

A Piece of Cake?

A Case Study of Idiomatic Usage in Norwegian Lower Secondary School Students Before and After Idiom-Focused Teaching

Ingvild Eek



Thesis in fulfillment of ENG 4190, Master of English
Language, 60 pts.

ILOS

Supervisor: Professor Johan Elsness

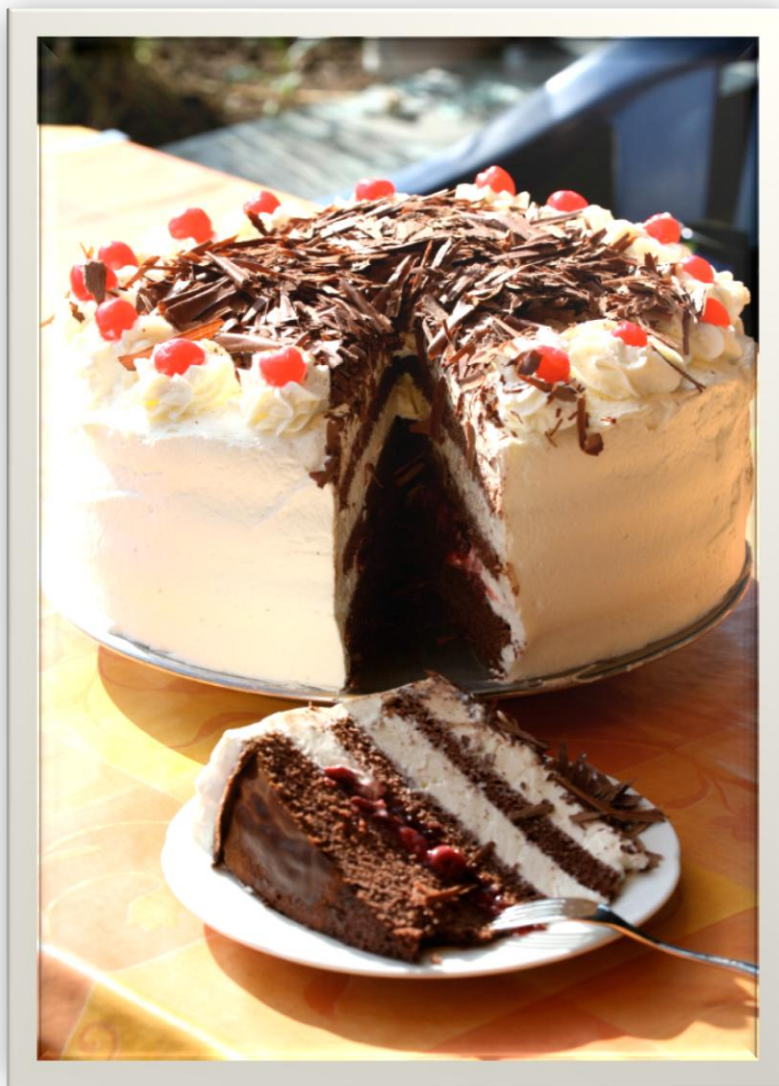
UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

Fall 2012

A Piece of Cake?

A Case Study of Idiomatic Usage in Norwegian Lower Secondary School Students Before and After Idiom-Focused Teaching

Ingvild Eek



Thesis in fulfillment of ENG 4190, Master of English Language
ILOS

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

© Ingvild Eek

2012

A Piece of Cake? A Case Study of Idiomatic Usage in Norwegian Lower Secondary School
Students Before and After Idiom-Focused Teaching

Ingvild Eek

<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

Abstract:

A Piece of Cake?

A Case Study of idiomatic usage in Norwegian Lower-Secondary School Students' Texts Before and After Idiom Focused Teaching.

This case study of intermediate Norwegian Lower Secondary School learners of English aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) *To what extent do Norwegian learners of English in Lower Secondary School use idiomatic expression in their written work?*
- 2) *If teachers focus more deliberately on idiomatic language while teaching, will the students' competence in using idiomatic expressions increase?*

This second question also attempted to find out whether the students would produce more varied or/and sophisticated idiomatic language after an approximately 5-month long period of focused teaching.

The material consisted of two sets of 60+ texts each, the majority from the students' end-of-term evaluations. The texts were analyzed, and the number of idioms used counted, each new idiom registered, along with the number of times each idiom occurred in the material as a whole. In the approximately 5 months between the 1st and 2nd set being produced, the students participated in regular English classes in which there was placed additional focus on the recognition, interpretation and acquisition of idiomatic language. A combination approach was chosen, including cross-language exploration, memorization, interpreting meaning from context and identification, implementing both explicit and implicit teaching strategies.

Idiomatic expressions in the 1st set were very basic, the majority being phrasal or prepositional verbs. The findings indicate that the students in general developed more advanced idiomatic language between the 1st and 2nd sets. There is a notable increase in idioms used, from a total of 146 instances of idiomatic language in the full 1st set of texts, to 246 instances in the full 2nd set. There is also an increase in the number of different idiomatic expressions used by the students; 163 new idiomatic expressions were registered in the 2nd set that had not been present in the 1st set, and a number of these expressions could be traced back to the idiom focused teaching done in the months between the sets of texts being written.

The findings seen overall indicate that idiom-focused teaching was effective in increasing the idiomatic competence of this learner group.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible if not for the contribution and assistance of several people who deserve to be acknowledged.

First and foremost I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Professor Johan Elsness at ILOS, for his encouragement, advice and guidance throughout the process. I would also like to thank the administration at Gjøklep Ungdomsskole in Holmestrand, for allowing me to carry out my investigation there. Also at Gjøklep, my colleague June Dahle, who generously provided me with access to her 10th grade students and herself carried out idiom-focused teaching with this group. Her help was invaluable.

On the home front, thanks are also due. To complete a degree while working full time, with a small child in the house has, undeniably, been a challenge. To do so has only been possible through the unfailing support of those closest to me: Heartfelt thanks go out to my parents for babysitting and moral support throughout. Special thanks to my husband for patience, love, support and numerous pots of coffee, and to my son for only scribbling with his markers on my less important notes.

Last, but not least, I want to thank the students who graciously agreed to participate in this study. Without them, there would have been no study.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	pg. 10
2. <i>Idiom</i> and <i>idiomatic</i> and its Characteristics in Relation to Learner Language and this Case Study	pg. 15
2.1 A Definition of Idiom for the Purpose of this Study.	pg. 15
2.2 Idiomatic Expressions and Learner Language	pg. 23
3. Formal Characteristics of Idioms	pg. 30
3.1 Features of Idioms	pg. 30
3.2 Idiomatic Creativity and Variation	pg. 33
4 Idiomatic Meaning:	
2 Classes of Models for Idiom Comprehension	pg. 41
4.1 A Direct Look-Up Model versus a Compositional Model	
4.2 Sinclair’s Idiom Principle as Response to Universal Grammar	pg. 43
5 Culture-Dependent Aspects of Idiomatic Language	pg. 45
6 Idiom Acquisition and Learner Language in Second Language Acquisition Literature	pg. 49
6.1. Characteristics of Learner Language	pg. 49
6.2. Focus on Form versus the Communicative Approach in Second/Foreign Language – Explicit or Implicit Learning?	pg. 52
7 Metaphorical Competence	pg. 55
8 Presentation of the Study	pg. 61
8.1 Material and Participants – Variable and Shared Factors	pg. 61
8.2 Task Variables	pg. 63
8.3 Individual Cognitive and Affective Factors	pg. 65
9 Method	pg. 68
9.1 Practical Considerations and Pedagogical Activities Chosen for Idiom-Focused Teaching	pg. 68
9.2 Idiomatic Expressions Taught as Lexical Phrases	pg. 70
9.3 Chosen Pedagogical Approaches	pg. 71
9.4 Collecting and Analyzing the Material	pg. 81
10 Discussion of Findings	pg. 84
10.1 8 th Grade Student Texts	pg. 85
10.2 9 th Grade Student Texts	pg. 89
10.3 10 th Grade Student Texts	pg. 94
10.4 Summary and Discussion of Total Results	pg. 100
11 Conclusion	pg. 105
Sources	pg. 110
Appendix I	pg. 117
Appendix II	pg. 122
Appendix III	pg. 124

A Piece of Cake?

A Case Study of idiomatic usage in Norwegian Lower-Secondary School Students' Texts Before and After Idiom-Focused Teaching.

1 Introduction

We have the ability to speak in riddles. These riddles are neither constructed nor interpreted in the normal way. Yet we use them so readily that we are unusually unaware of their special character – unless we have the misfortune not to be a native speaker. We call these special riddles idioms. They are one of the many ways in which natural languages differ from those artificial languages that experts have designed on logical principles – mathematical calculi, computer programming languages, and systems of formal logic. Idioms are mysterious. (Johnson-Laird, 1993, pp. ix, x)

These “riddles”, idioms, are phrases where the “meanings of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the ‘idiomatic’ expression as a whole” (Crystal, 1991). It is commonly acknowledged among language teachers and linguists that the mastering of idioms is a challenge for language learners (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1993, p. 22) (Crystal, 2010, p. 109). Teaching idiomatic language is, equally, a challenge for the educator: “Formulaic language has proven difficult to characterize and challenging to harness for effective teaching and learning in the L2 context” (Wray & Fitzpatrick, 2008, p. 123). Even advanced learners of second and foreign languages have great difficulty with native-like collocation and idiomaticity (Ellis, 2008, p. 7). Supporting this, from the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics, is among others Kövecses (2010, pp. ,231) , who calls idioms “a notoriously difficult area of foreign language learning and teaching”. Lewis (2009) supports this statement, and

emphasizes the need for command of more than one language in today's world where people have more contact across borders than ever before.

Norwegian students now start learning English from the age of 6, in 1st grade. English is everywhere in their environment: music, films, TV programs, the internet, computer games, etc. all provide English input. Additionally, it is quite common to go abroad on holiday and use English as a *lingua franca* when travelling and when communicating with people from a different linguistic background. English has a prominent status in Norwegian society, but does not qualify for second language status on a national level. However, it is too prevalent to really feel like a foreign language to Norwegians. It is also not only the first foreign language learnt in Norwegian schools, but the only compulsory one, which adds to the difficulty of categorizing English as either a second or a foreign language. There are some aspects of Norwegians learning English that are similar to the situation of an L2 learner, while in some aspects it is still very much a foreign language. The terms *second* and *foreign* language as related to English teaching and learning in Norway will therefore at times be used interchangeably, and at other times be distinguished as one or the other.

Lewis recognizes the difficulty of achieving natural fluency and idiomaticity in a language other than one's native tongue:

Yet the natural fluency and idiomaticity in speech as well as in writing, typical of our native language, are not to be taken for granted in a second or foreign language. Indeed, the ability to write is highly valued in literate societies, and while a demanding task for many in their first language, it is even harder in a second or foreign language. (Lewis, 2009, p. 1).

The question then becomes: Why is that? What makes an idiom, as a phraseological unit, so difficult? For a clearer understanding, let us take a look at a few idioms chosen randomly from *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (2005): *to burn the candle at both ends*, *to be beside yourself*, *to go bananas*, *to bring home the bacon*. For someone whose native language is not English, understanding what is meant by these expressions can be challenging, even when the learner knows what each of the lexical items making up the phrase refers to. Why would someone burn a candle at both ends, when it is clearly only designed to be lit on one end, and how does this apply to a person's actions? Is it not physically impossible to be beside oneself? How exactly does one go about going bananas? Does it have something to do with eating fruit? Or going somewhere? And what about bringing home the bacon? It clearly has a literal sense, as it is possible for someone to go to the grocery store, buy bacon and bring it home – but the learner will sense from the context that this is probably not the intended meaning.

This ambiguity is challenging, as well as interesting. Why do we use idioms? Why are they important? And how can they be taught effectively to learners? Several linguists have devoted considerable attention to the first two questions, and there are theories within vocabulary acquisition in second/foreign language pedagogy which aim to answer the last question. But what would I find if I were to put a selection of these theories into practice in an ordinary Norwegian classroom with ordinary Norwegian students?

This study was motivated in part by a personal fascination with, as Johnson-Laird puts it, “the mystery” of idioms and a wish to find out more, and in part by my experiences as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language in Norwegian Lower Secondary School. There seemed to be a notable lack of focus on idiomatic language in a lot of teaching practice, as well as in the written compositions that the students produced. A number of texts produced by students were, in addition to the commonplace issues with grammar, structure and lexis – quite “flat”. They lacked that element which idiomatic language brings to the table, exemplified here by Lewis (2009), who admittedly subscribes to an even wider definition of idiomaticity than the one chosen for the purpose of this study:

A text lacking in idiomaticity conjures up other images in the reader’s mind than those presumably intended and the reader has to compensate for this by rereading and reinterpreting the text. Examples of texts lacking in idiomaticity are: inappropriate choices from dictionaries, a mixture of formal and informal language, repetitions, translations, “school English”, shortage or absence of phrases, deficient sentence structure and lack of coherence. As expected, some aspects of idiomaticity feed into fluency. (Lewis, 2009, p. 14)

The goal, then, became to discover whether the students knew what an idiom was, how to use such expressions in English, and whether focusing more on idiomatic language in teaching would produce any tangible results. There was a desire to see what could be done with a more systematic approach. Additionally, the general impression from second language acquisition literature was that there seemed to be a lack of studies done on this particular age group. A lot of studies had been done on early learners (primarily L2 students), and several on adults or young adults, often writing for academic purposes. The younger teenagers seemed somehow to be missing from the linguistic picture. Among the studies encountered were also a lot of laboratory studies, or studies done on students of intensive language courses. Less work seemed to have been done on the students in the regular school system, even though they represent the majority of language learners, at least in a Scandinavian context. These factors shaped my research questions:

1) *To what extent do intermediate Norwegian learners of English in Lower Secondary School use idiomatic expressions in their written work?*

A majority of studies seemed to concern themselves with learners in upper secondary school or above, for instance Lewis (2009), Hasselgren (1994), Howarth (1998), Zhanrong (2002) and Johansson's corpus study (2008). Norwegian students now start learning English in school from the 1st grade, and there seemed to be room for an investigation of younger learners than those that had participated in the other studies. When analyzing texts written by learners in 8th, 9th and 10th grade in a Norwegian Lower Secondary School, would any examples of use of idiomatic language be found? This first research question aims to investigate how many idiomatic expressions the students would use, what kind of idiomatic language (degree of sophistication and variation), and whether they were able to use the expressions correctly.

2) *If teachers focus more deliberately on idiomatic language while teaching, will the students' competence in using idiomatic expressions increase?*

This question is of interest as the students are of different skill levels, not only because there is a difference in age, but the proficiency levels of students from within the same grade also vary greatly. The traditional view concerning idiom acquisition and second/foreign language acquisition holds that idioms are among the last features of a foreign/second language to be acquired. If the assumption is that there is a correspondence between learners' usage of idiomatic expressions and proficiency in the target language, would this mean that only the most highly skilled students would be able to correctly use idiomatic language? The second research question seeks to determine whether a deliberate focus on idioms in teaching would lead to a wider range of students producing more idiomatic language in their writing and whether the students as a whole would produce more varied or/and sophisticated idiomatic language after a period of such focused teaching.

Two of the criteria used in assessing written work in English in Norway in the Lower Secondary level final exams are idiomaticity and fluency. Set phrases such as idioms, when used appropriately in the context and according to the subject matter, are widely recognized by language educators as being good indicators of the fluency level in written texts. Irujo (1986) states that idiomatic expressions should be on the agenda for language learners at all levels: This gives us good reason to examine the actual use of idiomatic language in students belonging to the age group represented in this case study.

A hypothesis when starting this study was that the learners would produce little and basic idiomatic language, assumed to be due to their varying proficiency level and a limited natural exposure to the target language. In addition to any idiomatic expressions presumably being less sophisticated than one might expect from a native speaker (particularly in the 1st text set), it was expected that the learners would show less variation in their idiomatic usage than a native speaker might, as well as the usage often being off-target or slightly incorrect in context. It was also assumed that the learners' use of idiomatic expressions would reflect their individual language skills, that those more skilled would produce more idiomatic language. The hope was that a focused approach to idioms would result in the majority of students developing a higher level of idiomatic competence.

In the focused teaching, the goal was to implement several different approaches to language teaching. The approaches chosen range from context-based to focus-on-form, from awareness activities to memorization. They are based on language pedagogy theories which will be further discussed in Chapter 9. The teaching took place as part of regular English classes, and had to be fitted into the regular curriculum.

In a laboratory setting, given the time to focus intensively on idioms, perhaps even including only students motivated to undertake the work, it is likely the results would have been more dramatic. Instead, these are regular students in regular classrooms where every day brings new challenges of scheduling, curriculum, discipline and motivation. The study has been carried through in an authentic Norwegian language learning setting, and as such it is to be hoped that it will accurately reflect the language used by regular students.

This thesis is divided into 11 chapters with chapter 1 introducing the background for the thesis along with the research questions and hypothesis. Chapter 2 presents the definition of idiom/idiomatic chosen for this case study, as well as discussing idiomatic expressions in relation to learner language. Formal features of idioms and theories of idiomatic creativity and variation are outlined in chapter 3. This section is followed by chapter 4, which takes a look at opposing models for idiom comprehension; the *direct look-up* models and the *compositional* models, along with a section presenting an outline of Sinclair's *Idiom Principle* as it evolved in the wake of Chomsky's Universal Grammar theory. In chapter 5, some aspects of idiomatic language that are culture-dependent are briefly examined in light of the particular challenges facing learners. Chapter 6 delves further into the subject of learner language as it discusses the acquisition of idiomatic language in light of second language acquisition and pedagogy

theories. Chapter 7 concludes the theoretical section with a look at the relevance of metaphorical competence in light of theories of cognitive processing of idiomatic language.

The focus of Chapter 8 is the presentation of the study. In this chapter the participants as well as the tasks they were given are described, along with the shared and variable factors of each. This chapter also contains a section examining the possible impact of individual cognitive and affective factors on learners' performance. The first part of Chapter 9 accounts for the practical considerations of carrying out a case study such as this, and gives an outline of pedagogical activities chosen to carry out the idiom focused teaching in the classroom. This chapter also considers different pedagogical approaches and theories, such as teaching vocabulary in the form of lexical phrases, as applied to idiomatic expressions. The last section of chapter 9 explains how the material was gathered and analyzed.

Chapter 10 discusses the findings and results that emerged after analyzing the material. Each group of students (8th grade, 9th grade and 10th grade) and their results in the 1st and 2nd sets are presented and discussed in turn. The last section of the chapter gives a summary and a discussion of the overall outcome. Chapter 11 concludes the thesis, giving a short summary of the theoretical background and how it applied to this case study as well as highlighting the main results of the investigation. The research questions and hypothesis are addressed again and compared with the main results.

2. *Idiom and idiomatic* and its Characteristics in Relation to Learner Language and this Case Study

This chapter presents the definition of idiom that was chosen for this case study, and discusses the reasoning behind that choice. It also aims to examine some of the particular difficulties learners face when they encounter idiomatic language, such as the lack of transparency.

2.1 A Definition of Idiom for the Purpose of this Study.

Some idioms may be more transparent to a native speaker of Norwegian given the relatively close geographical proximity of Norway and Great Britain and the influence of English-

speaking culture, our common Germanic linguistic roots as well as the influence of Latin on both our languages. There are, however, numerous examples of idiomatic usage that can be simply baffling to a learner.

A study by Laufer (1997) identified intralexical factors that affect vocabulary learning and found idiomaticity, register restrictions and one form having several meanings to be among the difficulty-inducing factors when acquiring new vocabulary in a foreign language (Laufer, 1997, p. 154). Not only does one lexical item have several meanings in the foreign language, but these meanings may not correspond with the meanings of the equivalent word in the mother tongue. It gets increasingly more challenging when the language is figurative, as is the case with idioms. The senses of a word, and the uses and figurative associations of that word can differ greatly between languages. Even though idiomatic collocations exist in all languages, Crystal presents it neatly:

Collocations differ greatly between languages, and provide a major difficulty in mastering foreign languages. In English we ‘face’ problems and ‘interpret’ dreams; but in Modern Hebrew, we have to ‘stand in front of’ problems and ‘solve’ dreams. In Japanese the verb for ‘drink’ collocates with water and soup, but also with tablets and words (Crystal, 2010, p. 109).

Crystal talks about idiomatic collocations; idioms are also seen by some as being “dead metaphors”, and they are also at times placed in the general category of set phrases. It seems necessary to differentiate at an early stage between the terms *idiom*, *collocation*, *metaphor* and *set phrase*. The term *collocation* refers to:

(...) the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items. For example, *auspicious* ‘collocates’ with *occasion*, *event*, *sign*, etc.; and *letter* collocates with *alphabet*, *graphic*, etc. on the one hand, and *postman*, *pillar-box*, etc. on the other. Collocations are, then, a type of syntagmatic lexical relation. They are linguistically predictable to a greater or lesser extent (e.g. the bond between *spick* and *span* is stronger than that between *letter* and *pillar-box*), and this differentiates them from sense associations which tend to include idiosyncratic connections (e.g. *mother-in-law* associating with *hippopotamus*). Some words have no special collocational restrictions – grammatical words such as the, of, after, in. By contrast, there are many totally predictable restrictions, as in *eke + out*, *spick + span*, and these are usually analysed as idioms, clichés, etc. (Crystal, 1991)

While idioms can be said to be collocations, not all collocations are idioms. *Collocation* as a linguistic term centers on the active use of language, how words are being used in relation to each other by a speaker/writer and which words will exhibit a tendency of being used together. Idioms are relatively frozen in structure, as will be discussed further later on, and being both common in language and fixed in form, the words which make up a familiar idiom will have a degree of collocational bond to each other. How strong this relation is, varies.

In the examples chosen by Crystal above, *eke + out* and *spick + span*, the individual lexical items involved (with the exception of *out*), are relatively uncommon in everyday language,

except in this idiomatic sense. As such, they have a stronger collocational relation than may be the case for other phrases. “*Bringing home the bacon*”, for instance, involves *bring + home + bacon*.

These individual lexical items have a collocational relation when in use in this idiomatic expression, but individually they each have other, stronger, collocational relations. *Bacon*, for instance, is likely to collocate with *crispy* far more often than with *bring + home*. *Home* collocates strongly with words such as *made* and *grown*, to pick the first that come to mind. *Bacon* pops up at a far later stage in the thought process if we were to think of either *home* or *bring* separately. Due to this variability, as well as the term *collocation* encompassing a far wider linguistic field than the term *idiom/idiomatic*, collocations will not be discussed in further detail in this paper.

Idioms as “frozen”, dead metaphors are another characterization that shows up in the literature. Gibbs (1993, p. 57) argues that this view of idiom is simply wrong: “I argue that many idioms are very much alive metaphorically, and that speakers make sense of idioms because of the metaphorical knowledge that motivates these phrases’ figurative meanings”. Additionally, while idioms are figurative and metaphorical, a *metaphor* is not necessarily an idiom. Idioms are relatively fixed and allow little (though some) creative manipulation. Metaphors allow far more creativity, and are far less fixed. “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980,2003, p. 5).

While idioms do have a non-literal meaning, they are more fixed than metaphors, making *metaphor* a larger category, comprising far more than merely idioms. Where idioms are exclusively a feature of language, it is often argued that *metaphor* is something more – a central part of our conceptual system. In other words, idiom is language; metaphor is thought first, language second. While I do briefly get into some metaphoric theory in chapter 7 when discussing a cognitive approach to idioms, this field is far too wide to include in a work such as this, and the extensive studies done in this field cannot be done justice to here. Moreover, the focus of this thesis is the idiomatic language use exhibited by learners; metaphor as a conceptual system is therefore of limited interest, except when it may apply to idiomatic comprehension and acquisition, as implied by some cognitive linguists.

Idioms are often referred to as set phrases, or fixed expressions. A *set phrase* is by definition a common expression whose wording is not subject to variation and whose words cannot be

changed without compromising or altering the meaning of the expression. Many idioms can indeed be considered set phrases based on these criteria. However, most idioms, as well as most proverbs, still cannot be said to be set phrases, as they can often be subject to variation to varying degrees, as will be discussed and shown by means of corpus investigation in section 3.2. Moreover, many idioms do not necessarily form single units, but may allow intervening terms: For examples of this, turn to the above corpus investigation by Langlotz (2006), cited below, along with my own corpus investigation of the matter. “Distinctions between ‘fixed’ or ‘set’ expressions, frozen expressions, idioms, formulae, etc. are at best variably and hazily drawn” (Matthews, 2007, p. 141). While there is indeed some overlap between the terms *idiom*, *set phrase*, *collocation* and *metaphor*, they cannot be said to be equivalents.

As this area of language seems difficult to categorize and define clearly, there are numerous varying definitions in the literature concerning *what* exactly constitutes an idiom or idiomatic language. These definitions range from very narrow to very wide. As will be pointed out later in this section, I have chosen a wide definition of idiom/idiomatic for the purpose of this case study. This definition has been chosen with the learner participants, the material available, and the characteristics of learner language in mind.

The subject of this study is the use of idioms in texts written by a group of Norwegian learners of English, more specifically learners aged 13-16, in Lower Secondary School (Norw.: *Ungdomsskolen*). The learners are regular teenagers, in my opinion a representative selection. They are a mixed group in terms of English language skill. While there are a couple of very competent students who exhibit a high degree of general proficiency and fluency, there are also a few at the other end of the scale whose texts show very basic language skills and at times are difficult to comprehend. The vast majority of the students are somewhere in the middle, still writing in a rather basic language more based on translating their thoughts from Norwegian to English than on thinking in English, but in a process of aspiring towards greater proficiency.

When surveyed, the students’ level of commitment to English as a subject differs: Some of the students love studying English; some just think it is “OK”, just another subject to be dealt with in school before the day is over. In this, they are very representative of students their age group. Very few students dislike the subject outright, and they all have an understanding of the importance of acquiring English skills in today’s world – not to mention how they see the

language as a gateway into popular culture; Youth culture in Norway today being influenced to an extensive degree by the culture of English-speaking countries, perhaps mainly that of the US.

General creative writing skills, by which is meant conscious use of the language to build tension in a story, creative use of descriptions, appropriate structure of the text, creating authentic dialogue within the text, as well as other related skills, are also of importance when considering the material available for this study. It seems fair to assume that the students who show an interest in as well as natural aptitude and inclination for language and the use of language in general, will also be the students who are more likely to use idioms in their texts, as idioms represent a more creative way with words. In terms of the students' general creative writing skills, they vary in the same way as their English language skills. Some are good writers with a flair for the dramatic and a knowledge, or instinct, of how to use the language in a way that grabs the interest of the reader, and some truly loathe the concept of writing a text. A problem which became evident while working with the material available for this thesis was that the students' writing skills when it came to writing in more fact-based genres, such as essays and articles, were inadequate. More on this later, in Chapter 10, section 10.4.

The majority of the participants are somewhere in the middle in terms of skills – recognizing writing as a perhaps necessary evil that is expected of them, and recognizing that the effort they put in will be reflected in their grades, which most of them do care about to some extent. Their motivation differs from day to day, fluctuating with other small or big events in their life that seems all-consuming at that particular moment. Constancy is not the hallmark of a teenager. Additionally, the texts used for analysis in this study are texts the students have written for their end-of-term evaluations, and the topics they had to choose from were given by the teachers. This limited choice of topic may, in some cases, have meant that the students were, despite our best efforts, given topics they did not find interesting and engaging, or indeed had the necessary skill set to produce, which may again have adversely affected the quality of the finished product.

What is important to keep in mind is that these are *learners*. They are young people in the process of learning not only creative and fact-based writing, but also the English language, and the combination can be challenging. Their skills are limited, not yet fully evolved, and it is commonly supposed that the on-target use of idioms is one of the last, if not *the* last, steps on the ladder of mastering a language. If we assume that speakers are driven by the idiom

principle (as outlined in section 4.2), an adult speaker of an L1 has full access to set phrases and idiomatic expressions involving familiar topics and situations. An L2 or foreign language learner is in a process of acquiring them. Idiomaticity, along with fluency, are expected to “progress in tandem with the development of formulaic language and proficiency in the target language (Lewis, 2009, p. 6).

Second Language Acquisition theory acknowledges that individual differences in L2 acquisition does exist, encompassing many and various dimensions (Ellis, 1997, p. 73): Learners’ personalities influence the degree of anxiety they experience, their preparedness to take risks in using an L2 within their peer group, their ‘learning styles’ – preferred ways of learning, perhaps influencing their attitude to the task given (be it spoken or written, and the different variations within those two categories). Two of the major dimensions are considered to be motivation and language aptitude, the latter being the extent of which someone possesses a natural ability for learning an L2, believed to be part related to general intelligence, part distinct. These two dimensions will be discussed in more detail in chapter 8, section 8.3.

The finer points of idiom classification and the discussion of linguistic characteristics idioms may or may not have, as presented in the section on definitions of idiom in the literature, might provide too narrow a definition in terms of the material available for this case study. As mentioned earlier, a judgment was made that by choosing a broader definition, including lexical idioms and phrasal/prepositional verbs (such as *give in/up*) as well as phrasal idioms (such as *raining cats and dogs*) the material might provide more information.

This study builds on work done in a classroom, on living language and the learning process, not laboratory conditions. The lexical idioms, meaning phrasal verbs that may be opaque to a non-native English speaker, make up a significant, though mostly implicit, part of the curriculum, in the sense that they show up often in text and authentic language, while the exposure to phrasal idioms through sources such as textbooks is more limited, and less reoccurring. A phrase such as *raining cats and dogs* might show up a couple of times throughout the year, but other idioms, such as *give in*, *show up* or *hang on* will occur repeatedly, and show up in students’ own language more often. This was also evident when analyzing the texts – these kinds of lexical idioms were quite prevalent (see Chapter 10 and Appendix I).

However, the actual focus and importance put on this aspect of language throughout the course of day-to-day teaching may vary, despite teachers' best intentions. As stated in the introduction, this sense that the students might be missing out on an important aspect of the language they are learning formed part of the basis for the subject of this thesis.

On the other hand, the phrasal idioms often command considerable interest from the students – they are seen as interesting and fun. The question then becomes whether this novelty factor will transfer over into a student's actual language use, or whether the phrasal idioms remain something “fun” they learned once in class, but have not yet mastered enough or internalized (ref: Chomsky, 1986; I-language (Crystal, 1991 , p. 170)) to a degree where they feel comfortable using the expressions themselves. To avoid the exclusion of any potentially interesting data, the definition of idiom I have chosen for this study is therefore of the traditional kind, and it is wide definition.

The chosen definition is obtained from Crystal (1991) and the entry for **idiom(atic)** in his *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. The bold and enlarged font has been added to emphasize the particular section of this entry that is chosen as the definition for the case study:

A term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit. **From a semantic viewpoint, the meanings of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the ‘idiomatic’ expression as a whole.** From a syntactic viewpoint, the words often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts, e.g. it's raining cats and dogs does not permit *it's raining a cat and a dog/dogs and cats, etc. because of their lack of internal contrastivity, some linguists refer to idioms as 'ready-made utterances'. An alternative terminology refers to idioms as 'habitual collocations' (Crystal, 1991 , p. 170).

