

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

UNDERSTANDING IDIOMS

- A comparison of Finnish third grade students of national senior secondary school and IB Diploma Programme

A Pro Gradu Thesis in English

by

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2006

HUMANISTINEN TIEDEKUNTA
KIELTEN LAITOS

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Pro Gradu -tutkielma

Englannin kieli

Helmikuu 2006

89 sivua + 3 liitettä

Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää ymmärtävätkö suomalaiset lukion 3.vuosikurssin opiskelijat eli abiturientit englannin kielen idiomeja ja kuinka heidän taustansa vaikuttaa ymmärtämiseen. Työssä vertaillaan kansallisen lukion opiskelijoita opiskelijoihin, jotka ovat suorittaneet kansainvälistä IB -tutkintoa. Tarkoituksena on lisäksi katsoa, onko osa idiomeista selvästi helpompia tai vaikeampia kuin toiset. Tutkimuksessa on osittain pyritty toistamaan aiempi Mäntylän (2004) idiomitutkimus. Tuloksia verrataan aiempaan tutkimukseen.

Idiomien ymmärtämistä testattiin kyselylomakkeella, jonka ensimmäinen osa selvitti opiskelijoiden taustaa: oleskelu englanninkielisessä ympäristössä, harrastuneisuus vapaa-ajalla sekä yhteydet syntyperäisiin puhujiin. Idiomiosassa 20 idiomia esitettiin lyhyissä autenttisissa konteksteissa, jota seurasi monivalintatehtävä, jossa opiskelijoiden piti valita kolmesta vaihtoehdosta sopivin. 115 abiturienttia kolmesta eri lukiosta ja kaupungista osallistui tutkimukseen: 73 kansallisen lukion ja 42 IB -opiskelijaa.

Suomalaiset abiturientit ymmärtävät englannin idiomeja erittäin hyvin. Keskimäärin he saivat 71 % idiomeista oikein, mutta IB -opiskelijat suoriutuivat huomattavasti paremmin kuin kansallisen lukion. Osa idiomeista oli selvästi helpompia ja toiset taas vaikeampia. Kaikkien osallistujien osalta kahdeksaa idiomia voitiin pitää helppoina ja kolmea vaikeana. IB-opiskelijoille helppoja idiomeja oli kuitenkin 13, kun taas kansallisen lukion opiskelijoille vain seitsemän. Molemmille vaikeita oli kolme. Osallistujaryhmät myös pitivät eri idiomeja helpoimpina ja vaikeimpina. Viiden idiomien kohdalla IB- ja kansallisen lukion opiskelijoiden vastaukset erosivat merkittävästi. Kaikissa näissä IB -opiskelijat vastasivat huomattavasti paremmin. Oleskelu englanninkielisessä ympäristössä, yhteydet syntyperäisiin puhujiin sekä lukeminen englannin kielellä yli neljä tuntia viikossa vaikuttivat positiivisesti idiomien ymmärtämiseen. Myös idiomien esittäminen lyhyissä esimerkkilauseissa kontekstin puuttumisen sijaan auttoi ymmärtämistä.

Abiturientit osaavat päätellä idiomien merkityksen kontekstista hyvin, mutta idiomien opetukseen tulisi kiinnittää huomiota, sillä ne mainitaan uudessa opetussuunnitelmassa ensimmäistä kertaa. Vaikka idiomit ovat vain pieni osa kielitaitoa, on sujuva puhuminen ja kirjoittaminen erittäin vaikeaa ilman niitä.

Asiasanat: idioms, idiom comprehension, second language learning, senior secondary school, International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

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1. INTRODUCTION

Idioms are an interesting phenomenon in languages. A meaning of an idiom is not a sum of its literal parts and often it does not have equivalents in other languages. Thus, idioms can be very difficult for foreign language learners. This study examines how well Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school recognise and understand meanings of English idioms. There is clearly a need to study idioms from the point of view of second language learning since most of the studies on English idioms have concentrated on how native speakers understand them. There are few studies on idioms in foreign language learning and even fewer considering Finnish learners of English.

In the present study I investigate whether Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms and if some idioms are easier or more difficult than others. I also examine if third grade students who attend the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB) understand the meanings of idioms better than third grade students who study according to the national curriculum. I am also interested in seeing how the background of the students, such as residence in an English speaking environment for a longer period of time and involvement with the language in leisure time, affects the understanding.

Mäntylä (2004) is one of the few who have studied how Finnish speakers of English understand idioms. In her doctoral dissertation *Idioms and Language Users: The effect of the characteristics of idioms on their recognition and interpretation by native and non-native speakers of English* she studied the acceptability of different meanings of idioms, the effect of context and the recognition of idioms. Mäntylä's study has inspired the present study since I have similar interests with her. The point of view of the present study is, however, different. Mäntylä studied the effect of the characteristics of idioms on their recognition and interpretation. I am interested in seeing if Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand English idioms and

whether their understanding is influenced by selected aspects of their background or not.

Thus, the research questions of the present study are: Do Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms?, Do third grade students who attend the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme understand idioms better than other third grade students of senior secondary school?, Are some idioms more easy or difficult than others? and Does the background of the students affect the understanding of idioms? Further aims are to look at if the results confirm previous studies and discuss the effect of methodological choices on the results.

This is a quantitative study and the data was collected with a questionnaire. The participants of the study were 115 Finnish third grade students of senior secondary schools, 73 from national senior secondary school classes and 42 from the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme classes. The questionnaire had two parts: background and idioms. The purpose of the background questionnaire was to find out if students had spent time in English speaking environments and how much they were exposed to the English language in their spare time as well as to inquire about students' contacts with native speakers.

The idiom questionnaire was adapted from the third part of Mäntylä's (2004) questionnaire that concerned the recognition of idioms. The questionnaire was a forced multiple-choice test where 20 idioms of English were tested. Mäntylä's questionnaire was altered to suit the purposes of this study. 20 of Mäntylä's 45 idioms were selected and three alternatives were given with only one correct meaning. Furthermore, the idioms in this questionnaire were presented within a brief context of how they can be used in clauses whereas Mäntylä had no context. Thus, there was also a methodological aim in the study. If the participants in the present study are more familiar with English idioms than fourth year university students of English in Mäntylä's study, it does not necessarily mean that they have better skills in English but shows the importance of context for understanding.

The field of research is the study of vocabulary and idioms. The study is also partially in the field of second language learning since the participants of the study were second language learners. The role and significance of idioms in second language learning as well as the difficulties of learning and teaching them are considered. The present study provides some information on the command of English idioms Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school have and discusses whether more attention should be paid to idioms in second language teaching. After all, idioms are an important part of everyday language.

Before reporting on the results of the questionnaire, previous studies on idioms are introduced and the definition that is used in the present study is given. The theories and studies on idiom comprehension are also presented. Foreign language learning is discussed in the context of learning vocabulary and idioms and the language skills that are required from the participants are also taken into consideration. The curricula of both Finnish senior secondary school and International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme are also looked at. Furthermore, the results of previous research by Mäntylä (2004) are reported and the methodology of the present study is discussed in detail. The introduction of results is followed by a thorough discussion.

2. IDIOMS

Idioms are a fascinating phenomenon in language and the interest in them has a long tradition (Cacciari and Tabossi 1993: xi). Johnson-Laird (1993: ix-x) describes idioms as mysterious and “the poetry of daily discourse”. Levorato (1993: 126) adds that the reason why they are so intriguing is that they engage imagination, can transform abstract meanings into more concrete ones and enrich the meaning of simple concepts. Idiomatic expressions are not a restricted part of the language of popular culture but they exist in every area of human communication (Levorato: 1993:126). They are pervasive, which

emphasises even more their importance in language. Spontaneous speech becomes difficult without the use of idiomatic language. (Johnson- Laird 1993: x)

The focus in idiom studies has ranged from form and frozenness to metaphoricity and the degree of literalness, i.e. from idiom structure to idiom meaning (Mäntylä 2004: 26). Different approaches and the different features of idioms have added to the complexity of the term. According to Cacciari and Tabossi (1993: xiii) the difficulties in characterizing idioms is one of the reasons why idioms have attained fairly little attention even though their relevance is unquestionable. Idioms are illogical and frustrating features of discourse since their meanings do not depend on the meanings of their parts and the syntactic relations of those parts (Johnson-Laird 1993: vii).

2.1 The complex nature of idioms

Idiom studies have a long tradition in the former Soviet Union and Russia but in the West idioms have not gained any greater attention until recently despite some studies published in the 1960s and 1970s (Mäntylä 2004: 48). In spite of the increased number of studies on idioms, scholars have not been able to agree on definition of the term. However, what is agreed on is that idioms are very difficult to characterize and as Mäntylä (2004: 36) points out, it is impossible to define them in an indisputable way.

To make the matter even more complicated, one also has to distinguish idioms from idiomaticity. Fernando (1996: 30) argues that idioms and idiomaticity are not identical despite their close relations. All idioms naturally indicate idiomaticity but all word combinations that show idiomaticity are not idioms. Fernando (1996: 30) gives examples of word combinations, such as catch a bus/ a tram and black/strong coffee, which indicate idiomaticity but are not idioms since they are quite unrestricted in their variants. The components of idioms cannot be changed or they can be changed only within limitations.

Thus, the required features of idioms should be looked at to understand better their complex nature.

Mäntylä (2004: 26) thinks that the character, range of literalness and figurativeness as well as the relationship between them appears to be the main point with idioms. This is the case since it is difficult to define the relationship of idioms to other metaphorical and multi-word expressions. However, Mäntylä (2004: 26) points out that there are also other features of idioms that have been considered, such as their structure. The definition of the term has depended on which feature is emphasized. Some characteristics of idioms are more important than others but there must be many features involved in order to call an expression an idiom (Mäntylä 2004: 28).

Fernando (1996: 3) lists three features that are commonly brought up with idioms: compositeness, institutionalization and semantic opacity. Compositeness means that idioms consist of more than one word, i.e. they are multiword expressions. Institutionalization denotes that idioms are the end product of 'ad hoc' expressions which have conventionalized and, therefore, idioms are conventionalized expressions. Semantic opacity stands for non-literal features of idioms. The meanings of idioms are not the sum of their literal parts. However, Fernando (1996:3) admits that these three characteristics occur very commonly in many types of multiword expressions. It means that also such expressions as collocations, proverbs and similes can be categorized as idioms. Thus, there must be also other features that distinguish idioms from other similar expressions.

Mäntylä (2004: 28-35) discusses five features that are generally considered when characterizing idioms. They are metaphoricity/figurativeness (they are used as synonyms), analysability/non-compositionality, fixedness of form, level of formality and multi-word expressions. Metaphoricity is regarded as an essential feature of an idiom and it is also the most commonly mentioned one. Non-compositionality is seen as an indication that idioms are dead, i.e. their meanings are arbitrary and not figurative. Fixedness of form, on the other hand, means that idioms do not tolerate any variation in their structure, they are

frozen. The level of formality is connected to idioms in the sense that they are considered to belong to informal, spoken language rather than to formal, written language. Finally, idioms involve more than one word and, therefore, they are multi-word expressions.

However, Mäntylä (2004: 28-35) challenges these views. The five features mentioned above are reviewed on the basis of other idiom studies and each characteristic is critically considered as well as their significance in defining idioms. According to Mäntylä (2004: 28) idioms are no longer seen as merely dead, frozen metaphors. There are several idioms that are not dead or frozen. The connection between metaphoricity and the origins of an idiom can be detected and idioms, in fact, tolerate variations. Nevertheless, if idioms are not arbitrary but they perform as single arbitrary words, it adds to the complexity of these expressions (Mäntylä 2004: 27). Despite this, idioms are more comprehensible if fixed notions about idiom features are put aside and their figurativeness is acknowledged. All in all, Mäntylä (2004: 35) remarks that instead of the importance or degree of any single feature, idiom should consist of the combination of these features. None of the features mentioned above is alone enough to label an expression as an idiom.

Idioms have been studied from several different perspectives. The focus of the studies has also affected how the term has been defined. Mäntylä (2004: 48) introduces five different approaches linguists have taken to idioms:

1. the structure of an idiom and its variations and transformations
2. the processing and storing of idioms
3. the metaphoricity of idioms
4. teaching, learning and understanding idioms
5. idioms within the wider perspective of idiomatic language, and the functions of idioms.

All the approaches represent a certain period of time and reflect the linguistic thinking of the time. The definition has depended on the feature of idioms that has been considered the most significant one. For the purposes of the present study I will not look at all the approaches since Mäntylä (2004), Strässler (1982) and Fernando (1996) provide excellent reviews on the wide area of

idioms studies. Mäntylä (2004) considers all the different approaches in idiom studies from the 1960s to the 1990s. Strässler (1982) also reviews major idiom studies from 1960s to 1970s and takes a pragmatic view on idioms himself. Fernando (1996) introduces a review of works on idioms from two points of view, focusing on lexically and grammatically regular idioms and the idiosyncrasies of English. Furthermore, Cacciari and Tabossi (1993) present a wide collection of articles on smaller studies.

In the present study I will concentrate on idiom studies involving the structure of idioms as well as on studies dealing with the teaching, learning and understanding idioms since I study how Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms. I will introduce some major, or even “classical”, studies on idioms by Weinreich (1969), Fraser (1970) and a more recent one by Fernando (1996). More importantly than only providing a definition for the term, these studies present different viewpoints on idioms. Previous studies on idiom comprehension and teaching and learning of idioms will be discussed in detail in chapters three and four.

2.2. Some definitions on idioms

It seems that one cannot write about idioms without mentioning Uriel Weinreich’s (1969) study “*Problems in the Analysis of Idioms*”. He (1969: 25) begins his analysis by stating two problems one has to face when identifying idiomaticity. The first problem is to distinguish idioms from non-idiomatic expressions and the second is to find out if idioms can be broken up into non-idiomatic constituents. His approach is very analytic as well as formal and he presents several different formulas. He (ibid: 40) summarizes the long analysis by writing that, in contrast to non-idiomatic expressions, the semantic structure of idioms is “an extreme example of contextual semantic specialization, defined by a cluster of characteristics that also occur separately”. Later on, he reveals his definition for idioms. According to Weinreich (1969: 42) an idiom is a phraseological unit which has at least two polysemous constituents, and in

which there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsenses. This seems to be a very complex definition and it requires some clarification.

First of all, according to Fernando (1996: 6) Weinreich calls multi-word expressions phraseological units. Weinreich (1969: 42) himself clarifies the definition of an idiom with an example. There are three ways of reading the expression *red herring*. One way is to understand it literally, a fish coloured the colour of red. Another way to interpret the expression is to select the subsense of red, a fish smoked and cured with saltpeter. Finally, the third way of interpreting the expression is to see it as an idiom that can be paraphrased as “phony issue”. All in all, Weinreich provides a definition for the term but does not by any means try to fix all multi-word expressions into the category of idiom. He is very thorough in his analysis and discusses the problems in defining idioms but his work is “highly formal” as Fernando (1996: 6) points out. Thus, Weinreich’s definition is not really useful for the present study since it concentrates too much on form instead of meaning.

Another distinguished scholar Fraser (1970) studied idioms in the framework of transformational grammar. He had two problems he wanted to look at more closely. First, how the meanings of idioms can be represented in the deep structure of a sentence and, second, how idioms can be expected to undergo particular syntactic transformations. However, he seems to take the definition of an idiom for granted since he only states it at the beginning of his article:

“...a constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed.”
(Fraser 1970: 22)

Fraser (1970: 27) comes to the conclusion that idioms have the same deep structure analysis as their literal counterparts. Nevertheless, according to Fraser (ibid: 34) idioms behave differently despite what could be expected on the basis of their structure. English idioms vary widely with regard to how frozen they are and how much they tolerate various syntactic transformations. Fraser (1970: 33) also specifies the definition he provides earlier in his study. He claims that different parts of the idiom have not preserved their literal interpretations within the idiom. The different parts of the idiom do not

advance the semantic interpretation of the expression after the idiom is constructed.

