></p> |
| <p>27. go into the red</p> <p>a) become very angry</p> <p>b) owe money to the bank</p> <p>c) become red in the face because you are ashamed</p> <p>d) become red in the face because you are hot</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>nähdä punaista</i>/ Italian expression <i>veder rosso</i></p> <p>connected to the literal meaning of the idiom and the meaning of the Italian expression <i>rosso come un gambero</i></p> <p>English idiom <i>red as a beetroot</i></p> |
| <p>28. up to your neck</p> <p>a) having a great deal of work to do or having more work to do than one can handle</p> <p>b) concentrating and working hard at something</p> <p>c) losing courage and becoming too afraid to do something</p> <p>d) very deeply involved in something, especially something bad as debt or corruption</p> | <p>Italian expression <i>preso fino al collo</i>/ Finnish expression <i>kyynärpäitä myöten</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>immerso fino al collo</i></p> <p>Finnish expression <i>mennä sisu kaulaan</i></p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>29. like a headless chicken</p> <p>a) be always late and do things at the very last moment</p> <p>b) behave in an uncontrolled way and not think calmly or logically</p> <p>c) be very drunk and act in a stupid manner</p> <p>d) walk around aimlessly or without direction</p> | <p>Italian expression <i>essere la gallina nera</i></p> <p>Finnish expression <i>päissään kuin ellun kana</i>/ Italian expression <i>andare a gallina</i> linked to the literal meaning of the idiom</p> |
| <p>30. put the cart before the horse</p> <p>a) begin a journey</p> <p>b) begin planning something, e.g. a project</p> <p>c) understand how something works</p> <p>d) do or say things in the wrong order</p> | <p>linked to the literal meaning of the idiom</p> <p>linked to the literal meaning and the image it creates</p> <p>Finnish expression <i>olla/pysyä kärryillä</i></p> |
| <p>31. go into overdrive</p> <p>a) begin to work very hard or perform very well</p> <p>b) show great excitement or interest in something</p> <p>c) start thinking clearly about something</p> <p>d) have more abilities than the others and start to utilize them</p> | <p>English idiom <i>go overboard for</i>/ another meaning of the Finnish equivalent</p> <p>English idiom <i>get your brain into gear</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>avere una 17erpen in più</i></p> |
| <p>32. at your fingertips</p> <p>a) know thoroughly facts or information and be able to refer to them quickly</p> <p>b) have something in your possession or under your control</p> <p>c) be responsible for something or someone</p> <p>d) have something readily available for you to use or reach</p> | <p>linked to the literal meaning</p> <p>English expression <i>on your hands</i></p> |
| <p>33. the eleventh hour</p> <p>a) very late</p> <p>b) the moment of death</p> <p>c) the right moment</p> <p>d) the last possible moment</p> | <p>Italian expression <i>ora estrema</i>/ Finnish expression <i>kuoleman hetki</i> Italian expression <i>a quest'ora</i></p> |

| | |
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| <p>34. a carbon copy</p> <p>a) a complete or close copy</p> <p>b) cheaply made or done, of inferior quality</p> <p>c) a person who is like another person in many ways</p> <p>d) a person who is apathetic and weak</p> | <p>Finnish expression <i>halpa kopio</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>essere un carbone spento</i></p> |
| <p>35. bitten by the bug</p> <p>a) become very enthusiastic about something and start doing it a lot</p> <p>b) be criticized in an unfair way or for something that is not your fault</p> <p>c) be annoyed or impatient</p> <p>d) fall ill suddenly</p> | <p>Italian expression <i>essere morsi da un 18erpent</i></p> <p>Italian expression <i>mordersi le dita</i></p> <p>connected to the literal meaning</p> |
| <p>36. the early bird catches the worm</p> <p>a) a person who starts to do something as soon as possible will be successful</p> <p>b) a person who is very fast and effective will be successful</p> <p>c) a person who does not worry about the little things in life will be successful</p> <p>d) a person who gets up early to work will be successful</p> | <p>English expression <i>like a bird</i></p> <p>linked to the actual meaning of the idiom</p> |