Crystal goes on to state that there is ‘considerable discussion’ as to the extent to which it is possible to establish a degree and kind of idiomaticity, making the point that some idioms permit a certain degree of internal change, while others again can be somewhat more literal in meaning (Crystal, 1991 , p. 170).

This ongoing ‘considerable discussion’ is part of what makes it possible to choose a broad definition of what an idiom is and what *idiomatic* entails. The choice was made to include in the study the kind of idioms that are phrasal/prepositional verbs. These are part of the idiomatic group of expressions because the second element of the verb (adverb or preposition) is not necessarily predictable, and have the potential to be unclear, especially for learners:

For instance, why the word *up* in *call up a friend*? Why not say *call on a friend* or *call in a friend*? Actually, those are three separate, unpredictable combinations, and they each mean something completely different. For example, you can *call up a friend* on the telephone, *call on a friend* to have a visit, and *call in a friend* to come and help you with something. (Spears, 2005, p. v)

Such idiomatic phrases do indeed have the potential for confusion for Norwegian learners of English, especially as the preposition used in a phrase such as *call up a friend* would be a completely different one in Norwegian, we say “ringe til en venn”, or *call to a friend*, which is incorrect usage in English. Also, to *call on a friend* would be opaque to a native speaker of Norwegian, as it could mean “calling out in a loud voice for a friend to come”, not “going to pay a visit to a friend”.

While these are lexical idioms, and not phrasal idioms such as *kick the bucket* (Flores d'Arcais, 1993, p. 79), they still fall under the definition of idiom chosen for this study. The choice was made to also include such expressions as *fall asleep* and *fall in love*, (appearing several times in my material) both because these expressions are included in the *McGraw-Hill Dictionary* (Spears, 2005) which has been the main idiom dictionary and work of reference for this study, and because they also are not completely transparent to the learner. Certainly, the verb *to fall*, directly translated in the sense of a physical act or phenomenon, does not immediately make it obvious what is going on when someone is *falling asleep* or *falling in love*. Therefore, while the use of such phrases may not be considered a sophisticated, conscious use of idiomatic language, they should nevertheless be included in a wide definition such as the one used for the purpose of this thesis when discussing the language of learners.

While my definition is a wide one, there are those who would widen the range even more. In discussing what *idiomaticity* means in relation to L2 students, Lewis (2009) interviewed Swedish language educators and ended up with the following:

Idiomaticity involves the use of expressions ranging from traditional idioms to appropriately used everyday expressions. According to the teacher interviewed, examples of features in idiomaticity are: phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs, the use of the *-ing* form after prepositions and certain verbs, links, word combinations whose sum is larger than the sum of the constituent parts, but also words “simply fitting together”. (Lewis, 2009, p. 14)

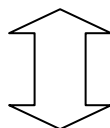
This view creates precedence for choosing a definition such as the one chosen for this study, and including phrasal and prepositional verbs in the investigation. If the students participating in this case had been native speakers of English, phrasal and prepositional verbs might not have been considered idiomatic, and the definition chosen might have been narrower. Take the phrase *fall in love*; it is not necessarily the first choice of a Norwegian speaking learner at this stage of English language acquisition. In Norwegian we say “bli forelsket”, and so the

incorrect phrase *become in love* shows up in several student texts in the material, where students have not internalized the idiomatic expression to a degree where they are comfortable using it themselves, or it does not automatically occur to them when they are writing. If the expression was not idiomatic, this confusion would not have been present. That is not to say that any expression or phrase a student misinterprets or uses incorrectly is idiomatic, note that the definition of idiom states that an expression or phrase that is still potentially opaque or unpredictable *despite* someone having full knowledge of the lexical meaning of the words in the phrase and the grammar involved is idiomatic. The fact that such errors do occur in the material lays the foundation for choosing a broad definition of idiomatic language, one tailored to the specific characteristics of learner language.

2.2 Idiomatic Expressions and Learner Language

The main problem with idioms then, seen in light of learner language, is one of transparency. Unfamiliar idiomatic phrases are not transparent to native speakers, let alone to learners of a different cultural and linguistic background, even if they know all the words that make up the phrase. This opaqueness is one of the main features of idioms. Langlotz uses the term *semantic non-compositionality* to describe this opaqueness, pointing to that the idiomatic construction's overall meaning is "not the derivational sum of the meanings of their constituents", but rather "a semantic extension from the compositional result of the meanings of its lexical constituents", reflecting an institutionalized (fixed within a given speech community pattern of figuration with two levels of meaning:

- a) The literal meaning (the sum of the meaning of the constituents)



Pattern of figuration

- b) The idiomatic meaning (the lexicalized extended meaning of the construction)

(Langlotz, 2006, p. 4)

The purpose of this pattern of figuration is to illustrate that “the more discrepancy between the literal and the idiomatic meaning a construction features, the more opaque it is (Langlotz, 2006, p. 4)

As listeners, learners will first try to come up with a literal interpretation from the meaning of its parts and the syntactic relations among them. Let us look at the expression “*you are pulling my leg*”, using an example presented by Johnson-Laird (1993). If someone whose native language is not English was accused of pulling someone’s leg, in all likelihood the person would be confused, considering his hands were nowhere near the accuser’s legs at that time (we are assuming this is the case). The learner is able to construct the literal meaning compositionally, but the utterance as a whole still makes no sense to him. However, as Johnson-Laird further points out, the idiomatic sense is not “fully compositional” – if I am the accuser, I am not referring to just my leg, but to me, and this is not clear from the composition, or the noun phrase by itself. The expression as a whole is needed in order to recognize the possibility of an idiomatic interpretation. This results in an opaque phrase for the learner. It is almost as if the native speaker is, indeed in a more literal sense, speaking in riddles. So how is a phrase recognized as being idiomatic?

The logical approach to language relegates idioms to the sidelines. Speakers use idiomatic expressions, on this account, as though they were words or phrases that have become frozen into a single form with a special meaning. Somewhere in the mind these expressions are stored as exceptions, much as they might be listed at the end of a dictionary. Listeners first try to make a literal interpretation of an utterance. The literal meaning can be constructed compositionally, that is, it can be composed from the meaning of its parts according to the syntactic relations amongst them. (Johnson-Laird, 1993, p. viii)

The idiomatic meaning, however, cannot be fully understood by such a compositional view. It depends on the context for interpretation. If a speaker was to describe a situation as being *a piece of cake* when there is obviously no cake involved, the hearer will likely catch on to at least the presence of an idiomatic sense, if not always the meaning.

If a compositional interpretation is nonsensical in the context of the utterance, then the listener is supposed to check whether an idiomatic sense is listed and whether it makes better sense. In short, idioms are exceptions to the general rule of compositionality, and where the general rule fails, the list of exceptions (e.g. frozen idioms) is examined to see whether it provides a more appropriate interpretation. This sort of proposal has been advanced from many quarters, particularly by philosophers, logicians, and those housebound cartographers who rely solely on intuition to draw maps of the mind. (Johnson-Laird, 1993, p. viii)

While Johnson-Laird does not ultimately agree with this approach, one valid point stands out in terms of foreign language acquisition. If the listener cannot make sense of the expression by interpreting compositionally, it is stated, he or she should check for possible idiomatic interpretations. However, if idiomatic expressions have not been a focus of the listener’s

education in the language, no such reference can be found. The listeners are then left with an information gap and a vague sense of unease because they are not catching on to what is really going on in the communicative situation, and are therefore unable to fully participate.

Adding to the possible confusion is the fact that while some idioms are virtually unchangeable, such as *Hold your horses*, meaning “Don’t be impetuous” (neither verb, noun or object can be changed and still yield the intended figurative meaning: “We hold our horses”, “She was holding her horses”, “Hold your stallions/mares” – in all these utterances, the sense of the actual meaning of a horse, instead of the figurative meaning of the phrase *Hold your horses* is the sense first processed by the listener), others can be changed or manipulated to different degrees (Bolinger & Sears, 1981, p. 53). An expression such as *He’s dead to the world*, can be modified for person and time, changing who is fast asleep and whether it is happening in present or past tense, for instance. (Bolinger & Sears, 1981, p. 53). Such changes are still fairly easy for a learner to deal with if they have learned the phrase as a lexical chunk with its figurative meaning (more on lexical chunks in Chapter 9, Section 9.2.), while others can be more challenging to identify in their manipulated form. If the students for example have learned the phrase *to find fault with*, it is still not a given that it will be as easily interpreted if the phrase is transformed into a passive “fault was found with them”.

Additionally, there does not seem to be a homogenous pattern of syntactic behavior that can be applied to which idiomatic phrases can be manipulated and which cannot; to what degree the idiom is “frozen”. An expression such as *lay down the law* accepts most syntactic operations, but *blow off steam* which has an identical syntactic structure, accepts none (Tabossi & Zardon, 1993, p. 145). The different ways idioms can change or be manipulated are treated further in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.).

Experience from the EFL classroom seems to indicate that when students have memorized word lists and learned the meanings of words and phrases, they still do not always understand, or use correctly, those same words or phrases if variations are present; case in point the numerous student texts where the student has obviously memorized a verb in its infinitive form, and uses it like that – without conjugation – understanding the meaning, but not the grammar involved in the usage. How much more complicated is it not then, for this same student, when the meaning is figurative, there is a collocation of words that mean something different than the literal meaning familiar to the student, and in addition the phrase is manipulated and changed? One 8th grade student who participated in this study attempted to

use the idiom *to drive someone up the wall*, attempting to adapt it grammatically and to the context of in his story, and wrote:

- 1) “He always wished he had a little brother but I came too late. I think I got him *to drive up on the wall*, because I cried, no, yelled, for seven months, mum told me, and I believe it!”[Text 4, 8th grade, 2nd set]

He was aiming for the figurative sense, knew the original idiom, but when he had to modify it for his context, he ran into difficulties.

It is also an interesting observation that formulaic, prefabricated multi-word units when produced by native speakers ironically enough are in danger of being deemed “cliché” language use, whereas the ability to use such sequences is simultaneously recognized as a mark of fluency if applied to second or foreign language learners (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 39-40). One way of looking at this is that clichés become clichés through extensive use and familiarity. They are reliable phrases, ways of using figurative language to convey a meaning that the speaker can be fairly certain will be understood by the target group. Clichés are highly dependent upon culture, aspects of which the language learner needs to internalize in order to communicate successfully in a native-like fashion. They are social codes, in a way, signifying that the speaker is “part of the group”. A learner who has not only mastered the grammar and basic vocabulary, but also the common references and cultural codes of the target language can arguably be said to be highly fluent. Culture-dependent aspects of idiomatic language are discussed further in Chapter 5.

Because idioms are one way of using figurative language, they “have often been considered “dead metaphors” – i.e. expressions that were once innovative, but are now conventionalized and frozen” (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1993:xiii). Viewed as such, they were seen as less relevant than metaphors. Partly, the authors point out, this has to do with the nature and structure of idioms – at the same time elusive and fixed: when interpreting their meaning, we seem to retrieve that meaning from memory in a similar process as that of retrieving the meaning of lexical items. However, the structure of idioms can be at times frozen and at other times quite flexible and capable of being modified, their flexibility also depending on the extent to which the figurative meaning of the idiomatic phrase is related to the literal meaning (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1993). In support of this view, they cite Nunberg (1978), Cutler (1982), and Wasow, Sag & Nunberg (1983), Gibbs, Nayak, Bolton & Keppel (1988) and Gibbs & Nayak (1989).

To quote:

Idioms are very elusive, and the difficulty of exactly characterizing them is perhaps one of the reasons why relatively little attention has traditionally been accorded to these expressions, in spite of their unquestionable relevance, which resides in at least two considerations: Idioms are a clear challenge to current compositional models of language comprehension, and their use in language is so widespread to justify Searle's (1975) informal rule of conversation: "Speak idiomatically unless there is some good reason not to do so" (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1993, p. xiii)

Different definitions of idioms that concentrate on lack of transparency can be found in the literature:

Idiomacity is the term used to describe the common phenomenon that the meaning of an expression is difficult or even impossible to derive from the meanings of the constituents it is composed of (Fiedler, 2007, p. 22).

Idioms are phrases that cannot be understood literally. They are opaque, or even if more transparent, unpredictable, as they do not have an expected, literal meaning. You can have complete understanding of all the words in a phrase and understand the grammar, but the phrase may still be confusing. A phrase or sentence of this type is said to be idiomatic. (Spears, 2005)

While focusing on the lack of transparency, the point is made that there is variation also in this aspect, there is a scale of sorts on which we can place idioms in terms of transparency and whether or not an idiom is derived from a proverb or a metaphor:

At one end of the continuum are phrases such as *by and large*, which seem to be nothing more than long words. Furthermore, not only does this expression mean something other than its constituents, its meaning seems to bear no relation to those constituents. At the other extreme are familiar proverbs and idioms that allude to apocryphal events, such as residents of glass houses throwing stones, people carrying coals to Newcastle, and farmers locking barn doors after horses have been stolen. In these cases, the meaning of the constituents are relevant, but the meaning of each expression is not just something other than the meaning of the constituent parts. The expression's meaning is also something more than the meaning of the parts. The expression itself alludes to an archetypical case of the class of events that it typifies. (...) In between the wordlike *by-and-large* idioms and the metaphorlike *coals-to-Newcastle* idioms are those that can have quite variable relations between their constituent and idiomatic meanings. Like *by and large*, phrasal idioms such as *kick the bucket* have meanings that bear no discernible relation to their idiomatic meanings, in this case "to die". Like *coals to Newcastle*, other phrasal idioms such as *spill the beans* bear a somewhat metaphorical relation to their idiomatic meanings, in this case *divulge secrets*. (Glucksberg, 1993, pp. 3-4)

Others focus on the nature of idioms as fixed collocations, which in turn has implications for language teaching:

The more fixed a collocation is, the more we think of it as an 'idiom' – a pattern to be learned as a whole, and not be 'the sum of its parts' (Crystal, 2010, p. 109).

Langlotz (2006) uses a definition of idiom or *idiomatic construction* which is clear and somewhat concise and restricted, although he excludes idiomatic compounds (such as *chatterbox*) for instance, as they lack the multi-word feature:

An idiom is an institutionalized construction that is composed of two or more lexical items and has the composite structure of a phrase or semi-clause, which may feature constructional idiosyncrasy. An idiom primarily has an ideational discourse-function and features figuration, i.e. its semantic structure is derivationally non-compositional. Moreover, it is considerably fixed and collocationally restricted (Langlotz, 2006, p. 5).

We will revisit Langlotz terminology and definitions in the Chapter 3, *Formal Characteristics of Idiom*, more specifically in section 3.2.

The best way to understand an idiom is to interpret the role it plays in the context it is used (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2002). It is possible to understand each word that make up an idiom, understand the literal meaning of the idiom, but still miss the communicative intention of the utterance completely. In LK06, concerning English learning in Norway, the goal of being able to communicate effectively is the main focus, and with that goal comes the linguistic skills that are deemed necessary: “God kommunikasjon forutsetter kunnskaper og ferdigheter i å bruke ordforråd og idiomatiske strukturer, uttale, intonasjon, rettskriving, grammatikk og oppbygging av setninger og tekster.” Knowledge of, and proficiency in the use of, idiomatic structures are crucial to good communication with native speakers.

Still unanswered is the question of why idioms are present in language at all:

Why, for example, do idioms exist? Their origin is singularly mysterious in the logical account of language. It is not at all obvious why speakers should use expressions that cannot be understood in the normal way. Idioms should be rare exceptions comparable to slips of the tongue. Yet it is difficult to speak spontaneously without lapsing into some idiomatic usage. Try it with a foreigner, and you will see that you are often aware of using an idiom only after the event. Even in explaining an idiom, you can find to your expense that you are using another. Hence, **the first reason for the importance of idioms is that they are pervasive.** (Johnson-Laird, 1993, p. viii)

While teaching idioms for this project, this exact problem was encountered numerous times when attempting to describe the meaning of an idiom to the students. I would run through an entire explanation only to discover that I had used at least one other idiom in order to explain the original one, and the student might be none the wiser for my effort. Often, the most successful explanation of an idiomatic phrase in English was the equivalent – or close to – idiomatic phrase in Norwegian.

One reaction to this pervasiveness is to argue that all usage is idiomatic. (Connectionists have a natural inclination to make such claims.) And this hypothesis has the advantage that it removes at a stroke the mystery of the origin of idioms: They arise in the natural use of natural language. Yet fish are unaware of the water – that is to say, if all is idiom, why do we ever draw the distinction between the literal and the idiomatic? Clearly, utterances with a literal interpretation are just as pervasive as idioms. There may be a continuum from clear cases of literal usage to clear cases of idiomatic usage, but the two ends of the continuum are plain enough. The creative use of language - at any level from phonology to pragmatics – is a natural part of discourse. Speakers – some more than others – invent words and phrases to force us to pay attention, to amuse us, to astonish us, and to challenge us. And they create new ways to convey old meanings for the sheer joy of invention. (Johnson-Laird, 1993, p. viii)

This sort of creativity, when performed successfully, is often the hallmark of a good writer, as well as speaker; someone with the ability to construct expressions which are familiar enough to the reader in origin that the idiomatic meaning is immediately understood, while still

tweaking the original phrase enough that it seems even more perfect and describes a situation even better than the original idiom. Doing this successfully, however, requires quite sophisticated language skills on the writer's part, as well as a good understanding of his audience.

But the creation of idioms also reflects new conceptions of the world, new ways in which individuals construct mental models of the world, and new ways in which to convey their contents vividly. It is through idioms – and I include those special cases that rhetoricians dignify as tropes, such as metaphor, irony, metonymy, and synecdoche – that the truly creative nature of human expression reveals itself. **Idioms are the poetry of daily discourse. That is the second reason for their importance.**

In terms of writing and reading texts, this is at least as true as for speaking. When going through the material for this project, as well as while reading and correcting other student work, I would at times come across texts which were, at first reading, inexplicably “flat”. I use the term *inexplicably* as these texts are sometimes quite good for their expected skill level in terms of other language areas: the grammar is up to standard, the vocabulary is basic, but acceptable, the structure of the text is satisfactory... But still, the text falls short of being really good. A common reason: the writer uses no, or very little, idiomatic language. The lack of linguistic creativity in writing translates to a lack of interest and involvement for the reader.

Alas, we are not all capable of idiomatic invention, but most of us do pick up, borrow, or steal the idioms of others. Our linguistic usage is full of second-hand idioms, dead metaphors, and stale similes. We use these clichés without thinking; and we understand them equally automatically. However, if we are supposed to try to make a literal interpretation before we seek an idiomatic one, then we should understand literal meanings faster than idioms. In fact, as a number of studies have shown, we can understand idioms just as fast as literal usages. For twenty years or more, psycholinguists have pursued an intensive examination of how the mental parser works. Compositional interpretation is, in principle, straightforward. But how are idioms interpreted? Speakers certainly acquire a knowledge of familiar idioms, and this knowledge somehow enables them to cope as readily with idiomatic usage as with literal meaning. **Idioms are easy, and this surprising fact is the third reason for their importance.** (Johnson-Laird, 1993, p. ix)

Idioms are indeed easy to use once their figurative meaning and appropriate usage contexts have been understood and the phrases have been incorporated into the vocabulary. Part of the aim of this thesis is to explore ways of achieving just that. The use of idioms enables us as speakers and writers to convey an exact meaning, a mood, sometimes a subtle distinction, or an ironic implication in a manner which is perhaps more elegant than we are able to convey using more literal language. Being familiar, the use of such phrases can also serve in creating a kind of subtle feeling of camaraderie between speakers, or between writer and reader: “I understand what you are saying; I know what you mean by saying it in this way.” As such, idiomatic phrases are important for expressing oneself and understanding others. In other words, they are important for the successful communication skills which teachers of English in Norway are required to help their students develop.

3. Formal Characteristics of Idioms

The class of linguistic expressions that we call idioms is a mixed bag. It involves metaphors (e.g. *spill the beans*), metonymies (e.g. *throw up one's hands*), pairs of words (e.g. *cats and dogs*), idioms with it (e.g. *live it up*), similes (e.g. *as easy as pie*), sayings (e.g. *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*), phrasal verbs (e.g. *come up*, as in “Christmas morning is *coming up*”), grammatical idioms (e.g. *let alone*), and others (Kövecses, 2010, p. 231)

What is perhaps one of the most interesting things about idioms, is the fact that so many linguists have made various attempts to structure the terminology, and yet phraseologists “still cannot agree on a shared set of terms to describe the linguistic phenomena they discuss” (Langlotz, 2006). What follows is an account of attempts to classify formal features and types of idioms, and an investigation of possible idiomatic variation and creativity.

3.1. Features of Idioms

Grammatically, several types of idioms have been classified by researchers. The following table of formal grammatical features has been adapted from McCarthy (2002):

Types of idioms:

Table 1) Table of formal grammatical features of idioms as adapted from McCarthy (2002)

<i>Form</i>	<i>Example</i>
verb + object/complement (and/or adverbial)	kill two birds with one stone
prepositional phrase	in the blink of an eye
compound	a bone of contention
simile (as+ adjective+ as, or like + noun)	as dry as a bone
binomial (word + and + word)	rough and ready
trinomial (word + word + and + word)	cool, calm and collected
whole clause or sentence	to cut a long story short

To be noted in reference to the examples used in this table is that the example of a *trinomial*, *cool, calm and collected*, might be said to be a borderline case of idiom in terms of lack of transparency. It can be argued that its meaning can be understood semantically more readily than most idioms; knowing the meaning of the word components in this idiom does indeed facilitate understanding of the idiomatic meaning. In light of learner language, the last word,

collected, is the one with the most potential to be confusing, as the primary sense of this word is that of *gather* or *assemble*, or perhaps mainly “*Bring together*; to get things of the same type from different places and bring them together” and “*Keep objects*; to get and keep objects of the same type, because you think they are attractive and interesting” (Longman Dictionary, 2009). It is this primary sense that is most likely to be familiar to learners, and as such they may find themselves at a loss when this word is applied figuratively to describe an individual’s behavior.

A classification as the one exemplified in the above Table 1) is doubtlessly useful when analyzing an idiomatic phrase, but that is assuming one has even been able to agree on exactly *what* constitutes idiomatic language to begin with. This is not necessarily an easy thing to do, though numerous attempts have been made. In the following, we follow Langlotz’s (Langlotz, 2006) classification. It is worth noticing that Langlotz writes from the place of cognitive linguistics. I do not aim within the scope of this paper to take a stand on which school of thought is the correct one. The attempt is rather made in general to see what from the different schools of thought seems sensible and has something to contribute from an EFL teaching point of view. There seems to be a general consensus in teaching that one has to pick through a jungle of linguistic and pedagogical theories and use what seems right for the situation at hand.

Table 2) Description of the features of idiomatic constructions according to form, meaning, and grammatical status (Langlotz, 2006, p.3)

Semiotic dimension	Feature	Term
Grammatical status	Degree of conventionalization or familiarity	<i>institutionalization</i>
Form	Formal complexity of construction: multi-word unit Lexicogrammatical behaviour: restricted syntactic, morphosyntactic and lexical variability	<i>compositeness</i> <i>frozenness/fixedness</i>
Meaning	Meaning cannot be derived from constituent words but is extended/figurative	<i>non-compositionality</i>

Langlotz describes idiomatic constructions as complex symbols which have certain specific formal, semantic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic characteristics (Langlotz, 2006), and presents the above table, summarizing and patterning these features according to form, meaning and grammatical status.

Langlotz uses the term *institutionalization*, citing Fernando (1996, p. 3) in order to describe aspects of an idiom's degree of familiarity and conventionality within a given speech community, as the idiomatic phrase is a linguistic construction of such a community and has thereby gone through a sociolinguistic process of conventionalization. *Compositeness* refers to idioms being multi-word units consisting of two or more lexical constituents (Langlotz, 2006, p. 3). *Kick the bucket* has the constituents *kick* and *bucket*, and the conventional article *the* in use for *bucket*. He states in his table that idioms are multiword units; they are typically composed as phrases or semi-clauses.

Still, he recognizes that “idiomatic compounds (blackbird, chatterbox), phrasal verbs (stand by, see through, come across) and proverbs (birds of a feather flock together” should also be included in the group of composite idiomatic constructions (Langlotz, 2006, p. 3). He notes that there is disagreement among linguists as to whether these constructions should be included when analyzing and defining proper idioms. Some linguists have included them; Langlotz names Makkai (1972) and Kuiper and Everaert (2004) among them, while others, such as Rothkegel (1973) and Moon (2001) have excluded them. For the purposes of this study, the first position is adopted, as stated earlier.

Langlotz has used Fraser's term and notion of *frozenness* (Fraser, 1970) in order to capture the lexicogrammatical restrictions that can influence the variability of the lexical constituents as well as their grammatical behavior. He further uses *fixedness* to denote the syntactic and morphosyntactic restrictions, for example if the phrase cannot be passivised and points out that idiomatic phrases also have restricted collocability in the sense that certain lexical constituents cannot be replaced by others (Langlotz, 2006, p. 4)

Finally, the feature of *semantic non-compositionality* should be a familiar one by now: most idiomatic phrases are formally invariable to varying extent. They cannot normally be changed or varied significantly without losing their idiomatic meaning. Going back to the *pulling my leg* example: a speaker cannot exchange “leg” for “arm” and still send the same message to the listener. If the statement became *you are pulling my arm*, the likely result would be confusion, and a judgment on the listener's part that the speaker does not master, or even

perhaps understands, the idiom he is attempting to use. The implications for errors for foreign language learners should be clear. Langlotz (2006) remarks, however, that no matter how one attempts to formally classify features of idioms, it is evident that none of the discriminatory features is clear-cut:

First, the feature of compositeness creates some overlap with compounds (see Gläser 1986, 1998). Moreover, institutionalization, frozenness and non-compositionality are clines. And while the discursive functions of different phrasemes are usually more distinct, they can nevertheless overlap. As a result, no definition of idiom can be fully clear-cut. Rather, the definitory dimensions must be understood as continua that can be spotted on a given construction to find out about its degree of idiomaticity, i.e. its degree of belonging to the class of idiomatic constructions. Only the sum of all dimensions, the full spectrum of all descriptive spotlights – provides a holistic picture of the specific idiomatic nature of a construction (Langlotz, 2006, p. 5).

McCarthy (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2002) presents only a few cases where certain grammatical or vocabulary components can be changed:

Table 3) Some cases where certain grammatical or vocabulary components of idioms can be changed (McCarthy, 2002:6.)

<i>Variation</i>	<i>Example</i>
Occasionally an idiom in the active voice can be used in the passive.	Government Ministers always pass the buck if they are challenged about poverty. The buck has been passed from Minister to Minister. No one seems prepared to accept the responsibility.
Some verb-based idioms also have noun-compound forms.	There is too much buck-passing in government nowadays. No one accepts the blame for anything.
One or more words in the idiom can be varied.	Stop acting the fool/goat!

3.2 Idiomatic Creativity and Variation

A creative native speaker (or someone of near-native speaker proficiency) can “play” with some idiomatic expressions and vary very familiar idioms in order to make a point, as stated earlier in the quote by Johnson-Laird (1993). There seems, however, to be a limit to how much an idiom can be altered, for example by substituting a word in the idiom for another, without the idiomatic expression losing its meaning and function. Glucksberg (1993) uses the example of *break the ice* (“a more or less discrete event that results in a relaxation of a stiff, awkward, chilly social situation” (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 7)). He states that while substituting

crack for *break* is relatively acceptable and will not alter the meaning of the idiom or the phrase being recognized as idiomatic, substituting words such as *crush*, *grind* or *shave* is not acceptable. Glucksberg remarks that while all of these actions are perfectly appropriate to do to the object *ice*, they are unacceptable for creative use in this idiom. Agreeing with Glucksberg in this seems straightforward: *crack the ice* is close enough to the original idiom to be recognized, but to *crush the ice*, or *grind the ice* or *shave the ice* seem like different actions altogether, and is more likely to be taken literally than as examples of idiomatic creativity.

Even if these substitutions were to be recognized by listeners as variations on a familiar idiom, they seemingly lend a different quality to the social action; to *crush the ice* in an uncomfortable social situation seems to lack a certain grace – the action sounds more violent than is alluded to in the original idiom. We would be talking about an instance of semantic productivity, rather than lexical flexibility. Furthermore, Stock, Slack and Ortony (1993) comment upon just this observation of Glucksberg, stating that while such lexical productivity is occasionally possible, it is very far from being a rule – one cannot say “drops the beans” or “release the cat from the bag”, even though the substitutions fall within the same semantic range.

This leads to their second argument: even on those occasions where such a substitution is possible, the range of acceptable and available substitutions is very restricted if the figurative meaning of the expression is to be retained, as also pointed out by Glucksberg. They further point to the likelihood of a speaker who makes such substitutions actually exploiting the idiomatic expression’s “own bizarreness – a speaker knows full well that there is something wrong with talking about “cracking the ice” and this very fact motivates his or her creative use of such an expression” (Stock, et al., 1993, p. 234). In fact, they state; the speaker is making use of a pun.

The fact that such semantically productive idioms, and indeed puns on familiar idioms “appear in everyday conversation and the media” (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 8), does not lessen the importance of teaching learners about idioms – in fact, the opposite is true. When journalists and others modify idiomatic expressions creatively, altering them and adding to them, breaking them up and alluding to them, it becomes even more crucial that the learner is familiar with the original idiom; otherwise the message will come across as completely opaque. Consider this story which appeared in a New York Times article on the rise and fall

of the Wall Street firm Drexel Burnham Lambert and is used in the following example by Glucksberg. The idiom involved is *kill the goose that lays the golden egg(s)*, meaning to “destroy a reliable and valuable source of income” (Oxford University Press, 2005):

Drexel had made a fortune on junk bonds and then found themselves seriously short of cash. Before declaring bankruptcy, the firm’s assets were distributed among the senior executives in the form of very substantial cash bonuses. As a direct result of this bonus distribution, Drexel’s cash reserve was depleted, forcing the firm into bankruptcy. In this context, the meaning of this twist on a familiar idiom is clear: “Drexel’s senior executives, not content with collecting one golden egg after another, seem to have insisted then on eating the goose.” (Glucksberg, 1993, pp. 8-9).

In reference to Glucksberg’s phrasing: the meaning of the twist might be perfectly clear to a native speaker, but it would probably be less so to a learner, especially if that learner’s native language does not have a version of this idiom that holds the same meaning as the English one.

On the topic of variation, to *melt* the proverbial ice, Glucksberg states, might be possible if a gradual change in the social atmosphere was involved (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 7). With this, Glucksberg points to a potential role of literal word meanings in idioms – while substitutions are possible, semantic constraints are placed on idiomatic creativity because idioms must be processed linguistically. This is true even when such processing is unnecessary in order to determine the meaning of an idiom. (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 7).