Fraser (1970: 39) concludes his discussion of idioms by introducing a Frozenness Hierarchy for idioms:

- L6 - Unrestricted
- L5 – Reconstitution (the action nominalization)
- L4 – Extraction (passive transformation)
- L3 – Permutation (particle movement)
- L2 – Insertion (indirect object movement)
- L1 – Adjunction (gerund nominalization)
- LØ – Completely Frozen

The hierarchy describes a set of features that indicate what linguistic operations an idiom will undergo. These operations are adjunction or insertion of some non-idiomatic constituent to the idiom, permutation of some two successive constituents of the idiom, extraction of some constituent of the idiom to some extra-idiom position in the sentence and reconstitution of the idiom into another constituent structure organization (Fraser 1970: 36-37).

The level L6 of the hierarchy allows any, i.e. unrestricted, operations and, therefore, no idioms belong to this particular level. The level LØ, on the other hand, does not allow any operations and idioms analysed as belonging to this particular level are completely frozen and literally uninterpretable. The idiom is syntactically less frozen when it is higher up in the hierarchy. As an idiom belongs to one level of the hierarchy, it means that they automatically belong to any lower level of the hierarchy. Fraser (1970: 39) presents an example of an idiom, *pass the buck* which belongs to level L5. It allows any reconstitution operation as well as operations of extraction and permutation whereas *blow off some steam* belongs to level L1 and it does not allow any other operations besides adjunction. (Fraser 1970: 39, 42)

Weinreich's (1969) and Fraser's (1970) work is respected and well-known in the area of idiom studies. There were also other significant studies on idiom structure during the 1970's, see for example Makkai (1972) and Newmeyer (1974). However, the intention is also to examine studies on idioms published later than 1970's. From the idioms studies published in 1990's I will

investigate Fernando's (1996) work in this chapter since her study represents a new kind of approach to idioms and the definition is not determined by structure.

Fernando's (1996: 38) definition of idioms is quite broad: "conventionalized multi-word expressions often, but not always, non-literal." According to her the basis of idiomaticity is the habitual co-occurrence of specific words which leads to the formation of different kinds of idioms and habitual collocations. Nevertheless, Fernando (1996: 30-31) distinguishes both idioms and idiomaticity as well as idioms and habitual collocations. All word combinations indicating idiomaticity are not idioms and idioms and habitual collocations are related, and yet, two different lexical types. Idioms require a specific order and lexical form, or at least they can vary only within certain restrictions, and they are conventionally established in this form.

Despite the broad definition of an idiom, Fernando (1996: 32) separates idioms and habitual collocations more closely in their own categories. As indicated by Fernando (ibid: 32, 35-36) idioms have three sub-classes: pure idioms, semi-idioms and literal idioms. Pure idioms are multi-word expressions that are non-literal and conventionalized. Within pure idioms Fernando (1996: 31-2) differentiates the ones that are non-literal and invariant from the ones that have restricted variance. Semi-idioms are expressions that have at least one constituent that has a non-literal subsense as well as one or more literal constituents. The constituents that have the non-literal subsense usually have it only when they occur in that specific relation. Semi-idioms are also either invariant in their form or they allow restricted variances in the structure. Literal idioms are semantically less complicated than pure and semi-idioms. They are mostly sayings, such as *a merry Christmas and a happy New Year*, and they encounter one important feature of idioms. They are invariant or have restricted variance.

Fernando (1996: 37) admits that the categorization she makes is unclear. The division between pure idioms, semi-idioms, literal idioms and collocations is difficult to make. The terminology is overlapping at least with semi-idioms and

restricted collocations (Cowie 1981 as cited in Fernando 1996: 37). Moreover, Fernando (1996: 70-74) categorizes pure, semi-, literal idioms and collocations in 12 different degrees of lexical variance as well as presents a functional categorization which is divided into ideational, interpersonal and relational functions. This categorization is drawn from Halliday's (1985: 321-345) functional grammar where metaphorical modes of expressions are dealt with under the headings of ideational and interpersonal metaphors. However, as Mäntylä (2004: 27) points out, it is impossible and unnecessary to combine all the significant features of idioms into one single categorization system even though Fernando has tried to accomplish it. Fernando's definition is too broad and confusing for the present study.

2.3 The definition of idiom in the present study

The present study is an attempt to replicate Mäntylä's (2004) study to some extent. Since I use part of Mäntylä's questionnaire, the definition of idiom used in this study is adapted from Mäntylä (2004: 37):

“an idiom is an expression that contains more than one word, and whose meaning is different from the sum of the literal meanings of its components.”

Nevertheless, she excludes proverbs, sayings and conversational phrases from the definition. She argues that despite the fact that they are multi-word expressions with non-literal meanings, they also belong to a category of their own on the basis of their function. According to Mäntylä (2004: 37) proverbs often have some additional meaning or their purpose can be to teach a lesson being culturally attached. Proverbs are used to have a particular effect on the speech of participants. Sayings, on the other hand, are close to idioms but usually they are not figurative. Conversational phrases are also usually more literal than metaphorical and they serve a special interactional function. However, Mäntylä (2004: 37) admits that there is vagueness in the boundaries between different multi-word expressions.

Mäntylä's (2004) definition is very carefully considered in the sense that she has come to it after pondering different characteristics and their significance in

idiom definition. Mäntylä (2004: 37) thinks that the focus should be on the meaning of the whole expression rather than on the structure when considering idioms. I agree with this claim since I study how Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms. I am not investigating if they know certain kind of idioms better or worse but their understanding of the idioms they may encounter in general. The meanings of idioms rather than their structure is much more essential and important in the present study. Thus, it would not make any sense to use a very strict definition of an idiom based on structure since it would not serve the purposes of this study. Furthermore, the idioms that were chosen to be tested in the idiom questionnaire are from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995) which also defines idioms very loosely. The editors of the dictionary state that "an idiom is a special kind of phrase. It is a group of words which have a different meaning when used together from the one it would have if the meaning of each word were taken literally." However, the editors also emphasise that idioms are metaphorical and they have left out of the dictionary fixed expressions, phrasal verbs, greetings and fixed formulae.

Mäntylä (2004: 38) also points out that the metaphorical or figurative nature of idioms is the feature that is most commonly shared by different definitions. Idioms differ in form and structure a great deal and there are no rules which explain idiom structure. No single feature, such as invariable structure or vocabulary, or lack of it is enough to label an expression as an idiom. Thus, it makes sense to emphasise the meaning of the expression rather than form in defining idioms. Another vaguely shared view about idioms among scholars, according to Mäntylä (2004: 38) is that their significance in language is acknowledged, which has resulted in addition of idioms in second language teaching materials, for example.

3. THE COMPREHENSION OF IDIOMS

Most studies on idiom comprehension have not bothered with the definition of the term as such and have taken the term for granted (Mäntylä 2004: 36). They have concentrated on the psycholinguistic process of how idioms are stored in the mind. The views on idiom comprehension have varied as well as the terminology. Glucksberg (1993: 4) has divided the main theories into two models, a direct look-up and a compositional model. A direct look-up model assumes that idioms are understood by memory retrieval and not by linguistic processing. Glucksberg (1993: 4) considers that Bobrow and Bell (1973), Swinney and Cutler (1979) as well as Gibbs (1980) to some extent represent a direct look-up view. However, he (*ibid*: 5) points out that later on Gibbs' (1992, 1993) views have evolved more in the direction of the compositional model. In the compositional model idioms are not considered arbitrary and they are comprehended through normal linguistic processing with the help of pragmatic interpretation in discourse contexts. Gluckberg (1993: 6) regards Cacciari and Tabossi (1988) as representatives of this model and also thinks that their hypothesis corresponds most likely with idiom processing as it has been studied so far.

These major views on idiom comprehension as well as some factors that seem to have an effect on the comprehension process are introduced next. These theories or models represent the broad outline of idiom comprehension study. The focus is on the results and theories scholars have developed on the basis of them, not in the methods they have used. The study methods are discussed in connection with the factors that may affect the comprehension process.

3.1 Different views on idiom comprehension

One of the first studies on the comprehension of idioms was Bobrow and Bell's (1973). They claimed that there are two distinct processing models, one for idiomatic and another for literal sentences. They based their hypothesis on Quillian's (1968 as cited in Bobrow and Bell 1973: 343) notion that idioms

seem to be processed as a single word whereas literal expressions involve the processing of the meaning of each word in order to understand the whole expression.

Bobrow and Bell (1973: 344-345) performed experiments where sentences were introduced in literal or idiomatic sets or with no set. The first sentences were clearly idiomatic or literal in their meaning and the last sentence was an ambiguous test sentence with both idiomatic and literal meaning. The participants were given two explanations for each sentence and they were asked to report which meaning they thought of first with the test sentence. Bobrow and Bell (1973: 344) expected that the idiomatic set would increase the probability of participants responding on the idiomatic meaning first and vice versa. They did the experiments first using idiomatic sentences that were highly biased in their idiomatic meaning, i.e. the participants reported they saw the idiomatic meaning of the sentence first in a no set condition that was neither idiomatic nor literal. Thus, it would be difficult to increase this bias with idiom set condition. They did the second experiment with idioms that were judged as being poorly biased towards the idiomatic meaning in a no set condition.

The results showed that highly biased idioms in the literal set decreased the number of participants who reported seeing the idiomatic meaning first and less biased idioms in the idiom set increased that number. As a result of the two experiments Bobrow and Bell (1973: 346) came to a conclusion that there are two distinct strategies for processing idiomatic and literal expressions, one processing mode is used for idiomatic ambiguities and another for literal. In the experiment the participants were induced to employ either of the processing modes by using appropriate set condition. Nevertheless, Bobrow and Bell (1973: 346) admit that there has to be more research done to identify more closely the variables that affect the choice of processing model.

Later on the Bobrow and Bell's (1973) claims have been criticized and rejected. Swinney and Cutler (1979: 526) call Bobrow and Bell's model for idiom comprehension "the idiom list hypothesis" and strongly criticise it. They

think that it is not unexpected that people choose the appropriate meaning in a biased context. However, they do not consider it evidence for two separate processing systems. Swinney and Cutler's (1979: 525) own model is labelled "the lexical representation hypothesis" which means that idioms are stored in the lexicon the same way as other words. Swinney and Cutler (ibid: 527-531) performed an experiment where participants were presented a string of words and asked to decide whether it was an acceptable phrase in English or not, while their reaction times were measured.

Swinney and Cutler's (1979) results were consistent with the model they presented. The grammatical English idioms were judged as acceptable more quickly than matched control phrases. Idiom meaning is understood faster since the processing of the relationships between individual words in literal phrases takes time. Furthermore, Swinney and Cutler (1979: 526) claim that there cannot be any separate processing model for idioms or "a special idiom list" since in that case the decision making would require longer or at least the same time as with literal phrases. According to Swinney and Cutler (1979: 528, 533) idioms are lexical items in the memory and instead of some "special processing" they can be considered to be within "normal processing" as long as one is aware of what a normal system does.

Raymond Gibbs Jr. (e.g. 1980, 1985, 1992) has had a major influence in the field of idiom comprehension studies. His work has been very important and ground breaking. In one of his earlier studies Gibbs (1980: 149) argues that the question of idiom comprehension is more about the conventionality of expressions than their literacy or metaphoricity. He (1980: 149-155) studied how conventional and unconventional uses of idioms are understood and remembered. The target sentences were introduced with idiomatic, literal or no context and reaction times were measured. The idioms in this study had both literal as well as idiomatic meaning. The participants needed more time to comprehend the literal meanings of idioms than idiomatic meanings.

According to Gibbs (1980: 152) it is an indication that the comprehension of idioms depends on the conventionality of the sentence rather than on

metaphoricity. It is easier to understand idioms idiomatically than literally since they are conventionally used in their idiomatic meanings. Gibbs (1980: 152- 153) also detected that people remembered the literal uses of idioms better when they were read stories and asked to recall them as well as write down what they remembered twenty-four hours later. He (1980: 153) talks about “double-take”. It means that when an unconventional use of idiom is heard, one tries to analyze it according to its conventional use. If it does not fit the context, one resorts to the unconventional use of idiom, i.e. the literal meaning. The conventional uses of idioms are understood faster since they are also processed more quickly, whereas unconventional uses are recalled better since their processing takes more time. Thus, people understand the meanings of idioms without first resorting to their literal meanings (Gibbs 1985: 466).

All in all, the point Gibbs (1985: 465-466, 470) makes is that idiom comprehension is a much more complicated matter than Swinney and Cutler’s (1979) “lexical representation hypothesis” suggests. The literal meanings of idioms are not assessed at the same time as their idiomatic meanings but idiomatic meanings are understood more or less directly. Gibbs (1985: 466) considers that this is the case since many idioms do not have precise literal meanings. Gibbs (1992: 494) claims that idioms have different and more exact meanings than their literal counterparts. The literal paraphrase “to get very angry” is not as accurate and complex in its meaning as idiomatic expression “to blow your stack” (Gibbs 1992: 504). Gibbs (1993: 58) has also criticized other scholars for confusing conventional idioms with dead metaphors. He (1992: 485) strongly feels that “idioms have complex figurative interpretations that are not arbitrarily determined”. Idioms are not arbitrary, dead metaphors since the conceptual metaphors of everyday thought and reasoning stimulate the meanings of some idioms (Gibbs 1992: 504). Furthermore, people are not aware of the origins of idioms and, therefore, it is thought that they are understood similarly as words (Gibbs 1993: 58). Gibbs (ibid: 58) admits that the use of idioms is a matter of convention. People have learnt their meanings without knowing where they originate from. However, it does not mean that idioms with highly conventionalized meanings are metaphorically dead (Gibbs 1993: 60).

Cacciari and Tabossi (1988: 668-669) consider both Swinney and Cutler's (1979) "lexical representation hypothesis" as well as Gibbs' (1980, 1986) earlier views on idiom comprehension ambiguous. They (1988: 678) present an alternative hypothesis since their results did not support either of the prior theories. They measured the participants' mean reaction times to target words and standard deviations for lexical decisions. The target words were associated with the meaning of idiom, the last word in the string of words or an unrelated word, i.e. idiom, literal and control target. Cacciari and Tabossi (1988: 677) discovered that there was a difference with predictable and unpredictable idioms. In the case of predictable idioms the appearance of the last word of the string activated only the idiomatic meaning whereas with unpredictable idioms only the literal meaning was motivated until later when both meanings were realised.

On the basis of these results, Cacciari and Tabossi (1988: 678) suggested an alternative hypothesis for idiom comprehension. Idioms do not exist distinct in the mental lexicon. Their meanings are tied to certain strings of words and the meanings are recognised after the sufficient input of the string is provided. Cacciari and Tabossi (1988: 678) talk about "the key" of the string of words. The idiom string cannot be identified until the key is accessed from the mental lexicon and, therefore, the processing of idiomatic string is literal until the activation of its key. Furthermore, Cacciari and Tabossi (1988: 679) consider that words in the lexicon are only in one form and they are not assessed as either literal or idiomatic. For idioms that have both literal and idiomatic meaning, comprehension depends on how early or late the idiomatic construction is accessible. Thus, idioms are treated like any other strings and the idiomatic configuration is activated despite the position of the key.

Cacciari and Tabossi (1988: 679, 680) admit that their hypothesis is incomplete and tentative. The notion of key is referred to as if it was a single word and there could be only one of them in each idiomatic string. They justify this claim by stating that these assumptions about the key were made for the benefit of simplicity and they are not necessarily true in general. Idioms can become

identifiable after a preposition, an article, more than one word and so on. Cacciari and Tabossi (1988: 680) claim that this hypothesis was presented since their data could not be explained with other idiom comprehension models but it needs further investigation.

However, Cacciari and Tabossi's (1988) hypothesis has not been totally rejected. Flores d'Arcais' (1993: 97) main findings were that unfamiliar idioms require additional processing whereas highly familiar idioms are understood easily. He (1993: 97) also found out that even though familiar idiomatic phrases should be recognised only after a few words, they are processed like any other linguistic strings. The input is processed through a full syntactic analysis. This finding is consistent with Cacciari and Tabossi's (1988) hypothesis. Tabossi and Zardon (1993: 153-154) also came to the conclusion that the notion of key has a significant part in determining the idiomatic meaning. Their findings also argue with the view that idioms would be processed as long words since the meaning of an idiom is activated only after sufficient input and not right after emergence of it.

The way we process idioms is not the only thing that affects their understanding. There are several factors affecting the interpretation process. The effects of familiarity and transparency of idioms as well as the role of context and choice of method are examined next.