APPENDIX 4. The mean percentages of the subjects for idioms with two correct meanings and idioms with one correct meaning

| Idioms with two correct meanings | Finnish subjects | | | Italian subjects | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|------------------|------------|-------------|
| | 1 (%) | 2 (%) | 0(%) | 1 (%) | 2(%) | 0 (%) |
| 1. in front of your eyes | 57.1 | 22.9 | 20 | 64.7 | 8.8 | 26.5 |
| 2. slip on a banana skin | 77.1 | 8.6 | 14.3 | 76.5 | 17.6 | 5.9 |
| 4. lose your head | 68.6 | 22.9 | 8.6 | 73.5 | 23.5 | 2.9 |
| 5. blow up in your face | 82.9 | 11.4 | 5.7 | 64.7 | 8.8 | 26.5 |
| 7. a dark horse | 40 | 45.7 | 14.3 | 29.4 | 0 | 70.6 |
| 8. see the light of day | 60 | 11.4 | 28.6 | 47.1 | 5.9 | 47.1 |
| 9. off your head | 60 | 14.3 | 25.7 | 61.8 | 0.0 | 38.2 |
| 12. feel something in your bones | 57.1 | 40 | 2.9 | 61.8 | 26.5 | 11.8 |
| 14. play with fire | 34.3 | 62.9 | 2.9 | 70.6 | 23.5 | 5.9 |
| 15. lick someone's arse | 40 | 60 | 0.0 | 58.8 | 20.6 | 20.6 |
| 16. the upper hand | 62.9 | 34.3 | 2.9 | 52.9 | 5.9 | 41.2 |
| 17. cut to the bone | 80 | 5.7 | 14.3 | 79.4 | 0.0 | 17.6 |
| 18. bite off more than you can chew | 40 | 60 | 0.0 | 70.6 | 14.7 | 14.7 |
| 19. not worth the candle | 65.7 | 20 | 14.3 | 44.1 | 26.5 | 29.4 |
| 22. tighten your belt | 82.9 | 11.4 | 5.7 | 79.4 | 8.8 | 11.8 |
| 23. sweep the board | 31.4 | 20 | 48.6 | 47.1 | 0.0 | 52.9 |
| 25. in inverted commas | 71.4 | 8.6 | 20 | 64.7 | 0.0 | 35.3 |
| 32. at your fingertips | 80 | 5.7 | 14.3 | 47.1 | 5.9 | 47.1 |
| 33. the eleventh hour | 85.7 | 11.4 | 2.9 | 70.6 | 0.0 | 29.4 |
| 34. a carbon copy | 60 | 5.7 | 34.3 | 61.8 | 11.8 | 26.5 |
| 35. bitten by the bug | 85.7 | 0.0 | 14.3 | 29.4 | 0.0 | 70.6 |
| 36. the early bird catches the worm | 57.1 | 42.9 | 0.0 | 73.5 | 5.9 | 20.6 |
| Mean percentages | 62.7 | 23.9 | 13.4 | 60.4 | 9.8 | 29.7 |

| Idioms with one correct meaning | Finnish subjects | | Italian subjects | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|-------------|------------------|-------------|
| | 1 (%) | 0 (%) | 1 (%) | 0 (%) |
| 3. battle of wills | 94.3 | 5.7 | 50 | 50 |
| 6. over my dead body | 91.4 | 8.6 | 64.7 | 35.3 |
| 10. the rest is history | 74.3 | 25.7 | 67.6 | 32.4 |
| 11. a big fish | 40 | 60 | 61.8 | 38.2 |
| 13. bear fruit | 97.1 | 2.9 | 52.9 | 47.1 |
| 20. make your blood boil | 97.1 | 2.9 | 82.4 | 17.6 |
| 21. bite your tongue | 88.6 | 11.4 | 70.6 | 29.4 |
| 24. open your heart | 77.1 | 22.9 | 41.2 | 58.8 |
| 26. have blood on your hands | 65.7 | 34.3 | 26.5 | 73.5 |
| 27. go into the red | 42.9 | 57.1 | 58.8 | 41.2 |
| 28. up to your neck | 71.4 | 28.6 | 44.1 | 55.9 |
| 29. like a headless chicken | 97.1 | 2.9 | 55.9 | 44.1 |
| 30. put the cart before the horse | 82.9 | 17.1 | 70.6 | 29.4 |
| 31. go into overdrive | 40 | 60 | 26.5 | 73.5 |
| 3. battle of wills | 94.3 | 5.7 | 50 | 50 |
| 6. over my dead body | 91.4 | 8.6 | 64.7 | 35.3 |
| Mean percentages | 75.7 | 24.3 | 55.3 | 44.7 |