Some points have already been made concerning idiomatic phrases and their interpersonal linguistic function. Plainly, idioms serve different communicative purposes. Langlotz uses the terms *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual* functions (Fernando 1996, Halliday 1978, Strässler 1982).

Prototypical idioms primarily serve an ideational function. For instance, *grasp the nettle* communicates an experience or event (tackle a problem). In contrast, the address formula *good morning* serves an interpersonal function, thereby playing a significant role in the pragmatics of English-speaking countries, whereas the routine formulation *in a nutshell* is mainly used to support textual structuring (Langlotz, 2006, p. 5).

Glucksberg makes other observations concerning semantic restraints on idiom use. He uses the example *kick the bucket*¹ and illustrates his point of view that the semantic properties of the words making up the idioms have important roles to play in use and comprehension by adding an adverb to the phrase, by doing so he is telling us something about the *kick* part of the phrase, along with its idiomatic meaning. He states that “People can die silently, and so it makes sense to say, “He silently kicked the bucket.” (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 8) The point Glucksberg is making is that any modification or creativity one attempts with an idiom needs to correspond to the idiomatic sense of the phrase, here: “to die”. This idiomatic sense is more important than the verb used in the phrase, and has to be taken into consideration first and foremost when being creative with the phrase: “People cannot die “sharply”, so even though one can *kick* sharply, one cannot say “He sharply kicked the bucket”” (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 8). In an aside: to say that this idiom means simply “to die” might be an oversimplification, according to Stock, Slack and Ortony (Stock, et al., 1993, p. 233):

One could not describe a convicted murderer who just had been given a lethal injection by a state executioner as having just *kicked the bucket*. The idiom seems to require death by (more or less) natural causes, and relatively suddenly too. But this means that the idiom carves out a certain piece of our knowledge about dying. It is as though it imposed constraints on the values of some of the parameters (e.g. method, cause, etc.) associated with dying. Such an account at least would explain why we have such idioms - they serve to specialize an existing concept in a way not specialized by an existing lexical item. (This is probably not always true, but it is probably often or even usually true) (Stock, et al., 1993, p. 233).

Such specialization is valuable to a language user in order to convey nuances not otherwise easily expressed, but it is not a far leap of the imagination that is needed to reach a conclusion that such specialization might make the correct use of idiomatic language an even bigger challenge for the not-yet-as-sophisticated learner. It is, however, one of the things that seem to make the more advanced students more motivated and interested in furthering their language skills – usually those students who are already concerned with both correct and creative use of language in general. Returning to the pure semantic properties of our somewhat morbid example:

While the act of “kicking” is secondary when it comes to choosing the proper adverb to be creative with this phrase, its semantic properties come into play in a different way. While “He

¹ Linguists discussing idioms seem particularly fond of this particular idiom; *kick the bucket* has been found used as an example in most of the reference literature I have consulted for this thesis.

lay dying for three days” is perfectly normal to say, can you say “He lay kicking the bucket for three days”? No, that would not make sense – the act of kicking, by its very nature, cannot be drawn out over the space of several days – one would have to kick again and again, a repeated action, and by its very nature it is impossible for dying to be a repeated action (Glucksberg, 1993).

Langlotz (2006) emphasizes a particular form of creativity which he describes as *idiomatic creativity*: “Idiomatic creativity captures the varied evocation of a relatively stable idiomatic construction in a specific context of use. Thus, rather than just being reproduced, idioms can be varied in discourse”, remarking that “these constructions may change their conventional appearance: parts of their conventional formal and semantic substructures can be highlighted with others changing or fading away” (Langlotz, 2006, p. 7).

I have chosen to include Langlotz’s results when investigating the idiom *grasp the nettle* in the BNC (British National Corpus). These examples illustrate both Langlotz’s notion of idiomatic creativity and the point made earlier in section 2.1., concerning the variability of idiomatic expressions:

- 1) He does not appear, however, to *have grasped the management nettle* or to *have found a way of dealing with its stings*. (K4T:127)
- 2) Conservation thinking has begun to *grasp a few of the same nettles*. (APN:1380)
- 3) Disappointing as the terms were from the peasant point of view ‘for the Imperial government to *grasp the nettle of Emancipation* at all was a remarkable departure. (EA6:823)
- 4) It seemed to us that *two nettles had to be grasped*: the first was to decide whether divorce law should attempt to remedy the ‘injustice’ meted out to ‘innocent’ spouses who are divorced against their will. (BNK: 1130)
- 5) Moreover, deep-rooted public opposition to urban road construction emerged in the 1970s, so that the only feasible way forward would have been a policy of car restraint. But *this nettle was never grasped*; [...], (C8F: 189)
- 6) *There is a nettle for a somebody* – it might as well be the new Environment Secretary – *to grasp*. (AAG: 73).
- 7) But it was NME that embraced *the intellectual nettle most firmly*. (CHA: 1670) (Langlotz, 2006, p. 8)

This phenomenon is the one Langlotz calls *idiomatic creativity*, where the idiomatic constructions can change their conventional appearance, “parts of their conventional formal and semantic substructures can be highlighted with others changing or fading away” (Langlotz, 2006, p. 9)

Glucksberg presents a list of productive operations used when varying idioms to perform an intentional communicative function:

Table 4) A list of productive operations used when varying idioms to perform an intentional communicative function. Adapted from Glucksberg (1993)

	Type	Example
1.	Adjectival modification	“When drugs are involved, it’s time to speak your <i>parental</i> mind.”
2.	Adverbial modification	“Did he <i>finally</i> speak his mind?”
3.	Quantification	“As a diverse but purposeful group, you should speak your <i>minds</i> .”
4.	Tense marking	“He <i>spoke</i> his mind.”
5.	All of the above	“The tenant’s association <i>finally spoke</i> their <i>collective minds</i> .”

In order to check for variations in two familiar idiomatic expressions, I performed a corpus investigation in COCA – the Corpus of Contemporary American English. First, I checked the expression *get off on the right foot* and found these examples of variations among the results (the expression is placed in italics, the variations in bold):

- 1) They first saw each other at a bar in the East Village in December 1997, and things did not immediately **get** *off on the right foot*. " It was all very confusing, " says Andrew Berg, 41, (Newsweek Web Exclusives 2011)
- 2) WALTRIP: Every year you go into the season, you want to **start** *off on the right foot*, have as much positive energy surrounding you as you can possibly have. (Sporting News 2011)
- 3) Feeling like an oasis during this relentlessly hot summer, the Kahuna Laguna really **started our vacation** *off on the right foot*. (USAToday Sep. 2010)
- 4) Education takes a lot of time and effort, but it **sets you** *off on the right foot*, " Halper said. (Ms. Dec 2006/Jan 2007)

- 5) Sometimes, though, you needed a little help, and that's why Stubbs had asked one of his assistants to plant the blond girl in the third row. Just a little parlor trick to *get him off on the right foot*. (Book, Ben Rehder: Gun Shy 2007)
- 6) But he said that he thought the best thing he could do to make their lives better was to work on *getting the Schwarzenegger administration off on the right foot* and help the governor to turn California around. (NPR_ATC 2003, spoken)
- 7) "There's nothing like *starting off on the right foot*, " I tell them buoyantly, and hold the door open as they drag in an industrial-strength vacuum and a shopping cart full of cleaning supplies. (Michigan Quarterly Review 2000 – fall)
- 8) The reaction was very positive. I was able to solve most of their problems, and each customer immediately got to know me as the guy who fixed things. It *got us off on the right foot*. " (Atlanta Journal Constitution 2001)

These findings not only indicate that the phrase is idiomatic in American English, but that some variation is allowed in terms of the verb used, as well as inserting into the phrase *who* “gets off on the right foot”.

I also investigated the phrase *Rome wasn't built in a day*. There were fewer variations to be found here, but a few examples did show up:

- 1) We all know *Rome wasn't built in one day*. You know, so it's going to take time. And -- and we understand that. And, you know, we -- we have to keep on making progress every day and just continue to get better. (CBS THE EARLY SHOW, spoken, Aug. 27 2010)
- 2) This was a good question, but *Rome cannot be built in a day*, even if the Navajos are the largest tribe in the United States. (American Indian Quarterly, summer/fall 2005)
- 3) Ning raced toward the ball, grabbed it, and stormed toward the other basket, making a lay-up to win the scrimmage. "*Rome wasn't built in a week*." "Good block, Shannon," Coach Foster said. (Highlights for Children, Feb. 1998)

We can see that *wasn't* and *cannot* were used interchangeably, as well as the quantifier *one* and the indefinite article *a*.

When looking at the material the students participating in this study produced, quantification and tense marking give the impression of being easiest to master – at least, they seem to

present no more of a challenge when applied to idioms than these grammatical operations do when applied to general language:

2. “The story of Anne Frank is just one of many gruesome stories from the Second World War. Millions of people suffered and *paid with their lives* as a price.”[Text 10, 9th grade, 1st set]

Some will still confuse verb forms and tenses and write things like “felled asleep” [Text 7, 8th grade, 1st set].

Note: the choice was made when including quotes from the student material in this text to correct more random concord errors and spelling errors before including the quotes here. This has not been done out of a wish to present the students’ grammar skills in a more favorable light, but simply in order to keep the focus on the topic of the investigation; idiomatic language. Basic grammar errors might detract from this focus. However, the students’ choice of words or other idiosyncrasies of their language have not been altered – the quotes are very much their work. The only corrections made concern basic concord and spelling. Returning to the above point concerning modification for communicative functions; adverbial and adjectival modifications, not to mention a combination of all four, are all conspicuously absent in the student material. Most likely, such modifications demand a level of linguistic sophistication none of these students yet possess in a foreign language.

4. Idiomatic Meaning: 2 Classes of Models for Idiom Comprehension

Considering the different problems that can be encountered in deciphering idiom meaning, and the degree of variation which can be found in this class, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of models and theories have cropped up, aiming to show how we as language users process idiomatic meaning. Exactly how we cognitively process and understand idioms is a field of research in its own right, and a far too extensive body of work to include in detail in a thesis like this. Instead, two schools of thought that have been predominant will be briefly outlined. This chapter also aims to present Sinclair's idiom principle and cast a glance at the prominent theory in linguistics that this principle evolved in light of; more precisely, Chomsky's Universal Grammar.

4.1 A Direct Look-Up Model versus a Compositional Model

According to Glucksberg (1993), two main classes of models have been proposed for idiom comprehension. One class treats idioms as being expressions that have meaning that are stipulated arbitrarily, understood simply by retrieving the meaning of an idiom as a whole, exemplified by such idioms as *by and large* and *kick the bucket*. The other kind of comprehension model deals with idioms of the class represented by *carrying coals to Newcastle*: these do not have an arbitrary meaning, referring rather to actual historical fact (coal-mining in Newcastle and the essential pointlessness of bringing coals to such a place) and takes on the stereotypical meaning of uselessly bringing something somewhere.

While the first class is named a *direct look-up* model by Glucksberg, referring to the act of mentally "looking up" the meaning of the idiomatic phrase using a mental lexicon of some sort, the second class is different. Here, one understands the meaning of idioms through linguistic processing, along with making use of one's pragmatic knowledge of discourse contexts the idiom is used in (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 4). This class of models is referred to as *compositional*, and there seems to be no accepted truth among researchers when it comes to which model is the correct one.

Within the school of thought of *direct look-up*, three versions have been proposed, all depending on direct memory retrieval processes rather than linguistic processing. Glucksberg (1993, 4-5) cites Brobrow & Bell (1973) and their *idiom list* hypothesis where they propose that we have a mental idiom lexicon that we turn to when we fail to understand the meaning of a phrase through using our mental word lexicon. However, Glucksberg argues that this proposition is easily countered by findings that prove we do not spend more time deciphering and interpreting idiomatic meanings than we do understanding literal meanings – we understand idioms just as quickly, and therefore the idea that we have to go through one process, then reject it when it yields no results, in order to move on to another mental lexicon is flawed, as such a two-stage process would take more time. In support, Glucksberg cites the findings of Gibbs (1980) and Ortony, Schallert, Reynolds and Antos (1978) (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 5). The reader might be reminded by Johnson-Laird (1993), as quoted in Section 2.2., equally giving support to this view.

Also falling under the category of *direct look-up* is Swinney and Cutler's (1979) *lexical hypothesis*. Here, idiomatic expressions are seen as simply long words, accessed through normal linguistic processing from our mental lexicon, where they exist side by side, so to speak, with the words they are made up of. The idiomatic phrase registers as a linguistic unit, and its meaning does not need to be processed step-by-step or word for word. A literal meaning does not have to be rejected and then an idiomatic meaning searched for – rather, an idiomatic meaning is recognized immediately, as the phrase is accessed in our lexicon as a unit, and as such this model accounts for the relative ease and speed with which we understand familiar idioms. Indeed, a familiar idiom will be understood more quickly than comparable literal expressions, as the idiomatic expression is processed as one unit, rather than as a phrase made up by several individual words (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 5). Gibbs (1984) proposed that if a phrase was recognized immediately as an idiom, all linguistic processing could be bypassed and be made redundant, and called this model the *direct access hypothesis*. However, he soon abandoned this more extreme version of the lexical hypothesis in favor of a more compositional view (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 5).

The variability of idioms was discussed earlier, using *by and large* and *carry coals to Newcastle* as examples. Attempts have been made, such as by Nurnberg (1978) to bring order to this variability through placing idioms along a graded “continuum of compositionality” (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 5). Nurnberg's version, however, is declared by Glucksberg (1993) to be too simple to capture the natural complexity of idioms, and he prefers instead a proposal by

Cacciari and Tabossi (1988), where “Linguistic processing and idiom look-up can occur in parallel, but idiom look-up cannot begin until the idiom itself is recognized as a configuration, that is, as a unitary expression with meaning beyond that of its constituents” (Glucksberg, 1993, p. 6), further stating that, alongside the “race models” discussed, this model fit best with what is known about idiom processing.

4.2 Sinclair’s Idiom Principle as Response to Universal Grammar

No account of idiom comprehension and production would be complete without a brief look at Sinclair’s *idiom principle* (1987). Chomsky (1965), (1957) had taken a strong stance against the behaviorist view of language, which described language production as reproductions of memorized linguistic structures, and its proponents such as Skinner (1957) and Bloomfield (1967). Chomsky instead proposed the Universal Grammar theory, stating that all human beings have innate the prespecification in their brains that permits the learning of languages to take place. The *grammar* of any single language is not innate, children will have to pick up the specifics and acquire the grammar of the language they are surrounded by, but the conditions for learning are innate – the grammar-acquiring capacity (Jackendorff, 2002, pp. 71-71). Chomsky’s Universal Grammar emphasized syntax as a formal combinatory apparatus, and as such drew the focus away from lexicon – the stock of pre-fabricated units. Chomsky put linguistic creativity in the foreground, given that syntax was the means of producing language, through creatively combining memorized units from the lexicon, not structures.

Chomsky’s generative paradigm garnered a lot of attention but was considered incomplete by some linguists (Langlotz, 2006, p. 6), notably Halliday with his theory of social semiotics (1978), Pawley & Syder (1983) among other, and last but not least Sinclair (1987, pp. ,319). Though from different subfields, these linguists all argued that linguistic production could not adequately be described using this syntax vs. lexicon dichotomy. One might speculate that Chomsky is a likely candidate to be one of the unnamed linguists who inspired the characterization “housebound cartographers who rely solely on intuition to draw maps of the mind”, in Johnson-Lairds words (1993, viii); who indeed points out idioms’ position as exceptions to the general compositional rules.

Contrasting, or perhaps complementing Chomsky, Sinclair introduced the contrasting principles the open-choice (or creativity) principle and the idiom principle (1987, pp. 319). The open-choice principle he saw as being “inherent in the segmental descriptions of grammatical structures and finds expression of this in the “slot-and-filler” models provided by most grammatical approaches” (Langlotz, 2006, p. 6). Therefore, it wasn’t enough in order to fully explain linguistic production and interpretation, and needed a complementing principle:

The principle of idiom is that a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments. To some extent this may reflect the recurrence of similar situations in human affairs; it may illustrate a natural tendency to economy of effort, or it may be motivated in part by the exigencies of real-time conversation. However, it arises, it has been relegated to an inferior position in most current linguistics, because it does not fit the open-choice model (Sinclair, 1987, p. 320).

Phraseology as a linguistic discipline has focused on those linguistic constructs and expressions which are closely connected to this principle. Idioms can be seen as violating Chomsky’s notion of linguistic creativity in that that they are not produced through linguistic composition, but rather reproduced from the mental lexicon, and they have therefore typically been treated a lexical units (Langlotz, 2006, p. 7). As seen earlier in the idiom-variation data on the idiom *grasp the nettle*, according to Langlotz (2006) the answer might perhaps not lie fully with either Chomsky or Sinclair, but might be somewhere in the middle:

Idiom variation data therefore question the strict dichotomy between the creativity principle and the idiom principle. Rather than leading to a strict opposition between regular standard constructions and irregular idiomatic constructions, idiomatic creativity implies that idiom production and comprehension are subject to a dynamic tension between the two principles. This further suggests that idioms cannot merely be described as lexical items; rather, they seem to occupy a position between the lexicon and syntax, leading to a fuzzy dividing line between the productive and reproductive aspects of linguistic competence (Langlotz, 2006, p. 9).

Within EFL teaching, this has significance for the teaching of idiomatic expressions as part of vocabulary, as will be shown in Chapter 6; Idiom Acquisition and Learner Language.

5. Culture-Dependent Aspects of Idiomatic Language

Knowledge of the different forms of interaction, different levels of politeness and being able to adapt one's language to the situation are also skills that are deemed important to master in order to achieve successful communication:

Å vise høflighet og hensyn til gjeldende omgangsformer i ulike språkhandlinger er også et viktig element. Dette går hånd i hånd med tilpasning av språket til mottaker og situasjon, blant annet gjennom å skille mellom formelle og uformelle, skriftlige og muntlige stilnivåer. (LK 06, Læreplan i engelsk)

This chapter aims to account for some culture-dependent aspects of idiomatic language usage and comprehension, and the corresponding impact for learners of foreign language.

What does politeness have to do with using idioms? Consider this true story: A few years back, a friend of a friend, then a young girl of about 16, visited the US. Her English was the typical "school English", along with what she had managed to glean from watching American movies, listening to music, etc. She was visiting an American, upper/middle class family, polite and quite formal people, and was out sightseeing with some of the older members of this family. She felt the need to visit the ladies' room, and told her group: "Excuse me; I just have to go take a leak." Mortification ensued.

It is fair to assume that the Norwegian girl in question had mainly been exposed to such "outside school sources" of language usage as were tailored to her age group: movies, literature and music geared towards teenagers. It is a matter of register – and adapting your style and vocabulary appropriately for your audience. How could she be expected to know that the idiom she used was very informal, indeed slightly vulgar, and almost exclusively used by younger men? No one had taught her that was the case – it is not an area teachers would normally focus on in class - but the native speakers certainly knew, and were rather shocked. While a learner is generally given some leeway by native speakers in terms of errors, avoiding outright embarrassment on both parts seems a worthwhile goal.

Culture is an aspect of idiomaticity. For the learner, coming from another cultural background, this aspect is perhaps even more relevant. "One of the reasons idiomatic language is difficult to translate is because it is the area of language closest to culture. The metaphors of one culture will be different from those of another" (Wright, 2002, p. 10).

Our idioms have evolved in the culture where our language is actively used. As stated by Lewis (2009, p. 2) when discussing formulaic language and idiomatic expressions in terms of learning a foreign language: “Culturally tinged cognitive frames reflected in language contribute to the opaqueness and problems of identification”. For a learner living his or her life surrounded by a culture that differs from the target language’s, be it to a large degree or to a more minor degree, culture can play a significant part in whether or not they understand the idiomatic phrase being used. As Crystal points out in the quote cited earlier: “in English we “face” problems and “interpret” dreams, but in modern Hebrew we “stand in front of” problems and “solve” dreams” (Crystal, 2010, p. 109). In teaching Norwegian students for the purpose of this case study, this particular difficulty was encountered several times; for example when explaining common American baseball idioms such as *off base*, *touch base* or *out of left field* – the average student simply does not have a cultural frame of reference within which he or she is able to interpret these expressions adequately.

This goes both ways: to further illustrate the general untranslatability of idioms, a quick round of questioning of American friends living in Norway yielded the following selection of some of the most baffling Norwegian expressions they have encountered, as well as their own comments and questions about these phrases (in italics):

- “å gå på måfå” - *Where is måfå, exactly?*
- ”har du gått på felgen?” – *Am I riding my bumper?*
- ”ugler i mosen” – *Why are owls in moss?*
- “frisk som en fisk” – *Are fish healthy?*
- ”kjært barn har mange navn” – *If they are special, should not the name be unique?*
- “du må få ut fingeren” – *From WHERE exactly? The only American alternative I know that seems approximately the same, is extremely rude – but this expression is not rude in Norwegian?*
- “å måtte svelge noen kameler” – *Swallow camels means WHAT?*
- ”er du lut fattig eller?” – *Is not lut the weird salt for fish? (added cultural confusion here...)*
- ”det var på hengende håret” – *It was on a hanging hair?*
- ”forklare hvor David kjøpte ølet” – *I asked for translation of this, and it was apparently David from the Bible, but the rest I do not get.*
- “det er bikkjekaldt ute” – *Dogs are not even cold, they are warm and fluffy?*
- ”tak for sist” – *Totally confusing to know when, where or why to use this one.*
- “å være helt bak mål” – *Being completely behind goal?*
- ”gjøre noen en bjørnetjeneste” – *You are doing me a bearfavour?*

These examples and interpretations do not exactly qualify as scientific observations, but they do provide a good illustration of how difficult idiomaticity in a foreign language can be. Add

to this the fact that the people who generously provided examples of their own linguistic inadequacy, so to speak, are well-educated adults; educated – indeed language teachers in Lower Secondary School and college - often with a degree of fluency and a proficiency level in Norwegian that can be considered native-like, and the potential difficulties become even more apparent.

Phrases derived from a culturally more familiar background, such as ones originating from the Bible: *cast pearl for swine* or *the eye of a needle* may be more familiar to Norwegian learners because the culture the students are immersed in is a western culture with its roots in Christianity. In English, the King James Bible has often been said to have had the most impact on the English language of any book in history (Crystal, 2010). These biblically derived idioms can be found in all the arenas language is normally used, be it formal or informal, at a football game, on the news, in social media, among friends – people use these phrases everywhere. Crystal (2010) investigated just how many idiomatic phrases the English language has this single source to thank for, and arrived at 257, using his definition of what should count as an idiom (he acknowledges that other analysts may end up with a different total, depending on the criteria used).

The same familiarity might be the case with idioms derived from Shakespeare, the only other single source to even approach the Bible in terms of linguistic influence, though the number of phrases we can confidently attribute to him is under a hundred (Crystal, 2010). Even some Latin phrases, such as the *exception that proves the rule* (Norw. “Unntaket som bekrefter regelen”), from the Latin legal maxim *exception probat regulum in casibus non exceptis* (Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 96) might have an air of familiarity to them.

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009) defines an idiom first and foremost as “a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word” and in turn define an idiomatic expression/phrase as being “an idiom *typical of the natural way in which someone speaks or writes when they are using their own language*” (italics added).

The cultural aspect is of interest in relation to different varieties of English, as well. British and American English can assign different senses to the (seemingly) same idiom. This can cause some confusion for a learner who assumes that, apart from a few lexical differences, Americans and the British speak the same language and so the meaning of the words and expressions should be the same in both varieties. This was experienced personally when I,

with my already acquired American English, was a student in London ten years back. Coming home one night, the young couple in whose apartment I was renting a room was in the kitchen. The man looked a little worse for wear, sitting at the kitchen table with his head in his hands, obscuring his face. His wife laughed and told me “Don’t worry about him, he’s just *pissed*.” Admittedly, this expression, much like the example presented above, is classified as vulgar slang, but I knew the meaning most commonly assigned to it in American English, and immediately assumed the man was very, very angry or annoyed. I slunk upstairs to my room, slightly worried about the domestic situation, not knowing at the time that the sense of that idiom, as it was most commonly used in British English, was that of being “very drunk” (orig. *pissed as a newt* (Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 221)).

Another example is the different senses give to the word *mad* in BrE and AmE. When someone is sad to be *mad* in AmE, often it means that they are very angry, whereas in BrE, it means that they are insane. Add to the confusion the slang use that something is *totally mad*, meaning that it is really good, and you are left with quite the recipe for cultural clash. While neither of these expressions satisfies the traditional criteria of idioms being multi-word constructs, they certainly satisfy the opaqueness criteria, and as such can be considered idiomatic.

While expressions such as the ones above might not be the ones most commonly taught in classrooms around Norway, it is fair to say that one would be hard pressed to find a teenage student who had not at least heard them before. Quite probably in some cases, they are the only kind of idioms they know. The vulgar or informal expressions will oftentimes be the ones students are most familiar with; as they make up a lot of the language they are exposed to through mass media targeted towards their age group. Part of a language educator’s job is to cultivate a certain cultural and pragmatic competence; to avoid students using improper language in future interaction with native speakers of English. This competence involves using and understanding idiomatic phrases and their appropriate usage, along with having a certain control over stylistic register – when to say what, and to whom.

6. Idiom Acquisition and Learner Language in Second Language Acquisition Literature

Idioms are clearly part of the natural vocabulary of a native speaker of English. For a learner, the acquisition of vocabulary is one of the most important parts of learning a language, but it consists of more than memorizing lists of lexical units and individual lexical items that correlate 1:1 with items from your L1 – familiarity with a lexical item involves more than knowing its semantic aspects (Takac, 2008, p. 16). A learner needs to discover and build on patterns within the L2, recognize collocations and more or less conventionalized and predictable chunks of language: it is the ability to use such sequences that brings an L2 learner closer to the native speaker, the use of idiomatic, frequent and familiar units reflect a native-like competence. The learner needs to acquire those lexical sequences (collocations, phrases and idioms) and their meaning as well as the individual lexemes they consist of (Takac, 2008, p. 17):

Several studies have been undertaken to find out how people store L1 words in their memory, their “mental lexicon”. These studies have disclosed networks of associations between words. To know a word is, therefore, often understood as having a network of associations between the word and other words in the language. Learning a word is frequently interpreted as a relational process, and establishing a variety of associations between words is often emphasized in formally oriented present-day approaches to L2 vocabulary teaching: “The more associations and interconnections we have developed, the more efficiently we can recall and retrieve” (Rivers 1983:129).

This chapter focuses on characteristics of learner language as presented in the literature. The second section of the chapter takes a look at some theories and approaches in language pedagogy, mainly that of form-focused vs. a context-based, communicative approach and the theories of explicit vs. implicit learning.

6.1. Characteristics of Learner Language

Stig Johansson provides a breakdown of learner language characteristics, aiming to show reasons as to why learner language description remains a challenge:

- *Learner language is transitional and changeable;*
- *There is greater variability than in other language systems;*
- *There is no speech community and no social norm (Johansson, 2008, p. 114).*

Johansson also points out that while there is a lot of variability, “features tend to get fossilized or fixed, stopping short of full mastery of the target language”, and also mentions backsliding: “slipping back to earlier stages when the period of active learning stops and the language is insufficiently used” (Johansson, 2008, pp. 114-115).

Among the characteristics of learner language are a lack of lexical variation and an overuse of common words, as well as clear errors. All of these indicate that a text has been produced by a learner (Johansson, 2008, p. 118). Johansson also mentions *equivalence* errors, citing some of these errors to involve the transfer of idioms and longer expressions. This type of error is called an *interlingual* error, and happens when a word in the target language is wrongly equated with a word in the native language (Johansson, 2008, pp. 118-119). Another term for these types of errors is *interference*:

When we use a foreign language, we may make mistakes because of influence from our mother tongue – mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, and other levels of language – often referred to as *interference*. This is why books in grammar and phonetics for foreign students with a particular mother tongue usually focus a lot on differences between the mother tongue – or L1 – and the target language – or L2. Being aware of these differences is essential in order to learn the correct and idiomatic use of the foreign language. Without such awareness, we tend to see and hear things in familiar ways, according to the categories which we are familiar with from our native language. And that is not surprising. This is the way we tend to see, hear, and interpret things in general. (Johansson, 2008, p. 9)

For this reason, the teachers involved in this case study placed extra emphasis on aspects of idiomatic language that could be a subject of interference, as is recounted in Chapter 9.

Equivalence errors - where a word in the target language is wrongly equated with a word in the mother tongue (Johansson, 2008) - are found in the material gathered for this thesis as well, for instance in the case of “hold my head cold” (correct: *keep my head cold*) [Text 4, 9th grade, 2nd set], though this may also reflect a conceptual confusion – that of confusing semantically related words (Johansson, 2008).

Additionally, learner language is characterized by being less varied than that of a native speaker. Common and familiar words are often overused, leading to the tendency described by Hasselgren (Hasselgren, 1994) to use certain words and expressions as lexical teddy bears. While the learner is overusing these familiar words and expressions, other words and expressions may end up being underused (Johansson, 2008, p. 123). Paquot (2008) found a similar tendency in her study of non-native writers’ use of fixed formulas for the purpose of exemplification: her subjects tended to overuse certain phrases in their writing, choosing the expressions *for example* and *for instance* far more often than expressions such as *to illustrate this*, etc. This result she deemed to be clearly in line with Granger (1998, pp. ,156) who

concludes that “learners repertoires for introducing arguments and points of view are very restricted and they therefore “cling on” to certain fixed phrases and expressions which they feel confident in using”.

Research then, seems to have found that not only single lexical units are being treated as teddy bears or security blankets; multi-word, formulaic phrases are used by learners in this way as well. Paquot (2008, pp. ,116) suggests in her conclusion that textbooks and teaching materials should make the learner aware of such tendencies to overuse particular words and phrases and make them aware of proper alternatives. Focusing on this, she says, may prove particularly useful to learners to help them conform to “the native stylistic norms for a particular register” which “entails not only making appropriate grammatical and lexical choices, but also selecting conventional [multi-word units] to an appropriate extent (Howarth, 1998, p. 186), cited in Paquot (2008, pp. ,116).

Accordingly, while idiomatic language provides a good way to vary one’s language alongside being a mark of fluency, there seems to be a danger of using idiomatic phrases as lexical teddy bears in a learning process. Actually, Granger and Meunier take it one step further, also referring to Hasselgren in stating “ As for idioms, teachers and students alike seem to view them as phraseological teddy bears, probably not because they use them very often but because they are very popular for the fascinating cultural window they open onto the target language” (Granger & Meunier, 2008). This statement may have a slight dismissive feeling to it, but it is unclear whether their intention is to say that while teachers and students may find these phrases amusing but irrelevant for their own use, the authors do not share this point of view, or whether the authors themselves feel that idiomatic phrases are the least interesting part of phraseology.

Regardless of viewpoint, Granger and Meunier go on to mention one of the numerous challenges that must be faced in the EFL classroom; that of dealing with learners’ attitudes and boosting their motivation.