3.2 Familiarity and transparency

Cronk and Schweigert (1992) have pondered the effects of familiarity, literalness and usage on the comprehension process. They studied the relationship between familiarity and the idioms' figurative and literal meaning. Cronk and Schweigert measured with computer the reading times as the participants read sentences with idiomatic expressions. Their results confirm that the comprehension is reliant both on literalness as well as on familiarity. On the other hand, Cronk and Schweigert (1992: 138) were surprised that familiarity had an effect only on idioms' figurative use and idioms that are

rated high in literalness were understood faster than idioms with low-literalness ratings. Thus, idioms that are unfamiliar and have low ratings in literalness cause most problems in interpretation. Cronk and Schweigert's (1992: 139) results verify that figurative meanings of idioms are processed more quickly than literal ones. However, they (ibid: 140) point out that their results are not consistent with Gibbs' (1980) theory since figurative meanings are not understood more rapidly in the case of less familiar idioms.

Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) have examined the effects of transparency and familiarity in idiom explanation. What is interesting in their study is that their participants were children and adolescents aged 11, 14 and 17. Their results on 17 year-olds are particularly intriguing for the present study since the participants in this study were 18-19 years old. According to Nippold and Rudzinski (1993: 728) idioms vary significantly in their degree of difficulty for children and adolescents. They assume familiarity and transparency can explain these differences.

Nippold and Rudzinski (1993: 730-731) compared children and adolescents to adults on how they judged idioms' familiarity and transparency. Adolescents considered idioms less familiar and more transparent than adults, who in the particular study were university students. Nippold and Rudzinski (1993: 731) assume that high school students compared to university students judge idioms as less familiar since they have been less involved with such literate activities as reading and analysing the meanings of words. Moreover, since adolescents are also less familiar with idioms, they are more likely to resort to literal meanings of them when figuring out what the expression means. Thus, they see idioms as more transparent than adults.

Nippold and Rudzinski (1993: 731-736) also studied idiom explanation and in the task they employed, the participants were requested to explain idioms in their own words. They noticed that idiom explanation improves gradually during the ages between 11 and 17. In addition, they found that familiarity and transparency had a significant effect on comprehension. High-familiarity

idioms were commonly less problematic to explain than moderate or low familiarity idioms.

Nippold and Taylor (1995) replicated Nippold and Rudzinski's (1993) study but instead of using an explanation mode, they tested the same things by using a forced choice task. The results confirmed the previous study but the forced choice response model was more sensitive to both familiarity and transparency. Variation between high, moderate and low familiarity idioms was statistically significant whereas in the previous study this was not the case. Thus, also the choice of study method seems to affect the results. Nippold and Taylor (1995: 429-431) point out that explanation tasks are more demanding than forced choice tests but in the forced choice task participants performed better and their accuracy in the task exceeded the explanation task. However, the accuracy score did not exceed 90 %, even with the oldest participants, which speaks for the fact that the task was challenging enough. The use of forced choice test enabled the youth to show their precise knowledge of idioms since they could choose an accurate meaning for the idiom and they were not hindered by their limitations of performance, as in the explanation task (Nippold and Taylor 1995: 431).

Nevertheless, it is possible that the multiple choice tests overestimate the skills of children to comprehend idioms (Levorato 1993: 109-110). According to Nippold and Taylor (1995: 432) the way the forced choice test is constructed affects the results. Variables, such as the number of choices provided, their likelihood to occur in given context and the extent to which choices reflect the literal meanings of idioms, should be considered when designing a forced choice response mode. The present study also represents this mode of response. Nippold and Taylor's (1995: 429-431) remarks on how demanding explanation tasks are, even for native speakers, compared to forced choice tests, support the choice of method in the present study. Second language learners would most probably be at a disadvantage with idiom explanation task since their language skills are still insufficient. However, a forced choice task is not too easy for second language learners since Nippold and Taylor (1995) considered it challenging enough for native speakers. In addition, it is easier to study

difficulties in responses with forced choice tasks than in explanation tasks since according to Nippold and Taylor (1995: 430) forced choice tests increase participants' accuracy. All in all, Nippold and Taylor's (1995) study proves that familiarity and transparency of idioms are significant factors in idiom explanation in youth also in forced multiple choice tasks and, therefore, their effects on results are considered in the present study.

3.3 The role of context

The present study is an attempt to partially replicate Mäntylä's (2004) study of recognition and interpretation on idioms. Besides using the same idioms as Mäntylä, the present study also has a methodological aim. It is to investigate if comprehension of idioms improves when idioms are presented within a context. Whereas Mäntylä tested the recognition of idioms outside context, in the present study the examined idioms were presented within a brief context since also context plays a considerable role in idiom comprehension.

Levorato (1993) has studied the effects of context on the idiom comprehension process with children. Idioms were presented within a context as well as alone, outside a context. The idioms in the study had both literal and figurative meaning and, therefore, outside the context also literal meanings of idioms had to be considered as correct answers. Levorato (1993: 107) chose to conduct a multiple choice test since previous studies had indicated the difficulties children have with explaining the meaning of a sentence.

Levorato's (1993: 108) results showed that idiomatic answers were chosen within the context more often than outside context. The older children also selected idiomatic answers outside context more frequently than younger ones. The linguistic context in which an idiom is embedded seems to have an important part in the acquisition of the ability to comprehend idioms. It offers the needed semantic background. Levorato (1993: 108-109) repeated the test by using a context that induced the literal meaning of the idiom instead of the "idiomatic" context used in the first experiment. Once again the older children

chose more idiomatic answers and idiomatic answers within the context were more frequent than outside of it even though it enhanced the literal meaning. However, the answers which were neither literal nor idiomatic but reasonable for context, i.e. associate answers, were picked equally often with both literal and idiomatic context (Levorato 1993: 109). Levorato (ibid.) assumes that the younger children made these choices since they are not familiar with the use of context in the idiom comprehending process.

Levorato (1993: 113-115) also investigated the role of familiarity compared to the role of context. She noticed that familiarity increases the effect of context. Within literal contexts unfamiliar idioms are understood literally more often than familiar idioms. Thus, familiarity does have an effect even with context since it is easier for children to understand familiar idioms when they can associate the figurative meaning to some occasion they have already encountered.

Comprehension is not an “all-or-none” process (Levorato 1993: 106). It takes place in several different depths and levels relying on different factors such as the requirements of the task, previous knowledge and the ability to process language. Figurative competence is the result of linguistic development and only thoroughly competent speakers have acquired this skill (Levorato 1993: 104). Thus, it is interesting to look at the results Levorati (1993) has obtained with children since I consider second language learners to be on a quite comparable level with children who are learning their first, native language. Neither has acquired the language skills and competence of an adult native speaker. On the whole, according to Levorato (1993: 119) the acquisition of idioms demands complicated linguistic and cognitive skills. It requires more than merely passively learning conventional expressions.

3.4 Summary

The comprehension of idioms is not a simple matter. The views presented in this chapter indicate the different ways idioms can be seen. They reflect

different conceptions of idioms and most of all they mirror the time of their publication. Gibbs' work on idiom comprehension is a good example of the phenomenon. He has done research from the late 1970's, early 1980's onwards and his notions on the process of idiom interpretation have gradually changed along with the times. In 1993 he finally wrote:

“The complexity of idioms leave us, at present, with no other alternative than to embrace the plurality of theories that have been proposed to account for different aspects of idiomatic language.”

(Gibbs 1993: 75)

Gibbs (1993: 74) argues that the problem of theoretic models explaining idioms comprehension is that they assume there would be a single solution to this dilemma. The more the complexity of idioms is studied, the more obvious it becomes that no single theory or model takes account of all the possible forms of idioms or situations in which they occur. Thus, Gibbs (1993: 75) suggests that instead of some single processing procedure, various sources of information are assessed during the immediate understanding of what is meant with idiomatic phrases. Nevertheless, Gibbs (1993: 75) emphasises that the assumption that similar types of analyses come about whenever an idiom is encountered is false.

Familiarity, literalness and transparency of idioms as well as their context are interesting factors in the comprehension process since they may explain the differences between idioms also in the present study. When an idiom is clearly better or worse understood than others, along with students' background, these factors can affect comprehension. The role of context can also be seen when the results are compared to those of Mäntylä (2004). In addition, according to Levorato (1993: 112) multiple choice tasks are suitable when measuring independent variables, such as age or the informativeness of the context, whereas completion tasks tell more about the strategies employed in the comprehension process. The multiple choice test was chosen for the present study since the aim is to study included variables rather than strategies.

4. IDIOMS AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Idioms are fairly easy for native speakers. Johnson–Laird (1993: ix) describes idioms as riddles which cannot be constructed or interpreted in a conventional way. Still they are used without difficulty and even not knowing their special nature – unless one is not a native speaker. Idioms cause problems to second language learners since most of them do not have simple equivalents in another language which makes their teaching also problematic. How to teach expressions that mean something different than the sum of their constituents? However, it is impossible to speak naturally and fluently without the use of idiomatic expressions.

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992: xiii) see that language teaching for many years has concentrated on grammar. Instead of only knowing the language structure, language learners should understand how the language is really used. According to Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992: xv) language acquisition involves a stage where learners use “unanalyzed chunks of language in certain predictable social contexts”. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992: xv) call it ‘prefabricated’ language and previously it was seen as a separate and unimportant as well as tangential from the main body of language. However, as Nattinger and DeCarrico (*ibid.*) point out, formulaic speech has risen in more recent research in the focus of language learning. The increased interest in prefabricated language in linguistic theory has been mostly directed to idioms and their grammatical description as well as their position in regard to regular phrases (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992: 33).

4.1 Difficulties in learning and teaching idioms

Irujo (1986b: 236-238) has listed some reasons why idioms are so difficult for second language learners. First of all, the non-literalness of idioms is tricky since most idioms have literal counterparts. It is demanding for second language learners to discover which meaning is meant, the literal or idiomatic. This is the case in particular when the idiom is not familiar to the learner. In

comparison, native speakers usually know immediately which meaning is intended. Another problem is the lack of exposure to idioms. According to Irujo (1986b: 236) native speakers use simplified language avoiding idioms when talking to language learners. She (ibid: 237) points out that even though idioms are commonly used in television, it means learners get in touch with idioms in non-interactive situations. Learners do not have a possibility to ask what these expressions actually mean or get any feedback on their own usage, which brings us to the next problem. The correct use of idioms in appropriate situations in correct forms is extremely challenging for second language learners. The formality of idioms differs and many idioms have grammatical constraints. They can be used only in certain forms and they do not tolerate much variation. Furthermore, learners often try to resort to their native language when using idioms and it often leads to incorrect and comical expressions. Finally, Irujo (1986b: 237) lists the lack of sufficient teaching materials. Idioms in second language teaching materials are often ignored or treated as “other expressions” without an explanation of their character or usage. Irujo (1986b: 237) thinks that teachers should offer exercises on idioms since materials often poorly support the teaching of them.

Sornig (1988) draws attention to the fact that even native speakers are uncertain with the use of idioms and make mistakes. It is obvious that teaching such expressions to language learners is problematic. Thus, Sornig (1988: 285) states “whilst anything can be learned, not everything can be taught”. Idioms are so unique that no simple rule regarding them can be given. According to Sornig (1988: 285) the teaching of idioms should begin from the point of view of native speakers and how they learn to understand idioms. Idioms are impressive in a situational way and communicatively effective, which is why they are remembered. Sornig (1988: 286) argues that learning a language means that one learns to deal with communicative situations successfully. He (ibid.) suggests that teaching of idioms should be approached by categorizing idioms according to their communicative functions. After all, the reason for the use of idioms is to bring colour to communicative interaction, not just to call things simply by their names, but to express them in a vivid way and not only to state an opinion but to give the other person a piece of one’s mind.

It is clear that idioms should be taught but the question is which ones. Irujo (1986a) has studied transfer in the acquisition of idioms in a second language. She studied native speakers of Spanish who studied English as their second language and was interested in seeing how much they relied on their native language when trying to comprehend and produce English idioms. Irujo (186a: 294-297) noticed that participants understood the identical and similar kinds of idioms better than idioms that differed from the ones they had in their native language. The results showed that the participants made use of their native language but they also employed the strategies of the target language. Often used, short and simple as well as quite transparent were the best known idioms. The least known idioms, on the other hand, were less used, informal and included complex vocabulary. The participants were also able to generalise the meaning of a Spanish idiom into an English idiom even though the form differed to some extent.

On the basis of her results, Irujo (1986a: 298) suggests that teachers should make use of the learners' first language since learners use the knowledge of it anyway when trying to comprehend idioms in a foreign language. Her data on best and least known idioms offers some guidance in the matter of which idioms should be taught. There is no point in trying to teach infrequent, highly colloquial idioms that contain difficult vocabulary to second language learners. Besides they often sound strange when produced by a non-native speaker. Furthermore, Irujo (1986a: 299) proposes that teaching the comprehension of idioms should prepare learners with skills to use the context in guessing the meaning and to handle figurative language generally.

In an article published later on, Irujo (1986b: 238) lists more clearly the factors that should be considered when choosing which idioms to teach: frequency of use, transparency, appropriateness, simplicity of form as well as vocabulary and similarity to first-language idioms. All in all, the teaching of idioms should not be ignored even at the beginning levels (Irujo 1986b: 240). They only have to be dealt with the appropriate way that fits the learners' current stage of learning. Irujo (1986b: 240) points out that the learning of idioms is essential for vocabulary learning of a second language. Learners are often interested in

idioms but are afraid of using them since figurative language is an area of language that causes difficulties (Irujo 1986b: 241). However, the use of proper strategies to introduce idioms to second language learners can help them to get rid of “idiom-phobia” and to carry on acquiring idioms outside the classroom.

4.2 Mäntylä (2004)

Studies on idiom comprehension have mainly concentrated on native speakers. There are few studies on how foreign or second language learners comprehend idioms. English idioms and second language learners have been neglected in idiom studies even though idioms are very important and English is a dominant language in the world (Mäntylä 2004: 85). However, Mäntylä (2004) has studied the effect of the characteristics of idioms on their recognition and interpretation. Her participants were university students or graduates at Finnish and British universities. She studied the acceptability of different meanings of idioms, the effect of context and recognition of idioms. The study was carried out with a three part questionnaire. The first part examined the acceptability of idioms. The participants were asked to evaluate the meanings of twenty frequent idioms. In the second part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to consider the appropriateness of the same twenty idioms in different situational contexts. The third part of the questionnaire was a multiple-choice test where the participants chose the correct meaning for the idiom from the given alternatives. The third part consisted of 45 idioms. All the idioms used in the whole questionnaire were from the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms (1995)* and chosen on the basis of their frequencies.

Mäntylä's (2004) results show that also the answers of native speakers differed from one another and according to the participants not all meanings for idioms given in dictionaries were acceptable. Despite several possible interpretations, usually one meaning was held more acceptable than others. Furthermore, native speakers considered the meanings either more acceptable or less acceptable whereas there was variation among the responses of non-native speakers. Non-native speakers accepted the use of idioms in different contexts

more widely than native speakers. Non-native speakers also accepted idioms in particular in informal or even colloquial contexts. Native speakers preferred informal contexts whereas non-native speakers were more willing to use of idioms also in formal contexts.

The present study is an attempt to partially replicate the third part of Mäntylä's (2004) questionnaire which concerned the recognition of idioms. However, the questionnaire was altered to suit the purposes of the present study. The idioms were presented within a brief context whereas Mäntylä had no context and instead of four alternatives with more than one correct answer, I had only three alternatives with only one correct answer. Mäntylä also had 45 idioms from which I chose the first ten idioms that were the most frequent in the *Collins* frequency band and the ten first idioms that were from the second most frequent in the band. One purpose of the present study is to compare the results of the present study with Mäntylä's Finnish participants. Thus, the results of the third part of her study are now looked at in detail.

Mäntylä's (2004) results indicate that even native speakers do not agree on the meanings of idioms. Nevertheless, non-native speakers recognised idioms fairly little compared to native speakers. According to Mäntylä (2004: 118) there were nine idioms out of 45 that caused no significant differences between native and non-native speakers. From the idioms used in the present study *throw off balance* and *smell a rat* were equally easy for both groups whereas *make noises* and *hedge your bets* were equally difficult.