APPENDIX 5. Finnish summary

Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitettiin, miten suomalaiset englannin kielen yliopisto-opiskelijat ja italialaiset englannin kielen yliopisto-opiskelijat tunnistavat englannin kielen idiomeja. Erityisesti oman äidinkielen vaikutusta idiomien ymmärtämiseen tutkittiin, kuin myös idiomien moninaisten ominaisuuksien vaikutusta idiomien merkitysten tulkitsemiseen. Lisäksi suomalaisilta ja italialaisilta englannin opiskelijoilta kysyttiin, osaavatko he käyttää idiomeja, ja onko idiomien oppiminen heidän mielestään tarpeellista. Viime vuosikymmenillä sanastontutkimus on nostanut rooliaan toisen kielen oppimisen tutkimisessa. Myös pidemmät sanajonot, kuten idiomit, sanonnat, kollokaatiot ja fraasit nähdään tärkeänä osana sanastoa. Kuten tutkimus on osoittanut, suuri osa sanastosta koostuu näistä sanajonoista, joilla on taipumus esiintyä yhdessä. Englannin kielessä idiomeja käytetään yleisesti sekä puhutussa että kirjoitetussa kielessä. Erityisesti edistyneempien englannin kielen oppijoiden täytyisi osata tunnistaa ja ymmärtää edes jossain määrin idiomeja.

Näitä analysoimattomina kokonaisuuksina opittuja kieliaineksia (engl. formulaic language) on tutkittu soveltavassa kielitieteessä sekä erityisesti psykolingvistiikassa. Erityisesti idiomit ovat olleet tutkimuksen kohteena, koska ne koostuvat useasta sanasta, mutta toimivat yksikkönä ainakin jollain tasolla. Idiomeja on vaikea luonnehtia tarkasti, koska ne ovat monimerkityksisiä ja ei ole olemassa yhtä hyväksyttyä idiomimääritelmää. Vuosikymmenien aikana on korostettu idiomien eri ominaisuuksia ja myös idiomien suhde muihin kuvainnollisiin ilmaisuihin on ollut keskustelun aiheena. Kuitenkin kaikki tutkijat ovat samaa mieltä siitä, että idiomit ovat monisanainen kuvainnollinen ilmaus, jonka merkitys on eri kuin sen sisältämien sanojen kirjaimellisten merkitysten summa.

Kun tutkitaan sanaston oppimista kokonaisuudessaan, on tärkeää määritellä, mitä sanalla tarkoitetaan ja kuinka paljon toisen kielen oppijan täytyy osata sanoja. Sanaston arvioiminen ei ole helppoa, mutta arviolta toisen kielen oppijan täytyisi tuntea noin 3000 usein esiintyvää sanaa. On myös paljon puhuttu ydinsanastosta, joka toisen kielen oppijan täytyisi hallita. Se ei kuitenkaan sisällä idiomeja tai muita sanajonoja, ja vaikka ydinsanasto voi olla hyödyllinen alkeistason oppijoille, edistyneempien oppijoiden täytyy hallita kompleksisempi sanasto. On lisäksi tärkeää tehdä ero reseptiivisen ja produktiivisen sanaston hallinnan välillä. Kielten oppijoiden täytyy tietää puhuttu ja kirjallinen muoto sanasta, mutta heidän täytyy osata myös yhdistää sana sen

merkitykseen. Tässä tutkimuksessa tutkittiin vain reseptiivistä sanaston hallintaa. Idiomit ovat haastavia kielten oppijoille, sillä heidän täytyy idiomeja tunnistaessaan tietää useita kirjaimellisia ja kuvainnollisia merkityksiä näille ilmauksille.