Some may simply not be interested in learning multiword units when they consider that one word is problematic enough to learn (...); others may be afraid of being accused of plagiarism, and yet others may give preponderance to communication rather than accuracy (although one could argue that accuracy and effective communication often go hand in hand). One of the future challenges for teachers will be to help learners become aware of the pervasiveness of phraseology and its potential in promoting fluency in language (Granger & Meunier, 2008, p. 248).

The student group involved in this project in general exhibited greater motivation and enthusiasm for participating in the lessons where the focus was on idioms. This may have

been for the “cultural window” it provided, or it may simply have been an enthusiasm with an aspect of language learning that was fresh and new to them – the novelty factor, so to speak. Regardless of the reasons behind their motivation, it seems worthy of note. Now, if Granger and Meunier may have sounded slightly dismissive of idioms, they might be excused simply based on the fact that the book the quote has been extracted from seems to be mainly geared towards the issues of more advanced learners, mainly the EAP learners (English for Academic Purposes). In the general EFL classroom, with young teenage learners, it is most teachers’ observation that one should never underestimate the power of motivation – perhaps even more important when working with this age group than with arguably more self-disciplined adult students.

6.2 Focus on Form versus the Communicative Approach in Second/Foreign Language Pedagogy – Explicit or Implicit Learning?

Some other linguists, notably Firth (1957), Sinclair et al (1970), Hakuta (1976), Wong Fillmore (1976), Pawley and Syder (1982), Peters (1983), and Wray (2002) are among those who have stressed the formulaic nature of much of our speech behavior, thereby giving weight to the argument that learning a language involves learning multi-word sequences, and a lot of them (Kennedy, 2008, p. 37). Lewis (1993) as well, known for his Lexical Approach, predicated upon the idiom principle and focused instruction on relatively fixed, frequently occurring expressions (Ellis, 2008, p. 7), arguing that this form of instruction was the most effective in terms of acquiring functional vocabulary. At least in the case of the findings of this case study related to the pedagogical approaches chosen, this seems to hold true.

Connected to this subject, Kennedy (2008) highlights other issues in language pedagogy. He points to the fact that there has been, over the course of the last 50 years or so, a tension and a power struggle between form-focused and message-focused approaches to language pedagogy. The focus on message seems to have won at the moment. It can be argued that phraseology is the linguistic “home” of idiomatic phrases, and given that phraseology has, he argues, tended to favor form-focused pedagogical approaches, less focus has been given to such phrases and their characteristics in what is now a primarily message-focused pedagogical community (Kennedy, 2008, p. 37).

Spada and Lightbown (2008:200-1) argue for a need for form-focused instruction together with a communicative (message-focused) approach, stating that integrated focus-on-form “can contribute to the automatization of language features that have emerged in students’ language but that are not used reliably when there are competing demands for attention”, and may even prove essential in promoting the acquisition of some language features that are “hard to perceive in the normal stream of communicative speech, those for which there is a misleading similarity to the L1, and those that are unlikely to cause communication breakdown” Spada & Lightbown (2008, p. 200), cited in Eek (2011). Idiomatic phrases can be argued to be one such feature.

Referring again to Hasselgren (1994), and her theory of lexical teddy bears, (i.e. “safe words” that students tend to overuse and consequently underuse others, leading to a less varied vocabulary,) there are some further points to be made in favor of a more form focused pedagogy. When it comes to vocabulary in general, Schmitt (2000:142-50), argues that both an *incidental* (i.e. picking up words during a communicative activity,) as well as an *explicit* (learning by focusing the attention on new lexical items and their meaning, often involving repetition) learning of vocabulary, is needed in order to reach a level approaching that of native speakers. Given that idiomatic language is deemed to be one of the “final frontiers”, so to speak, of achieving native-like proficiency, the learning of idiomatic phrases should then take place both incidentally and explicitly. While working on idioms with the students participating in this project, focus was therefore placed both on repetition, in the learning of new phrases, as well as on awareness training – pointing out idioms when they occurred in the students’ and teacher’s language, a more incidental approach.

Schmitt seems to contrast Krashen (1982) in arguing for a combination of focus-on-form and communicative negotiation of meaning, stressing the incremental nature of vocabulary acquisition, and the necessity of repetition as a strategy in order to fully acquire a lexical item’s - and presumably also an idiomatic phrase’s - meaning, use and collocations; implying that while a word can be picked up in discourse, it might not be used often enough, and in diverse enough situations, that its meaning and usage is fully acquired (Schmitt, 2000:117-120).

For a fair number of idioms, this is certainly the case. As pointed out earlier, the students will encounter common idioms of the phrasal/prepositional verb variety quite often in their curriculum texts, whereas the longer idiomatic phrases, such as to *kick the bucket*, to *keep*

one's chin up, to *bend over backwards* or to *go from rags to riches* will show up only a very few times. When it comes to the more complicated, proverb-like phrases, such as *pretty is as pretty does*, or exclamations like *you could have knocked me down with a feather*, it would be a stroke of luck if they showed up at all. Some explicit instruction seems to be necessary.

Meara et al. (1997, p. 42) investigated the lexical environment in an intensive L2 environment and found it to be rich, but noted the possibility that students could be unable to acquire large vocabularies without explicit instruction. Swan comments that referential lexis is a vast field, indeed that “when we have taught students what they need to know in order to carry out the main communicative functions, we *still* have most of the language left to teach” (Swan, 1985, p. 81). Idiomatic language is a central part of that “language left to teach”: the students may know all the words in the phrase, understand the grammar, and yet completely miss the figurative meaning of the phrase or the proper context to use it.

Going back to explicit and implicit learning, the point is certainly not to argue for an exclusively explicit teaching strategy. Teachers and linguists have long recognized that both varieties are involved in language learning; however, there has been considerable discussion as to the relative weight that should be given to each (Kennedy, 2008, p. 38). As argued by Ellis (1994) and Kirsner (1994), “phraseology is learned especially through implicit learning by unconsciously meeting multi-word sequences repeatedly in context” (Kennedy, 2008, p. 38). So the more a learner is exposed to such multi-word units, the more fluent he or she becomes in retrieving them and including them in their own produced language (Bybee & Hopper, 2001). Both implicit and explicit learning has its purpose to serve when acquiring a language, and the challenge is to devise methodologies which maximize opportunities for implicit learning, so that the learners get enough experience with multi-word units, among them idiomatic phrases, that they are able to internalize them (Kennedy, 2008). Kennedy further suggests that it is the most frequently occurring of these collocations that need to be learned first, and this is part of the basis for choosing to work primarily with a selection of common idioms with the participants in this study.

7. Metaphorical Competence

This chapter considers the possible role of metaphorical competence in understanding and acquiring idiomatic language.

Jon Wright points out in the introduction to his *Idiom Organizer*, meant as a work- and -study book for students of English as a foreign language:

It is impossible to speak, read or listen to English without meeting idiomatic language. This is not something you can leave until you reach an advanced level. All native speaker English is idiomatic. Every newspaper is full of metaphorical language. You cannot avoid it or leave it till later (Wright, 2002, p. 9).

This statement echoes the Johnson-Laird (1993) statement quoted in section 2.2., concerning idioms' pervasiveness in language: "It is difficult to speak spontaneously without lapsing into idiomatic usage. (...) Even in explaining an idiom, you can find to your expense that you are using another." (Johnson-Laird, 1993, p. ix). Experiences during the teaching phase of this study support this statement. Wright (2002) includes metaphorical uses of words in his book, reasoning that often the metaphorical use of the word is more common in everyday language than its literal use, and counsels his students to look for clues of the metaphorical/figurative use of the words within the literal meaning: "Often the literal meaning creates a picture in your mind and this picture makes the other meanings easier to understand" (Wright, 2002, p. 9). In many cases, this is true, but there are also plenty of idioms where the figurative meaning is not easily understood from the literal, perhaps especially for a student of English as a foreign language.

Some metaphorical competence is therefore required to break down an idiom into its components parts and make semantic inferences about them, and even more in order to comprehend or recognize idioms when they have been subjected to variations or substitutions (Levorato, 1993, p. 122). L2-oriented metaphor research treats various aspects of metaphorical language processing, understanding idioms, metaphors and various multi-word units (e.g. phrasal verbs) as essential components of L2 competence (Cieslicka & Singleton, 2004). Danesi (1992) argues that lack of metaphorical competence "is a major reason why L2 learners fail to become native-like and that metaphorical competence is usually inadequate in classroom L2 learners even after years of learning" (Cieslicka & Singleton, 2004, p. 69). He

further argues that because of this, educators need to develop instructional techniques to build metaphorical competence in their students.

Kövecses devotes a chapter of his book “*Metaphor: A practical introduction*” to the subject of metaphor, metonymy and idioms. In this, he states:

In the traditional view, idioms are regarded as a special set of the larger category of words. They are assumed to be a matter of language alone; that is, they are taken to be items of the lexicon (i.e., the mental dictionary) that are independent of any conceptual system. According to the traditional view, all there is to idioms is that, similar to words, they have certain syntactic properties and a have a meaning that is special, relative to the meanings of the forms that comprise it. (...) Moreover, idioms are also taken to be independent of each other, which follows from the previous view that idioms are simply a matter of language. If they are just a matter of language, then we just need to characterize their sense relations one by one. Words are characterized in the lexicon one by one according to their syntactic properties and meaning, and the same is assumed to apply to idioms. (...) I suggest that one major stumbling block in understanding the nature of idioms and making use of this understanding in the teaching of foreign languages is that they are regarded as linguistic expressions that are independent of any conceptual system and that they are isolated from each other at the conceptual level. (Kövecses, 2010, pp. 232,232)

If we see idioms in light of this traditional view, it is argued, they are simply a matter of language, characterized in the same way as words in the lexicon; one by one, according to their syntactic properties and meaning, recognizing merely certain sense relations, such as homonymy, synonymy, polysemy and antonymy – all linguistic relations.

What is faulty in this traditional view, Kövecses argues, is that it divorces linguistic meaning from the human conceptual system and encyclopedic knowledge that speakers of a language share, and that seeing idiomatic expressions as independent in this fashion gets in the way of both understanding the nature of idioms and making use of the understanding in teaching foreign languages (Kövecses, 2010, p. 232). In other words, language teachers and students are missing out, by only seeing idioms as a simply a matter of language, rather than a cognitive linguistic phenomenon. It is therefore worth taking a quick look at this cognitive linguistic school of thought.

It is not the intention here to go into metaphorical theory in general, but what may be worthwhile to keep in the back of our minds while teaching, is the position taken by Lakoff (1980,2003) and others, among them Kövecses (2010); that metaphors and figurative language use plays a very big role in how we come to grip with the world around us (Cieslicka & Singleton, 2004, p. 70). In fact, in the concluding remarks of their article, Cieslicka and Singleton state that the results of a number of studies suggest that “raising learner’s consciousness about the conceptual motivation of linguistic metaphors in the L2

leads to improved performance in the processing and retention of the metaphors in question” (Cieslicka & Singleton, 2004, p. 80).

Kövecses argues very strongly for a cognitive view of idioms, providing numerous examples, mainly focusing on idioms belonging to metaphorical categories well-known from Lakoff and Johnson (1980,2003), such as ANGER IS FIRE (e.g. *to be spitting fire, have smoke coming out of one’s ears*), LOVE IS FIRE (e.g. *to carry a torch for someone*) CONFLICT IS FIRE (e.g. *to spark off a conflict*), ENERGY IS FUEL FOR THE FIRE (e.g. *burning the candle at both ends*) and ENTHUSIASM IS FIRE (e.g. “*The speaker fanned the flames of the crowd’s enthusiasm*”) (Kövecses, 2010). On this basis, it is argued that “many, perhaps most” idioms can be generalized as being products of our conceptual system and not just a matter of language:

An idiom is not just an expression that has a meaning that is somehow special in relation to the meaning of its constituting parts, but it arises from our more general knowledge of the world embodied in our conceptual system. In other words, idioms (or, at least, the majority of them) are conceptual, and not linguistic in nature (Kövecses, 2010, p. 232).

This comes across as very nice and tidy, and indeed it seems to make a lot of sense. It might even be the truth, but there is one problem which Kövecses admittedly also recognizes: note that in the above citations, it says “many, perhaps most”. Following this first characterization, the statement is later made stronger: “at least the majority”. If this particular language use is anything to go by, it indicates that Kövecses might have more enthusiasm than actual confidence in his theory, but that is not the main issue. The problem is, if many, or most, or a majority of idioms, do originate based on our conceptual system, what about those who do not fit into such a neat categorization? Kövecses recognizes that these exist, though somewhat dismissively comments:

In some cases we do not have conceptual motivation for the meanings of idioms at all (as in the case of the well-worn idiom *kick the bucket*). Understandably, these latter kinds of idiomatic expressions are the most celebrated examples of idioms in the standard views (Kövecses, 2010, p. 233).

He might be right; there is no common consensus on this issue as yet. However, the basis comes across as being too weak, his arguments fail to include too large and common a group of expressions to completely convince. Kövecses utters in one particular instance “The motivation for the occurrence of particular words in a large number of idioms can be thought of as a cognitive mechanism that *links* (italics added) domains of knowledge to idiomatic meanings” (Kövecses, 2010, p. 233). Looking at it as a link (though it is perhaps unlikely from the context that the author intended this interpretation), rather than as a point of origin

makes more sense, as it indicates an acknowledgment that there is indeed a large number of idioms which appears to be related conceptually in some sense. The problem, as is a common trap of research, is that a theory is presented as absolute truth when it does not encompass all it needs to.

The interesting part of this theory in light of this case study, and indeed the reason for including it, is that Kövecses draws a clear line from his theory to implications for foreign language teaching and learning. He suggests that in being presented with such cognitive motivation, or semantic transparency, the links to common conceptual fields should facilitate the learning and teaching of idioms. “By providing them with cognitive motivation for idioms, learners of foreign languages should be able to learn the idioms faster and retain them longer in memory” (Kövecses, 2010, p. 233). He quotes Suzanne Irujo as an applied linguist who agrees with this viewpoint:

Teaching students strategies for dealing with figurative language will help them to take advantage of the semantic transparency of some idioms. If they can figure out the meaning of an idiom by themselves, they will have a link from the idiomatic meaning to the literal words, which will help them learn the idiom (Irujo, 1993, p. 217).

Note that Irujo’s article was not primarily about making a case for cognitive linguistics, but rather about testing the assumption that even very advanced speakers of a second language tend to avoid producing idioms. Irujo tested fluent Spanish-English bilinguals, arguably far more advanced than the average “learner” referred to when using the term learner language, particularly considering the teenaged participants of this study.

This notion that linguistic competence and maturity in general may have their roles to play in whether or not a more cognitive approach produces better results seems to be valid, judging from experiences had while working with these younger students. The point that raising learner’s consciousness of conceptual motivation may lead to improved processing performance and retention, raised by Cieslicka and Singleton (2004), referred to above, was taken into account when conducting the work on idioms with the students in this study. In practice, what this meant was that the students were encouraged to be aware of possible metaphors when they encountered unfamiliar idioms, and their metaphoric interpretations were the subject of discussions in class. At times, the students managed to hit on the correct metaphor and the correct interpretation of the idiom, while at other times they veered far off the mark and displayed significant confusion.

What was interesting to note was how the metaphoric angle appealed strongly to certain students, notable the more advanced ones – one could almost see the light bulbs switch on in their heads – whereas others saw the whole concept of metaphors as being far beyond them and completely irrelevant to learning a language. One tentative conclusion may be that the majority of the students were too immature in their metaphoric competence, they had not read widely enough or indeed lived long enough yet to truly grasp metaphoric images even in their own mother tongue and attempting this in another language – one where some still struggle to build a sentence with a correct word order – seemed an insurmountable and incomprehensible challenge. Perhaps this indicates that a cognitive view of idioms, taught in a way that utilizes metaphorical competence, might be slightly better suited for more mature students.

While one does not have to agree whole-heartedly that it is constructive to teach Norwegian Lower Secondary School students conceptual metaphor theory in and of itself, it may be productive to simply encourage the students to think about possible symbolism and encourage them to look for common threads to search for patterns that will help them assign meaning to the idiomatic expressions they encounter. Concentrating heavily on metaphor theory at this point in the learning process is perhaps unrealistic – there seems to be neither space nor time for it in the curriculum, nor will the students in general be motivated and understand the reason behind it. They are simply not mature enough, as indeed our experiences seem to indicate.

However, what does seem to make sense, and is in fact completely in line with the pedagogical principle of building upon what is already known and then expanding, is guiding the students' attention to what possible metaphor could exist within an idiom. From there, the teacher could ask the question: What does the mental image that you get have to do with possible meaning, does it make sense, and do you know of any other expressions that could be related? In Norwegian we have the idiomatic expression “å ha en knagg å henge noe på”, meaning that acquired information becomes more internalized and understood on a deeper level when you have something already known or experienced, to relate it to. It appeared likely that this would also help the students remember the newly learned expressions.

One of the exercises done with the student groups while learning about idioms before writing their 2nd set of texts was to give them a list of idioms that were common, but probably unfamiliar to most of the students (note: this short list is not identical to the one included in Appendix III, though a few of the idioms are present in both). They were then put into groups

and asked to come up with possible interpretations of the meaning of these idioms. Surprisingly often they were, if not completely on target, at least not far from it. Some of these idioms showed up in the students' texts in the 2nd set, especially *a piece of cake*, which was used multiple times by multiple students [Examples 3-7, Chapter 9, Section 9.3].

Another possible reason to at least dip into the subject of metaphors is that the English curriculum also demands that the students learn to write creatively and in different genres, in English (LK06). Using figurative language does in general lead to texts that give a more sophisticated impression. After all, in teaching Norwegian, teachers focus on figurative language and metaphor as part of creative writing and the analysis of texts. There seems to be no reason as to why this focus should not carry over into the teaching of English once the students have reached a level of linguistic proficiency going beyond simple understanding of basic lexemes and grammar. As stated already in the introduction, in order to communicate successfully in English, idiomatic competence is necessary, and some awareness of metaphor theory might contribute to the development of this competence.

8. Presentation of the Study

This chapter accounts for the variable and shared factors of the participants and material examines the task variables, and relates the characteristics of the participant group to second language acquisition theories on individual cognitive and affective factors of successful language acquisition.

8.1. Material and Participants – Variable and Shared Factors

The material consists of two sets: the 1st set represents, for all three grades, the students' end-of-term texts for the fall term of 2011. The 2nd set consists mostly of student texts from their spring mid-term or end-of-term evaluation. For the 10th grade students however, the second set of texts is from a single lesson spent writing rather than a session of several hours such as the 8th and 9th grade students had. The reason for this is that the 10th grade students have final exams at the end of term and that material is unavailable due to the nature of the examination.

There were also difficulties in that the 10th grade has quite a busy schedule at the end of the year, where the focus is primarily on preparing for their final exams. This “writing lesson” was an attempt at getting at least some usable material from this group. That presented certain challenges, as the second set of texts is very much shorter than the first, usually just around a page or less in length, and also in a different genre than the majority of other texts from both sets.

Genre seems to be a key variable, as the analysis will show. For the 9th and 8th grade students, the texts are from their end-of-term evaluations. The first set of texts, comprising all three grade years, consists of 63 texts. These texts have then been analyzed, and the number of idioms used in each counted. Also, the idioms used have been registered, along with the number of times each idiom occurred in the material as a whole. I have also noted how many students used no idioms at all, including any phrasal verbs counted as idiomatic.

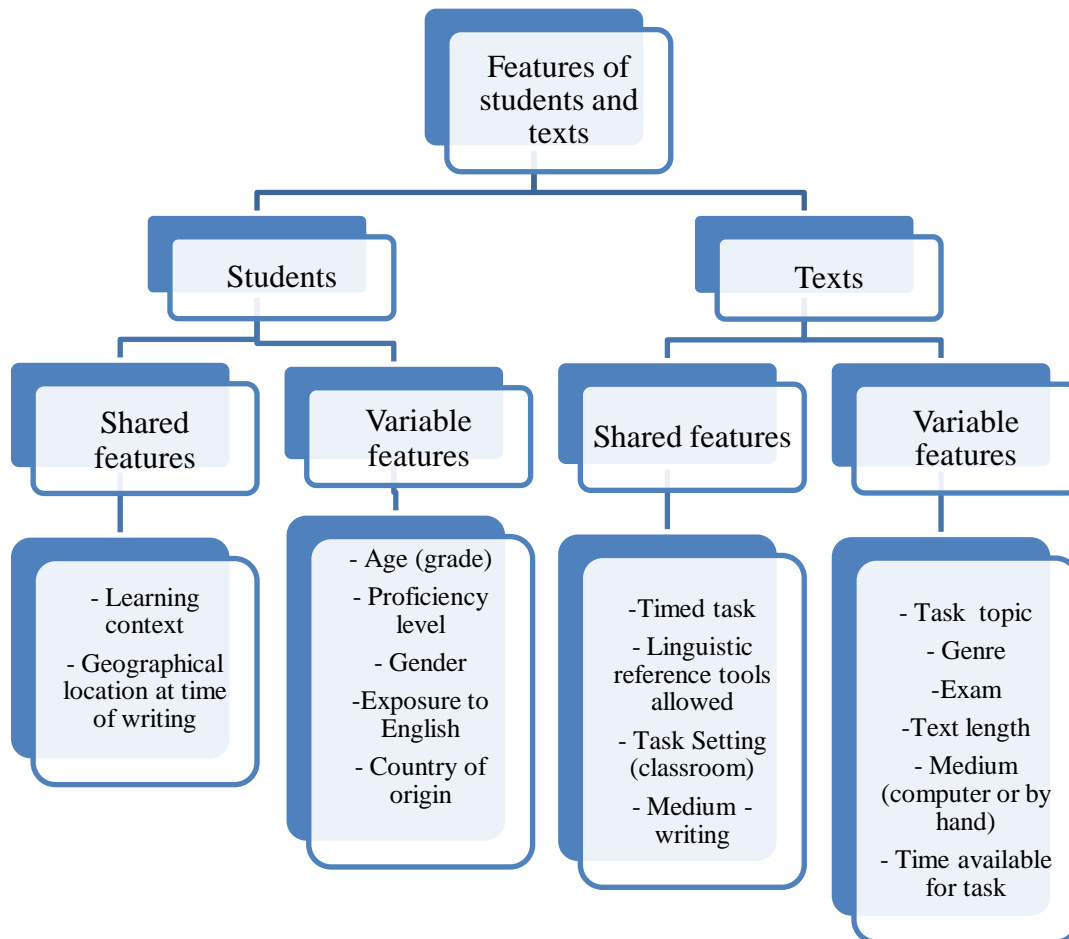


Figure 1) Shared and variable features of students and texts.

As shown in the above figure, students and texts have certain shared features as well as certain variable features. All students have been taught and tested in a classroom setting, at the same location. All students were given several task topics to choose between, with the option of writing a factual text or a fiction story (with the notable exception of 10th grade, 2nd set). Very few students have chosen to write factual texts, a tendency which will be discussed in Section 10.3. Most of the texts are written on computers, except for the 8th grade, whose 2nd set had to be written by hand due to the unavailability of computers at the time of their testing.

While the learners have been taught in the same learning context, their proficiency level varies, as well as their exposure to the target language, English. Some are well travelled, a very few (1-2) have parents who speak English as their native tongue, while others have barely been exposed to natural English outside the classroom. A few are bilingual to some

degree (Turkish-Norwegian, Hindi-Norwegian, German-Norwegian, Polish-Norwegian, etc.), though the impact of this on their English seem to vary. For some, mastering a third language is an obvious struggle, while others take to it naturally.

8.2 Task Variables

The length of the texts varies from 1 page to 5-6, depending on the student and their fluency as well as their confidence and ability in creative writing. They were all allowed the same reference tools: approved dictionaries, grammar notes and a booklet of idioms that had been worked with in class (Appendix III). They were encouraged to use these tools. All students were encouraged to use idioms in their texts before they began the task.

The time the students had available to write, varied. Ideally (for research purposes), the task topics would have been the same, the length of the texts approximately equal, and the time allowed should have been the same. This was not possible for several reasons:

- Task topics had to be given according to the curriculum set for each grade, as the text were to be graded as part of their end-of-term evaluation.
- Each task calls for an approximate number of pages/words in the answer. This varies from task to task, and between grades. For example, 9th grade students are expected to write longer and more elaborate texts than 8th grade students and so on. (Note, however, that while this is the expectation, it is not always the case, as it varies according to the student's proficiency).
- The time given to each task changed. For the 1st set of texts, the 9th and 10th grades were given a full school day (approximately 5 hours) to write, while the 8th grade had a half-day test (3 hours). All had computers for this testing. For the 2nd set of texts, 8th and 9th grade had full days, while it was only possible to do a 1-hour task with the 10th year group. 9th and 10th grade had computers for this testing, while 8th grade had to write by hand.

The participants in this study were, as mentioned earlier, students in a Norwegian Lower Secondary School, more specifically Gjøklep Ungdomsskole in Holmestrand, Vestfold. All the students were aware of their participation in this study, and had consented to the use of their texts for analyzing by signing a consent form. A letter was sent to their

parents/guardians, describing the study and informing them that the students were taking part. They were given the opportunity to ask questions of their teacher concerning the study, and it was emphasized that participating was completely voluntary, would have no effect on their grade, and the texts were to be anonymous (number only, no names) in the event that anyone outside the faculty of Gjøklep needed to see them. There were no objections from parents/guardians, and no students opted out of participating. The general feeling seemed to be that this was interesting, and the students felt that while they were given some extra work compared with the other students in their year; they were also getting an “edge”, by learning about idiomatic language and practicing using it correctly.

It is interesting to note that before this work on idioms, most of the students had little or no concept of what an idiom is or what its characteristics are. Despite this, in the evaluation forms used in this school for grading, the ability to use idioms is stated as part of what distinguishes the top grades from the lower ones. In other words, idiomatic competence is a mark of proficiency – but it had not been taught in class. This seems to support the theory presented by Kennedy (2008), as referred to in Section 2.2. concerning idioms and learner language, mainly that the nature and role of phraseology (including the learning of idioms as multi-word units) tend to be neglected in teaching, perhaps due to a shift away from “focus on form” to “focus on message” in language pedagogy (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 36-38).

The student groups are different in several ways, apart from the obvious factors such as age. Most especially, the group dynamics – and thereby the learning environment – differ. The 8th grade group as a whole worked very well. They were interested in learning English and tended to encourage each other. This meant that the students in general were less afraid of making mistakes, and consequently they all used the language more actively. This group tended to stick to speaking English in their lessons and took their tasks seriously. Some struggled a lot with their language skills, but as a whole, the group was fairly proficient for their age. They did, however, originally come from 5 different schools, and had been taught in very different ways before they started Lower Secondary School. For some, it was quite a leap to be in a class where the teacher spoke American English throughout the whole lesson.

The 9th year group presented more of a challenge. The group dynamic was very different. Certain students would point out other students’ mistakes and make fun of them, and there was a very unequal power balance in the group. Consequently, several students were afraid of speaking English in class, a constant challenge for the teachers. This worked out negatively in

terms of their practice in and exposure to the language. The group would often digress and try to pull the focus of the lesson in another direction, as well as answer and pose questions in Norwegian, even though the teacher used American English consistently. They changed English teachers 4 times during their 8th year, and as such they missed out on a lot in terms of language learning. Their language skills vary greatly, from very poor to almost native-like. Three of the students in this group are exceptionally proficient for their age when it comes to written English.

8.3 Individual Cognitive and Affective Factors

In terms of individual learner factors when acquiring a new language, the literature recognizes both cognitive and affective factors and variations. Among cognitive factors, a distinction has traditionally been made between *field independence* and *field dependence*.

Field independence has been described as the ability to understand individual items in the context or “field” in which they occur and, *at the same time*, the ability to identify and classify them independently of the “field”. Field dependence, on the other hand, has been described as a tendency in the learner to be dependent on the total “field”, with the result that the parts that constitute the “field are not so easily identified. It has been suggested that learners who are primarily field-independent profit most from deductively oriented teaching approaches, while learners who are primarily field dependent profit most from inductively oriented approaches. (Simensen, 1998, pp. 99-100)

This distinction between learner styles is part of the reasoning for providing as varied teaching approaches as possible in order to reach each individual student, a principle also followed in this study, as will be further described in the section on method.

Affective factors are more complicated, but have been suggested by Stern (1983), cited in Simensen (1998) to be at least as important as the cognitive factors in terms of individual learner differences. Among these affective factors is the ability to cope with using a means of communication far less satisfying than one’s native tongue. For some learners, this can be an embarrassing experience; they may feel inadequate, that they are losing status in the peer group by showing themselves as vulnerable in the sense of being in a situation they don’t fully master. Some students may feel that since they cannot express themselves in a specific way, they lose some of their personality and identity in the peer group. (Simensen, 1998, p. 100) These sorts of fears are commonly displayed by students: “I don’t know how to say that in English”, “I feel silly”, “I am scared to speak English in front of the others”. These students often have a difficult time reaching a higher level in terms of foreign language competence.

It has therefore been claimed that a self-confident person, one who is extroverted and detached, with a positive image and a sense of humor, makes a better L2 student (Simensen, 1998, p. 100). This seems to be the case when observing the personalities of the stronger students. They seem far less self-conscious about their ability, and about their own linguistic errors, but instead take it all in stride, so to speak. This lack of performance anxiety, if one may call it that, seems to translate into a smoother learning curve and a generally stronger foreign language skill set. Such a learner may also be better equipped to deal with the uncertainty, or ambiguity that a learner is confronted with when dealing with a language he or she does not fully comprehend, while other learners may react with anxiety or even aggression.

Studies have also suggested that children and adult learners may differ in relation to affective factors, in that adult learners are less “open” to the input necessary for language development and high eventual attainment. Krashen introduced an “affective filter hypothesis” in his monitor theory, and has claimed that the strength of this affective filter increases around puberty (Simensen, 1998, p. 100). This change may be related to the social and psychological changes the individual undergoes around that time – specifically the time the participants in this study find themselves in. This line of thought has influenced L2 teaching during the last three decades.

Motivation is indeed a factor, but it is, as stated by Simonsen, a complicated field. It is not the intention to go into detail about that research field here, but motivation as a concept is central to teaching and learning, and deserves some attention in a study such as this. What follows is Simensen’s general description of motivation and its relation to L2 or foreign language learning.

It has for a long time been assumed that how well and how fast L2 learners learn depends on their attitudes towards learning in general and L2 learning in particular. It has also been assumed that learners’ attitudes to learning a particular L2 language are influenced by the attitudes of the society in which they live. If, for example, a society has negative attitudes to a particular L2 culture, this is expected to have unfavorable effects on the attitudes of the learners to learning that specific language.