Mäntylä (2004: 127-128) has divided the idioms that caused differences in responses between native and non-native speakers into three groups according to their transparency. **Transparent idioms'** literal and figurative meanings are connected to each other and their figurative meaning can be reasoned from the literal meaning. **Semi-transparent idioms** have a connection between literal and figurative meanings but it is not as apparent as with transparent idioms and, finally, **opaque idioms'** literal and figurative meanings are entirely different and the literal meaning does not give any indication of the figurative

meaning. Mäntylä (2004: 128), however, points out that the degree of transparency is sometimes debatable and there are some border line cases.

In table 1 Mäntylä's (2004) results of the twenty idioms that were also used in the present study are introduced. The percentage indicates how many Finnish participants chose the intended alternative, which is the correct one also in my questionnaire. However, one should keep in mind that Mäntylä had more than one correct or appropriate choice among the alternatives since the meanings given in different dictionaries vary. Thus, some low percentages can be due to the many appropriate answers instead of only one. In my questionnaire the number of correct answers was limited owing to the context within which the idiom was presented.

Table 1. Mäntylä's results on the part of 20 idioms also used in the present study.

IDIOM	DEGREE OF TRANSPARENCY	%
<i>throw off balance</i>	transparent	≈ 90 %
<i>smell a rat</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 98 %
<i>make noises</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 17 %
<i>hedge your bets</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 38 %
<i>give the green light</i>	transparent	≈ 99 %
<i>get the chop</i>	transparent	≈ 39 %
<i>keep your head down</i>	transparent	≈ 70 %
<i>pull faces</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 25 %
<i>across the board</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 41 %
<i>be in gear</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 59 %
<i>come to ahead</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 56 %
<i>with bated breath</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 21 %
<i>a lame duck</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 50 %
<i>vote with your feet</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 65 %
<i>ahead of the game</i>	semi-transparent	≈ 37 %
<i>on edge</i>	opaque	≈ 62 %
<i>have a chip on your shoulder</i>	opaque	≈ 38 %
<i>bring home</i>	opaque	≈ 34 %
<i>the nooks and crannies</i>	opaque	≈ 39 %
<i>be home and dry</i>	opaque	≈ 22 %

Mäntylä's (2004: 171) results indicate that the transparency of idioms helped the Finnish participants to recognise idioms. The participants also relied on

their mother tongue and idioms that have a direct translation equivalent in Finnish were familiar and quite easy for the participants. However, Mäntylä (2004: 172) remarks that it is difficult to define whether idioms in two different languages are equivalents or not. An idiom can have a similar kind of form but the meaning or tone can be different. Furthermore, it is problematic to say how individuals regard the relationship between two idioms in two different languages. Nevertheless, Mäntylä (2004: 172) reports that Finnish equivalents had an effect on the recognition and opaque idioms with no kind of equivalent in Finnish were the most difficult to understand. The effects of transparency and mother tongue equivalents confirm the findings of previous studies but Mäntylä's (2004: 172) results indicated that the frequency of the idiom did not have an impact on the recognition among the Finnish participants.

Mäntylä (2004: 173-174) also lists strategies the participants used to understand idioms. Firstly, they resorted to the Finnish language and even when there was no clear equivalent in Finnish, they picked up a figurative expression in Finnish that shared even a single word with the English one. Secondly, they relied on the literal meaning and chose the alternative that gave the literal meaning. Finally, if neither of the mentioned strategies worked, they gave in to pure guessing. Thus, it appeared that the transparency of idioms helped the interpretation only when it was alongside with the Finnish language. Mäntylä (2004: 174-176) also writes about the possible problems of her study. She mentions that the idioms used in the study are only as representative as the *Collins Cobuild* (1995) dictionary. The selection was based on the frequency band of the particular dictionary. Moreover, the unfamiliarity of idioms was problematic for the Finnish participants as well as the fact that the idioms were presented without a context. Multiple choice tests also have their restrictions but Mäntylä justifies their use by pointing out that otherwise the third part of the questionnaire would have been too difficult for non-native speakers. Mäntylä (2004: 174) also admits that the effects of context in the interpretation of unfamiliar idioms might reveal interesting viewpoints. The context may limit the interpretation options but, on the other hand, it can assist in excluding the obviously wrong ones.

Mäntylä's (2004) study shows that idioms are difficult for second language learners even though the participants in her study were mostly fourth year university students of English and, therefore, advanced ones. Mäntylä found out that idioms which have some sort of an equivalent in Finnish were easier to understand than idioms which did not have any. Thus, one can assume that idioms are connected to the specific language and culture which leads to a conclusion that there has to be a relationship between idioms and language proficiency. I assume that one cannot understand idioms very well without a good knowledge of the target language and culture.

It is interesting to study how Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand idioms and compare the results with those of the Finnish university students. If university students know very few idioms, do third grade students understand them at all? This was the motivation for my study. I wanted to study if students who have finished all their English courses at senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms. Furthermore, it seemed reasonable to investigate the comprehension of idioms since their production is usually not expected from second language learners. According to Mäntylä (2004: 87) it might even be irrational to teach non-native speakers to actively use and produce idioms since the learners also need to have other kinds of knowledge of idioms than merely their dictionary meaning. They have to know about the word's context, register and style, for instance. The connections between words and their meanings may be complicated. On the other hand, idioms are part of everyday communication and, therefore, Mäntylä (2004: 87) is very much in favour of teaching the recognition of idioms as well as tools to figure out their meanings for second language learners. After all, idioms are pervasive in the language and second language learners should at least be aware of them.

5. IDIOMS IN SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

The participants of the present study were Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school. The purpose of the study was to compare the comprehension of idioms between third grade students who attend the national senior secondary school with those who attend the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. Idioms do not play a significant role in the English teaching of senior secondary school but they are considered to be an indication of good language skills.

5.1 Finnish senior secondary school

The Finnish senior secondary school usually takes three years to complete. Nevertheless, it is possible to graduate in two and a half or in four years. Students have to complete a minimum of 75 courses altogether and at the end of senior secondary school i.e. usually at the end of the third grade, they take part in the national matriculation examinations. In the Finnish senior secondary school students have six compulsory courses of English or some other language that they have selected as their first foreign language at the lower stage of comprehensive school. The language is usually English and also in the present study all participants had studied English as their first foreign language. Furthermore, the school has to offer at least two specialization courses in this language. Specialization courses are designed to complement the compulsory courses and to advance the learning. Generally students take part in specialization courses in order to secure their success in the national matriculation examination. Thus, Finnish third grade students of national senior secondary school typically study eight courses of English during their senior secondary education. (*Framework curriculum for the senior secondary school* 1994)

5.2 The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme is a two-year programme before university studies organized by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO). According to the IBO's website it is a non-profit educational organization that was founded in 1968. The organization is ruled by the Council of Foundation which has 16 members and the director general as well as the headquarters are placed in Geneva, Switzerland. The curriculum, assessment and publications are, however, taken care of in Cardiff, United Kingdom. Besides the Diploma Programme, the organisation offers also the Middle Years Programme for students aged 11 to 16 and the Primary Years Programme for students aged 3 to 12. (*International Baccalaureate Organization* n.d.)

The Diploma Programme (DP) is a comprehensive two-year curriculum for secondary school students. According to the IBO the programme is meant to prepare students for university studies and, therefore, it comprises the two final years of secondary school. The programme allows students also to carry out the national requirements and the organization boasts that it combines the best features of each national system without being based on any of them. The education is available in English, Spanish or French. The DP leads to examinations which are assessed against high criteria. The DP's grading system is criterion-referenced and the high levels of achievement are defined in the IB-curriculum. The students' DP work is evaluated in Cardiff by IBO examiners. (*International Baccalaureate Organization* n.d.)

According to the IBO the heart of DP are the three additional elements that students are required to study alongside with six academic subjects: Theory of Knowledge (TOK), Creativity, Action, Service (CAS) and an extended essay of 4, 000 words. Theory of Knowledge is a course that consists of at least 100 hours of teaching and aims at developing students' critical thinking. Creativity, Action, Service means that IB diploma students take part in certain activities that can be artistic productions, sport or community service activities. Each

student is also expected to write an extended essay on a topic they are interested in but it has to be written in one of the 60 subjects. In addition to these three courses, students study six academic subjects and they have to take both the humanities and the sciences. Students complete at least three but no more than four subjects at a higher level and the rest at a standard level. Finnish IB-students study English at a higher level. The higher level means 240 hours of teaching and the standard level 150. (*International Baccalaureate Organization* n.d.)

Since the Finnish senior secondary school lasts three years and the IB Diploma Programme only two years, the Finnish IB-students have a preparatory year. During the pre-DP year they study according to the national programme but the compulsory courses are taught in English to familiarise students with the language. The education in the IB Diploma Programme is in English. In addition, students obtain guidance in the upcoming DP studies such as TOK and CAS. The students who successfully complete the pre-DP year, which includes a minimum of 30 courses, are admitted to the Diploma Programme. (*Jyväskylän lyseon lukio* n.d.)

As I collected the data for the present study, I also inquired about the education of the teachers who teach the IB Diploma Programme students in Finland. The teachers have the university degree that is required to teach a certain subject in Finnish senior secondary school and in addition they have to take part in a week long summer workshop that the International Baccalaureate Organization organizes for all the new teachers who wish to teach IB Diploma students. During the workshop they examine the programme and the syllabus of the subject they are going to teach. In fact, this is the only formal training for IB teachers. However, in some schools the teachers are offered a possibility to take part in continuation work shops about every two years. In Joensuu the senior secondary school has cooperated with a local free college that has organized “classroom English” course and other language education for teachers. Teachers have also applied for language courses, for example in England, on their own initiative. All the senior secondary schools that

participated in the present study had one to two native teachers in their teaching staff.

5.3 Idioms in English teaching

The purpose of the present study is to investigate how Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms. In order to know what to expect from the results of the idiom questionnaire and to have a clear picture of the teaching as well as learning of idioms in senior secondary school, one has to consider how much idioms are present in the English teaching. Thus, I will look at the course books used in classes, the curricula, both national and International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB), and present some views that teachers have on idioms.

The students who graduate from the national side of the senior secondary school in spring 2005 have studied according to the *Framework curriculum for the senior secondary school 1994*. The new curriculum comes into force from the beginning of August 2005. The curriculum from 1994 states the objectives of foreign language learning quite generally. The main focus is that the students learn to understand well both speech and writing, are able to communicate fluently as well as use appropriate vocabulary, write fluent texts and obtain knowledge about the target countries and cultures of the area. Moreover, the topics and themes for the compulsory courses are given in the curriculum. The goals of vocabulary learning are defined very broadly since the curriculum only mentions that “the range of vocabulary and structures are expanded during the whole of senior secondary school” (*Framework curriculum for the senior secondary school 1994*: 73). Idioms or even idiomatic language are not mentioned at all.

Nevertheless, idioms seem to be a current issue in foreign language teaching and they are considered as an indication of good language skills. Whereas the curriculum from 1994 does not mention idioms, the new *Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2003* (Framework curriculum for senior

secondary school 2003) does. The new curriculum (2003: 242-243) defines explicitly the goals of teaching and the level of proficiency each student is expected to achieve in listening and reading comprehension as well as in speech and writing. Idiomatic language comes up in this context. The levels are adapted from the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001). Students are expected to reach the level B2.1 which is described as “the ability to cope with problems in regular social discourse with native speakers” (“selviytyminen säännöllisessä kanssakäymisessä syntyperäisten kanssa”). It is determined as a basic level of independent language skills.

The four basic skills, listening, reading, writing and speaking, are all carefully described with details of what students should command on this particular level regarding these skills. Idioms are mentioned in connection to speaking and reading. By the end of senior secondary school students should achieve, among other things, the ability to use versatile language structures and broad vocabulary in speech including idiomatic and conceptual vocabulary. In reading students are expected to understand different types of texts that are several pages long. The only thing that they are still allowed to have problems with, are idioms and cultural references in longer texts. Thus, the understanding of idioms is clearly considered to be difficult and all students are not expected to learn to understand English idioms by the end of their secondary education. Nevertheless, all students should reach the level B2.1 and it is naturally desirable that some students would achieve even higher level in their language skills. (*Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2003: 242-243*)

In the IB syllabus idiomatic language stands out more clearly. *The IB Diploma Programme guide: Language A2* (2002) also divides the language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. In all of these students are required to either understand or use a range of vocabulary and idiom at the end of the language course A2. Later on in the booklet there are also instructions on what has to be integrated into the teaching: a suitable range of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and complex grammatical expressions. Furthermore, in the assessment criteria of the IB Diploma Programme students do not reach the standards set to the higher grades unless their vocabulary and idiom is not

varied and appropriate to the task. For the highest levels the vocabulary and idiom has to be varied and highly appropriate. (*The IB Diploma Programme guide: Language A2 2002: 9, 13-14*)

In addition to the curricula, idioms can become familiar through course books and their texts. I looked at the two course book series used in senior secondary schools, *In touch* (Davies et al. 2002a, 2002b, 2002c) and *English Update* (Kallela et al. 1999, 2000a, 2000b), in order to get an idea how they present idioms to students, if at all. Two of the schools that participated in the study used *In Touch* and one used *English Update*. Three course books from both book series were looked through and they were the course books of compulsory English courses 2, 3 and 4. In the IB-classes there are no course books for English teaching. Instead, students have English literature and they are required to read novels. Teachers also provide students material, such as newspaper articles, web pages and other authentic texts.

English Update (Kallela et al. 1999, 2000a, 2000b) did not contain any exercises that were particularly concentrated on idioms. The course books, however, included texts that were labelled “Fact & Fiction” and they were authentic texts, such as newspaper articles, extracts from novels and so on. One can assume that they include idiomatic language. The main reading texts of the course books were also quite long and varied in themes which can be expected on this level. No attention was drawn to idioms, they will only come up in texts, if at all. *In Touch* (Davies et al. 2002a, 2002b, 2002c), on the other hand, was very multi-faceted in its exercises in general. The course book series has 12 different kinds of exercises that are repeated throughout the books. One exercise type is named “idioms”. In the three course books I looked at, there were three exercises on idioms. One was a task where students had to match an idiom that was presented in a brief context with an explanation. Another exercise was to complete a speaker’s balloon with one of the idioms given in a box below the exercise. The task continued with the question of how students would translate these expressions. The third exercise was under the heading of idiom exercise but, in fact, it was an exercise on proverbs which are excluded from idioms in the present study (see p. 15). Nevertheless, *In Touch* considered

idioms in their own right and provided practise on them. The main reading texts were also long and varied in themes as in *English Update* and *In Touch* also had “Read On” texts that seemed authentic since they were mostly extracts from either novels or other literary pieces of work.

As I collected the data in schools, I also conducted informal interviews in which I asked the teachers’ views on idioms. I asked how idioms are present in the teaching and whether they should be taught more or not, referring to the new curriculum that now pays attention to idioms. All teachers pointed out that idioms are not taught systematically but they can be seen in course books, matriculation examination booklets, listening comprehension tasks, articles and in the extra material used in classes. One teacher even mentioned that she has done idiom exercises with her classes and another said he tries to draw students’ attention to idioms when they read texts together in class. Teachers who used *In Touch* (Davies et al. 2002a, 2002b, 2002c) as their course book thought that it considered idioms very well. None of the teachers thought that idioms ought to be any more present in the teaching than they are. Nevertheless, one teacher felt that it would be nice to have more time for everything during the classes but the time is limited. Another considered idioms an essential part of fluent, “idiomatic” language and, therefore, thought that they are obviously part of the teaching. He also said that students have a positive attitude towards the learning of idioms since they usually differ in some funny way from the Finnish equivalents. Moreover, he pointed out that each English teacher emphasises different things in their teaching but he believed all teachers are aware of the importance of idioms as well as pay attention to them during lessons.