Sanastontutkimuksissa on noussut pohdinnan kohteeksi leksikaaliset fraasit, kuten sanonnat, sananlaskut ja idiomit. Leksikaaliset fraasit ovat tärkeä osa kielen oppimista, ja nähtävästi niitä käytetään niin kuin yksittäisiä sanoja. Idiomit erottuvat muista leksikaalisista fraaseista sillä, että vaikka ne koostuvat useasta osasta, ne toimivat yksikkönä jossain määrin. Leksikaaliset fraasit auttavat kielen käyttäjiä sujuvuudessa. On tutkittu, että toisen kielen oppijat luottavat vahvasti leksikaalisiin fraaseihin alemmalla tasolla, kun taas edistyneemmille toisen kielen oppijoille leksikaaliset fraasit aiheuttavat suuria ongelmia. Jos kielen oppija osaa käyttää leksikaalisia fraaseja, se auttaa häntä vieraan kielen sujuvuudessa.

Idiomit ovat saaneet paljon huomiota, kun on puhuttu leksikaalisista fraaseista. Kuitenkin suurin osa tutkimuksesta on keskittynyt siihen, miten idiomit ovat järjestyneet mentaaliseen leksikkoon, miten ne ymmärretään ja kuinka ne määritellään. Osa tutkijoista sisällyttää idiomeihin metaforat, vertaukset, sananlaskut ja jopa yksittäiset sanat, kun taas osa tutkijoista on tiukempia määritelmässään. Kaikista yleisin idiomin määritelmä on, että idiomin merkitys ei ole yksittäisten sanojen merkitysten summa. Toinen tärkeä idiomeja määrittävä asia on, että idiomit koostuvat useasta sanasta. Nämä ovatkin tärkeitä lähtökohtia idiomin määrittelyssä. Idiomi on määritelty tässä tutkimuksessa useasta sanasta koostuvaksi kuvainnolliseksi ilmaukseksi, jonka merkitys on eri kuin sen sisältämien sanojen kirjaimellisten merkitysten tulos, esim. *leikkiä tulella*.

Idiomeilla on moninaisia ominaisuuksia ja niitä on perinteisesti pidetty "kuolleina". On oletettu, että idiomit ovat olleet alun perin metaforisia, mutta ovat menettäneet kuvainnollisuutensa. Tämä näkökulma on kuitenkin uudemmilla tutkimuksilla osoitettu vääräksi. Idiomit ovat hyvin kuvainnollisia ja niiden juuret ovat usein ilmauksen kirjaimellisessa merkityksessä ja sen luomassa mielikuvassa. Toki useiden idiomien kohdalla linkki idiomin alkuperän ja sen merkityksen välillä on heikentynyt ja se tekee kielen käyttäjille haastavaksi päätellä idiomin oikea merkitys.

Osan idiomeista voi ymmärtää myös kirjaimellisesti, ja vaikka se ei olekaan kovin todennäköistä, idiomien ymmärtäminen on haastavaa. Idiomit luokitellaan usein sen

mukaan, kuinka kuvainnollisia ne ovat. Osa idiomeista on semanttisesti läpinäkyviä, jolloin kirjaimellisen merkityksen luoma mielikuva on selkeästi yhteydessä idiomien kuvainnolliseen merkitykseen. Idiomi on puoliläpinäkyvä, jos kirjaimellisen merkityksen luomassa mielikuvassa on jotain, joka yhdistää idiomien kuvainnolliseen merkitykseen. Idiomi on läpinäkymätön eli opaakki, jos kirjaimellinen merkitys ja kuvainnollinen merkitys ovat täysin toisistaan poikkeavat. Joka tapauksessa idiomien yksittäisten sanojen merkitykset vaikuttavat idiomien tulkintaan.