Positive attitudes normally correlate with a willingness, drive, desire, or need to do something, for example, to learn. This willingness, drive, etc. is what is usually understood by the term “motivation”. Thus, motivation is thought of as something that starts a process or an action, such as learning something. A series of drives, etc. have been specified to account for motivation in general. These may tentatively be placed along a scale from a drive to explore the unknown, at one end, to a drive to be known, be accepted and approved of by others (ego enhancement), at the other. (Simensen, 1998, p. 101)

A challenge when teaching is therefore to instill such a drive in your students, in order that they reach a high level of attainment and end up with the desired results. A general impression

based on the reactions of the students during the idiom focused teaching, was that focusing on this aspect of language had positive impact on the students' curiosity about English. Several students expressed interest in learning more about the cultural context of some of the idiomatic phrases, as well as the proper context of usage.

In teaching English and focusing on idioms for this project, I taught the 8th and 9th year myself, while my experienced colleague June Dahle taught the 10th grade. She and her students graciously agreed to take part in the research, for which I am grateful. In Dahle's opinion, the proficiency level of this 10th grade group was not very high, although a few students were fairly competent. Their motivation was also questionable at times, though they reportedly enjoyed working with idioms as a topic. This student group was exposed to natural English through Dahle's teaching, as she is British and uses the language actively when teaching.

These different group dynamics and different competence levels undoubtedly had some effect on the results, but they can also be said to be a strength of the study. If a study like this is to be useful, it seems logical that it needs to have real students in real classroom environments as its participants. Choosing "ideal" student groups would distort the results and their usefulness in terms of real-world teaching. No class consists of only top students who are unfailingly supportive of each other, especially when the students considered are young teenagers. For authentic results, it seemed logical to use "regular" students in a "regular" classroom setting.

9. Method

This chapter presents an overview of the chosen pedagogical activities for the purpose of idiom focused teaching, along with the practical considerations of carrying out the study. The arguments for teaching idiomatic phrases as lexical chunks are reviewed, and the pedagogical approaches and theories that laid the foundation for the choice of activities are described in more detail. The chapter concludes with a section describing how the material was collected and analyzed.

9.1. Practical Considerations and Pedagogical Activities Chosen for Idiom Focused Teaching

The texts were written roughly 5 months apart. During the time that passed between the two sets of texts being written, the students attended regular English lessons twice weekly, excepting holidays and weeks off that broke up the spring term significantly. During the course of the lessons, the teachers involved aimed to work actively with idioms, highlighting this feature of language in different ways with the goal of making the students more conscious of idiomatic phrases and hopefully start making them part of their own language to a greater extent. The point to make here is that the work involving idioms had to be fit into regular lessons, while at the same time devoting enough time to the rest of the curriculum. Most of the work was done towards the end of the spring term. Ideally, it would have been interesting to see if more concentrated efforts had resulted in different findings, but ultimately one has to work within the constraints of the classroom situation and the regulations and directives given by the national curriculum.

A brief overview of some of the strategies employed and activities used to focus on idioms in class:

- Introductory lesson on idioms. Stretching over 2 regular lessons, the teachers used power point presentations with examples, film clips, as well as group and individual activities. The students were presented with a definition of “idiom” and there was a general classroom discussion. The activities included a list of common

idioms that the students, in groups, were told to discuss and come up with theories as to what their meaning was, trying to find idioms in Norwegian that they knew of, and playing “idiom charades” at the end of the lesson.

- Worksheets with common idioms, study and “fill-in” tasks. Given to work with in class and at home.
- “Idiom texts” – texts containing a lot of idioms (example: Appendix II). Students worked in pairs and highlighted the idioms they could find. Teacher then went through the text and asked for the student’s results, with a classroom discussion.
- Focus on idioms in Norwegian, and trying to find equivalent English ones. Also done the other way around as English idioms were encountered in curriculum texts and elsewhere.
- Awareness training. Making students look for idioms in written and spoken language while going through regular curriculum lessons.
- Having fun with translating idioms word for word into Norwegian, with the purpose of highlighting the basic feature of idioms as generally untranslatable (a particular favorite activity of the students, especially with such idioms as *a piece of cake* – which sound absurd when translated in context, directly to Norwegian “*denne jobben her var et kakestykke*”, and may explain why that particular idiom showed up so many times (9) in the second set of texts compared to other idioms.)
- Actively encouraging and pointing out when students use idioms in their spoken language.

Additionally, each student was given a 12-page leaflet with common idioms (sort of an abbreviated dictionary of idioms). In the 8th and 9th grade this was used for different activities:

- Going through the leaflet and highlighting the idioms the student felt that he/she knew enough to be comfortable with their meaning and use themselves.
- Highlighting in a different color the idioms they had heard, but had been unsure of their meaning and usage.
- Trying to find equivalents in Norwegian to a selection of the idioms. Picking out idioms that were felt to have no equivalent in Norwegian.
- Picking out at least 5 different idioms which they did not know or were familiar with, familiarizing themselves with their meaning and creating sentences that illustrated the idiom’s meaning and usage. These sentences were then presented to

the group as a whole and discussed, added to or changed as necessary. This was done on a couple of occasions with each class.

- Taking the leaflet along with them to their exams, being actively encouraged to use them while writing their texts. Most students did this.

9.2 Idiomatic Expressions Taught as Lexical Phrases

Teaching idioms to the students means introducing them to new vocabulary, in other words teaching lexis in the form of phrases rather than single words. Several linguists claim that teaching lexis as phrases is important, for two major reasons:

- 1) *Phrases are what constitute language, therefore phrases are important.*
- 2) *Phrases are essential because they are useful to learners*

(Lee, 2004)

Pawley and Syder (1983, 191) support the first approach, arguing that native speakers possess “knowledge of a body of sentences which are institutionalized or lexicalized”, estimating that native speakers have hundreds of thousands of units “of clause length or longer whose grammatical form and lexical content are wholly or largely fixed” and that this knowledge makes natives speakers capable of fluent and idiomatic control of language (Lee, 2004).

Lewis, whose theory of lexis centers around the notion that “much of our supposedly original language use is, in fact, made of prefabricated chunks, much larger than single words” (Lewis, 1996, p. 10) as well as Sinclair, whose idiom principle I touched upon in section 4.2, also lend support to this approach.

The second view is supported by, amongst others, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) who present a range of advantages of learning lexical phrases. Summarized in Lee (2004):

First, learners can creatively construct sentences simply because the phrases are stored and reproduced as whole chunks, and this can ease frustration and develop motivation and fluency. Second, since phrases have their origins in common and predictable social contexts, they are easier for learners to memorise, as opposed to separate words. Third, phrases work as productive tools for communicating with other people. This can further create social motivation for learning the language. Fourth, since most phrases can be analysed by regular grammatical rules, and classified into patterns, learning phrases can help learners understand grammatical rules of the language.

Now, this fourth and last point might not apply to idioms. As discussed earlier, idioms are more than “the sum of its parts”, and those parts are not as easily dealt with grammatically in terms of classification as other fixed phrases, if the meaning of the idiom is to be retained.

The second aspect, however, may apply all the more to this type of phrases. Idiomatic phrases can be more salient in the minds of the learners, as they are often seen as interesting and different, which in turn can translate into better retention and integration. The third aspect of social motivation can be said to hold true for idioms, as successful communication rests on a common understanding of meanings, and no one wants to be seen as a fool because he or she does not grasp the idiomatic meaning of another's utterance.

9.3 Chosen Pedagogical Approaches

As seen in the list of activities in section 9.1., the teachers used a variety of approaches. One was the teaching of idioms as lexical chunks, some of which the students worked to memorize. Memorization, while being somewhat old-fashioned in current pedagogy, still has its uses, provided it is not the exclusive teaching method implemented.

While the western world has largely stepped away from memorization as a method, there is the case of the Chinese. Chinese teachers still make heavy use of memorization in learning a foreign language, and the students do seem to attain quite a high proficiency level (Wray & Fitzpatrick, 2008). Wray and Fitzpatrick refer to Ding (2007) when stating that “there are good reasons for believing that memorization, if effectively applied, can be highly beneficial to those who already have knowledge of a language. They further refer to other studies that have explored the practices of Chinese students, citing Au & Wentwistle (1999), Dahlin & Watkins (2000), Ting & Qi (2001), Kennedy (2002), Zhanrong (2002), and Cooper (2004) and noting that the recurrent theme is that an effective and conscious use of memorization can be highly beneficial. In fact, an effective use of memorization lies “at the heart of the commonly found superior performance of Asian compared to Western students” Dahlin & Watkins (2000, p. 66) cited in Wray & Fitzpatrick (2008).

If indeed Chinese students consistently perform better than Western students, this is probably down to more factors than memorization alone. Wray and Fitzpatrick cite a study by Marton et al. (1993) that showed that Chinese educators were indeed very positive to memorization, provided it was linked with understanding, echoing Dahlin & Watkins (2000) and Cooper (2004) who state that it is indeed effective when directly used to consolidate and/or facilitate understanding (Wray & Fitzpatrick, 2008).

Marton et al. (1993) showed that there were two ways for memorization to link with understanding. The students could memorize something they had already understood, in order to enhance their potential of remembering and accessing the material. Or, memorization could be a process that brought understanding in itself, where the mind would work on the material subconsciously, identifying and consolidating heretofore unfamiliar patterns, leading to “the discovery of meaning” according to Dahlin & Watkins (2000, p. 80), cited in Wray & Fitzpatrick (2008, p. 125). As pointed out by Wray and Fitzpatrick, these findings “suggest that, in either case, the effectiveness of the memorization comes down to the attention that the learner pays to the detail of the material, so that learning outcomes are contingent on accuracy” (Wray & Fitzpatrick, 2008, p. 125).

Based on these theories, some memorization was included. Supporting Wray and Fitzpatrick’s comment about learning outcomes depending on the students’ attention to detail and consciousness of the learning process, the results seem to indicate that it was indeed the more advanced students who benefited the most from memorizing idiomatic phrases. These students were most successful in implementing their memorized phrases into both spoken and written production. Perhaps this was a reflection of the nature of idiomatic language – the more advanced students are also the ones with the most cultural and linguistic competence in English, probably due to their skill level; unlike the less advanced students, their proficiency has reached a level where they can concentrate more on the information in a text, rather than simply worry about form and meaning.

Mainly, however, the focus was on consciousness-raising activities, using both implicit and explicit methods. As pointed out by Willis and Willis (1996), teachers should not present a large number of examples for memorization, as the learning of phrases is open-ended. Instead, the teachers should aim to raise learners’ consciousness of the importance of such elements. It is commonly acknowledged in pedagogy circles that a variety of methods and activities is the most ideal in order to achieve the best possible result, as individual students will respond differently to the various methods and activities. The aim of consciousness-raising activities is to help learners develop their own strategies for learning and implementing new lexis.

A lot of words change meaning from one context to another. These words can be called multi-meaning words (Lee, 2004). Idioms, then, can perhaps be said to be multi-meaning phrases. Nagy (1997) points out that that first-language learners pick up most vocabulary from the context, and the acquisition of multi-meaning words can be accounted for by such incidental

learning. This would arguably be the case also for idiomatic language, especially considering the cultural aspect of idiomatic usage. For someone who is learning a foreign language, context is also important in order to grasp correct meaning and usage of multi-meaning words and phrases. Nagy (1997), as referred to in Lee (2004), argues that such contextual inferences contribute to a development of an understanding of word meaning at different levels of knowledge.

When using the term “context” in this text I follow, in accordance with Lewis (2009), the notion of “contextual representation” presented by Miller (1999); that of abstract representations of words in the mental lexicon. In language comprehension, three types of context can be discerned: *situational*, *topical* and *local* context, all of which are included when the term is used in this text. Situation involves the learners’ background/world knowledge; in this case it often made a difference in terms of comprehension whether a student had travelled to and spent time in English-speaking cultures. Topical context involves vocabulary belonging to the specific subject matter; for instance American English sports-derived idioms were far easier to comprehend for the students who were familiar with the sports in question (i.e. *out of left field*, from baseball). Local context (co-text) involves the words in the immediate vicinity of the phrase, which may indicate for example syntactic categories (Lewis, 2009, p. 4).

According to Nagy, learners can learn word meaning from the context as follows: 1. *Syntactic knowledge*: the different syntactical behavior of each word can be learned from the context; 2: *Word schemas*: by indicating, e.g., thematic or taxonomic associates, the context can place constraints on possible word meanings; 3. *Vocabulary knowledge*: the meaning of words around a target item can be learned from the context, i.e. learners can infer the meaning of a word even if they lack the knowledge of other words within the context; 4. *Word knowledge*: the context enables a learner to select the appropriate sense of an ambiguous word or to infer with the meaning of an unfamiliar word; 5. *Strategic knowledge*: training students in the use of context can enhance students’ ability to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. This strategic knowledge involves conscious control over cognitive resources.

Not all of these levels apply as seamlessly to idiomatic phrases. Level 1, syntactic knowledge, comes less into play when dealing with idiomatic language. Students can certainly encounter unfamiliar words within a new idiomatic phrase, but understanding that word and its syntactical behavior is not necessarily helpful in understanding the idiomatic meaning of the

phrase. Words schemas, level 2, is, equally, less relevant as applied to idiomatic phrases: while knowing the associates of a word may help in understanding the meaning of the word, this will not be as helpful when dealing with idiomatic phrases, for the above stated reasons.

Level 3, vocabulary knowledge is perhaps more helpful. It is possible for learners to get a sense of the meaning of an idiomatic phrase through the context in circumstances where the context provides enough information for an interpretation to be possible. Consider a context such as this: Sue has just learned that Ellen's boyfriend has left her. She and Ellen are friends, and they are having a conversation about this, when Sue says *"Don't worry, Ellen, you'll find another boyfriend, a better one. There are lots of good men out there. There are plenty of fish in the sea!"* Here, the context is clear enough that it is obvious even to a less advanced learner that Sue is not talking about a good place to go fishing or making a statement about general oceanic wildlife. The meaning can be inferred from the context, and the phrase will probably be remembered better by the student than if it had been simply presented in a word list for memorization. Also, as the context is easily discernible, it places a constraint on possible meanings, making it logical for the learner to search for an alternative, idiomatic meaning. As such, idiomatic phrases presented in contexts containing enough information to both constrain, indicate alternative meaning and give a hint as to what that meaning is, can be successful consciousness-raising exercises to expand vocabulary. Level 4 also comes into this – word knowledge, in a rich enough context, will enable the learner to select an appropriate sense of the phrase.

Level 5, strategic knowledge, is arguable among the most important things teachers can pass on to their students. The lexis, whether seen as single word units or as lexical chunks, of any given language is far too large to memorize it all. As noted by Willis and Willis (1996) "language is so vast and varied that we can never provide learners with a viable and comprehensive description of the language as a whole". When the student reaches a certain level and is exposed to natural language either in written or spoken form, he or she is bound to be confronted with unfamiliar words and phrases. At that point, having a good interpretative strategy in place can make all the difference. The aim of consciousness-raising activities is to provide learners with activities "which encourage them to think about samples of language and to draw their own conclusions about how the language works" (Willis & Willis, 1996). Training in the conscious use of context can facilitate the development of such strategies. As this is an already established way of working with vocabulary in terms of single lexical units

in the classroom, it was natural to take it to the next level, so to speak, and include phrases, more specifically idiomatic phrases.

One way the teachers attempted to raise the students' awareness of idiomatic language was through pointing it out when such phrases occurred in their textbooks. Having them stop and think and come up with an interpretation of the meaning based on the context, and in some cases debate the different interpretations, rather than just looking the phrase up to see what it meant was the strategy most often implemented. While it can't be proven empirically here that the phrases they encountered and interpreted in this way were better remembered than phrases memorized from a list, I have noticed students using these phrases more and longer after the first encounter, than those simply memorized.

That being said, some of the idiomatic expressions from their list (Appendix III) were retained in a similar fashion. This was not so much those who had been simply memorized 'as is' from a list, but rather those that the students had been told to choose (they chose freely) and make sentences with that illustrated the meaning of the expression. When compared to the context – interpretation process described above, this process was similar, only reversed. The students were told to make sentences (it could be more than one) that illustrated the use and meaning of the expression *after* they had been told the idiomatic meaning of the phrase. In this way, they created their own context that supported the meaning. When students used an idiomatic phrase several times in their own texts, they often stated when asked that it was one of the expressions they had picked out and created their own supporting context for. It follows that this may be an effective way to learn phrasal lexis, particularly idiomatic phrases. It is undeniably time-consuming, but a good addition to other consciousness-raising activities.

This is not to say that inferring meaning from context is a problem-free method. If a learner is to rely solely on inferring word meaning from context, there are several problems. As briefly mentioned above, it is likely to be a slow and time-consuming process. And as noted both by linguists in the literature and experienced in the course of working with this thesis: time is very limited for most learners, and only a limited portion of this already limited time can be spent on learning new vocabulary (Carter & McCarthy, 1988), (Sökmen, 1997).

Additionally, the process is not exactly error-proof. Second language learners, and foreign language learners even more so, often have limited and insufficient vocabulary knowledge until they reach a fairly high level, and can often fail to guess the correct meaning of a word (Sökmen, 1997). When related to the work on idioms done in the classrooms for this project,

it was evident that the students often had problems coming up with the correct interpretations. There were several discussions, where the more advanced students tended to be the ones with the correct interpretations. However, these discussions, when they reached a shared understanding and a common interpretation, benefited not only the stronger, but also the less advanced students, who also tended to use expressions treated in this way more often and more correctly than other phrases which had not been the subject of discussion. It seemed that the discussion with their peers had increased their understanding in a way the other instructional activities had not.

Nagy (1997) refers to Giko (1978) who claims that explicit instruction is relatively more important in the vocabulary growth of second language learners than implicit methods and use of context, the reasoning being that native speakers are more effective at using context than learners. The learners had to reach a comparably higher level before working from context was effective. It stands to reason that if you do not have a good enough basic knowledge of a language's structure, usage patterns and vocabulary, interpreting from context will be a challenge. However, it seemed that, as shown above, discussion of interpretation along with consciousness-raising activities, can make a difference also for the less advanced students. It is, however, important to remember that this seems to be the case when it comes to idiomatic expressions and phrases; I do not presume to make any estimates or statements about single-word units.

Categories of consciousness-raising activities given by Willis and Willis include *identification*, *classification*, *reconstruction* and *cross-language exploration*. They also mention training in how to use reference materials. This last point did not receive any special focus in the work on this project. Classification and reconstruction is more relevant in terms of single word unit vocabulary activities; however the two remaining categories of activities were implemented in this process, specifically identification and cross-language exploration.

Identification was implemented in the way that students were actively encouraged to identify idiomatic expressions in several texts. The texts included special "idiom-texts" sourced from EFL websites, texts that are specially written from a consciousness-raising point of view and have a high frequency of idiomatic language, as well as texts from their regular textbooks.

As to which was more effective, I am of a divided mind. On one hand, the students perhaps enjoyed working with the idiom-texts more than they did their regular textbook texts. The downside, however, was that these special texts were brimming with idioms to the point of

ridiculousness, they were obviously not authentic texts, but written for that specific purpose. The students found them funny, not necessarily in a good way. Also, the focus shifted from being aware of and working consciously with the idioms present in the text to being entertained and focused on the bizarreness of the text. Nevertheless, they picked up some new words and expressions, and perhaps the novelty factor and general amusement facilitated their learning in that it made them more conscious of looking for idioms in other texts.

When working with their regular textbooks texts, however, the students seemed more focused. Perhaps this was due to the markedly more authentic nature of the texts. Less hilarity, but more focus on content and thereby context seems to have made for better retention and understanding of meaning. Familiarity may also have something to do with it – making it easier for them to focus when the framework of the texts and the books they were in created a familiar setting. Still, the textbooks may not be enough:

Learners are often addressed in a simplified language lacking in formulaic sequences and although input is provided by television and films, this does not result in the type of interaction required for learning. Understanding the actual meaning is only the first step in learning to use formulaic sequences correctly. They appear in different registers and may exhibit grammatical constraints. Additionally, teaching materials pay little attention to formulaic language, and when they do, the opportunities for practice are too limited to ensure that learners are able to comprehend as well as produce the formulaic sequences in question. (Irujo 1986, referred to in Lewis 2009).

Based on this assumption that the textbooks in themselves were not adequate for satisfactory acquisition, authentic texts were provided. The teachers involved also consistently spoke English in the classroom, encouraging the students to do the same – not only to the teacher, but between themselves while working on tasks, etc. We made a conscious effort as teachers to try and not simplify our language too much, but rather use as natural a language as possible, complete with idiomatic expressions. From the moment the students stepped into their English class, the classroom was declared an “English Zone”. This takes some practice, and not all students are able to follow these directions, but in general, they do; thereby creating as authentic a practice situation as possible.

Identification also had a role to play in spoken language. It was not uncommon that the class stopped and discussed an idiom they had heard in one of the film clips or tracks from the CD accompanying the textbook, in addition to the teacher’s or their peers’ spoken language. They found this quite enjoyable and interesting.

Cross-language exploration was also utilized. James (1994), cited in Lee (2004), suggests that raising awareness of learners own native language can help learners understand a second or

foreign language by comparing the two and “facilitating bridges between them”. Through such contrasting activities, the learners can recognize how familiar knowledge from their mother tongue may seem new and difficult in a foreign language. It may make the foreign language less foreign, in a way, if similarities can be found and exploited (while obviously being aware of the possibly negative effect of cross-language transfer).

Lewis (2009, p. 34) cites Nation (2001) in discussing the productive learning of collocations (in which she includes idiomatic language) in terms of learning burden. Nation states that acquisition is facilitated when the predictability of the combination of words is based on previous knowledge. Lewis then draws a line to L2 teaching by saying that “Relying on the similarity between L1 and L2 collocations may be a means of easing the learning burden” (Lewis, 2009, p. 34). She goes on to reason that in heterogeneous groups of learners, such as international classes, this type of predictability is incompatible with the mixed linguistic backgrounds of the participants. In a classroom setting such as the one where this study was undertaken, however, the student group was far more homogeneous in linguistic background, with a very few exceptions, and as such, cross-language exploration was deemed to be a potentially valuable pedagogical tool.

Cross-language exploration was used mainly in the introductory part of the idiom work. Partly, this was done in order to explain what an idiom actually is – as the linguistic term was unfamiliar to the students. They were encouraged to think of idiomatic expressions in Norwegian. They were given a few words to start with “død”, “sulten”, “trøtt” – and asked to find expressions that they knew of that were idioms. They came up with several: “død som en sild”, “Sulten som en ulv”, “Kunne spist en hest”, ”helt pumpa”, ”ferdig”, among others. After this exercise they felt they had a grasp on the concept of idiomatic expressions, and so this understanding was facilitated by cross-language exploration.

Another way of implementing cross-language exploration was when working with identification of idiomatic expressions. The students had a lot of fun trying to translate idioms word for word. The resulting absurdities were not only highly entertaining, but served a purpose: they learned through experience that idioms are untranslatable. They also started searching for equivalent expressions in Norwegian. I am convinced that this sort of activity facilitated memorization of certain expressions: The idiom *a piece of cake* was one of the idioms that really lent itself to this sort of direct translation, as the result always became completely absurd (“Denne fjellveggen kan jeg klatre opp fort, den er et kakestykke!”).

According to Irujo (1986), comparing meanings between literal expressions and figurative expressions will promote comprehension, and comparing expressions in the native and target languages will encourage positive transfer while preventing negative transfer. The students thought it was fun, and the result shows up in the material: *a piece of cake* is not present at all in the 1st set of texts. However, it occurs 9 times, in 9 different texts in the 2nd set, as the most used expression, some examples of which follows:

3. “ – Aren’t the guardians there? – Relax, that will be *a piece of cake*.” [Text 12, 8th grade, 2nd set]
4. “I got really upset, and sent an ugly message back. I was going to get a date with him, but understood that this was not [going to be] *a piece of cake*.” [Text 8, 8th grade, 2nd set]
5. “If I had my own hero, nobody would try to crowd me and mess with me anymore. If I had a hero, it would be *a piece of cake*” [Text 5, 8th grade, 2nd set]
6. “My name is Miller. John Miller. I’m a detective, an old school detective. Sometimes, my job is *a piece of cake*. And sometimes, it’s not.” [Text 19, 9th grade, 2nd set].
7. “The whole mission was planned, so for him it would be *a piece of cake*” [Text 5, 9th grade, 2nd set]

To sum up, in teaching idiomatic language for the purpose of this study, a complementary approach was chosen, using both formal teaching and exposure through listening and reading as well as consciousness-raising activities. The aim of this chapter, in addition to simply explaining what was done, has been to link the methods chosen to relevant theories in EFL pedagogy. Simensen (1998) sums up the approach and theoretical background nicely:

Another important point in current thinking about teaching is to try to create situations where students feel they need to learn new words. And, however, strange it may sound, an equally important point is to get students to accept a feeling of vagueness in relation to the meaning of new words. The basic idea is that we learn the meaning of a word gradually. This means that in the beginning, learners may have a vague and fuzzy idea about its meaning, but that every time they come across it in new contexts they get a clearer idea about the range of its meanings. (Simensen, 1998, p. 221)

In practice, this may mean that when students encounter phrases and words in a text, rather than just looking them up in the accompanying word lists or another reference work, trying to memorize them and then simply move on, they should go back and reread the text where they first encountered them – and in so doing, a new level of meaning would be assigned to the word or phrase, as they now have a greater chance of remembering it in context. That context

tells the student something about usage and meaning that he or she is unable to get from a word list, and makes it more likely that the student will recognize the word or phrase the next time it is encountered. With the new context then comes another layer of meaning and usage, each encounter leading to a greater chance of integrating the new word or phrase into the student's active vocabulary and his or her own use. Building on this principle, we worked both with memorizing and awareness-raising activities, often encountering some of the same phrases.

It has been suggested that L2 learners first learn the prototypical meaning of a word. A final important point is that, if possible, students should discover the meaning of new words themselves. Getting the students to guess or infer the meaning of new words on the basis of the surrounding text, is considered much better for learning than providing them with explanations, definitions, synonyms, glossing, etc. right away. Discovering the meaning of a new word requires more mental energy than merely being offered an explanation. The assumption is that there is a close relationship between the mental energy put into understanding a word, sometimes called *cognitive depth of processing*, and how likely it is that it will be remembered. We may also say that the more personal commitment there is, the better the retention will be. (Simensen, 1998, p. 221)

While what Simensen is writing about here is mostly vocabulary in the sense of single word units, there is no reason not to apply the same reasoning to lexical chunks, and among them, idiomatic language. The same principles apply when talking about memory retention, understanding, and eventual production of a phrase as that of a word. In fact, Simensen herself discusses lexical chunks favorably (Simensen, 1998, p. 222).

As a teacher or a researcher both, one always wishes for more time. This project was no exception. There were a lot of things that need to be fitted in to that school year. Inevitably, there was a rush toward the end of the year, not least because of public holidays, days off in connection with exams, field trips, etc. This did affect the amount of explicit idiom focus the teachers were able to include.

While operating within the constraints of regular teaching hours and a set curriculum may mean that one could expect achieving less dramatic results, what it also means, as mentioned earlier, is that the study hopefully will paint a picture of a realistic situation. This regular classroom scenario is, after all, where the majority of Norwegian learners build their formal English competency, regardless of outside sources and influences. These constraints on time devoted to the subject, the curriculum teachers are bound by national directives to cover – these are constraints any teacher faces. Therefore, it seemed interesting to see if even these little “drips” of idiom learning and awareness the students received during the weeks between texts being written, would make a difference in their language use.

9.4 Collecting and Analyzing the Material

After both sets of texts had been collected, they were analyzed. The texts were examined for instances of use of idioms – both of the traditional phrasal idiom variety and the (perhaps less sophisticated, but nonetheless included as idiomatic) phrasal/prepositional verbs. When an idiom was found, it was checked against the main reference work, the *McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs* (Spears, 2005), as well as the *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (Ayto, 2009) and other reference works. If the phrase/phrasal or prepositional verb was included in any of these two books, it was included in the count in accordance with the definition of *idiomatic* chosen for the purpose of this study. The texts were given numbers, and the number of instances of idiom use was stated, along with any instances of incorrect usage, etc. Excerpt of table to illustrate (full table can be found in chapter 10, section 10.3):

Table 5) Table illustrates how idioms in students' text were counted. Column 1 represents the numbers assigned to the individual texts, column 2 counts the number of instances of idiomatic usage, column 3 contains notes any errors or variations registered.

9 th grade texts 2 nd set		
Text number	Correct use	Incorrect use/notes
1	3	1 off-target use "hope on the best"
2	9	Incorrect use: the cold was to die for – wrong sense self-made variation: it was raining pigs (not counted) Incorrect use: to be on the right foot (to get off on the...)
3	1	+ 1 possible: to drive over to
4	1	off-target use "hold my head cold" (keep)
5	16	+ possible : "can't say no to this one slight off-target usage: to rush against the clock

In cases where the idiom was only slightly incorrect, but often used correctly in context in terms of meaning, the phrase was included in the count. Example: "hold my head cold" (*keep my head cold*, transference from Norwegian *holde hodet kaldt*, or "hope on the best" (*hope for the best*, preposition error). Such phrases are included, though marked as incorrect or off-target, as they are to be expected as part of a learning process, and reflect a developing idiomatic language competence. There were a very few instances of self-made variations on

common idioms, such as “it was raining pigs” (*raining cats and dogs*); these were not included in the count.

Other examples of incorrect uses, or expressions with traces of idiomatic formulaicity not matching native target (underlined):

8. “I started searching deeper. I searched a bit in the photo albums. Checked if I could find any other family members. They had only pictures of a child. I thought a bit, and I said to myself, -This is just a drop in the bucket.” [text 19, 9th grade, 2nd set] Meaning intended: This is just the beginning, this is barely scratching the surface
9. “They often use just words, or their eyes. “If eyes could kill, I’d probably be dead now”” [text 14, 9th grade, 2nd set] Intended idiom: *If looks could kill.*
10. “I’m as high as a kite, because I have grown so much since my thirteenth birthday” [Text 17, 8th grade, 2nd set] Confusion between literal and figurative meaning
11. “Everybody had on beautiful clothes. Now they were going to wine and dine.” [Text 20, 8th grade, 2nd set] Wrong context. The idiom implies a romantic courtship, but the context is teenage girls getting something to eat before a school dance.

On some occasions, a phrase showed up that was difficult to determine if was idiomatic. If that happened, it is marked in the table. Only a very few, perhaps two or three, which seemed idiomatic but was not found in any reference books, were included. One such was *ghost town*. A search in the COCA Corpus revealed 490 instances of this expression, with the same figurative meaning, and as such it was determined to be an idiom at least in American English. These instances of doubt, however, are so few that they are unlikely to affect the total result. While not all of the idioms used by the students were used absolutely correctly in terms of context and meaning, the fact that they are used at all can be considered positive from a language learning perspective as well as significant in terms of results in this project, seeing as they would show up in texts written by students who had not attempted any sort of idiom usage in the first set.

Once the number of idioms was counted, the idioms in each student text were added to a list of idioms used. Each new idiom was entered into a table, and each instance of use for that idiom was counted. The 2 sets of texts were counted separately, so that it was possible to keep

track of not only the total number of idioms used, but the variation of idioms used in each set.