All in all, idioms should be to some extent familiar to third grade students of senior secondary school even though they are not taught as such. It also seems that one can rightfully assume that IB-students would do better in an idiom comprehension test since they study in English, their study material is based on English literature and authentic texts, their syllabus acknowledges idioms and they have to take part in IB courses such as TOK and CAS as well as write an extended essay. However, since idioms are not formally or systematically

taught at school, it is reasonable to investigate how the selected aspects of the students' background, such as residence in English speaking countries as well as involvement and interest in the language in their spare time, affects the understanding. Thus, also students who are genuinely interested in the language and have contacts with native speakers can perform very well in an idiom comprehension test even though they have not had their senior secondary school education in English.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Participants

The participants of the study were six groups of Finnish third grade senior secondary school students. The participants were from three Finnish senior secondary schools in three different Finnish towns. The schools that participated the study were Joensuun Lyseon lukio in Joensuu, Jyväskylän Lyseon lukio in Jyväskylä and Tampereen Lyseon lukio in Tampere. They were chosen since they are all part of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme as well as provide education according to the Finnish national curriculum. One group of students who attend IB-class and one group who attend national senior secondary school were selected from each school. All in all, three of the groups were students who attend the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme whereas three of the groups students who attend regular Finnish senior secondary school. 120 students altogether participated in this study. However, five students of the IB-classes were not native speakers of Finnish and, therefore, they were excluded from the present study. As the purpose was to study Finnish third grade students, students who are not Finnish would falsify the results. Thus, the total amount of participants was 115: 73 from national senior secondary school classes and 42 from IB-classes.

I chose third grade students who attend regular Finnish senior secondary school as participants since I wanted to study how well Finnish students who are graduating from senior secondary school understand idioms. The groups that I have chosen in this study have studied English as their second language for eight to ten years. Finnish pupils begin to study their first foreign language, usually English, in elementary school. The foreign languages that begin in elementary school are called A-languages in the framework curriculum for comprehensive school (*Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelman perusteet 1994:18*). The participants in the present study have learned English either as their A1 or A2 –language which means they have begun their studies either in the third or fifth grade. Nevertheless, pupils are expected to have the same level of proficiency in English as they leave comprehensive school regardless whether they have taken English as their A1 or A2 language. Thus, they are treated as the same in the present study and the students were not asked if they have studied eight or ten years English. Furthermore, A-languages are not separated anymore in the current framework curriculum for comprehensive school, *Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2004*.

The participants had completed all their compulsory English courses since the data collection took place in January and the beginning of February one to three weeks before the beginning of the matriculation examinations. In this sense, third grade students of senior secondary school are a homogeneous group. They are about the same age and they have had about the same amount of formal school education in English. This allows me to investigate the effect of their background on their understanding of idioms.

Third grade students of senior secondary school who attend an international IB-class were chosen since I wanted to compare them who have studied according to the international IB-curriculum with the students who have studied according to the Finnish national curriculum. In IB-classes the teaching is in English. The students have to read and write in English much more than in regular senior secondary schools. This is the reason why I assume that they have better knowledge of the English language and culture than other third grade students. Furthermore, one has to pass an entrance exam to attend an IB-

class and, therefore, students who are admitted to the IB-programme are already required to have good skills in English. It is interesting to compare them with regular Finnish senior secondary school students and see if their greater involvement with the English language also means that they understand idioms better.

6.2 Questionnaire

The data was collected with a questionnaire. The questionnaire had two parts: a background section (see appendix 1) and the idiom test (see appendix 2). The questionnaire was piloted with a test group of 22 first year university students of English at the end of November 2004 eight weeks before the actual data collection. Seven of the test group had graduated from senior secondary school on the preceding spring. They were also asked to give feedback on the questionnaire and its clarity.

I chose first year university students of English as my test group since they had studied English only a few months at the university and, therefore, it should not have had a great influence on their language skills yet. Furthermore, one can assume that first year university students of English perform better in the idiom test than third grade students of senior secondary school since they have had to pass an entrance exam to gain admission to study English at university. Most of them had graduated from senior secondary school before entering university. Nevertheless, they are a selected group with good language skills and, therefore, the results I was going to get from the test group were likely to be better than the results of the third grade students. However, I had to take into consideration that IB-class students are also advanced in the English language. The idiom test could not be too easy for them if I also wanted to investigate the effects of the background on the IB students. The test had to indicate differences between them. Thus, the first year university students of English seemed to be a suitable test group.

The results of the pilot group indicated that the questionnaire worked well and there was no need to change it. The feedback from the group also gave no reason to alter the questionnaire. The participants of the pilot group had no problems in filling in the answers in the background questionnaire and the mean score of the idiom questionnaire was roughly 16 correct answers out of 20. No one got all the meanings of idioms right and the lowest score was 13. The idiom test in the questionnaire showed that it was not too easy but also not too difficult since the highest score was 19. The pilot test also confirmed that filling in the questionnaire did not take too long. The pilot group performed the task approximately in 15 minutes. I assumed that about 20 minutes is enough time also for third grade students to complete the questionnaire.

6.2.1 Background

The background questionnaire was designed to find out how much the participants were involved with the English language outside school. I was interested in seeing if the exposure to the language outside lessons would have an effect on the understanding of idioms. The questions in the background section were divided in three categories: residence in English-speaking countries/environments, leisure time and contacts with native speakers. The three categories were chosen since they represent authentic use of language that the participants were likely to encounter outside the school environment. The questions were in a multiple choice form as well as open questions and they were clarified with examples.

The residence in English-speaking countries -section of the background questionnaire served to find out if students had spent time in English speaking environments. They were asked how long they had stayed in an English speaking country, how old they were at the time and what they did there. There were alternatives given to all of these questions and students were to circle the alternative that described them best. They also had an opportunity to write their own answer on an empty line if none of the alternatives seemed right.

The leisure time -section of the background questionnaire was designed to find out the exposure to the English language in spare time. The section involved questions about television, reading and listening to music as well as how much they spend time on them weekly. There were alternatives to the questions on how much time they spend watching television, reading texts and listening to music in English so that they pay attention to the language and actively listen to it. They were also asked what kind of programmes they watch as well as what they read and listen to. Idioms occur in everyday language and, therefore, one can come across them when watching television and listening to music. There is also a difference in the language they are exposed to if they read comics or novels and whether they watch current affairs programmes or sitcoms. Open questions were used and students were asked to write a detailed answer to them. The last section of the background questionnaire simply inquired about students' contacts with native speakers, what kinds of contacts they had and how frequently.

6.2.2 Idioms

The idiom questionnaire was adapted from the third part of Mäntylä's (2004) questionnaire that concerned the recognition of idioms. I altered her questionnaire to suit my purposes better. The participants in my study were not as advanced as Mäntylä's participants as learners of English who were mostly fourth year university students of English. Thus, the idiom test could not be as demanding as Mäntylä's.

The idiom questionnaire was a forced multiple-choice test where 20 idioms of English were tested. They were the same ones as Mäntylä (2004) had used in her study. The idioms were chosen from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995). Mäntylä chose *Collins*-dictionary since it was the only idiom dictionary at the time that was based on frequencies. Idioms in the dictionary are marked for their frequency as they are found in the Bank of English¹. Idioms are

¹ The Bank of English is a database of contemporary language that includes different sources and styles of English language, totalling over 450 million words.

marked in four categories: the most frequent idioms, the second most frequent idioms and so on.

Mäntylä (2004) had 45 idioms in her study in the third part of the questionnaire and I used only 20 of them. I had to limit the number of idioms since filling of the questionnaire should not take too much class time. The schedule in senior secondary schools is very tight and it was very unlikely that any teacher would let me do a study during English lessons if it took more than 20 minutes which is almost half of the 45 minute lesson. Furthermore, students were more likely to concentrate on the task better when there were not too many idioms. They also had to fill in the background questionnaire. Furthermore, there was an example of a context with each idiom, which meant that students had to read a lot. It required a high level of concentration.

For the idiom questionnaire I chose the first ten idioms of Mäntylä's (2004) questionnaire that were from the most frequent band and the first ten idioms that were from the second most frequent band. Four of the idioms were transparent, 11 semi-transparent and five opaque. I intentionally left out the idioms from the third most frequent band. Idioms are very rare in the vocabulary as such. It would not make any sense to test if third grade students of senior secondary school understand idioms that they will hardly ever come across.

The idioms in my questionnaire were presented within a brief context of how they can be used in clauses whereas Mäntylä (2004) had no context. Mäntylä (2004: 94) justifies the exclusion of context with several reasons. The main aim of her study was to examine the characteristics of idioms and their effect on interpretation. She wanted the participants to find all the meanings for the idioms they could think of in different kinds of contexts. A given context would have restricted the possible meanings. In addition, she (2004: 94) thinks that context does not always help with the interpretation but can also confuse it.

However, the questionnaire would have been too difficult for third grade students of senior secondary school without any context. They are not

advanced learners of English and one cannot expect them to know meanings of idioms outside context. The aim of my study was not to examine the characteristics of idioms but the understanding of idioms. One of the aims was an attempt to solve if third grade students of senior secondary school can understand a meaning of an idiom when they come across within a context. The examples of idioms in a brief context in the questionnaire were taken from the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995) and *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (1998). These dictionaries were chosen since the examples presented in them are based on authentic written and spoken texts.

In the questionnaire there were three alternatives after each idiom from which the participants had to find the right meaning for the idiom. Only one alternative was correct since the idioms were presented in a brief context. Mäntylä (2004) gave four alternatives to choose from in her questionnaire. In addition, there was an empty line where participants could write down their own interpretations if none of the alternatives felt right. The correct answers in her questionnaire varied from one to three depending on the idiom. Idioms were presented without a context and, therefore, all the meanings given to an idiom in different dictionaries were taken into account.

The use of three alternatives seemed suitable for the present study since only one of the three was correct and there was no need to use three distracters within the alternatives instead of two. (The correct alternatives of the idiom test are presented in appendix 3.) The use of two distracters also saved some time. The distracters within the alternatives were in some cases the same ones as Mäntylä (2004) had used in her questionnaire. However, they were only used if they were possible in the brief context I had given; otherwise I replaced them with my own. There were several grounds for the distracters that were used. There were context based distracters, distracters that were connected to the literal meaning of the idiom or opposite to the literal meaning, distracters that were led from a similar kind of Finnish idiom that had a different meaning and distracters that captured the meaning of another idiom.

The participants in the present study are a small sample of the Finnish third grade students in senior secondary schools, so the results do not represent all Finnish third grade students. Furthermore, the context and distracters used within the alternatives in the idiom questionnaire might have affected the understanding of a single idiom. Some idioms had a longer context than others. This might have helped their understanding. Some of the distracters can also distract the participants better than others. Nevertheless, if the majority or minority of the participants understood the idiom, one was tempted to draw a conclusion that the particular idiom can be considered to be either easy or difficult. The main aim was, however, to get an overall picture of the understanding of idioms and the effect of the selected background aspects of the participants on the understanding. A further aim was to compare the results with Mäntylä (2004).

6.3 Data collection

Data collection took place in January and the beginning of February one to three weeks before the beginning of the matriculation examinations. In Tampere and Jyväskylä I personally delivered the questionnaires and was present as the participants filled them in. The questionnaires were posted to Joensuu. All the schools allowed their names to be published in this study. However, I was asked not to compare schools and, in fact, it was not the purpose of this study. I also asked some informal questions of the teachers while the students filled in the questionnaires and through email from Joensuu. The questions were asked in order to gain some background information for the study. The teachers were asked what course books the school uses in English lessons, what kind of education IB-teachers have whether they have native speakers as teachers. Their personal opinions about idioms in teaching were also inquired. The opinion questions were along the lines of what they thought about the teaching of idioms and how they are taken into account during lessons as well as if there should be more attention paid to them in English teaching.

In Joensuu Lyseon Lukio the data collection took place in January three weeks before the beginning of matriculation examinations. I posted the questionnaires and they were shortly posted back to me. 20 students from the IB-class and 30 students from the national senior secondary school class took part in the study. Two of the IB students were excluded from the present study since their mother tongue was Portuguese. The teacher informed me that the filling in the questionnaire took about 15 to 20 minutes in both groups and the fastest ones in the IB-class finished the questionnaire in ten minutes. He did not report that there were any problems in data collection and, therefore, I assume that also the students had no problems or questions about the questionnaire. The questions concerning the teacher's opinions about idioms were asked and answered by email.

In Tampereen Lyseon Lukio the data collection also took place in January but two weeks before the beginning of the matriculation examinations. I was present as both groups filled in the questionnaire. 19 students from the IB-class and 17 students from the national senior secondary school class took part in the study. Three IB students in Tampere were left out of this study due to their mother tongue. Before handing out the questionnaire I introduced myself and the present study very briefly. I also offered to give further instructions if the students had problems in understanding the questions. The instructions were given in Finnish in the national senior secondary school class and in English in the IB-class. The only question they asked was if they could also answer in Finnish to open questions and I allowed them to do so. The filling in the questionnaires took about 20 minutes in both groups and during this time I asked the teacher the questions concerning idioms.

In Jyväskylän Lyseon Lukio the data collection took place in February about a week before the beginning of the matriculation examinations. The situation was similar to the data collection in Tampere. The data collection proceeded in the same way but IB-students had some questions concerning the filling of the questionnaire. They were curious to know whether they should count IB-class as an English-speaking environment or not and if they should mention their school books in questions concerning the reading in English. I answered that I

understood that the IB-class is an English-speaking environment and what was meant by the question is visits in English-speaking environments outside the IB programme. Furthermore, they could mention their school books in the reading section if they read their school books during their leisure time. Eight students from the IB-class and 26 students from the national senior secondary school class took part in the study. The filling in the questionnaire took about 25 minutes in both groups. However, the fastest IB student finished it in ten minutes.

6.4 Research questions

The research questions of the present study are: Do Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms?, Do third grade students in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme understand idioms better than other third grade students of senior secondary school?, Are some idioms more easy or difficult than others? and Does the background of the students affect the understanding of idioms? The purpose is also to see if this study confirms the results of Mäntylä's (2004) research and what the impact of different methodological decision is, i.e. presenting idioms within a brief context.

It is assumed that IB students perform better in the idiom comprehension test since they are much more involved with English language. I also presume that the participants of the present study do well compared to Mäntylä's informants since they have examples of the idioms in a context of how they are used.

6.5 Analysis of the data

The data was analysed with the help of the SPSS computer programme. The programme is designed to ease the handling of large amounts of data. The programme also performs tests that make it possible to distinguish significant results from random variance. The significance of results was measured with the Pearson Chi-Square test and Fisher's Exact Test in situations where the

number of cases was small. When the test value was ≤ 0.5 there was a significant difference in results. Only statistically significant differences in results were reported in the present study. The graphics used to clarify the results were also made by using SPSS.

7. RESULTS

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms. The intention was also to compare the students attending national senior secondary school with the students who attend the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. Furthermore, the effects of the selected aspects of the students' background were studied and the degree difficulty of idioms for students was looked at.

The results of the idiom questionnaire are introduced first: the total number of correct answers the participants got out of the 20 idioms. The idioms are also looked at separately in order to find out which idioms were more difficult or easier than others. Possible reasons for their degree of difficulty, such as transparency, frequency as well as potential Finnish equivalents are also discussed since previous studies (see 3.2 and 4.) have suggested them as probable explanations for idiom comprehension. Moreover, the idioms that caused significant differences in the responses between the two participating groups, national senior secondary school students (hereafter referred as NSS students) and International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme students (hereafter referred as IB students), answered very differently are examined. The comparison between the two participating groups is considered when reporting the results. After the idiom questionnaire, the answers of the background questionnaire are looked at to see if they can explain some the results of the idiom questionnaire and if the residence in English speaking countries/environments, watching television, reading and listening to music in

English as well as the contacts with native speakers affect the comprehension of idioms.

However, it should be noted that only the differences which were statistically significant are reported in the present study. In other words, only the differences where the value of the Pearson Chi-Square test or Fisher's Exact Test (in situations where the number of cases was small) was equal or smaller than 0.05 were taken into consideration. Figures are used to clarify the results whenever they were regarded as necessary.