Yksi idiomien ominaisuuksista on myös se, että ne sietävät variaatiota, joka voi olla sanastollista tai kieliopillista. Kuitenkaan kaikki idiomit eivät ole muuntautumiskykyisiä. Muutokset esimerkiksi aikamuodossa tai luvussa eivät välttämättä vaikeuta vieraan kielen idiomien ymmärtämistä, mutta sanastolliset muutokset voivat jo aiheuttaa ongelmia idiomien merkitysten ymmärtämisessä. Yksi tärkeimmistä idiomien ominaisuuksista on kuvainnollisuus, ja useat tutkijat ovatkin luokitelleet idiomit läpinäkyvyyden mukaan. Tätä luokitusta käytettiin myös tässä tutkimuksessa, kun tutkittiin semanttisen läpinäkyvyyden vaikutusta idiomien tulkintaan ja ymmärtämiseen.

Toisen kielen oppimisen kannalta idiomeja ei ole kovin paljoa tutkittu. Idiomitutkimukset ovat keskittyneet syntyperäisiin englanninpuhujiin ja lapsiin. Myöskään äidinkielen roolia toisen kielen sanaston oppimisessa ei ole juurikaan tutkittu. Kuitenkin kielten oppijoille on tärkeää liittää uusi opittu sanasto omaan äidinkieleen. Nykyään siirtovaikutus nähdään tärkeänä tekijänä toisen kielen oppimisessa. Äidinkieli usein auttaa toisen kielen oppimisessa, mutta vaikutus voi olla myös negatiivinen. Suomalainen englannin kielen oppija voi esimerkiksi käyttää sanaa "language" laajennetussa merkityksessä, mikä johtaa virheeseen (esim. "He bit himself in the language", kun suomessa "kieli" merkitsee sekä englannin sanaa "language" että "tongue").

Enemmän äidinkieli kuitenkin auttaa toisen kielen oppimisessa kuin vaikeuttaa sitä. Kuten aiemmat tutkimukset osoittavat, erityisesti typologisesti läheisten kielten kohdalla sanaston oppiminen on helpompaa. Joka tapauksessa kaikkilla kielillä on jotain yhteistä, joten myös typologisesti kaukaisilla kielillä on jotain yhteistä, mikä helpottaa toisen kielen oppimista. Kielillä on myös sukulaisuussanoja, jotka auttavat sanaston hallitsemisessa, mutta "väärät ystävät" saattavat johtaa kielten oppijoita harhaan. Ne ovat sanapareja, joissa samannäköisillä tai samalta kuulostavilla sanoilla on eri merkitys eri kielissä. Ongelmia aiheuttavat erityisesti tapaukset, joissa vierasta kieltä opetteleva

ajattelee tutunnäköisen sanan tarkoittavan samaa kuin äidinkielessään. Hyvä esimerkki on suomen ilmaus *sinisilmäinen*, jonka englantilainen vastine *blue-eyed* tarkoittaa jotain ihan muuta kuin naiivia ja hyväuskoista.

Kuten aiemmin on jo mainittu, toisen kielen idiomien oppimista ei ole juurikaan tutkittu, vaikka idiomit ovat olennainen osa sanastoa. Toisen kielen oppijat kohtaavat suuria vaikeuksia idiomien ymmärtämisessä, koska heidän kielellinen kompetenssinsa ei ole lähellekään samalla tasolla kuin äidinkielisten puhujien. Ymmärtääkseen idiomien merkityksiä oppijan täytyy kyetä tekemään päätelmiä, aktivoimaan aiempaa tietoa, käyttämään mielikuvitusta ja aktivoimaan metalingvististä tietoa. Tietysti edistyneemmillä kielten oppijoilla on paremmat valmiudet idiomien ymmärtämiseen ja hallitsemiseen, ja tietous lisääntyy opintojen edetessä. On kuitenkin väitetty, että toisen kielen oppijat eivät voi koskaan hallita idiomeja täydellisesti, koska ne ovat niin monimerkityksisiä ilmauksia. Lisäksi idiomien eri ominaisuudet vaikuttavat niiden ymmärrettävyyteen. Kielten oppijat käyttävät useita strategioita idiomien ymmärtämiseen. Kielten oppijat saattavat esimerkiksi yrittää arvata merkitystä kontekstista, nojata idiomien kirjaimelliseen merkitykseen tai turvautua äidinkieleensä. Usein idiomien kirjaimellinen merkitys auttaakin idiomien ymmärtämisessä (esim. *kuin päätön kana*), mutta ei aina.