Excerpt from table (full table: Appendix I):

Table 6) Excerpt of table for the registration of idioms used by students and count of the number of times they occurred in the material. As a new idiom was found in the material, it was added to the list. If the idiom had been used before, another mark was made in the column next to it, such as in the case of “to handle something”. (+15 from first set) refers to 15 idioms registered in the 1st set also having been used in the 2nd set – these were marked in the 1st set table, in a separate column from the 1st set results.

Idioms from 2nd set	(+15 from first set)
to lose one's head	1
a dark horse	1
to be in charge	1
everything but the kitchen sink	1 (slightly off-target usage)
jog one's memory	1
to boast about something	1
like night and day	1
to handle something	11
in the case of	1
from rags to riches	1
to be on one's way	111
out of the blue	1

Having registered and organized the material in this way, the data was counted with the main focus being on three aspects:

- 1) Total counts of idiom usage in texts (overall instances of idiom use), aiming to find out if there was a difference between the 1st and 2nd sets.
- 2) Number of students using no idioms at all in their texts, to find out if there had been an improvement between the 1st and 2nd sets.
- 3) Number of different idioms used in the 1st and 2nd set, with aim of seeing if there was a pattern to the idioms used, and whether the 2nd set would show greater variation in idiom usage after having studied the subject.

As to why these three aspects were chosen as a starting point, it might be sensible to remind ourselves of the research questions for this thesis:

- *To what extent do Norwegian learners of English in Lower Secondary School use idiomatic expression in their written work?*
- *If teachers focus more deliberately on idiomatic language while teaching, will the students' competence in using idiomatic expressions increase?*

These questions and the findings in the material form the basis for the analysis, presentation of results, and discussion of the findings.

10. Discussion of Findings

This chapter lays out the findings for each grade in turn and discusses the findings in view of that particular group as it is described in Chapter 8. The chapter concludes with a section discussing the total results of the case study.

The following are tables counting idioms found in each text from each grade. The first table presents the results from the first set, and the second presents the results of the second set. The sets will then be compared and the results discussed. The results are presented in this order:

- 1) 8th grade first and second set
- 2) 9th grade first and second set
- 3) 10th grade first and second set

“Text number” is the number assigned each text instead of the student’s name. It is worth noting that for set number 2 the student has not been assigned the same number as in the first set. One reason for this is that the goal was to see the result overall, as a group. Additionally, although most of the students were present for both evaluations, some were absent the first time and present for the second, and vice versa.

The column headlined “Correct use” shows the count of instances of idiomatic expressions used by the student in the text in question. In the column titled “Incorrect use/notes”, notes are made regarding any particular features of idiomatic usage in that text. For example, if the student has used no idiomatic language at all in the text, if any idioms have been used incorrectly in sense or context, or represent an off-target variation, if the same idiomatic expression has been used repeatedly, etc. Examples of idiom use in the material have been included for each group, and their overall progress has been discussed.

10.1. 8th Grade Student Texts

Table 7) Table showing the count of idiomatic expressions used in the 8th grade students- 2nd set of texts. Instances of correct use are counted, and it has been noted when the students used no idiomatic expressions.

8th grades texts – 1st set table 7		
Text number	Correct use	Incorrect use/notes
1	1	
2	1	
3	0	no idiom use
4	0	no idiom use
5	0	no idiom use
6	1	
7	1	
8	1	
9	0	no idiom use
10	2	
11	0	no idiom use
12	0	no idiom use
13	1	
14	0	no idiom use
15	0	no idiom use
16	0	no idiom use
17	1	
18	2	
19	0	no idiom use
20	0	no idiom use
21	0	no idiom use
22	0	no idiom use
23	2	
Total count:	13	

This first set of data shows that the 8th-graders use few or no idioms in their texts. This was not unexpected. As the youngest student group, they had come from five different schools merely 4 months before. The students themselves expressed a lack of confidence in their English language abilities, both written and spoken, and from what they said, the amount of effort their old school had put into teaching English varied greatly. Some spoke of how their old teacher would rather have them practice their handwriting in English class, and most of the students claimed their old English teacher never used the language actively in class, i.e. never spoke English throughout the lesson. A lot of time seems to have been spent practicing vocabulary in the form of memorizing lists of words, which the students were then tested on. Very few phrases had been focused upon. The class has a very few strong students, one whose father is American, but otherwise they scored low to average on their national tests in the

beginning of the term (Nasjonale Prøver). The idioms used by this group in the 1st set were very basic, mostly phrasal/prepositional verbs:

12. “The second blob tries but fails as the other one, but the third *makes it*” [Text 2, 8th grade, 1st set]
13. “Peter and all the other soldiers stood ready when David came running out of the woods with the enemy *closing in fast*” [Text 10, 8th grade, 1st set].
14. “At nine o’clock Camilla found something, but she could not *figure out* what.” [Text 13, 8th grade, 1st set]

In fact, the most advanced idiomatic usage in this group in the 1st set was probably this:

15. “It said that the boy who became her husband also got rich. The poor boy thought that he should go to the castle and at least *give it a try*” [Text 23, 8th grade, 1st set]

Between the 1st and 2nd sets, the class had English lessons twice weekly; each lesson lasting 1 hour. Some students (5-6) had elected to specialize in English as their “foreign language” as well, so those students had an extra 2 hours of lessons throughout the week. These lessons differed from the regular with a mixed group of students from different classes, and idioms were not especially focused on. This group, however, will be briefly returned to in the conclusion, as they have provided a kind of informal control group in the time after the study was concluded.

The class went through the introductory session, and worked with idioms in the way described in the previous chapter. As a group, the 8th graders were decidedly the most positive, both when it came to working on developing their language skills, and encouraging each other along the way. The 2nd set of texts was written for their end of year examination, approximately 5 months after the 1st set. This group was the only group to not have access to computers when writing the 2nd set. As they are accustomed to writing using computers, this may have affected the end result; some students have more difficulty organizing their texts and reworking their drafts if they are writing by hand. This normally translates to less sophisticated language use, which again could have impacted the total results. Still, the findings from the 2nd set in this group show definite progress in terms of idiomatic competence:

Table 8) Table showing the count of idiomatic expressions used in the 8th grade students- 2nd set of texts. Student version of idiom is in double inverted commas, correct version is in italics.

8th grade texts, 2nd set		
Text number	Correct use	Incorrect use/notes
1	3	
2	0	no idiom use
3	2	
4	6	2 off-target usage: “leopard can’t change his spots”(sense), “came in the house” <i>came into the world</i> 1 incorrect variation: I got him to “drive up on the wall”
5	3	2 x the same
6	0	no idiom use
7	5	
8	7	3 x the same
9	0	no idiom use
10	2	
11	6	2 x the same 1 self-made variation, not counted
12	2	
13	7	
14	2	
15	4	
16	2	
17	4	2 x the same slight off-target usage, wrong sense: “high as a kite” (used for physical height)
18	4	
19	4	slight off-target usage: “cut the chase” <i>cut to the chase</i>
20	3	incorrect usage (sense): “to wine and dine”
21	3	off-target usage/variation: “like a blue moon” <i>once in a blue moon</i>
22	7	slight off-target usage: “take a peek”(sense)
23	4	+ one self-made: to “have muscles like a bear” (transfer from NO idiom: <i>sterk som en bjørn</i>)
Total count	80	

As stated above, this 2nd text set shows an improvement in language use from the 1st set, both generally and in terms of idiom use. The total instances of idiom use in the 1st set were 13, whereas the 2nd set show 80 instances of idiomatic language used. In the first set, 13 students used no idioms whatsoever. 7 students used 1 idiom, and no students used more than 2 idioms. Moreover, as pointed out above, the idiomatic language used was very basic.

However, in the 2nd set, only 3 students use no idioms at all. Additionally, it is worth noting that those 3 students are by far the weakest in terms of language skills in the class, averaging a grade of 2+ (on a scale of 1-6, 1 being fail). One of these students receives special education

one on one and in small groups in English, and had therefore also not been a part of the idiom work.

Another thing worth noting about the results of the 2nd set is that the idioms became more advanced. Phrasal verbs were still used, but quite a few of the longer idiomatic phrases had now entered their language. The students show themselves to be in a process of assimilating these phrases into their vocabulary and understanding their meaning and correct use. That they are in fact in the middle of such a process can be seen in the instances of slightly incorrect use found in the material, both concerning elements of the phrase itself, including grammar (“I got him to drive up on the wall” [Example 1] rather than I *drove him up the wall*, “cut the chase” rather than *cut to the chase*) as well as how and under what circumstances it is used. For example, to *wine and dine*, as showed in Example 11, was used not in the sense of “to treat someone to an experience of the type that includes fine wines; to entertain someone lavishly” (Spears, 2005, p. 759), but rather to describe a situation where some teenage friends went out for a quick meal.

Some examples of idiomatic usage from the 8th grade group after the focus period:

16. “The blacksmith said to the strange man, “*Keep an eye on them.*” [Text 1, 8th grade, 2nd set] (Student had some very basic idiom use (*beat up*) in 1st set)
17. “I really wanted to *be a Good Samaritan* there, but I guess I was too afraid. I really regret that now, but you *can't cry over spilt milk*. [Text 7, 8th grade, 2nd set] (This was the same student who provided the most advanced example, example 15, in the 1st set.)
18. “There he was, right by my desk. He was just standing there *in his own world.*” [Text 8, 8th grade, 2nd set] (Student had one instance of idiom use in 1st set, 7 instances in the 2nd set, all correct use.)
19. “- I'm tired of this now, we need to *give her a taste of her own medicine!*” [Text 11, 8th grade, 2nd set] (Student had no idiom use in 1st set, 6 instances in the 2nd set, plus an attempt on a self-made variation.)
20. “I said to myself, - *Break a leg!*” [Text 15, 8th grade, 2nd set] (Student had no idiom use in 1st set, 4 in the 2nd set, all correct.)
21. “It was *the dog days of summer.*” [Text 21, 8th grade, 2nd set] (Student had one instance of very basic idiom use in 1st set (*fall asleep*), 3 instances in 2nd set, all correct.)

22. “Then they remembered the old man at the market. “*Great minds think alike,*” said Traydimer. Four hours before the fight, Garen and Traydimer were at the market again. They were starting *to run out of steam*. But finally they found the old man and asked him, ...” [Text 18, 8th grade, 2nd set] (Student had no idiom use in 1st set, 4 in the 2nd set, all correct.)
23. “- Dad wants Alfred to be his heir to the throne, answered Arthur. – He wants us killed and we are *racing against the clock!*” the two boys came to a door guarded by four guards. – *Hold your horses*, boys, what hurry? Said the leader, a man named Francis, with a smile.” [Text 19, 8th grade, 2nd set] (Student had 2 instances of idiom use in 1st set, 4 in the 2nd, all correct.)

As mentioned in Example 19, there was also an instance of a student attempting to make up a new idiom, as well as one student [Text number 23, table 8] transferring to English the Norwegian idiom *sterk som en bjørn* and turning it into “to have muscles like a bear”.

Rather than such incorrect use being cause for disappointment, the opposite is in fact the case. As pointed out earlier, the students are in a process of learning. Such experimentation and such errors are part of the learning process, ref. (Ellis, 2009) and at this stage merely signify that the students are engaging, involving themselves and being interested. They are, in short, trying to figure out how this new thing works. In the coming discussion in Section 10.4., we will take a look at this process and such errors and experimentation from a language acquisition theory perspective.

10.2 9th Grade Student Texts

Moving on to the results from the 9th grade group, they paint a slightly different picture. Mainly, this has to do with the students being a year older, and correspondingly slightly more advanced in their English language skills.

There is however a few peculiarities with this group. One has to do with the type of teaching they have received, or rather, the lack of continuity in teaching. They had 4 different teachers in English during their 8th grade year. Understandably, the students were not very motivated, it took time to earn their trust, and quite a few of the students had no confidence in their ability, whereas others perhaps had a little too much confidence. When it came to written English, 3 students were outstanding, a few were pretty good, and the rest ranged from mid-

level to very poor competence. Luckily, the group as a whole had good understanding of spoken English, even though they were unwilling to produce spoken English themselves. This auditive/oral competence manifested itself in an interesting way. When looking at the data, most of the students had managed to include some form of idiomatic language in the 1st set:

Table 9) Table showing the count of idiomatic expressions used in the 8th grade students- 2nd set of texts. Correct version of idiom in italics, student version in double inverted commas.

9th grade texts – 1st set		
Text number	Correct use	Incorrect use/notes
1	7	
2	2	
3	1	1 – “give a lot of credits for it” (<i>give credit to/for</i>) off-target usage
4	6	
5	2	
6	4	
7	3	
8	3	
9	10	1 – bottom (<i>button</i>) he should push to ...
10	2	
11	0	No idiom use
12	7	(4 of the same)
13	2	Variation: <i>Sun was beating down</i> – “sun was beating her in the face”
14	8	
15	9	
16	0	1 off-target usage: “dragged in this fight” – intended: <i>dragged into</i>
17	3	
18	1	
19	0	The next week was going like a storm (transference from NO)
20	1	
21	5	(3 of the same)
22	9	
23	6	
24	1	
Total count	92	

Only one student [text number 11] actually used no idiomatic language at all. Number 16 and 19 as well are registered with no idioms, but both of these students have one instance each where they have attempted idiomatic language but either got it wrong (“the sun was beating her in the face” rather than the *sun was beating down* on her face), or transferred a Norwegian expression (“the next week was going like a storm” from *gikk som en storm*). Only 4 students have but one instance of idiomatic language.

This might be worth noting because, as mentioned in the beginning of the paper, idiomatic language tends to be seen as more or less “the final frontier” or second/foreign language

acquisition. The results from this study, however, may indicate that even less accomplished students have grasped at least some idiomatic expressions and are able to use them in their own production after having been exposed to specific training in idioms.

There is no question that the more advanced students use the most idiomatic language, but the presence of idiomatic structures in the writing of the less advanced students is interesting. After observing this in the 1st set of texts, there was evidence that these students' spoken language evolved, focusing on incorporating idioms. The observation was that they do indeed use idioms when speaking English, and more extensively than in their written language.

Worth noting is that a lot of students often struggle with writing longer texts to begin with, often in their mother tongue as well as English, which might indicate less advanced general writing skills as well as English language skills. What both written and spoken language had in common, though, was an informal register veering towards slang, highly influenced by American youth culture, and it was this type of idiomatic language which in general showed up among the less advanced students, for example to *have a hard time*, to *suck at something*, *good to go*, to *be grossed out*, to *beat up*, to *make it*, etc. Very few of more "sophisticated" phrasal idioms and on-target native-like usage showed up in this 1st set, and only then in texts written by the most skilled students:

24. "Tom sniggers while Theo *glares daggers at* Marley." [Text 22, 9th grade, 1st set]
9 instances of idiom use in 1st set. Very proficient student; has one American parent, speaks and writes with native-like fluency.
25. "You forgot to bring food, you are rude, you don't know how to read a map. And *for Christ's sake*, there is neither north nor south on the Moon!" [Text 1, 9th grade, 1st set) 8 instances of idiom use in 1st set. Very proficient student; speaks and writes with native-like fluency.

These more advanced students stand out from the group in several ways. Not only do they exhibit a high level of English proficiency, but they distinguish themselves as generally good writers, in terms of composition skill and the ability to build a story which draws the reader's interest. They enjoy writing, read extensively, and are interested in language in general. It appears likely that these traits and abilities work in their favor in terms of acquiring and integrating new vocabulary and including new phrases in their own work. These were also some of the students who showed interest in the metaphorical angle which, as discussed in Chapter 7, may indicate a higher degree of maturity.

The 9th grade group as a whole also showed considerable development in their 2nd set:

Table 10) Table showing the count of idiomatic expressions used in the 9th grade students' 2nd set of texts. Student version of idiom in double inverted commas, correct version in italics.

9th grade texts 2nd set		
Text number	Correct use	Incorrect use/notes
1	3	1 off-target usage "hope on the best" <i>hope for the best</i>
2	9	incorrect usage: the cold was "to die for" – wrong sense self-made variation: "it was raining pigs" (not counted) <i>raining cats and dogs</i> off-target usage: to be "on the right foot" <i>to get off on the right foot</i>
3	1	+ 1 possible: to drive over to
4	1	slight off-target usage "hold my head cold" <i>keep one's head cold</i> (NO transfer)
5	16	+ possible : "can't say no to this one" slight off-target usage: to "rush against the clock" <i>race against the clock</i>
6	16	
7	2	
8	0	no idiom use
9	8	
10	7	
11	20	
12	7	2 x the same + 3x the same
13	1	easy to say – var. of <i>That's easy for you to say</i>
14	20	8 x the same <i>pick on</i> someone (text subject: bullying) one off-target usage: "if eyes could kill" <i>if looks could kill</i>
15	6	incorrect usage : adding fuel to the fire (used literally)
16	3	2 x the same
17	5	
18	8	
19	5	incorrect usage: a <i>drop in the bucket</i> (wrong sense)
20	4	
21	3	
22	1	
23	2	2 x the same
Total count	148	

The more advanced students still used the most idiomatic language, but there was a marked increase in students showing numerous instances of idiom use. If "numerous" in this case is defined as 10 instances or more, only 1 student (text number 9) in the 1st set had that many (10). Text 15 and 22 were hovering right below that number, with 9 each. Looking at the second set, however, 4 students now are considerably above that number: Number 5 with 16, number 6 with 16, number 11 with 20 and number 14 with 20 instances (though in this last case, the same idiom was used 8 times due to text subject).

In the 1st set of texts, 93 instances of idiomatic language were recorded. In the 2nd set, that number has been raised to 148 (even with one less text in the 2nd set than in the 1st: 23 vs. 24). The 9th grade 2nd set show the same tendencies as the 8th grade 2nd set; there is evidence of the students being in a learning process, errors are made in terms of sense, context and grammar, as well as one self-made variation and at least one obvious transfer from Norwegian.

Some examples of idiom use from the 9th grade 2nd set, from students who all used very basic idiomatic language, if any, in their 1st set:

26. “-Like my dad liked to say, age is just a number! I can inform you that I have a lot of experience, and I am willing to *bend over backwards*. What is the case?” [Text 2, 9th grade, 2nd set)]
27. “I was *on the run* again, and it didn’t take a long time before I ran into a box on the wall where I could read “Fire Axe”” [Text 1, 9th grade, 2nd set]
28. “It’s a *toss-up* which one is going to get hit first. I hit him in the wing, and turn left. My plane can almost *turn on a nickel*, so I’m *out of his sight* in less than 10 seconds.” [Text 11, 9th grade, 2nd set.]
29. “Still, there is some bullying, but *Rome wasn’t built in one day*, and the teachers were prepared that it would take some time to please everybody.” [Text 9, 9th grade, 2nd set]
30. “Bill looked high up in the air; a really thick dark grey smoke flew high up in the big blue sky. “This is a *race against the clock*,” thought Bill.” [Text 15, 9th grade, 2nd set]
31. “While he was hiding he *took a peek* at his watch. His face got weird. He had to run. It was the only way. Or else it was *Game Over*.” [Text 5, 9th grade, 2nd set].

All of these students had used only simple idiomatic phrasal/prepositional verbs in their 1st text, if they had used any idiomatic language at all. All in all, the results are encouraging. This is a graphic representation of the increase in idiomatic usage in the 8th and 9th grade from the 1st to the 2nd set:

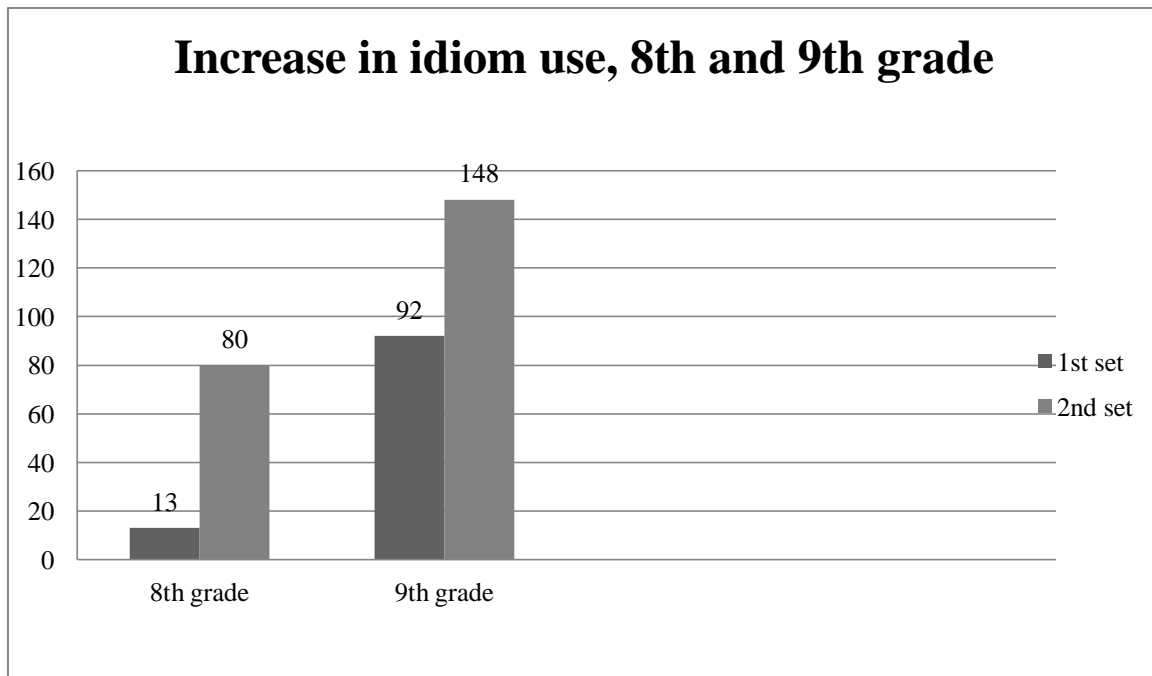


Figure 2) Graphic representation of the increase in idiomatic language use demonstrated by the students from the 1st to the 2nd set.

These results seem to indicate that even small ‘drips’ of focusing on idioms throughout regular English lessons along with encouraging the use of idiomatic language can contribute to more idiomatic language production, also for the less advanced students.

10.3 10th Grade Student Texts

In the 10th year group, the results were different. However, as discussed earlier, for this group, the circumstances were different as well. The 1st set of texts was gathered in the same way as for the 8th and 9th grade, using the students’ end of term evaluation texts. Unfortunately, as briefly mentioned earlier, this was not possible for the 2nd set. As the 10th year is the final year, the students have final exams rather than end of year/end of term evaluations. Their texts from their English final exams are unavailable; they are graded anonymously by teachers from other schools. Due to the nature of the 10th year final term, this made the investigation difficult.

The 10th year students do have mid-term evaluations, but these evaluations came so early in the term that very little work with idioms had been done by their teacher yet at that point. My colleague June Dahle helped me carry out the idiom work in this class. It is our opinion that

they had less time to devote to this subject than did the 8th and 9th year, as their final term is primarily devoted to preparing for their exams. In order to be able to collect some sort of data from this group, they were sat down for the length of one lesson (1 hour) to write a text. Note that for the 8th grade group, they had 3,5 hours to write the text for their 1st set, and 5, 5 hours to write the text for their 2nd set. The 9th year group had 5, 5 hours each time.

As a result, the 10th year 2nd set texts is considerably shorter in average than any of the other sets, creating less opportunity to use idiomatic language. Additionally, this group is the less accomplished group in terms of English language competence. There are a very few reasonable advanced students, but mostly the students score below average when they are graded. This showed in a lack of sophistication in their general vocabulary and grammar, and seems an obvious factor in their demonstrating little idiomatic language competence in their texts. One exception is the student with text number 1 from the 1st set, who used 18 idioms and thereby increased the total count substantially (though it may be noted that this was an overuse on the student’s part, cramming in as many idioms as possible without really achieving an organic text). It is evident that most of the other students in the group used very little idiomatic language in the 1st set:

Table 11) Table showing the count of idiomatic expressions used in the 10th grade students- 1st set of texts. Off-target student versions of idiom in double inverted commas.

10th grade texts – 1st set		
Text number	Correct use	Incorrect use/notes
1	18	1 – “bring me up”
2	0	no idiom use
3	2	1 – “dry as a” + incorrect comparison
4	0	no idiom use
5	5	
6	4	
7	7	
8	1	
9	3	3 x the same
10	2	
11	0	no idiom use
12	2	
13	1	
14	2	
15	2	
16	3	
Total count	52	

Even though the circumstances around the 2nd set of texts were less than ideal, based on the results from the 8th and 9th year groups, some increase in idiomatic language production was anticipated. However, this was not the case. In fact, the students produced rather a lot less idiomatic language in the 2nd set:

Table 12) Table showing the count of idiomatic expressions used in the 10th grade students- 2nd set of texts.

10th grade texts 2nd set		
Text number	Correct use	Incorrect use/notes
1	0	no idiom use
2	0	no idiom use
3	1	
4	2	
5	1	slight incorrect usage
6	1	
7	1	
8	0	no idiom use
9	4	2 of the same
10	1	
11	0	no idiom use
12	0	no idiom use
13	1	
14	1	
15	1	
16	4	2 of the same
17	0	no idiom use
Total count	18	

Some examples of correct idiomatic usage that did show up:

32. “It is a “piece of cake” to do a backflip” [Text 11, 10th grade, 2nd set]
33. “And when we were going to drive to the city, then there came something “out of the blue”, it was a big ball...” [Text 15, 10th grade, 2nd set]
34. “And you can say it like this, the people who moved to Australia went from “rags to riches”.”[Text 13, 10th grade, 2nd set]
35. “The culture in Norway isn’t like the culture in Afghanistan. It is just like night and day.” [Text 9, 10th grade, 2nd set]
36. “Most people there are Christian, though it’s the official religion there. “If I jog my memory”, I think it’s more like it is in Norway, like not that much into church and stuff, but go there once in a while”. [Text 6, 10th grade, 2nd set]

37. “I feel that Nixon “lost his head” when he understood he would have problems winning the election.” [Text 3, 10th grade, 2nd set]

Note that, apart from one student (who happens to be the student of the 18 idioms in the 1st set, table11)), the students all mark their idioms within their texts with double inverted commas. This might be because they were encouraged by their teacher to use them, and wanted to make sure that she noticed, but the 8th and 9th graders were also encouraged to incorporate their newly learned phrases into their texts, and they show no such inclination to obviously highlight them. The 10th graders were not instructed to highlight the idioms in such a way. In my opinion, this may indicate that the 10th grade students had internalized the idiomatic language to a lesser degree than the younger students had. This may be down to numerous factors, but any conclusion on my part would be based on speculation. The tendency is still interesting.

The texts in this set were substantially shorter than in the 1st set in most cases. What ultimately seemed to be the deciding factor, however, was perhaps more unexpected. The problem seems mainly to be genre. Whereas the majority of texts from both sets and all three grades were fiction texts, the task these students had been given was to write a short *factual* text. The texts were sometimes in the form of fictional travelogues, but should include facts, which seemed to be enough to bring the text away from the fictional genre. A lot of teachers have observed and expressed concern about students being uncomfortable with writing factual texts, say, an article rather than a short story. As the texts gathered for this project show, a majority of students have chosen a fiction genre rather than a factual genre (teachers are obligated to give them a choice in this kind of evaluation), when writing in both their mother tongue and in English. They are generally more comfortable with writing fiction.

Accordingly, not only were the texts shorter, but the genre was more difficult and challenged their general writing/composition skills. In terms of idioms, it seemed that the students had great difficulty integrating idiomatic language – even of the phrasal verb kind – into a factual text.

This tendency is in fact supported by what is generally known as accepted fact in the Norwegian Educational system, and is also backed up by research. Numerous studies have shown that Norwegian students are in fact not very good at reading or writing factual texts effectively. This is in spite of the fact that they have to relate to factual texts every day of their lives in our modern society. Several surveys and research projects have documented this: A

Norwegian project carried out from 1998-2001, “Kvalitetssikring av læringsutbyttet i norsk skriftlig”, (KAL), showed that students consistently chose non-factual texts for their final exams in their native tongue, and that those factual texts that were written, were of poorer quality and showcased the writers’ lack of writing and compositional skills (Feet 2011). The findings in this study have been confirmed by several other European studies. In her article “Svinaktig vanskelig? Skriftleg argumentasjon på ungdomstrinnet”, (2007) Anne Marit Igland points to The IAE Study of Written Composition, which concludes: “There do not appear to be universal dimensions regarding the difficulty of particular task types; ease or difficulty appears to depend upon practice and exposure.” (Purves 1992, p. 152, cited in Igland 2007, p. 279).

Igland’s article is interesting as it concerns the specific age group that participates in this study, and because the findings of the IAE study indicates that this age group does indeed have difficulties with writing of factual texts. A common strategy seems to be avoidance, which in turn affects negatively the students’ “practice and exposure”.

Even PISA test results in reading from year 2000 onwards indicate such a tendency, as Norwegian students consistently scored lowest on those tasks that were related to factual texts. Literary, non-factual text related tasks showed far better results. Still, the results were not uniform. Norwegian student achieved higher scores when the subject of the factual texts were topics that engaged young people, as well as asked for an understanding of the text as a whole. It may look as if the factual texts in general are seen as less entertaining and engaging by students, and therefore their motivation is lowered when they meet this type of text (Feet 2012).

“Nasjonale prøver”, the national tests that were implemented in Norway from 2004, show the same tendency. The most difficult tasks are those involving the reading of factual texts. The results from 8th grade 2007-2008 (the same age group of the now be 10th grade-participants in this study which was carried out in 2011-2012), show that students struggle to separate the relevant information from the irrelevant in texts where a lot of competing information is presented (Frønes & Roe 2010, 82). In fact, Norwegian students score lower than the international average on such tasks. Following results such as these, the focus has dramatically shifted in terms of genres to choose from on the students’ final exams, over to a focus on factual text genres. The tendency may be more prevalent in Norwegian exams, but is

gaining momentum in the English final exams as well (note that these final exams are issued on a national level, the individual school has no say in the tasks presented there).

While these studies and results mainly deal with students' reading abilities, it seems natural to assume the same tendencies show up when it comes to their writing abilities. It all comes down to practice and exposure – and it seems we still have a distance to go in Norway in that respect. Seen in light of these findings, I do not find it odd that the students have difficulties implementing idiomatic language when writing factual texts. Rather, my findings here seem to support the general impression that students in this age groups generally show poor skills when it comes to this kind of task. Additionally, it might also be the case that there is in general less idiomatic usage in factual texts than in fiction.