7.1 Idiom comprehension

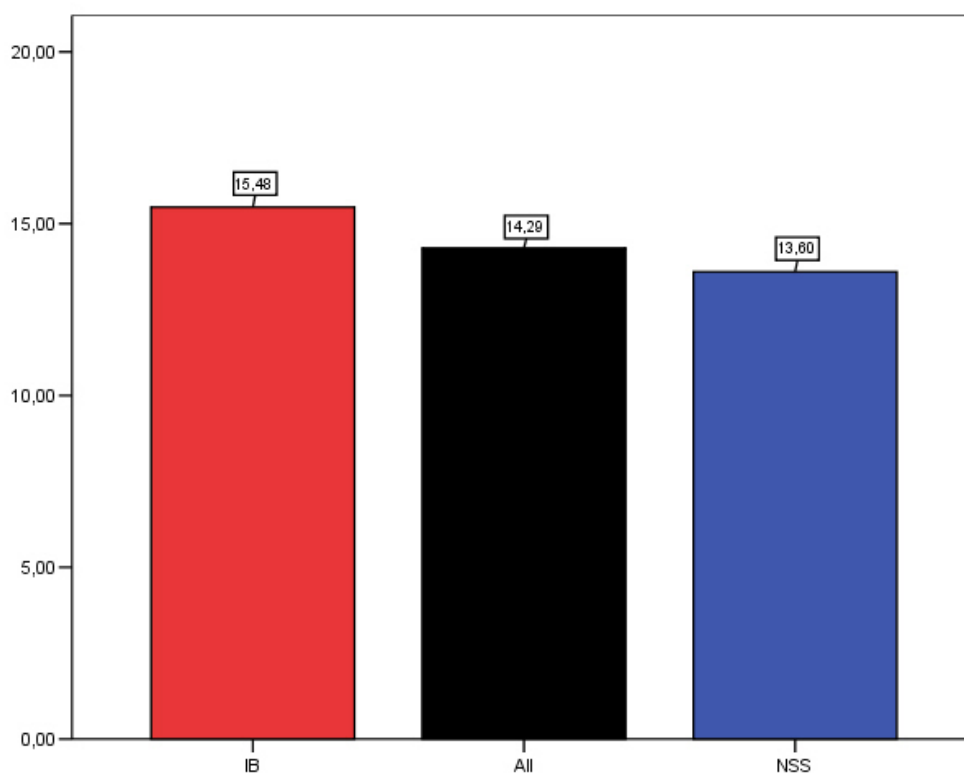


Figure 1. The mean score of correct answers in idiom questionnaire.

Figure 1 indicates the number of correct answers the participants got out of the 20 idioms. The mean score of the correct answers all participants got, including both NSS and IB students, was 14,29. The result is very good since they got 71 % of the idioms correct. The number of correct responses varied from seven to

19. However, as figure 1 shows, the difference between NSS and IB students was considerable. The mean score of correct responses of NSS students was 13,60 whereas the corresponding figure for IB students was 15,48. The difference is also statistically very significant. NSS students got 68 % of the idioms correct but IB students performed much better with 77 %. The number of correct answers varied from seven to 19 with NSS students and from ten to 19 with IB students. The results confirmed the assumption that IB students would perform better compared to NSS students. All in all, it can be said that Finnish third grade senior secondary school students understood English idioms very well.

7.2 Easy and difficult idioms

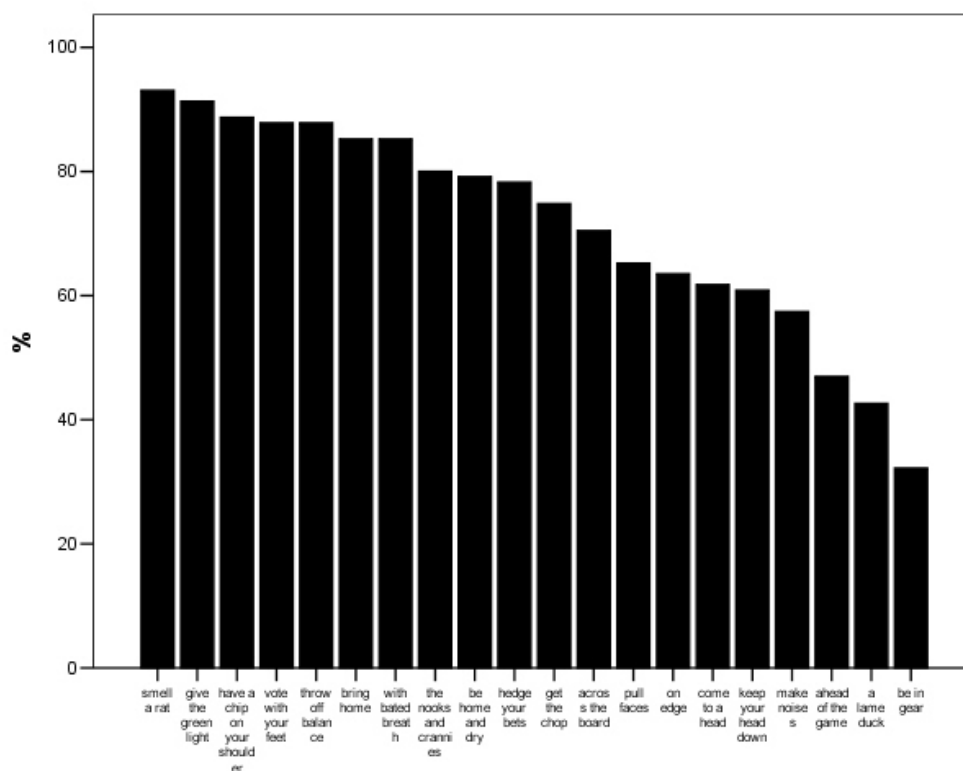


Figure 2. Distribution of correct answers for individual idioms.

Figure 2 indicates the percentages of correct responses for individual idioms. The bars in figure 2 are sorted in descending order from the idiom the participants chose the most correct answers for to the idiom they selected the

least correct alternatives. The bars show the order of individual idioms from the easiest idiom to the most difficult one. The idioms of which 80 % or more of the participants chose the correct alternative were regarded as easy or unproblematic and the ones of which less than half, i.e. 50 %, of all participants chose the correct alternative were considered to be difficult. As it can be seen from the figure, there were eight easy idioms: *smell a rat* (93,0 %), *give the green light* (91,3 %), *have a chip on your shoulder* (88,7 %), *vote with your feet* (87,8 %), *throw off balance* (87,8 %), *bring home* (85,2 %), *with bated breath* (85,2 %) *the nooks and crannies* (80,0 %) and three difficult ones: *ahead of the game* (43,5 %), *a lame duck* (42,6 %) and *be in gear* (32,2 %).

7.2.1 National senior secondary school

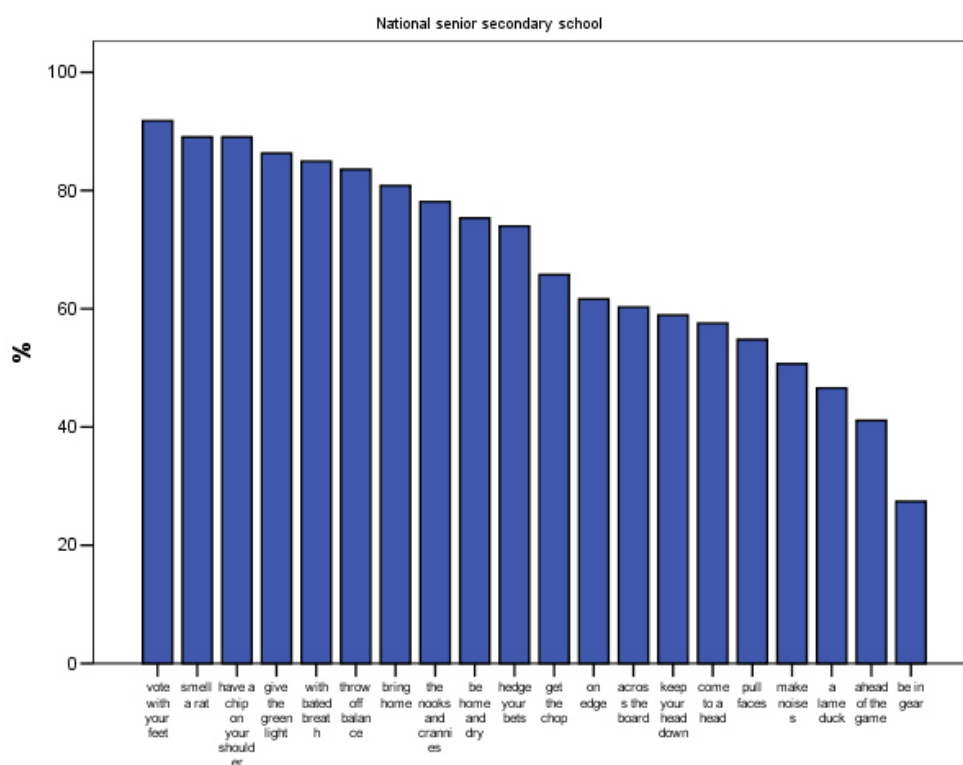


Figure 3. Distribution of correct answers for individual idioms in national senior secondary school groups.

Figure 3 displays the percentages of NSS students' correct answers on individual idioms. The bars are arranged in descending order from the easiest

to the most difficult idiom. The difficult idioms were the same three (*be in gear* 27,4 %, *ahead of the game* 43,8 % and *a lame duck* 46,6 %) that were also problematic when considering both participating groups, but instead of eight, there were only seven idioms where 80 % or more of NSS students chose the correct alternative. The seven easy idioms were: *vote with your feet* (91,3 %), *smell a rat* (89,0 %), *have a chip on your shoulder* (89,0 %), *give the green light* (86,3 %), *with bated breath* (84,9 %), *throw off balance* (83,6 %) and *bring home* (80,8 %). They were almost the same ones as introduced already with the results of all participants but the expression *the nooks and crannies* (78,1 %) was not so familiar to NSS students that it could be considered to be easy for them. The easiest idiom for NSS students was *vote with your feet* and the most difficult one *be in gear*.

7.2.2. International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme

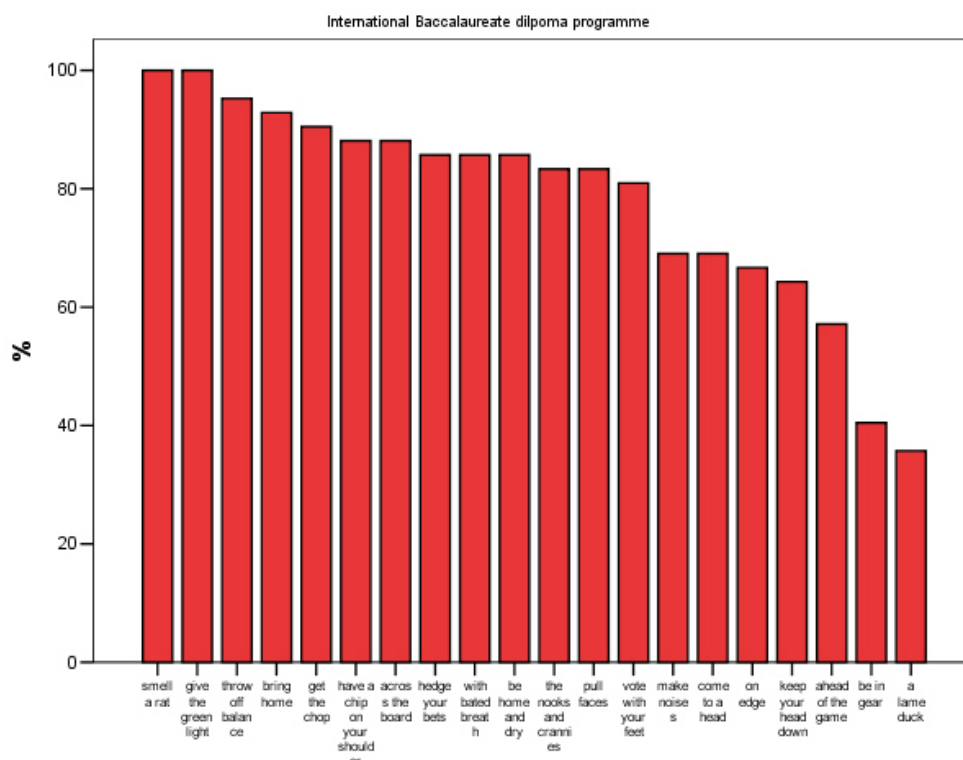


Figure 4. Distribution of correct answers for individual idioms in International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme groups.

Figure 4 presents the percentages of IB students' correct answers. The bars in this figure are also sorted in descending order from the easiest idiom to the most difficult one. The three idioms, *ahead of the game* (42,9 %), *be in gear* (40,5 %) and *a lame duck* (35,7 %), that were difficult for all, were also difficult for IB students. Whereas NSS students had only seven easy idioms, there were 13 idioms that were easy for IB students. Eight of these were the same ones that were easy when considering all participants: *smell a rat* (100,0 %), *give the green light* (100,0 %), *throw off balance* (95,2 %), *bring home* (92,9 %), *have a chip on your shoulder* (88,1 %), *with bated breath* (85,7 %), *the nooks and crannies* (83,3 %) and *vote with your feet* (81,9 %). The other five easy idioms were: *get the chop* (90,5 %), *hedge your bets* (85,7 %), *be home and dry* (85,7 %), *across the board* (88,1 %) and *pull faces* (83,3 %). The easiest idioms for IB students were the ones that all IB students answered correctly, *give the green light* and *smell a rat*. The most difficult idiom was *a lame duck*.

It is very interesting that the easiest as well as the most difficult idioms were different for NSS students and IB students. *Vote with your feet* was the easiest idiom for NSS students with 91,3 %. However, for IB students it was the least easy of the easiest idioms with 81,0 %. In addition, *a lame duck* was the most difficult idiom for IB students but for NSS students it was the least difficult of the difficult idioms. The ranking order of easy and difficult idioms for NSS and IB students are listed in tables 2 and 3 below to clarify the difference. The lists proceed from the easiest idiom (table 2) and the most difficult idiom (table 3) downwards.

Table 2. The order of easy idioms in two participating groups.

EASY IDIOMS

NSS	IB
1. <i>vote with your feet</i>	1. <i>smell a rat</i>
2. <i>smell a rat</i>	1. <i>give the green light</i>
3. <i>have a chip on your shoulder</i>	3. <i>throw off balance</i>
4. <i>give the green light</i>	4. <i>bring home</i>
5. <i>with bated breath</i>	5. <i>get the chop</i>
6. <i>throw off balance</i>	6. <i>have a chip on your shoulder</i>
7. <i>bring home</i>	6. <i>across the board</i>
	8. <i>hedge your bets</i>
	8. <i>with bated breath</i>
	8. <i>be home and dry</i>
	11. <i>the nooks and crannies</i>
	11. <i>pull faces</i>
	13. <i>vote with your feet</i>

Table 3. The order of difficult idioms in two participating groups.

DIFFICULT IDIOMS

NSS	IB
1. <i>be in gear</i>	1. <i>a lame duck</i>
2. <i>ahead of the game</i>	2. <i>be in gear</i>
3. <i>a lame duck</i>	3. <i>ahead of the game</i>

Tables 2 and 3 clearly show that NSS and IB students have approached idioms differently. Even though they have regarded the same idioms as easy or difficult, they have judged their level of simplicity or difficulty differently. The order of easy and difficult idioms was completely different. It is also noteworthy that IB students had 13 easy idioms, i.e. 80 % or more of them chose the correct alternative in 13 idioms, whereas NSS students had only

seven easy ones. This could mean that more advanced learners of English consider and comprehend idioms in a different way than less advanced. However, it is impossible to draw such conclusions on the basis of the present study.