Tämä tutkimus on luonut kattavan silmäyksen idiomien kompleksiseen maailmaan ja valottanut, miten toisen kielen oppijat ymmärtävät idiomeja. Suomalaisilla ja italialaisilla englannin kielen yliopisto-opiskelijoilla oli suuria vaikeuksia englannin kielen idiomien ymmärtämisessä. Suomalaiset kokivat osaavansa jonkin verran yleisimpiä ja tutuimpia englannin idiomeja, kun taas italialaiset eivät mielestään tunteneet juurikaan englannin idiomeja tai osanneet käyttää niitä. Kuitenkin suomalaisten ja italialaistenkin välillä oli tilastollisesti merkittävän ero. Suomalaisten maine vieraiden kielten oppijoina on hyvä, kun taas italialaisia pidetään yleisesti huonoina vieraiden kielten oppijoina. Suomessa vieraiden kielten opetuksella on pitkät perinteet, ja englannin kielellä on vahva asema Suomessa. Italiassa taas vieraiden kielten oppiminen ei ole riittävää ja siihen ei kiinnitetä paljoa huomiota. Tutkimuksen tulokset antavat ymmärtää, että suomalaisten ja italialaisten englannin opiskelijoiden figuratiivinen kompetenssi on jossain määrin puutteellinen, vaikka he muuten olisivatkin taitavia englannin kielen käyttäjiä. Kuitenkin suomalaisten idiomien merkitysten tuntemus on huomattavasti parempaa kuin italialaisilla. Täytyy kuitenkin muistaa, että yksittäiset italialaiset tunnistivat hyvin

englanninkielisiä idiomeja, vaikka italialaiset kokonaisuudessaan suoriutuivat merkittävästi suomalaisia heikommin.

Tutkituista idiomeista kaikkein helpoimpia suomalaisille ja italialaisille olivat idiomit, joille löytyi vastine opiskelijoiden omasta äidinkielestä. Erityisesti italialaiset opiskelijat olivat huomanneet äidinkielen vaikutuksen idiomien merkityksiä tunnistaessa. Italialaiset kommentoivat, että ne idiomit, joille löytyy vastine omassa äidinkielessä, ovat helpoimpia ymmärtää. Kun opiskelijat eivät tienneet englanninkielisen idiomien oikeaa merkitystä, he yrittivät löytää omasta äidinkielestään vastaavaa ilmaisua ja yrittivät sitä kautta löytää oikean merkityksen. Usein omasta äidinkielestä olikin apua merkitysten tunnistamisessa, mutta joskus äidinkielen ilmaisut johtivat opiskelijoita harhaan. Semanttisella läpinäkyvyydellä ei ollut lähellekään yhtä suurta roolia idiomien merkitysten tunnistamisessa kuin äidinkielellä, mutta semanttisesti läpinäkyvämmät idiomit oli helpompi tunnistaa kuin opaakit, läpinäkymättömät idiomit. Frekvenssillä ei näyttänyt olevan merkitystä idiomien ymmärtämiseen, sillä esimerkiksi suomalaiset opiskelijat ymmärsivät idiomeista parhaiten ne, joita käytetään harvoin englannin kielessä.

Lisää tutkimusta äidinkielen vaikutuksesta vieraan kielen sanaston oppimiseen tarvitaan. Olisi mielenkiintoista tutkia myös alkeistason vieraan kielen oppijoita. Täytyy ottaa huomioon, että ei ainoastaan äidinkieli voi vaikuttaa vieraan kielen oppimiseen, vaan myös oppijan toinen kieli voi vaikuttaa muiden kielten oppimiseen. Kuitenkin kaikilla vieraiden kielten oppijoilla on jo hallinnassa oma äidinkieli, joten sen vaikutusta ei voi väheksyä. Idiomeja ja leksikaalisia fraaseja täytyisi opettaa myös edistyneemmille oppijoille. Kuten tutkimuksen suomalaiset ja italialaiset koehenkilöt kommentoivat vastauksissaan, idiomien opiskelu on hyödyllistä ja tarpeellista. Idiomit auttavat kielten opiskelijoita käyttämään kieltä sujuvasti ja monipuolisesti.