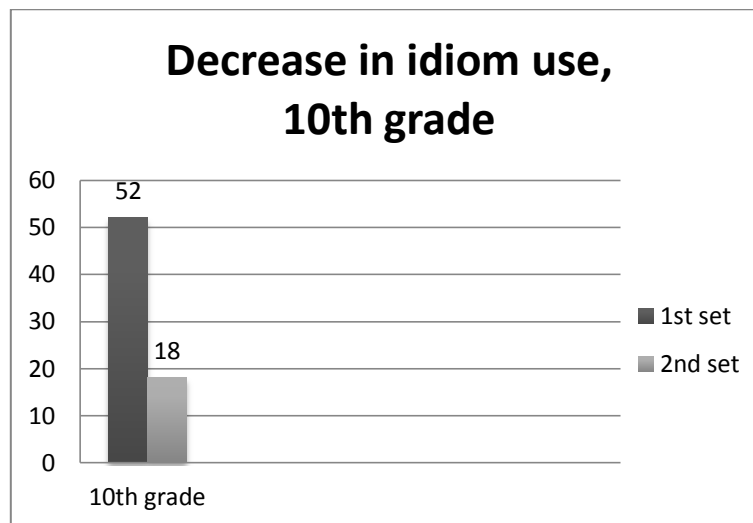


Figure 3) Graphic representation of the decrease in idiomatic language use from 1st to 2nd set, 10th grade students.

This is interesting because it highlights an area teachers apparently need to focus more on, areas of weakness which national educational policies are now starting to pick up on. Based on the tendencies shown even here in this comparably small study, there does indeed seem to be a need for more focus on how to write good factual texts, and incorporating the kind of idiomatic language they may have started to master in fictional texts.

10.4 Summary and Discussion of Total Results

All in all, the results of instances of idiom use for all three grades look like this:

Table 13) Table shows the total count of instances of idiomatic language use in both sets of texts, for all three grades.

Total count of instances of idiom use in texts		
	1st set total	2nd set total
8th grade texts	13 (23 texts)	80 (23 texts)
9th grade texts	92 (24 texts)	148 (23 texts)
10th grade texts	52 (16 texts)	18 (17 texts)

The number of students in the 10th grade group who used no idiomatic language at all also went up from the 1st set. In the 1st set, 3 students used no idioms, while that figure doubles to 6 students in the 2nd set. When looking at how many students used no idiomatic language at all in their texts, the figures look like this:

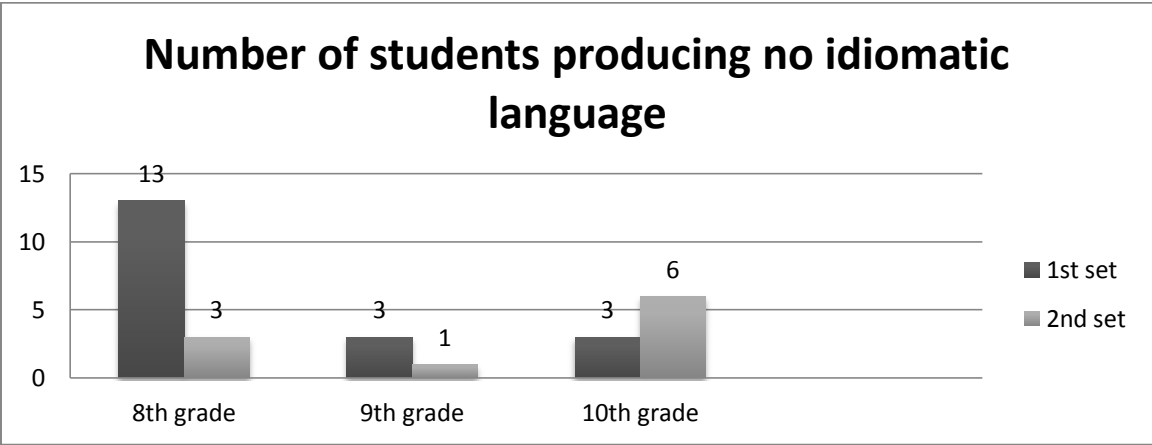


Figure 4) Graphic representation of the decrease/increase in number of students who produced no idiomatic language in their texts.

In numbers:

Table 14) Table shows the decrease/increase in number of students who produced no idiomatic language in their texts.

	1st set total	2nd set total
8th grade students	13 (out of 23)	3 (out of 23)
9th grade students	3 (out of 24)	1 (out of 23)
10th grade students	3 (out of 16)	6 (out of 17)

With the results of the overall count of instances seeming to indicate that the students had indeed acquired more idiomatic competence, it was interesting to see if the idiomatic phrases and phrasal verbs they had chosen indicated a greater variety of idioms used in the 2nd set. In other words: Had they learned anything new? And did they use what they had learned? More instances of idiom use would not be very interesting if the idioms used were mostly the same as in the 1st set, only used repeatedly.

In order to find out whether the students exhibited greater variation in their idiom usage in addition to increased occurrence, each idiom and idiomatic phrasal verb was registered. Every time a new idiom was found, the phrase was written down. When an already registered idiom was used again, the use was counted. Doing this allowed insight into whether the students had developed enough linguistically to make use of a greater variation of idiomatic language. Counting the 1st and 2nd sets separately meant that it was possible to investigate whether the students showed improvement in other ways in addition to mere frequency:

Table 15) Table shows the count of individual different idiomatic expressions used in total for all students in the 1st and 2nd set, as well as the number of new (not seen in the 1st set) idiomatic expressions used in the 2nd set, and those used in the 1st set which were repeated in the 2nd set.

Different idioms used (variation)	
1st set	103
2nd set	178
Idioms from 1st set repeated in 2nd set	15
New idioms used in 2nd set	163

The count clearly shows an increase in new idioms used, and thereby a greater variation. There is not a lot of repetition of idioms also used in the 1st set, which indicates that the students have made an effort to use the phrases they have learned in the period of time

between the texts being written – again indicating that the idiom-focused teaching has had an effect.

However, despite the data showing an increase in variation of idioms used, during the course of this research project the teachers involved ran into the problem of the students overusing certain phrases, making lexical teddy bears out of the idiomatic phrases they had learnt. This manifested itself in that several students in the gathered material for this study use the same idiom over and over in a text, rather than attempting to vary their language. For instance, one student uses the phrase “to pick on someone” in different forms 8 times throughout his text. Granted, the text topic was “Bullying”, but there are other equivalent terms and phrases that are clearly not being utilized. While this is the extreme example, there are approximately 8-10 students in each set who overuse an idiomatic expression, meaning they use it 2-3 times in one relatively short text.

While this is not exactly an error, it is part of that characteristic of learner texts which Johansson calls *dissonance*: “something about the learner text which does not quite sound right, without involving clear errors, frequently reflecting the overuse of common words, or core items” (Johansson, 2008, p. 125). Over-use is a well known feature of language learning, here defined by Ellis:

Over-use involves the use of an L2 feature more frequently than the feature is used by native speakers. It constitutes as “over-indulgence (Levinson 1971), which may be brought about by differences between the native and target languages. It may be reflected in errors (overgeneralization) or just a preference for one target-language form to the exclusion of other possible target forms (Ellis, 2009, p. 974)

Certainly, the student who used *pick on* 8 times in 2 pages was guilty of overuse. He or she could have chosen other terms, such as “*bully, victimize, tyrannize, torment, persecute, criticize, harass, hound, taunt or tease*” (Oxford Paperback Thesaurus, 2006, p. entry for “pick on”). That would, however, be presupposing that the student would know any of these terms and be comfortable enough with them to use any of them. Knowing the student in question, an approximate guess would be that he or she understands and is comfortable with approximately three of them. Before having worked on idioms and learned this expression, this student would quite probably have stuck to one term only: “bully”.

While over-use is not ideal, it is a common stage in learning, and if one is to momentarily take the viewpoint of a language educator rather than a linguist; it is a good thing, as it at least indicates a broadening of the vocabulary, which tends to lead to further curiosity and more

experimentation. Errors and overuse is not the main difficulty with this age group, though they certainly occur frequently. The problem is rather when the students lose interest or confidence and stop experimenting and trying out new vocabulary. Consequently, this student is on the right track.

Learners also seem to experience difficulty with the correct use of prepositions. Part of this difficulty is that “prepositions which are naturally associated cross-linguistically, such as *on* and *på*, often do not correspond (Johansson, 2008, p. 127). This is reflected in the material by examples like “hope on the best” (*hope for the best*) and “become dragged in this” (*dragged into*). It seems, however, that the students had fewer problems with preposition errors and less confusion when learning them as part of a collocational unit, as in a phrasal verb. This assumption is based on the material consisting of quite a lot of phrasal verbs containing a preposition, and yet relatively few errors (approximately 6) were registered for these phrases. Having corrected the 8th and 9th grade texts for the purpose of grading them as well as for researching this thesis, and thereby looking at all aspects of the students’ language, it is clear that the use of prepositions in general is a problem area. It is therefore interesting to note that it does seem to be less of a problem for students when the preposition is learned as part of a collocation, as it seems to support the theory that vocabulary is better learned in “chunks”, or as phrasal units.

This theory has been argued for by, among others, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) as being the pedagogically applicable unit of pre-fabricated language (Ellis, 2008, p. 7).

For a great deal of the time anyway, language production consists of piecing together the ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation and ... comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations. Our teaching therefore would center on these patterns and the ways they can be pieced together, along with the way they vary and the situations in which they occur (Nattinger, 1980, p. 341).

As explained in sections 9.1. and 9.3., one of the pedagogical approaches chosen was that of the students working with a relatively limited list of common idioms in order to memorize a selected few, create definitions and practice using the expressions in sentences. This handout list of idioms is included as Appendix III, while Appendix I contains the full table of idiomatic expressions used in both sets. It is of interest to find out whether this way of working with idiomatic expressions had proven effective. Idioms on the handout were cross-checked against the idioms from the 2nd set in the table (Appendix I). It was found that out of the total of 163 new idioms used in the 2nd set, 41 were found on the handout. That might not seem a significant number. When the total instances of idiom use in the 2nd set is taken into

account, you can see that the idioms on the handout represent 60 of the total 246 instances of idiomatic expressions used. What is significant, though, is that only one expression listed on the handout (*raining cats and dogs*) is included in the 1st set. That can indicate that all of the 41 new expressions may have been unfamiliar, at least to the point of the students not using them in their own written production, before the vocabulary work was undertaken.

The students seem to have started being able to piece together the ready-made units that idioms represent, and pick the ones appropriate for their chosen context when writing. The students seem to have become more skilled in using idiomatic language. There are a total of 163 new idioms that the students have learned and started to use in the relatively short time period between the 1st and 2nd sets of texts written. Additionally, the examples shown earlier tell us that students who used little or no idiomatic language now feel familiar enough with this linguistic element to use it in their own work, even sometimes experimenting with it. The majority of students appear to have accepted, to a larger degree, the feeling of vagueness in terms of meaning that Simonsen (1998) talks about. That, along with a willingness to submit oneself to the process of trial and error, leads to development. This development was especially gratifying to witness in those students who could not be considered to be particularly advanced. One 8th grade student, who used no idiomatic language at all in the 1st set, and cannot be considered to be an advanced student, produced this paragraph:

3. “I have many heroes like John Fogerty and Mark Crilley, but my real hero is my big brother Karl-Arne. He is a good friend, a good brother, and *last but not least* a good worker. He will never *run out of steam*, except when he is *feeling under the weather*.” [Text 4, 8th grade, 2nd set]

Additionally, there is some information to be gleaned from looking at the kind of idiomatic expressions that are left in the table if the expressions listed on the handout are removed from the equation. A quick look tells us that the majority of the expressions left are either phrasal or prepositional verbs such as *check in*, *catch up*, *hang out*, *beat up*, *pick on*, *blow up*, or set phrases that should already be familiar to the students at this level, such as *kind of*, *in the case of*, and *in my opinion*. Again, the wide definition chosen for this study qualifies these expressions as idiomatic, but it seems likely that a lot of them are already present in the students’ vocabulary. Also, it is important to remember that this handout was not by far the only source of new idiomatic expressions these students had – they had several other sources of input throughout the focused teaching period.

9. Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined some aspects of idiomatic language related to learner language and second/foreign language acquisition theories. We have seen that some of the main hindrances for learners in acquiring idioms are their transparency and their origin in a different cultural framework than that of the L1. This opacity, along with the lack of opportunity for learners in a Norwegian classroom setting to practice the language in a natural environment, presents some difficulty.

Idiomatic competence is regarded as a mark of fluency, and therefore needs to be focused upon in teaching. Related to this, we examined a few of the typical errors that learners make, and briefly outlined the pros and cons of form-focused instruction vs. a communicative, message-focused approach, i.e. explicit vs. implicit learning in chapter 6. Based on this, a combination approach to teaching was chosen, the details of which were accounted for in chapter 9.

We have seen that the exact definition of idiomatic and the exact formal characteristics of idioms are still somewhat up for debate in the linguistic research field; definitions of what constitutes idiomatic language can be both wide and narrow. A wide definition was chosen for the purpose of this study.

In chapter 3, the possibility for variation and creativity in idiomatic phrases was examined. This examination showed that while idioms are mostly fixed, there is the possibility of varying degrees of variation as long as the substitutions stay within the same semantic range as the original, as demonstrated by linguists such as Glucksberg and Langlotz, as well as in my own corpus investigation. The findings of this case study, however, showed little variation within the idiomatic phrases in the students' texts; only quantification and tense marking were present to any mentionable degree. It seems reasonable to assume that this is related to their English language proficiency; that they lack both the vocabulary and the full grasp of the meaning and cultural references of the phrase and thereby have difficulty varying the idiom and staying on-target in terms of usage. This is partly demonstrated through those variations that were attempted (more or less deliberately), which for the definite majority is deemed to be off-target usage.

Different models and theories concerning our understanding of idioms have been touched upon, and we have seen an emphasis on the role the context plays in understanding and acquiring idiomatic expressions. We have briefly accounted for the *direct look-up* model and the class of *compositional* models, as well as Sinclair's *idiom principle* contrasting or complementing Chomsky's Universal Grammar.

The culture-dependent aspects of idiomatic language were deemed especially relevant in relation to learner language. As the learners come from a Norwegian linguistic and cultural background, it is this cognitive framework that is prevalent, and this can present a challenge when it comes to understanding and acquiring idiomatic language. In relation to cognitive frameworks, some focus was also placed on metaphorical competence, and the possibility of making use of learners' inherent metaphorical competence in comprehending idiomatic language.

This case study set out to answer the following research questions:

- 3) *To what extent do Norwegian learners of English in Lower Secondary School use idiomatic expression in their written work?*

When studying texts written by learners in 8th, 9th and 10th grade in a Norwegian Lower Secondary School, would there be any examples of use of idiomatic language? Most of the literature on Second or Foreign Language acquisition seems to deal with either younger or older students. This first question also sought to find out what kind of idiomatic language the students used (degree of sophistication and variation), and whether they use the expressions correctly.

- 4) *If teachers focus more deliberately on idiomatic language while teaching, will the students' competence in using idiomatic expressions increase?*

The traditional view concerning idiom acquisition and Second/Foreign Language Acquisition holds that idioms are among the last features of a foreign/second language to be acquired. Does this mean that only the most highly skilled students will be able to use idiomatic language? This second question attempted to find out if a deliberate focus on idioms would lead to a wider range of students producing more idiomatic language in their writing, and whether the students produced more varied or/and sophisticated idiomatic language after a period of such focused teaching.

The hypothesis at the beginning of this study was that the participants would produce little and basic idiomatic language, mainly due to their varying proficiency level and limited natural exposure to the target language. In addition to any idiomatic expressions presumably being less sophisticated than one might expect from a native speaker (particularly in the 1st text set), it was expected that the participants, as learners, would show less variation in their idiomatic usage than a native speaker might, as well as the usage being often off-target or slightly incorrect in context. It was also assumed that the participants' use of idiomatic expressions would reflect their individual language skills, that those more skilled would produce more idiomatic language. The hope was that a focused approach to idioms in teaching over approximately a 5-month period would result in most, if not all, students developing more idiomatic competence.

In response to the first research question, the students were found to produce some idiomatic language, even in the 1st set, though very little in the case of the 8th grade students. Also, the idioms used were very basic, a lot of them were phrasal or prepositional verbs which, if a more narrow definition for idiomatic had been chosen, may not even have been counted. If the texts had been written by native speakers, I would not have counted a lot of these expressions as idiomatic. In respect to learners, however, the criteria change, as the threshold for which expressions can be considered opaque is significantly lowered for someone from a different cultural and linguistic background, as pointed out in chapter 2.

In response to the second research question, both the count of idioms in the tables presented in the above sections and the examples from the material seem to indicate that the students in general have developed a more advanced idiomatic language between the 1st and 2nd sets. The increase in idioms used, as well as the relatively few and often insignificant errors made, does indeed point to them having become more proficient in this aspect of the foreign language. The original hypothesis was proven correct in that the learners still did exhibit more basic idiomatic skills than would be expected from a native speaker, with less variation. However, the idioms used in the 1st set of texts were both fewer and in general less advanced, also in terms of indicating cultural competence and understanding of on-target usage, than a lot of those produced in the 2nd set.

The hypothesis was proven partly correct in that the more advanced students did, in several cases, produce more idiomatic language than the less proficient students. However, this was not always true. The majority of students produced more idiomatic expressions in their 2nd

texts, and while this held true for both advanced students and those at the other end of the scale, what stood out as more of a surprise was the students whose skill can be described as somewhat mid-level. In the 8th and 9th grades, these students exhibited a willingness to experiment with idiomatic phrases and include them in their own texts that was quite a step beyond what was initially expected. As the students in general expressed fascination with the idiomatic expressions and enjoyed working with them, this may be the source of that unexpected result. While a lot of these mid-level students made errors, this is not necessarily a bad thing, but more a sign of an evolutionary linguistic process the student is going through. We all crawl before we can run, and this is no less valid for language. What is important, as has also been shown in research on individual learner factors accounted for in section 8.3., is the willingness to crawl in the first place, to deal with the ambiguity and vagueness that comes with entering unfamiliar linguistic territory.

Perhaps slightly disappointing, though no less interesting, were the results of the 10th grade group. A number of things did not turn out as expected for this group. First, the restrictions placed on us by the curriculum and the looming final exams made it difficult to focus the teaching to the degree that we managed with the 8th and 9th grades. This also had an impact on the 2nd set of texts from this group; the time restrictions meant that these were markedly shorter than the 1st set. Additionally, the task given was to write a factual text. Not only did this task uncover that the student showed significantly less skill when writing in this kind of genre rather than in a fictional genre, but it also showed a significant decrease in idiom usage compared to the 1st set. This points to students having difficulty using idiomatic language in factual texts, as well as the possibility that less idiomatic language might also be an inherent, expected feature of factual text genres. Also to be considered was the general English proficiency level of the 10th grade students; it can be said to have been quite low. While the 9th grade group is one year younger, they still exhibited more traits of fluency, more extensive vocabulary and better grammar skills than the 10th year group (obviously with some exceptions).

The students in the 8th and 9th grades have made progress: they have learned new words and phrases, and they have learned them well enough that they have started incorporating them into their own language. What a case study like this lacks, is an external control group. In the absence of one such, I have looked at some of the available teaching material from the focus period, more specifically the handout of common idioms (Appendix III), and compared the idioms on this list to the ones produced by the students. I found that the expressions on this

handout represented 60 of the 246 total instances of idiomatic language use in the students' texts. I also found that the expressions from this handout represented the majority of the more sophisticated phrasal idioms used. As such, this aspect of the teaching seemed to have had some tangible effect.

Observations done of the then 8th grade students, now 9th grade students, in the months after this focus period was concluded seem to support that some learning of idiomatic language has taken place. I also teach a mixed group in English on this level, what is called Tilvalgsfag (elective subject). In this group, students from all 5 of the classes in this grade are put together, most are mid-level in terms of proficiency. Observations seem to indicate that only the students who were participants in this case study show any inclination or ability to use at least *some* idiomatic expressions in their writing and speech. The other students do not, as a general rule, use any phrasal idioms. The students who were participants also exhibit a greater interest in idiomatic expressions, and tend to notice them more when they are encountered in texts or audio material. They also seem to acquire a quicker grasp of the meaning and on-target usage of such phrases than the other students. This indicates that they, during the focus period, have started to develop strategies for interpreting idiomatic meaning out of the context. They are quite proud when they can explain the meaning of a new phrase to the other students in class – in itself a positive outcome, both in the sense of their own feeling of mastering something difficult, and in the case of the students being informed by their peers; research has shown such peer instruction to be at times more influential than the teachers' instruction (Perumal, 2008).

As pointed out in particular in Chapter 8, some of the conditions surrounding the teaching were perhaps less than ideal. Given the relatively limited time spent, and taking into consideration the students' general enthusiasm, it is not unlikely that more significant results and progress could have been made if the conditions had been less demanding and the restraints had been fewer. However, as the study was done in "real life", it is possible for the language educator to take something away from it to implement in the classroom, most notably the seemingly effective combined use of consciousness-raising activities and memorization strategies, perhaps most notably in spite of the challenges of scheduling and limited time available to devote to idiom-focus in the course of normal teaching activities. One of the central questions posed in the introduction to this study was whether these little 'drips' of focus on idioms would have any impact on the students' use of idiomatic language. The study seems to answer that question in the affirmative.

Sources:

Anon., n.d. *Idiomsite.com*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.idiomsite.com/>

[Accessed 2011-2012].

Anon., n.d. *Video clip used in introductory idiom work*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy6GzaLxhQw>

Au, C. & Entwistle, N., 1999. *Memorization with understanding in approaches to studying cultural variant or response to assessment demands*. Paper presented at the European Association on Learning and Instruction Conference, Gothenburg: s.n.

Ayto, J. (., 2009. *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berge, K., Evensen, L. S., Hertzberg, F. & Wagle, W., 2005. *Ungdommers skrivekompetanse Bind I og II*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Bloomfield, L., 1967. *Language*. s.l.:George Allen & Unwin LTD.

Bolinger, D., 1971. *The Phrasal Verb in English*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Bolinger, D. & Sears, D. A., 1981. *Aspects of Language*. New York, USA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc..

Bortfeld, H., 2002. What Native and Non-Native Speakers' Images for Idioms tell us about Figurative Language. In: *Bilingual Sentence Processing*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 275-295.

Brobow, S. & Bell, S., 1973. On catching on to idiomatic expression. *Memory and cognition*, 1, pp. 343-346.

Bybee, J. & Hopper, P., 2001. *Frequency and the emergence of linguistic structure*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Cacciari, C. & Tabossi, P., 1988. The comprehension of idioms. *Journal of Memory and Language*, pp. 668-683.

Cacciari, C. & Tabossi, P. e., 1993. *Idioms - Processing, Structure and Interpretation*. New Jersey, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc..

Carter, R. & McCarthy, M., 1988. *Vocabulary and language teaching*. London: Longman.

Chomsky, N., 1957. *Syntactic Structures*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Chomsky, N., 1965. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Cieslicka, A. & Singleton, D., 2004. Metaphorical Competence and the L2 learner. In: *Angles on the English-Speaking World (Vol.4). Writing and Vocabulary in Foreign Language Acquisition*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press (University of Copenhagen), pp. 69-84.

- Cooper, B., 2004. The enigma of the Chinese learner. *Accounting Education* 13, pp. 289-310.
- Crystal, D., 1991 . *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics, 3rd ed.*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Crystal, D., 2010. *Begat - The King James Bible & the English Language*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D., 2010. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, 3rd edition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cutler, A., 1982. Idioms: the older the colder. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 13, 2, pp. 317-320.
- Dahlin, B. & Watkins, D., 2000. The role of repetition in the process of memorizing and understanding: A comparison of the views of German and Chinese secondary school students in Hong Kong. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 70, pp. 65-84.
- Danesi, M., 1992. Metaphorical Competence in Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Teaching: The Neglected Dimension.. In: *Georgetown University Roundtable on Languages and Linguistics*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, pp. 489-500.
- Ding, Y., 2007. Text memorization and imitation: The practices of successful Chinese learners of English. *System*, 35, pp. 271-280.
- Eek, I., 2011. *Student Opinions of Teacher Centered vs. Student Centered Instruction in the EFL Classroom - Term Paper EDID 4010*. Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo.
- Ellis, N., 1994. *Implicit and Explicit learning of languages*. London: Academic Press.
- Ellis, N. C., 2008. Phraseology. In: *Phraseology in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 1-15.
- Ellis, R., 1997. *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R., 2009. *The Study of Second Language acquisition; 2nd edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feet, A. R., 2011. "Skriv en tekst..." *Et historisk blikk på sakprosaoppgavene i skriftlig avgangsprøve i norsk i grunnskolen, artikkel som del av masteremne i norsk*. Horten/Tønsberg: Høgskolen i Vestfold.
- Feet, A. R., 2012. "Hvis jeg skal lese en bok..." *Analyse av estetiske førstemøter mellom lærebok og elever. Masteroppgave i norsk..* Horten/Tønsberg: Høgskolen i Vestfold.
- Fernando, C., 1996. *Idioms and idiomaticity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fiedler, S., 2007. *English Phraseology, A Coursebook*. Tübingen, Germany: Narr Franke Attempto Verlag GmbH + Co. KG.
- Firth, J., 1957. *Papers in linguistics, 1934-1951*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flores d'Arcais, G. B., 1993. The Comprehension and Semantic Interpretation of Idioms. In: *Idioms - Processing, Structure and Interpretation*. Hillsdale, New Jersey, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.. Publishers, pp. 79-99.

- Fraser, B., 1970. Idioms within a transformational grammar. *Foundations of Language*, Issue 6, pp. 22-42.
- Frønes, T. & Roe, A., 2010. Sakprosaesing i skolen. In: *Sakprosa i skolen*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget/LNU, pp. 75-90.
- Gibbs, R., 1980. Spilling the beans on understanding and memory for idioms in context. *Memory & Cognition*, 8, pp. 149-156.
- Gibbs, R., 1984. Literal meaning and psychological theory. *Cognitive Science*, 8, pp. 275-304.
- Gibbs, R. W., 1993. Why Idioms Are Not Dead Metaphors. In: *IDIOMS: Processing, Structure, and Interpretation*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Publishers, pp. 57-78.
- Gibbs, W. R. & Nayak, N. P., 1989. Psycholinguistic studies on the syntactic behavior of idioms. *Cognitive Psychology*, 21, pp. 100-138.
- Gibbs, W. R., Nayak, N. P., Bolton, J. L. & Keppel, M., 1988. Speakers assumptions about the lexical flexibility of idioms. *Memory & Cognition*, 17, 1, pp. 58-68.
- Glucksberg, S., 1993. Idiom meanings and Allusional Content. In: *Idioms - Processing, structure and interpretation*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., pp. 3-27.
- Gläser, R., 2007. Supplements. In: *English Phraseology, A Coursebook*. Tübingen, Germany: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag GmbH + Co. KG, pp. 137-143.
- Granger, S., 1998. Prefabricated patters in advanced EFL writing: Collocations and Formulae. In: *Phraseology: Theory, Analysis and Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 145-160.
- Granger, S. & Meunier, F., 2008. Phraseology in language learning and teaching - Where to from here?. In: *Phraseology in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 247-252.
- Hakuta, K., 1974. Prefabricated patterns and the emergence of structure in second language acquisition. *Language Learning*, 24, pp. 287-298.
- Halliday, M. A. K., 1978. *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. Maryland: University Park Press.
- Halliday, M. & Hassan, R., 1976. *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Hasselgren, A., 1994. Lexical teddy bears and advanced learners: a study into the ways Norwegian students cope with English vocabulary. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, pp. Vol.4, No.2, pg 237-260.
- Howarth, P., 1998. The phraseology of learners' academic writing. In: *Phraseology: Theory, analysis and application*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 161-186.
- Igland, A., 2007. Svinaktig vanskelig? Skriftleg argumentasjon på ungdomstrinnet.. In: *Skriving for nåtid og framtid. Skrivning i arbeidsliv og skole*. Trondheim: Tapir akademiske forlag.
- Irujo, S., 1986. A piece of cake: Learning and teaching idioms". *ELT Journal*, Issue 40 (3), pp. 236-242.

- Irujo, S., 1993. Steering clear: Avoidance in the production of idioms. *IRAL (international Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching)*, 30 (3), pp. 205-219.
- Jackendorff, R., 2002. *Foundations of Language. Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- James, C., 1994. Explaining grammar to its learners. In: *Grammar and the Language Teacher*. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall International Ltd., pp. 203-214.
- Johansson, S., 2008. *Contrastive analysis and learner language; A corpus-based approach*. Oslo: University of Oslo.
- Johnson-Laird, P., 1993. Foreword. In: *Idioms - Processing, Structure, and Interpretation*. New Jersey, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., pp. vii-xi.
- Kennedy, G., 2008. Phrasology and language pedagogy. In: *Phraseology in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 21-42.
- Kennedy, P., 2002. Learning cultures and learning styles: Myth-understanding about adult (Hong Kong) Chinese learners. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 21 (5), pp. 430-445.
- Kirsner, K., 1994. Second language vocabulary learning. The role of implicit processes. In: *Implicit and explicit learning of languages*. London: Academic Press, pp. 283-311.
- Krashen, S., 1982. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Kuiper, K. & Everaert, M., 2004. Limits on the phrase structural configurations of phrasal lexical elements. In: C. Palm Meister, ed. *EUROPHRAS 2000*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, pp. 257-262.
- Kövecses, Z., 2010. *Metaphor - A Practical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M., 1980,2003. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Langlotz, A., 2006. *Idiomatic Creativity: A cognitive-linguistic model of idiom representation and idiom-variation in English*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Laufer, B., 1997. What's in a word that makes it hard or easy: Some intralexical factors that affect learning of words.. In: *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 140-155.
- Lee, S., 2004. Teaching lexis to EFL students. A review of current perspectives and methods.. *Annual Review of Education, Communication and Language Sciences. Volume 1*.
- Levorato, M., 1993. The Acquisition of Idioms and the Development of Figurative Competence. In: *Idioms - Processing, Structure and Interpretation*. Hillsdale, New Jersey, USA: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., pp. 101-128.
- Lewis, M., 1996. Implications of a lexical view of language. In: *Challenge and change in language teaching*. Oxford: Heinemann.

- Lewis, M., 2009. *The Idiom Principle in L2 English - Assessing elusive formulaic sequences as indicators of idiomaticity, fluency, and proficiency*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG.
- Littlewood, W., 1984. *Foreign and Second Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Longman Dictionary, 2009. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.
- Lyons, J., 1968. *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Makkai, A., 1972. *Idiom Structure in English*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Mark Davies, B. Y. U., 1990-2012. *COCA Corpus of Contemporary American English*. [Online] Available at: <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/> [Accessed 4 October 2012].
- Marton, F., Dall'Alba, G. & Tse, L., 1993. *The paradox of the Chinese learner [Occasional Paper no 93.1]*. Melbourne: RMIT, Educational Research and Development Unit.
- Matthews, P. A., 2007. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics*. 2nd. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCarthy, M. & O'Dell, F., 2002. *English Idioms in Use, Intermediate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meara, P., Lightbown, P. M. & Halter, R. H., 1997. Classrooms as lexical environments. *Language Teaching Research*, pp. vol.1,1. pg 28-47.
- Miller, G. A., 1999. On knowing a word. *Annual Review of Psychology*, Issue 50, pp. 1-19.
- Moon, R., 2001. *Fixed Expressions and idioms in English. A corpus-based approach..* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nagy, C., 1997. On the role of context in first- and second-language vocabulary learning.. In: *Vocabulary, Description, acquisition and pedagogy..* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nation, I. S. P., 2001. *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nattinger, J., 1980. A lexical phrase grammar for ESL. *TESOL Quarterly* 14, pp. 337-344.
- Nattinger, J. & DeCarrico, J., 1992. *Lexical phrases and language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nunberg, G., 1978. *The pragmatics of reference*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Linguistic Club.
- Ortony, A., Schallert, D. L., Reynolds, R. E. & Antos, S. J., 1978. Interpreting metaphors and idioms: Some effects of context on comprehension. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 17, pp. 465-477.