7.3 Idioms that caused differences between the two participating groups

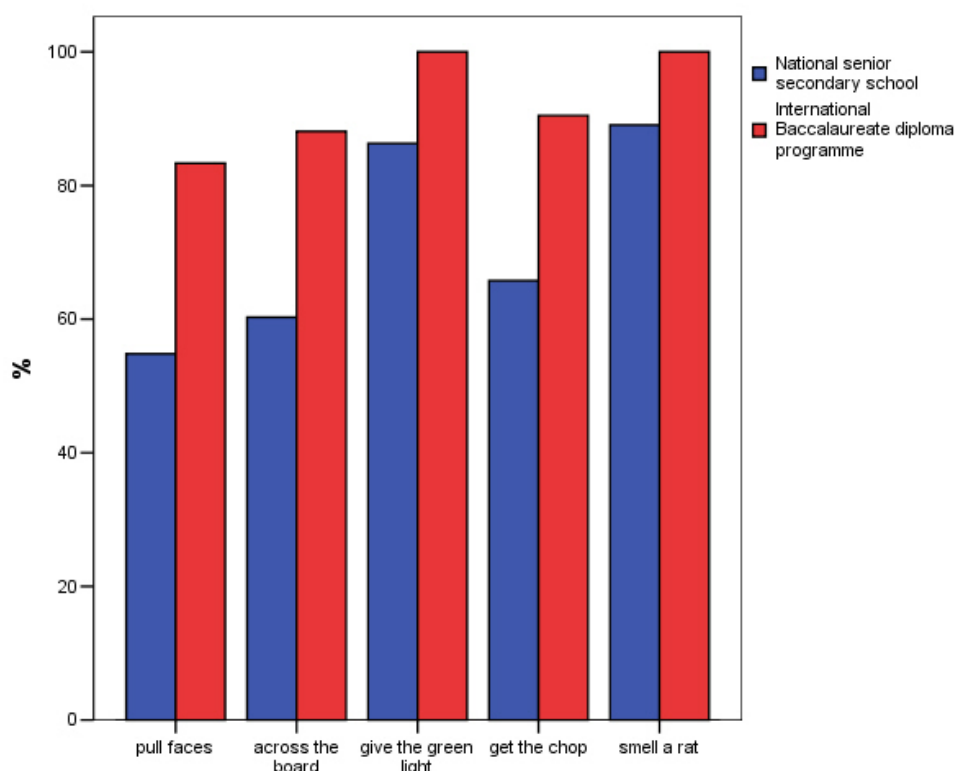


Figure 5. Idioms that caused statistical differences between NSS and IB students.

The five idioms that caused statistical differences between NSS and IB students are portrayed in figure 5. Red bars indicate the amount of correct responses of IB students and blue bars the corresponding results of NSS students. The five idioms were: *pull faces*, *across the board*, *give the green light*, *get the chop* and *smell a rat*. In all of these idioms IB students answered statistically much better than NSS students. It is interesting to consider what might have caused the differences. The possible reasons could be the transparency of idioms, the existence of an equivalent or misleading expressions in Finnish and the distractive alternatives. The degrees of

transparency and Finnish equivalents for the idioms are defined by Mäntylä (2004: 206-211).

83,3 % of the IB students chose the correct alternative for the idiom *pull faces* whereas the corresponding figure for NSS students was only 54,8 %. *Pull faces* has a potential “false friend” in Finnish, *vetää nenästä*. A false friend means that there is an expression in Finnish that includes the same word (e.g. *pull-vetää*) but has a different meaning. Thus, one could assume that this false friend misled NSS students but, in fact, only 6,9 % of them chose the distracter based on it. For some reason or other, 37,5 % of NSS students chose the distracter that was based on a similar kind of expression, *a long face*, which means that someone looks very serious or unhappy.

Across the board also divided the answers of the two participating groups. 88,1 % of the IB students but only 60,3 % of the NSS students picked out the intended alternative. It is quite understandable that this idiom was difficult for NSS students since it is a semi-transparent and it does not have any Finnish equivalent. However, this indicates that IB students either have very good knowledge of the English language or they are highly competent in working out the meaning of an expression in a given context since they have not been able to rely on their mother tongue when interpreting the meaning of this particular idiom.

It is not surprising that both participating groups answered very well on the idiom *give the green light* since it is a transparent idiom with a Finnish equivalent, *näyttää vihreää valoa*. Nevertheless, whereas all the IB students got it right, only 86,3 % of the NSS students were able to do the same. It is impressive that none of the 42 IB students was fooled by the distracters.

Get the chop turned out to be more difficult for NSS students than could be expected since it is a transparent idiom and it has a Finnish equivalent even though with different wording, *saada kenkää*. 90,5 % of the IB students answered correctly but only 65,8 % of the NSS students understood this idiom.

27,4 % of the NSS students were taken in by the distracter that described the state of mind that might follow as a result of getting the chop, be shocked.

Smell a rat was an easy idiom for both participating groups and also with this expression none of the IB students chose the distractive alternatives. However, compared to IB students, NSS students did not do so well. 89,0 % of them circled the intended alternative even though also this idiom has a Finnish equivalent with a slightly different wording, *haistaa palaneen käryä*.

7.4 The effects of the background

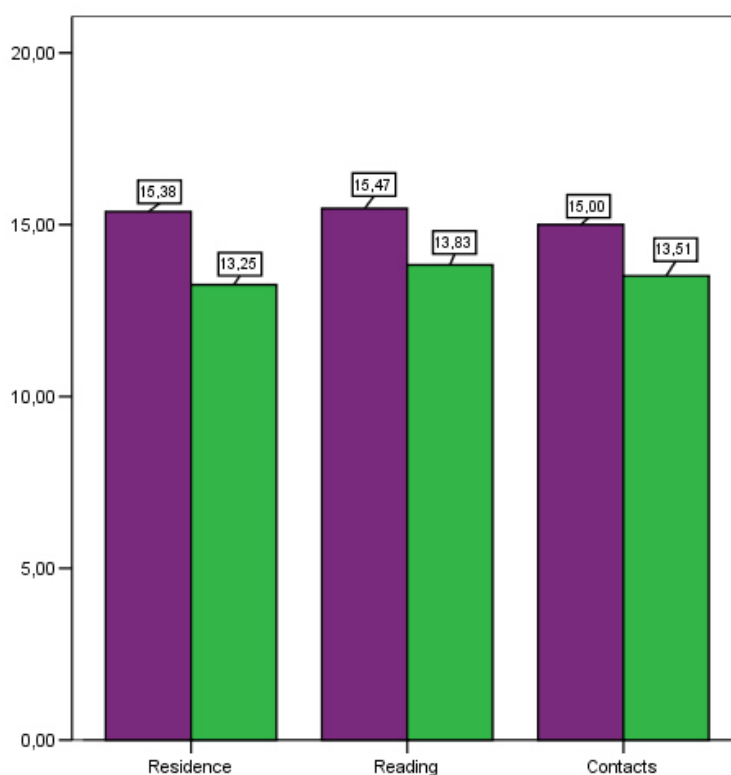


Figure 6. The effects of residence, reading, and contacts on the average score of correct answers in the idiom questionnaire.

Not only was the purpose of the present study to investigate how Finnish third grade senior secondary school students understand the meanings of English idioms but also to see if some selected aspects of their background affect the understanding. The chosen features of their background were residence in

English speaking countries, watching television, reading and listening to music in English as well as contacts with native speakers. Only the residences in English speaking countries/environments, reading in English and the contacts with native speakers are displayed in figure 6. Watching television or listening to music in English did not affect the performance in the idiom test. Figure 6 indicates the difference in the number of correct answers between the students who had stayed in English speaking countries/environments and those who had not, the difference between students who read in English over four hours per week compared to those who performed this activity less than four hours per week and the difference between the students who had contacts with native speakers and those who did not have any connections. The purple bars show the mean score of students who had stayed in English speaking countries/environments, who read over four hours a week and who had contacts with native speakers whereas the green bars indicate the average score of students who answered the opposite in the background questionnaire.

The mean number of correct responses in the idiom questionnaire was 15,38 (76,9 %) for students who had stayed in English speaking countries or environments. The corresponding figure was 13,35 (66,7 %) for those who had not been abroad. The difference is a very significant one. However, it did not make any difference how long they had stayed there, how old they had been or what they had done. In other words, there was no significant difference between students who had been in English-speaking countries for 1- 3 weeks and students who had stayed longer than one year. The age also turned out to be insignificant. It was also irrelevant if the students had been on holiday or on a language course.

Watching television or listening to music in English over or less than four hours per week did not affect the results of the idiom questionnaire. There were no significant differences. Nevertheless, reading in English over four hours a week did have a positive effect on idiom understanding. The mean score of correct answers was 15,47 (77,3 %) for students who read in English over four hours a week and 13,83 (69,2 %) for those who read less than four hours a

week. The background questionnaire also included detailed open questions about what kind of television programmes the participants watch, what they read in English and what kind of music they listen to. The effects of these questions on idiom comprehension were impossible to investigate since the answers varied extensively and they could not be categorised in any particular classes. A large number of the participants also left the open questions unanswered or answered with a single word. Thus, these questions turned out to be insignificant for the results of the present study.

Contacts with native speakers also helped idiom understanding. The mean number of correct responses in the idiom questionnaire was higher for students who had contacts with native speakers compared to those who did not. The mean score was 15,00 (75,0 %) for those in contact with natives and 13,51 (67,6 %) for others.

7.5 Summary of the results

The results show that Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms quite well when they are presented within a brief context. The results of the idiom questionnaire also confirmed that IB students understood idioms better than NSS students which could be expected. Eight of the idioms could be considered easy and three difficult for all the participants. The easiest idiom was *smell a rat* (93,0 %) and the most difficult *be in gear* (32,2 %). There were also six idioms more that were easy for IB students but not for NSS students. The easiest idiom for NSS students was *vote with your feet* (91,8 %) and the most difficult one *be in gear* (27,4 %). For IB students equally easy were *give the green light* (100,0 %) and *smell a rat* (100,0 %). The most difficult idiom was *a lame duck* (35,7 %). Five idioms, *pull faces*, *across the board*, *get the chop*, *give the green light* and *smell a rat*, caused significant differences in responses between the two participating groups. Of the selected aspects of the students' background residence in English speaking countries, contacts with native speakers as well as reading in

English over four hours a week had a positive influence on idiom comprehension.

8. DISCUSSION

The results of the present study were partially as expected in that the IB students got better results on the idiom questionnaire but it is important to consider why they performed better and why some features of the students' background influenced idiom comprehension while others were insignificant. An interesting issue to contemplate is also why certain idioms were more difficult or easier than others and what might be the causes behind it. Above all the results of the present study are considered in the light of previous idiom comprehension studies. The focus of comparison is particularly on Mäntylä's (2004) study.

8.1 Idioms and interest in the English language

The assumption that IB students have better knowledge of idioms than NSS students was confirmed right. IB students are much more involved with the English language than NSS students and it shows in their comprehension of idioms. The background questionnaire also revealed that all students who had been in English speaking countries or environments outdid the other students in idiom understanding. One has to take into account of the fact that IB students are constantly in an English speaking environment since the teaching in IB classes is in English and they are used to communicating in that language. I was aware of this and the question involving the residence in English speaking countries/environments in the questionnaire meant outside the IB Diploma Programme. Fortunately most of the IB students had understood this and did not count the IB Diploma Programme as a residence in English speaking

environment in their answers even though it naturally can be considered to be an English speaking environment.

The length of the stay in an English speaking country or environment, the students' age or activities students had practised there did not correlate with any differences in idiom recognition between the participants. One can assume that residence itself is of secondary importance, but the students who have been in English speaking environments and in particular travelled abroad, show a greater interest towards the English language and culture which also leads to a better understanding of idioms. Nevertheless, the significance of the time span that students have been exposed to the English language cannot be underestimated. Although the results of the background questionnaire suggest that the length of the exposure is irrelevant from the view of idiom comprehension, one cannot ignore that IB students who had studied in an English speaking environment in the IB Diploma Programme in Finland for three years got better results compared to their peers, who were exposed to English only during language lessons. Thus, it can be stated that a three-year long stay in English speaking environment can already be seen in the results.

The results of the background questionnaire also indicated that the students who read more than four hours per week chose more correct answers in the idiom questionnaire than those who read less than four hours. It can also explain why IB students did better. If reading in English improves the comprehension of idioms, it is clear why IB students had better results. They do not have course books during English lessons but they study literature which means they are required to read English novels. In addition, teachers provide them reading materials that are often authentic texts from magazines, newspapers, the Internet etc.

Incidentally, reading was the only leisure time activity that had any influence on idiom comprehension of the participants. Watching television and listening to music in English more or less than four hours a week did not make any difference. This confirms Irujo's (1986b: 237) claim that idioms are best learned in interactive situations. Language in television (and in music)

commonly contains idioms and idiomatic language but learners cannot negotiate their meanings if they do not understand them (Irujo 1986b: 237). The meanings can be discussed only in interactive conditions. For example, when talking to native speakers, a learner can consult the meanings of idioms whenever necessary. In the present study the participants who had contacts with native speakers also understood idioms better than others. Once again this can be an explanatory reason for IB students' superiority over NSS students. In all the IB schools that participated in the present study, there was at least one native speaker in the teaching staff which naturally means that IB students have regularly contacts with natives.

All in all, it seems that idiom comprehension increases when students show interest in language also outside class rooms by staying in English speaking countries, reading in English and being in contact with native speakers. The greater interest in and involvement with the English language surely partially explains why IB students' results exceeded the ones of NSS students.

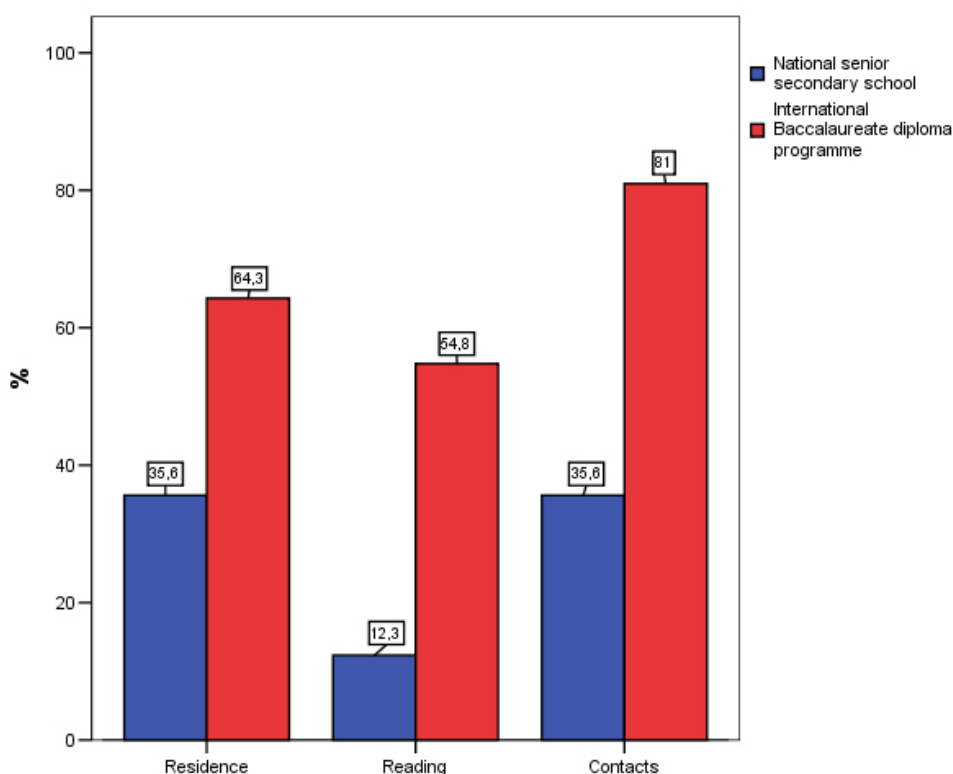


Figure 7. NSS and IB students who had stayed in English speaking country/environment, read over four hours a week and had contacts with native speakers.

Figure 7 shows the percentages of IB and NSS students who had been in English speaking countries/environments, who read more than four hours a week and who had contacts with native speakers. Red bars represent IB students and blue bars NSS students. The higher red bars reveal that IB students are more interested in language also in their leisure time than NSS students. 64,3 % of IB students but only 35,6 % of NSS students have stayed in English speaking environment outside school. Over half of the IB students (54,8 %) reads in English over four hours a week whereas only 12,3 % of the NSS students are equally active readers. The difference between IB and NSS students becomes particularly obvious when comparing the number of students who had contacts with native speakers of English, IB students 81,0 % and NSS students 35,6 %. The results of the present study suggest that idioms are not learned by only taking part in the English language lessons.

However, idioms can be taken into account of during English lessons. The lack of sufficient teaching materials is one of the reasons why idioms are so difficult to second language learners (Irujo 1986b: 237). Teachers can provide exercises on idioms and some course books, such as *In Touch* (Davies et al 2002a, 2002b, 2002c), have already noticed the need for idiom exercises. In fact, NSS students who had *In Touch* as their English course book got better results in the present study than NSS students who studied *English Update* (Kallela et al. 1999, 2000a, 2000b) that does not offer any exercises particularly on idioms. Their mean score of correct answers was 14,28 whereas “English Update-students” got only 12,63. This can be seen to suggest that by introducing idioms to students as well as providing sufficient exercises, they become more familiar and students also understand them better.