- Oxford Paperback Thesaurus, 3. e., 2006. *Oxford Paperback Thesaurus, 3rd edition Waite, M (ed.)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oxford University Press, 2005. *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Paquot, M., 2008. Exemplification in learner writing. In: *Phraseology in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 101-120.
- Pawley, A. & Syder, F., 1983. Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Nativelike selection and nativelike fluency. In: *Language and communication*. London: Longman, pp. 191-226.
- Pawley, A. & Syder, F., 1983. Two puzzles for linguistic theory: nativelike selection and nativelike fluency.. In: *Language and communication*. London: Longman.
- Perumal, J., 2008. *Student resistance and teacher authority: the demand and dynamics of collaborative learning*. s.l.:s.n.
- Peters, A., 1983. *The units of language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rothkegel, A., 1973. *Feste Syntagmen. Grundlagen, Strukturbeschreibung und automatische Analyse*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- Schmitt, N., 2000. *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Simensen, A. M., 1998. *Teaching a foreign language: Principles and procedures, 2nd ed.*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.
- Sinclair, J., 1987. *Looking Up. An account of the COBUILD project in lexical computing*. London: Collins Cobuild.
- Sinclair, J., Jones, S. & Daley, R., 1970. *English collocation studies: The OSTI report (edited by Ramesh Krishnamurthy 2004)*. London: Continuum.
- Skinner, B. F., 1957. *Verbal Behavior*. s.l.:Copley Publishing Group.
- Spada, N. & Lightbown, P. M., 2008. Form-Focused Instruction: Isolated or Integrated?. *TESOL Quarterly*, pp. Vol 42, No.2, pg 181-202.
- Spears, R. A., 2005. *McGraw-Hills Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs*. New York, USA: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc..
- Stern, H. H., 1983. *Fundamental Concepts of Language of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stock, O., Slack, J. & Ortony, A., 1993. Building castles in the Air. Some Computational and Theoretical Issues in Idiom Comprehension. In: *Idioms - Processing, Structure and Interpretation*. Hillsdale, New Jersey, USA: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, pp. 229-249.
- Swan, M., 1985. A critical look at the Communicative Approach (1). *ELT Journal*, pp. Vol 39/1, pg 2-11.
- Swan, M., 1985. A critical look at the Communicative Approach (2). *ELT Journal*, pp. Volume 39/2, pg 76-87.

- Swinney, D. A. & Cutler, A., 1979. The access and processing of idiomatic expressions. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 18, pp. 523-534.
- Sökmen, A., 1997. Current trends in Teaching second language Vocabulary. In: *Vocabulary: description, acquisition and pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tabossi, P. & Zardon, F., 1993. The Activation of Idiomatic Meaning in Spoken Language Comprehension. In: *Idioms - Processing, Structure and Interpretation*. Hillsdale, New Jersey, USA: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Publishers, pp. 145-162.
- Takac, V., 2008. *Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Foreign Language Acquisition*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Ting, Y. & Qi, Y., 2001. Learning English texts by heart in a Chinese University: A traditional literary practice in a modern setting.. *Foreign Language Circles* 5, pp. 58-65.
- Wasow, T., Sag, I. & Nunberg, G., 1983. *Idioms: An interim report*, Tokyo: s.n.
- Willis, J. & Willis, D., 1996. Consciousness-raising activities. . In: *Challenge and change in language teaching*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Wong-Fillmore, L., 1976. *The Second Time Around. PhD dissertation, Stanford University*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Wray, A., 2002. *Formulaic language and the lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wray, A. & Fitzpatrick, T., 2008. Why can't you just leave it alone? Deviations from memorized language as a gauge of nativelike competence. In: *Phraseology in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 123-148.
- Wright, J., 2002. *Idioms Organiser*. Hampshire, UK: Heinle, CENGAGE Learning.
- Zhanrong, L., 2002. Learning strategies of Chinese EFL learners: reviews of studies in China.. *RTVU ELT Express*, <http://www1.openedu.com.cn/elt/2/4.htm>, last accessed 16th of September 2012.

Appendix I

Idiom used (counts all variations of the idiom, e.g. tense, adjective modification, etc.) Listed in the order they showed up in the material.	Frequency In red: idioms from 1 st set used again in the 2 nd set	
Idioms from 1st set		
to break up with someone	1	
to shout someone's head off	1	
to break someone's heart	1	
to feel blue	1	
behind someone's back	1	1
to be sick of something	1	
to fight against/for something	3	
to be free as a bird	1	
raining cats and dogs	1	
to give in/up	3	3
to let something go	1	2
a matter of course	1	
to be green with envy	1	
to cry like a baby	1	
to die of laughter/to laugh oneself to death	1	
to go both ways (in the sense of reciprocity)	1	
to be on the run from something	1	1
to get busted	2	1
to learn/do something the hard way	2	
to chill/ chill out	1	1
to fall asleep	5	
to pull something back	1	
to spend time in someplace/with someone	5	
to pick someone up (in the sense of transporting someone)	5	
to fall in love with	8	7
to take care of something	1	
to mess with someone	1	
to get to something (abstract sense)	1	
to have a hard time	2	3
to catch something (transportation – a train, etc.)	1	
to pick one's way through something	1	
to come up with something	3	
to split up (in the sense of dividing someone/something)	1	
to suck at something	1	
to run for one's life	1	
to shake someone off (sense: escape)	1	
feel like a new man/woman/person	1	
to speak from the heart/ something coming from the heart	2	
to feel like something (sense: wanting to do something)	1	
for Christ's (someone's) sake!	1	
You bet!	1	
good to go	1	
to try one's best	1	
to be grossed out by something/someone	1	
to find something out	1	

how/where in the world..?	2	
to make it	1	
in the middle of nowhere	1	
to sign up for something	1	
to beat up	9	2
to show up	1	
to be out of control	1	
to take a break	1	
to take a chance	2	1
just in case	2	
to head to/for something/somewhere	2	4
to be happy to/with doing something	1	
to take a look	3	
to be for the best	1	
Beauty is only skin deep	1	
dirty look	1	
to be kicked out of something/somewhere	1	
can't help something	1	
push someone's buttons	1	
give something a try	2	
to lock someone up somewhere	1	
to play with someone's feelings/emotions	1	
Where/what/how the hell..?	2	
to make something up	1	
to miss the point	1	
to hang on	1	
couldn't care less	1	1
to figure something out	8	2
to take something into one's own hands	2	
to take out (sense: kill)	1	
the sun was beating down	1	
to be glued to something (i.e. the ground)	2	
a pain in the	1	
can't wait	4	
hit on someone	1	
to see where something goes	1	
Holy cow!/ Holy Shit!	2	
all set to (something)	1	
to throw up	2	1
to be pissed off/ piss someone off	1	
to make it (sense: survive/ manage something)	4	
to be dragged into something	1	
plan B	1	
dream of getting this far	1	
to show off	1	
to be all for something	1	
to get along	1	
shut up	1	1
to trail off	1	
to glare daggers at	1	
to keep up	2	
to tell the world about something	2	
Who cares?	1	
to close in on something/someone	1	
no problem	1	
...the crap out of...	1	
give credit to/for	1 (although incorrectly used)	

Idioms from 2 nd set	(+15 from first set)
to lose one's head	1
a dark horse	1
to be in charge	1
everything but the kitchen sink	1 (slightly incorrect usage)
jog one's memory	1
to boast about something	1
like night and day	1
to handle something	2
in the case of	1
from rags to riches	1
to be on one's way	3
out of the blue	1
to look forward to	4
to look up to	1
a piece of cake	9
to hope for the best	1
kind of/sort of	5
to die for	1
to bend over backwards	2
to get off on the right foot	1
to pay someone a visit	1
to go under-cover	1
to check in	1
to spot something/someone	1
to go back to the drawing-board	1
to call someone up	1
to keep one's head cold/keep a cool head	1
to take a peek	2
(a situation is) game over	1
a hat trick	1
to race against the clock	3
the dog days of summer	3
to wake someone up	1
Elvis has left the building	1
to grab something to eat (e.g. grab a burger)	1
to see one's chance (to do something)	1
to get away	1
to get up	1
to catch up with/to	2
in my opinion...	1
to play on your/someone's strengths	1
to show sign of	1
to be in one's element	1
to come of age	1
to speak up	1
to cut off (sense: interrupt)	1
to stand a chance	1
to break through (abstract sense)	1
to prod something (e.g. to prod his mind)	1
to claw someone's eyes out (abstract)	1
to get/have the upper hand	1
to save someone from themselves	1
to move at the speed of light	1
that's my thing/not my thing	1
to keep one's chin up	1
to be head over heels	1
to hang out	4

a toss-up	3
Rome wasn't built in a day	1
to grow up	1
take a turn for the worse	1
go into hiding	1
to get in trouble	1
to pay with one's life	1
by the way	1
to shake someone/something off	1
to mark off (sense:register)	1
without any further ado	1
go-time (as in "time to go")	1
to rain lead	1
to pop into/out of/in front of	1
to kick the bucket	1
to meet head on /head on head	1
to turn on a nickel	1
to be out of sight	1
to blow something up	6
to level with the earth/ground	1
to turn into Swiss cheese (e.g.full of holes)	1
to drop out of school	1
...easy for ...to say	1
to be a big deal	1
to keep one's mind on	1
to deal with (sense – handle a situation)	1
to pick on (bother,bully) someone	7
to call names/name-calling	1
to stick up for	1
to stick together	1
to die for/would die to...	1
to push someone away (abstract)	1
to stand tall (proud, brave)	1
to black out (sense: lose consciousness)	1
to add fuel to the fire	1
a ghost town	1
not a living soul	1
to be good as new	1
to find yourself somewhere (location)	1
to get rid off	1
to follow in someone's footsteps (emulate)	1
to get/have (no) clue	1
to be about to drop (off/dead)	1
to hear someone out	1
one's mind is racing	1
to faint dead away	1
a drop in the bucket	1
to be mixed up in	1
bullshit	1
to take to heart	1
to go/look inside oneself	1
to take something (e.g. Don't know how much I can take, abstract sense)	1
a taste of one's own medicine	2
to get away with	1
here you go	1
to sleep over (spending the night somewhere)	1
to keep an eye on	1
to chase down	1
to come into the house/world (being born)	1

to drive someone op the wall	1
a leopard can't change its spots	1
last but not least	2
to run out of steam	2
to feel under the weather	1
to crowd someone	2
to (not) be someone's business	1
to check on	1
dead as a doornail	1
to be a good Samaritan	1
don't cry over spilt milk	1
to be in one's own world	1
to have thoughts flying through one's head	1(NB: not on list, I judge to be idiomatic usage)
to be chicken/chicken out of	1
In your face!	3
break a leg (good luck)	2
to meet face to face	1
it's a small world	1
haven't got all day	1
to mess (something) up	1
to crack (someone) up (start laughing)	1
to smell a rat	1
to handle oneself	1
to be mad at someone	1
When it rains, it pours.	1
to hook (something) up (to fix something, someone gets a positive outcome – slang)	1
from day one	1
to push someone (pressure to do something)	1
as high as a kite	1
great minds think alike	1
like hell	1
hold your horses	1
cut to the chase	1
to wine and dine	1
to cross one's fingers	1
once in a blue moon	1
to be (a) southpaw (left-handed)	1
all someone can/could dream of	1
to pass the time	1
to be in the same boat	1
to be starving for something	1
you've got to be kidding me	1
a cock-and-bull story	1
to have a six-pack (chiseled abdominal muscles)	1
to hurry up	1
to wake up	1

Appendix II

Valentines Day Date

This is a story all about love and kisses and how one's heart can be broken.

One day I was at home and I had butterflies in my stomach. I couldn't eat or sleep because I was going to go on a blind date with a girl that I had a crush on . Well it wasn't exactly a blind date, I had seen her at the library, but she didn't know who I was or what I looked like. So for her it was a blind date. The date was going to take place on Valentine's Day and I was really feeling the pressure. I was hoping to fall in love on Valentine's Day! I hadn't been in love since my old flame and I had parted ways last year. When I broke up with her, there was certainly no love lost between us. But right now I was walking on air because the Love Bug had bitten me. I certainly hoped that this was not just puppy love. After all I was 14 years old. Surely I was old enough to fall in love for real. I also hoped that we might get a chance to neck while we are on the date. No wonder I had butterflies! Oh well, they always say that love conquers all and that once I started the date the butterflies would go away.

-

When I met the girl at her front door, I almost had a change of heart. At heart I was really quite a chicken. cross my heart and hope to die, when I opened the door I almost fell down on my knees. My date was just as gorgeous as could be and she was actually smiling at me. I saw her mom standing behind her and suddenly I had a heavy heart. Was she going to ask me all sorts of questions and make me feel uncomfortable? Was she going to tell me that the date was off? I thought to myself, "Have a heart, be nice to me and let me date your daughter." I was afraid that she was going to be hard hearted. But I didn't have anything to worry about. My date's mother had a heart of gold and welcomed me into the house. She said to me, "Take heart, it is obvious that you really like my daughter, because you wear your heart on your sleeve. I'm very happy to make your acquaintance and I hope that you and my daughter have a pleasant time on your date." Suddenly I wasn't sick at heart anymore. I hoped that this date was going to be the best date of my life. The only thing that she did say to me was that she hoped that I would treat her daughter with respect. I took that to heart and promised that I would treat her daughter like the queen that I thought that she was. That made her mom very happy. She told me that if I needed her to pick us up, or if there were any problems we could call her and she gave me her phone number. I made a half hearted effort to learn the number by heart, but I quite honestly couldn't concentrate on phone numbers at a time like this. Just as we were leaving she asked me if I was a bleeding heart. I wasn't sure exactly what she meant by that and was afraid to give her an answer which she didn't want to hear. So I came up with a brilliant response. I said, "What do you think?" She gave me a puzzled look and my heart skipped a beat as I closed the door.

-

Finally we were on our date on Valentine's Day. I had decided that I would start the date by taking her to McDonald's. I went up to the counter and blew her a kiss. I thought I looked so cute, my kiss curls were looking just right. As I blew her a kiss I saw that she was talking to another guy and laughing. When I got back with the 6 pack of Chicken McNuggets, she took one look at me and one at the new guy. I could tell by the look on her face that she was giving me the kiss off. She turned and walked out of McDonald's arm and arm with this new guy. Wow, what a short date. I was heart broken and I went home with a heavy heart. I had thought Valentine's Day was a perfect day to take out my heart throb. I guess taking her to McDonald's was not exactly a great idea. I guess I better kiss that one goodbye! The next day I met a new girl. I wasn't heart broken any more. Maybe it had been puppy love after all.

Appendix III

List of common idioms handed out to students

Source: www.idiomsite.com

A

A Bird In The Hand Is Worth Two In The Bush:

Having something that is certain is much better than taking a risk for more, because chances are you might lose everything.

A Blessing In Disguise:

Something good that isn't recognized at first.

A Chip On Your Shoulder:

Being upset for something that happened in the past.

A Dime A Dozen:

Anything that is common and easy to get.

A Doubting Thomas:

A skeptic who needs physical or personal evidence in order to believe something.

A Drop in the Bucket:

A very small part of something big or whole.

A Fool And His Money Are Easily Parted:

It's easy for a foolish person to lose his/her money.

A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand:

Everyone involved must unify and function together or it will not work out.

A Leopard Can't Change His Spots:

You cannot change who you are.

A Penny Saved Is A Penny Earned:

By not spending money, you are saving money (little by little).

A Picture Paints a Thousand Words:

A visual presentation is far more descriptive than words.

A Piece of Cake:

A task that can be accomplished very easily.

A Slap on the Wrist:

A very mild punishment.

A Taste Of Your Own Medicine:

When you are mistreated the same way you mistreat others.

A Toss-Up:

A result that is still unclear and can go either way.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words:

It's better to actually do something than just talk about it.

Add Fuel To The Fire:

Whenever something is done to make a bad situation even worse than it is.

Against The Clock:

Rushed and short on time.

All Bark And No Bite:

When someone is threatening and/or aggressive but not willing to engage in a fight.

All Greek to me:

Meaningless and incomprehensible like someone who cannot read, speak, or understand any of the Greek language would be.

All In The Same Boat:

When everyone is facing the same challenges.

An Arm And A Leg:

Very expensive. A large amount of money.

An Axe To Grind:

To have a dispute with someone.

Apple of My Eye:

Someone who is cherished above all others.

As High As A Kite:

Anything that is high up in the sky.

At The Drop Of A Hat:

Willing to do something immediately.

B

Back Seat Driver:

People who criticize from the sidelines, much like someone giving unwanted advice from the back seat of a vehicle to the driver.

Back To Square One:

Having to start all over again.

Back To The Drawing Board:

When an attempt fails and it's time to start all over.

Baker's Dozen:

Thirteen.

Barking Up The Wrong Tree:

A mistake made in something you are trying to achieve.

Beat A Dead Horse:

To force an issue that has already ended.

Beating Around The Bush:

Avoiding the main topic. Not speaking directly about the issue.

Bend Over Backwards:

Do whatever it takes to help. Willing to do anything.

Between A Rock And A Hard Place:

Stuck between two very bad options.

Bite Off More Than You Can Chew:

To take on a task that is way to big.

Bite Your Tongue:

To avoid talking.

Blood Is Thicker Than Water:

The family bond is closer than anything else.

Blue Moon:

A rare event or occurrence.

Break A Leg:

A superstitious way to say 'good luck' without saying 'good luck', but rather the opposite.

Buy A Lemon:

To purchase a vehicle that constantly gives problems or stops running after you drive it away.

C

Can't Cut The Mustard :

Someone who isn't adequate enough to compete or participate.

Cast Iron Stomach:

Someone who has no problems, complications or ill effects with eating anything or drinking anything.

Charley Horse:

Stiffness in the leg / A leg cramp.

Chew someone out:

Verbally scold someone.

Chip on his Shoulder:

Angry today about something that occurred in the past.

Chow Down:

To eat.

Close but no Cigar:

To be very near and almost accomplish a goal, but fall short.

Cock and Bull Story:

An unbelievable tale.

Come Hell Or High Water:

Any difficult situation or obstacle.

Crack Someone Up:

To make someone laugh.

Cross Your Fingers:

To hope that something happens the way you want it to.

Cry Over Spilt Milk:

When you complain about a loss from the past.

Cry Wolf:

Intentionally raise a false alarm.

Cup Of Joe:

A cup of coffee.

Curiosity Killed The Cat:

Being Inquisitive can lead you into a dangerous situation.

Cut to the Chase:

Leave out all the unnecessary details and just get to the point.

D

Dark Horse:

One who was previously unknown and is now prominent.

Dead Ringer:

100% identical. A duplicate.

Devil's Advocate:

Someone who takes a position for the sake of argument without believing in that particular side of the argument. It can also mean one who presents a counter argument for a position they do believe in, to another debater.

Don't count your chickens before they hatch:

Don't rely on it until you're sure of it.

Don't Look A Gift Horse In The Mouth:

When someone gives you a gift, don't be ungrateful.

Don't Put All Your Eggs In One Basket:

Do not put all your resources in one possibility.

Doozy:

Something outstanding.

Down To The Wire:

Something that ends at the last minute or last few seconds.

Drastic Times Call For Drastic Measures:

When you are extremely desperate you need to take extremely desperate actions.

Drink like a fish:

To drink very heavily.

Drive someone up the wall:

To irritate and/or annoy very much.

Dropping Like Flies:

A large number of people either falling ill or dying.

Dry Run:

Rehearsal.

E

Eighty Six:

A certain item is no longer available. Or this idiom can also mean, to throw away.

Elvis has left the building:

The show has come to an end. It's all over.

Ethnic Cleansing:

Killing of a certain ethnic or religious group on a massive scale.

Every Cloud Has A Silver Lining:

Be optimistic, even difficult times will lead to better days.

Everything But The Kitchen Sink:

Almost everything and anything has been included.

Excuse my French:

Please forgive me for cussing.

F

Feeding Frenzy:

An aggressive attack on someone by a group.

Field Day:

An enjoyable day or circumstance.

Finding Your Feet:

To become more comfortable in whatever you are doing.

Finger lickin' good:

A very tasty food or meal.

Fixed In Your Ways:

Not willing or wanting to change from your normal way of doing something.

Flash In The Pan:

Something that shows potential or looks promising in the beginning but fails to deliver anything in the end.

Flea Market:

A swap meet. A place where people gather to buy and sell inexpensive goods.

Flesh and Blood:

This idiom can mean living material of which people are made of, or it can refer to someone's family.

Flip The Bird:

To raise your middle finger at someone.

Foam at the Mouth:

To be enraged and show it.

Fools' Gold:

Iron pyrites, a worthless rock that resembles real gold.

French Kiss:

An open mouth kiss where tongues touch.

From Rags To Riches:

To go from being very poor to being very wealthy.

Fuddy-duddy:

An old-fashioned and foolish type of person.

Full Monty:

This idiom can mean either, "the whole thing" or "completely nude".

Funny Farm:

A mental institutional facility.

G

Get Down to Brass Tacks:

To become serious about something.

Get Over It:

To move beyond something that is bothering you.

Get Up On The Wrong Side Of The Bed:

Someone who is having a horrible day.

Get Your Walking Papers:

Get fired from a job.

Give Him The Slip:

To get away from. To escape.

Go Down Like A Lead Balloon:

To be received badly by an audience.

Go For Broke:

To gamble everything you have.

Go Out On A Limb:

Put yourself in a tough position in order to support someone/something.

Go The Extra Mile:

Going above and beyond whatever is required for the task at hand.

Good Samaritan:

Someone who helps others when they are in need, with no discussion for compensation, and no thought of a reward.

Graveyard Shift:

Working hours from about 12:00 am to 8:00 am. The time of the day when most other people are sleeping.

Great Minds Think Alike:

Intelligent people think like each other.

Green Room:

The waiting room, especially for those who are about to go on a tv or radio show.

Gut Feeling:

A personal intuition you get, especially when feel something may not be right.

H

Haste Makes Waste:

Quickly doing things results in a poor ending.

Hat Trick:

When one player scores three goals in the same hockey game. This idiom can also mean three scores in any other sport, such as 3 homeruns, 3 touchdowns, 3 soccer goals, etc.

Have an Axe to Grind:

To have a dispute with someone.

He Lost His Head:

Angry and overcome by emotions.

Head Over Heels:

Very excited and/or joyful, especially when in love.

Hell in a Handbasket:

Deteriorating and headed for complete disaster.

High Five:

Slapping palms above each others heads as celebration gesture.

High on the Hog:

Living in Luxury.

Hit The Books:

To study, especially for a test or exam.

Hit The Hay:

Go to bed or go to sleep.

Hit The Nail on the Head:

Do something exactly right or say something exactly right.

Hit The Sack:

Go to bed or go to sleep.

Hocus Pocus:

In general, a term used in magic or trickery.

Hold Your Horses:

Be patient.

I

Icing On The Cake:

When you already have it good and get something on top of what you already have.

Idle Hands Are The Devil's Tools:

You are more likely to get in trouble if you have nothing to do.

If It's Not One Thing, It's Another:

When one thing goes wrong, then another, and another...

In Like Flynn:

To be easily successful, especially when sexual or romantic.

In The Bag:

To have something secured.

In The Buff:

Nude.

In The Heat Of The Moment:

Overwhelmed by what is happening in the moment.

In Your Face:

An aggressive and bold confrontation.

It Takes Two To Tango:

A two person conflict where both people are at fault.

It's A Small World:

You frequently see the same people in different places.

Its Anyone's Call:

A competition where the outcome is difficult to judge or predict.

Ivy League:

Since 1954 the Ivy League has been the following universities: Columbia, Brown, Cornell, Dartmouth, Yale, Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Harvard.

J

Jaywalk:

Crossing the street (from the middle) without using the crosswalk.

Joshing Me:
Tricking me.

K

Keep An Eye On Him:
You should carefully watch him.

Keep body and soul together:
To earn a sufficient amount of money in order to keep yourself alive .

Keep your chin up:
To remain joyful in a tough situation.

Kick The Bucket:
Die.

Kitty-corner:
Diagonally across. Sometimes called Catty-Corner as well.

Knee Jerk Reaction:
A quick and automatic response.

Knock On Wood:
Knuckle tapping on wood in order to avoid some bad luck.

Know the Ropes:
To understand the details.

L

Last but not least:
An introduction phrase to let the audience know that the last person mentioned is no less important than those introduced before him/her.

Lend Me Your Ear:
To politely ask for someone's full attention.

Let Bygones Be Bygones:
To forget about a disagreement or argument.

Let Sleeping Dogs Lie:
To avoid restarting a conflict.

Let The Cat Out Of The Bag:
To share a secret that wasn't suppose to be shared.

Level playing field:
A fair competition where no side has an advantage.

Like a chicken with its head cut off:
To act in a frenzied manner.

liquor someone up:
To get someone drunk.

Long in the Tooth:
Old people (or horses).

Loose Cannon:
Someone who is unpredictable and can cause damage if not kept in check.

M

Make No Bones About:

To state a fact so there are no doubts or objections.

Method To My Madness:

Strange or crazy actions that appear meaningless but in the end are done for a good reason.

Mumbo Jumbo:

Nonsense or meaningless speech.

Mum's the word:

To keep quiet. To say nothing.

N

Nest Egg:

Savings set aside for future use.

Never Bite The Hand That Feeds You:

Don't hurt anyone that helps you.

New kid on the block:

Someone new to the group or area.

New York Minute:

A minute that seems to go by quickly, especially in a fast paced environment.

No Dice:

To not agree. To not accept a proposition.

No Room to Swing a Cat:

An unusually small or confined space.

Not Playing With a Full Deck:

Someone who lacks intelligence.

O

Off On The Wrong Foot:

Getting a bad start on a relationship or task.

Off The Hook:

No longer have to deal with a tough situation.

Off the Record:

Something said in confidence that the one speaking doesn't want attributed to him/her.

On Pins And Needles:

Anxious or nervous, especially in anticipation of something.

On The Fence:

Undecided.

On The Same Page:

When multiple people all agree on the same thing.

Out Of The Blue:
Something that suddenly and unexpectedly occurs.

Out On A Limb:
When someone puts themselves in a risky situation.

Out On The Town:
To enjoy yourself by going out.

Over My Dead Body:
When you absolutely will not allow something to happen.

Over the Top:
Very excessive.

P

Pass The Buck:
Avoid responsibility by giving it to someone else.

Pedal to the metal:
To go full speed, especially while driving a vehicle.

Peeping Tom:
Someone who observes people in the nude or sexually active people, mainly for his own gratification.

Pick up your ears:
To listen very carefully.

Pig In A Poke:
A deal that is made without first examining it.

Pig Out :
To eat a lot and eat it quickly.

Pipe Down:
To shut-up or be quiet.

Practice Makes Perfect:
By constantly practicing, you will become better.

Pull the plug:
To stop something. To bring something to an end.

Pulling Your Leg:
Tricking someone as a joke.

Put a sock in it:
To tell a noisy person or a group to be quiet.

Q

Queer the pitch:
Destroy or ruin a plan.

R

Raincheck:

An offer or deal that is declined right now but willing to accept later.

Raining Cats and Dogs:

A very loud and noisy rain storm.

Ring Fencing:

Separated usual judgement to guarantee protection, especially project funds.

Rise and Shine:

Time to get out of bed and get ready for work/school.

Rome Was Not Built In One Day:

If you want something to be completely properly, then its going to take time.

Rule Of Thumb:

A rough estimate.

Run out of steam:

To be completely out of energy.

S

Saved By The Bell:

Saved at the last possible moment.

Scapegoat:

Someone else who takes the blame.

Scot-free:

To escape and not have to pay.

Sick As A Dog:

To be very sick (with the flu or a cold).

Sitting Shotgun:

Riding in the front passenger seat of a car.

Sixth Sense:

A paranormal sense that allows you to communicate with the dead.

Skid Row:

The rundown area of a city where the homeless and drug users live.

Smell A Rat:

To detect someone in the group is betraying the others.

Smell Something Fishy:

Detecting that something isn't right and there might be a reason for it.

Son of a Gun:

A scamp.

Southpaw:

Someone who is left-handed.

Spitting Image:

The exact likeness or kind.

Start From Scratch:

To do it all over again from the beginning.

T

The Ball Is In Your Court:

It is your decision this time.

The Best Of Both Worlds:

There are two choices and you have them both.

The Bigger They Are The Harder They Fall:

While the bigger and stronger opponent might be a lot more difficult to beat, when you do they suffer a much bigger loss.

The Last Straw:

When one small burden after another creates an unbearable situation, the last straw is the last small burden that one can take.

The Whole Nine Yards:

Everything. All of it.

Third times a charm:

After no success the first two times, the third try is a lucky one.

Tie the knot:

To get married.

Til the cows come home:

A long time.

To Make A Long Story Short:

Something someone would say during a long and boring story in order to keep his/her audience from losing attention. Usually the story isn't shortened.

To Steal Someone's Thunder:

To take the credit for something someone else did.

Tongue-in-cheek:

humor, not to be taken serious.

Turn A Blind Eye:

Refuse to acknowledge something you know is real or legit.

Twenty three skidoo:

To be turned away.

U

Under the weather:

Feeling ill or sick.

Up a blind alley:

Going down a course of action that leads to a bad outcome.

Use Your Loaf:

Use your head. Think smart.

V

Van Gogh's ear for music:

Tone deaf.

Variety Is The Spice Of Life:

The more experiences you try the more exciting life can be.

W

Wag the Dog:

A diversion away from something of greater importance.

Water Under The Bridge:

Anything from the past that isn't significant or important anymore.

Wear Your Heart On Your Sleeve:

To openly and freely express your emotions.

When It Rains, It Pours:

Since it rarely rains, when it does it will be a huge storm.

When Pigs Fly :

Something that will never ever happen.

Wild and Woolly:

Uncultured and without laws.

Wine and Dine:

When somebody is treated to an expensive meal.

Without A Doubt:

For certain.

X

X marks the spot:

A phrase that is said when someone finds something he/she has been looking for.

Y

You Are What You Eat:

In order to stay healthy you must eat healthy foods.

You Can't Judge A Book By Its Cover:

Decisions shouldn't be made primarily on appearance.

You Can't Take it With You:

Enjoy what you have and not what you don't have, since when you die you cannot take things (such as money) with you.

Your Guess Is As Good As Mine:

I have no idea.

Z

Zero Tolerance:

No crime or law breaking big or small will be overlooked.