8.2 Possible reasons for easy and difficult idioms

The results of the present study should also be looked at in the light of other idiom studies. Previous studies (e.g. Irujo 1986a, Nippold and Rudzinski 1993, Mäntylä 2004) have indicated that such characteristics of idioms as familiarity,

transparency and equivalence in mother tongue affect the understanding. It is intriguing to examine if the present study confirms these claims.

Table 4 shows the familiarity, transparency and possible equivalent in Finnish of the idioms used in the present study. The familiarity is based on the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995) and idioms are either from the most frequent idioms frequency band or from the second most frequent idioms frequency band. Transparency and Finnish equivalents are defined by Mäntylä (2004:206-211). She (2004: 172) reminds, however, that the relationship between Finnish and English equivalents is problematic. It is difficult to define which idioms can be considered equivalents since there are differences in how language users distinguish idioms. Idioms can be equivalent in form but have a somewhat different meaning or the other way around. Mäntylä (2004: 173) has classified the idioms used in her and in the present study as having “a direct translation equivalent, an indirect translation equivalent or equivalent in totally different form”. An indirect translation equivalent means that corresponding idioms have a similar idea but it is expressed in slightly different wording and an equivalent in totally different form means that idioms have the similar meaning but different appearance. Some of the idioms also have so called false friends in Finnish which may make the understanding more difficult if participants resort to native language. False friends are expressions that appear to be equivalents but do not carry the same meaning in both languages.

In table 4 the idioms that were easy (≥ 80 % of the participants got it right) are typed in **green** and the difficult idioms (≤ 50 % of the participants answered correctly) are typed in **dark red** in order to help to recognise the idioms that are under examination.

Table 4. Idioms and their transparency, equivalence in Finnish and frequency (adapted from Mäntylä 2004: 206-211)

IDIOM	TRANSPARENCY	FINNISH EQUIVALENT	FREQUENCY
<i>throw off balance</i>	transparent	yes, translation	the most frequent
<i>pull faces</i>	transparent	yes, different wording	the most frequent
<i>on edge</i>	semi-transparent	yes, different wording	the most frequent
<i>have a chip on your shoulder</i>	opaque	no, false friend	the most frequent
<i>across the board</i>	opaque	no	the most frequent
<i>be in gear</i>	semi-transparent	yes, different wording	the most frequent
<i>come to a head</i>	semi-transparent	no	the most frequent
<i>bring home</i>	opaque	yes, different wording	the most frequent
<i>give the green light</i>	transparent	yes, translation	the most frequent
<i>the nooks and crannies</i>	opaque	no	the most frequent
<i>get the chop</i>	transparent	yes, different wording	the second most frequent
<i>hedge your bets</i>	semi-transparent	yes, different appearance	the second most frequent
<i>with bated breath</i>	semi-transparent	yes, translation	the second most frequent
<i>a lame duck</i>	semi-transparent	no	the second most frequent
<i>vote with your feet</i>	semi-transparent	yes, translation	the second most frequent
<i>ahead of the game</i>	semi-transparent	no, false friend	the second most frequent
<i>keep your head down</i>	transparent	no	the second most frequent
<i>be home and dry</i>	opaque	no, false friend	the second most frequent
<i>smell a rat</i>	semi-transparent	yes, different wording	the second most frequent
<i>make noises</i>	semi-transparent	no, false friend	the second most frequent

87,8 % of the participants found the correct answer for the idiom *throw off balance*. It is a transparent idiom and it is one of the most frequent idioms. The Finnish equivalent is a translation, *horjuttaa jonkun tasapainoa, suistaa joku raiteltaan*.

88,7 % discovered the meaning of *have a chip on your shoulder*. Surprisingly it was easy even though it is an opaque idiom. It is from the most frequent idioms frequency band and it does not have an equivalent in Finnish but a potential false friend, *taakka harteilla*.

85,2 % chose the correct alternative for *bring home*. It is also an opaque idiom but part of the most frequent idioms. It has a Finnish equivalent with different wording, *saada menemään perille/jakeluun* and a potential false friend *tuoda voitto kotiin*.

91,3 % answered correctly on *give the green light*. This was not unexpected since it is a transparent idiom and one of the most frequent idioms. In addition, it has a Finnish equivalent which is almost a direct translation, *näyttää vihreää valoa*.

80,0 % knew that *the nooks and crannies* are small and less accessible parts that are normally unnoticed. This result was unpredictable since it is an opaque idiom that has not got any Finnish equivalent. However, it is part of the most frequent English idioms.

85,2 % understood the meaning of *with bated breath* which is a semi-transparent idiom from the second most frequent band. It also has a Finnish equivalent, *henkeään pidätellen*.

87,8 % were aware of the expression *vote with your feet*. It is also a semi-transparent idiom from the second most frequent idioms frequency band that also has a Finnish equivalent, *äänestää jaloillaan*.

Finally, 93,0 % of the participants were familiar with the idiom *smell a rat*. It collected most correct answers and, therefore, was the easiest idiom for the participants. It is a semi-transparent idiom one of the second most frequent idioms. It has a Finnish equivalent but with slightly different wording, *haistaa palaneen käryä*.

Whereas these eight idioms were easy, only three turned out to be so difficult that less than half were able to select the correct answer. No more than 32,2 % of the students chose the correct alternative for *be in gear*. On the basis of this result, it was the most difficult idiom in the questionnaire. It is surprising since it is a semi-transparent idiom from the second most frequent idioms frequency band and it also has a Finnish equivalent with somewhat different wording, *täydellä höyryllä/teholla/voimalla*. Moreover, these characteristics are similar to the characteristics of the questionnaire's easiest idiom, *smell a rat*.

A lame duck was also an unfamiliar expression since only 42,6 % found the correct alternative. It is a semi-transparent idiom from the second most frequent idioms frequency band. It does not have any Finnish equivalent.

43,5 % recognised the expression *ahead of the game*. It is a semi-transparent idiom and one of the second most frequent idioms. Perhaps the participants were fooled by a potential false friend in Finnish, *aikaansa edellä*.

All in all, two of the eight easiest idioms are transparent, three semi-transparent and three opaque. Five of them are from the most frequent idioms frequency band and three from the second most. Six of the easy idioms have a Finnish equivalent, four with translation equivalent and two with different wording, but two of the easy idioms do not have equivalents and the other of these has even a false friend in Finnish. The difficult idioms then again are all semi-transparent and one is from the most frequent idioms frequency band and the other two from the second most. Two of the difficult idioms do not have Finnish equivalents but the other one has a false friend. One of the three difficult idioms has a Finnish equivalent with different wording. Next the results of the present study are compared to other idiom studies when

considering the effects of familiarity, transparency and equivalence on idiom comprehension.

8.2.1 Familiarity and transparency

Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) and Nippold and Taylor (1995) found that both familiarity as well as transparency have an effect on idiom comprehension (see 3.2). Both studies concerned adolescents of whom the oldest were around 17 years old which is quite close to the age of the participants in the present study who are 18-19 years old. Nippold and Taylor (1995) also had a forced multiple choice test. Thus, it is very interesting to compare the results even though the participants in both Nippold and Rudzinski's (1993) as well as Nippold and Taylor's (1995) studies were native speakers.

Nippold and Rudzinski (1993: 735) concluded that idioms that were rated as high or moderate in familiarity were easier than low familiarity idioms. Nippold and Taylor's (1995) results confirmed this but there was no statistically significant difference between high and moderate familiarity idioms for 17 year-olds. The familiarity of idioms in the present study was determined by their frequency of occurrence in language. Thus, it was expected that the familiarity or in this case the frequency would not explain the differences between easy and difficult idioms in the present study since they were all from either the most frequent or the second most frequent idioms frequency band. Five of the easy idioms were from the most frequent band and three from the second most frequent. Furthermore, the frequency was also insignificant for Mäntylä's (2004: 172) Finnish participants although she tested also some rarish idioms along side with frequent and fairly frequent idioms. These results confirm that frequency is irrelevant for non-native speakers even though it does make a difference for native speakers. It is not surprising that frequency does not make a difference among non-native speakers since even idioms that can be considered to be frequent are highly infrequent in comparison to really frequent English words (Mäntylä 2004: 172).

Mäntylä's (2004: 171) Finnish participants recognised transparent idioms better than opaque ones. However, in the present study there were four transparent idioms of which only two were among the easy idioms. Transparency certainly explains why *throw off balance* and *give the green light* had a high amount of correct answers, but 80 % or more of the participants chose the correct alternative also for *have a chip on your shoulder*, *bring home* and *the nooks and crannies* which are all opaque idioms. Furthermore, none of the difficult idioms was an opaque one and the easiest idiom for all, *smell a rat*, is a semi-transparent. Three out of the five opaque idioms altogether were easy for all participants and for IB students all opaque idioms of the present study could be considered easy. Thus, it seems that transparency had quite little influence on comprehension in the present study. However, it should be kept in mind that most of the idioms (11) used in the present study were semi-transparent and the purpose of the study was not to examine the effects of transparency of idioms on comprehension which would have required that there would have had to be idioms equally from all transparency groups. The transparency factor did not fully confirm Mäntylä's (2004) results.

8.2.2 Finnish equivalents

Irujo (1986a) studied how advanced learners of English who spoke Spanish as their mother tongue comprehended idioms and found out that English idioms that had equivalents in Spanish were easier than the ones without. She also noticed that participants relied on their native language. Mäntylä (2004) reported similar results. Idioms without any equivalent in Finnish were the most difficult. The present study confirms that idioms with some kind of corresponding expression in Finnish were generally easier than others. Six of the eight easy idioms had an equivalent in Finnish and two of the three difficult ones did not have a Finnish equivalent. Furthermore, the idiom that was the easiest for NSS students, *vote with your feet*, has a translation equivalent in Finnish in the same way as *give the green light* that all IB students answered correctly. However, two of the easy idioms did not have Finnish equivalents and one of the difficult ones did have a Finnish equivalent even though with

different wording. Mäntylä (2004: 172) thinks that this can be explained by the participants' inability to identify the expressions as equivalents.

All in all, it seems that in the present study the degree of transparency did not significantly help the comprehension whereas corresponding expressions in Finnish appeared to be assistance. On the basis of previous idiom studies, the easiest idioms should have been transparent ones with a Finnish translation equivalent i.e. *throw off balance* and *give the green light*. They were among the easiest idioms but the most difficult idioms, according to the same principles, should have been opaque idioms without Finnish equivalents i.e. *have a chip on your shoulder*, *the nooks and crannies* and *be home and dry*. However, the two former were among the easy idioms and the latter was among the easy idioms for IB students. Thus, there have to be also other variables that have affected the understanding.

8.3 Context

The role of context compared to no context in idiom comprehension can be looked at when the results of the present study are compared to Mäntylä's (2004) since the idioms used are the same ones and even some of the alternatives are alike. The methodological aim of the study was to see if the comprehension is improved when idioms are presented within a brief context. Table 5 indicates the percentages of how many Finnish third grade students in the present study chose the correct alternative and the corresponding figures from Mäntylä's study. However, one should keep in mind that Mäntylä had more than one correct or appropriate answer among the alternatives since the meanings given in different dictionaries vary. Thus, some low percentages can be due to the many appropriate answers instead of only one. In the present study the amount of correct answers is limited owing to the context within which the idiom is presented.

Table 5. Comparison to Mäntylä's (2004) results.

IDIOM	PRESENT STUDY	MÄNTYLÄ (2004)
<i>throw off balance</i>	87,8 %	≈ 90 %
<i>pull faces</i>	65,2 %	≈ 25 %
<i>on edge</i>	63,5 %	≈ 62 %
<i>have a chip on your shoulder</i>	88,7 %	≈ 38 %
<i>across the board</i>	70,4 %	≈ 41 %
<i>be in gear</i>	32,2 %	≈ 59 %
<i>come to a head</i>	61,7 %	≈ 56 %
<i>bring home</i>	85,2 %	≈ 34 %
<i>give the green light</i>	91,3 %	≈ 99 %
<i>the nooks and crannies</i>	80,0 %	≈ 39 %
<i>get the chop</i>	74,8 %	≈ 39 %
<i>hedge your bets</i>	78,3 %	≈ 38 %
<i>with bated breath</i>	85,2 %	≈ 21 %
<i>a lame duck</i>	42,6 %	≈ 50 %
<i>vote with your feet</i>	87,8 %	≈ 65 %
<i>ahead of the game</i>	43,5 %	≈ 37 %
<i>keep your head down</i>	60,9 %	≈ 70 %
<i>be home and dry</i>	79,1 %	≈ 22 %
<i>smell a rat</i>	93,0 %	≈ 98 %
<i>make noises</i>	57,4 %	≈ 17 %

The context has clearly helped the understanding. The participants of the present study performed substantially better as far as 11 of these idioms are concerned. The percentage of correct answers for 11 idioms was over 20

percentage points higher in the present study than in Mäntylä's (2004). Moreover, Mäntylä's Finnish participants did considerably better only with the idiom *be in gear*. It is highly unlikely that Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school would have better language skills than fourth year university students of English. Thus, the results indicate the role of context in idiom comprehension and show how idioms are far more easily understood within a brief context than without one. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that this comparison was made on account of 20 idioms and the results might have been different if all 45 idioms that Mäntylä used would have been tested here. Not to mention that some low percentages in Mäntylä's study can be due to the many appropriate answers instead of only one as already pointed out above.

Since the transparency of idioms seemed to have little effect on the idiom comprehension in the present study whereas in other studies it has had an impact, the brief context as well as the alternatives of the questionnaire must have affected the results of this study. In fact, it appears that they have influenced the comprehension quite significantly. The alternatives of the multiple choice test were all designed to fit the brief context. However, in some cases the alternatives were quite close to each other's meanings, such as in the case of one of the difficult idioms *a lame duck*. This may have confused and distracted the participants more than with other idioms where all the three alternatives were completely different in form and meaning. Another interesting point is the length and content of the brief context within which the idioms were presented. *Be in gear*, which turned out to be the most difficult idiom, was presented in a context that was only two short sentences which did not insinuate very much of the meaning. *Be in gear* is a semi-transparent idiom that has a Finnish equivalent even though with slightly different wording. In other words, the characteristics of this idiom are exactly the same as *smell a rat* which was the easiest idiom. Thus, the results suggest that the effect of such aspects as context and alternatives in multiple choice tests should not be underestimated. They can explain some of the results that seem unexpected or odd. They should be taken into account of alongside with transparency and correspondence to native language.

8.4 Evaluation

The reliability and the methodological choices of the present study have to be evaluated. The questionnaire as a whole functioned very well in the sense that students were able to fill it within the appropriate time and they did not also have any problems with the questions. The background questions were suitable for the study and they brought up some differences between the participants. The only minor set back was that students did not answer very enthusiastically on open questions concerning detailed information about their taste in music, television programmes and reading. Fortunately the questions were unimportant for the overall results. However, it is impossible to say if there was a difference between students who read comics in English compared to ones who read novels. Moreover, it is difficult to estimate whether residence in English speaking environments, reading over four hours a week and contacts with native speakers actually improved idiom comprehension or not since it was mostly IB students who were more involved with these activities. Thus, it is difficult to say whether it was these activities that increased idiom understanding or the studying in the IB Diploma Programme. All in all, the background questionnaire showed that IB students were more interested in the English language in their spare time and it must have had a positive influence also on idiom recognition.

The forced multiple choice test in the idiom questionnaire was also a good choice as well as the use of context. Otherwise the questionnaire would have been too demanding. The comparison to Mäntylä's (2004) study indicated that the presentation of idioms in an authentic context provided a great help for the participants. On the other hand, it is impossible to know how much the given context and the alternatives helped or hindered the understanding. They may have assisted students a great deal and the results may be better than the actual understanding of the participants since multiple choice tests also always enable the possibility to guess the meaning and occasionally it works, in particular when there are only three alternatives to choose from. In addition, some idioms

have different meanings and the ones that were judged as correct ones in the present study are from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995).

It would be interesting to carry out further research by using the same idioms but changing the alternatives or the given context in order to investigate their impact on comprehension. Generally speaking, the methodology in idiom studies is a complicated matter. It is no wonder that there are so many theories about idiom comprehension since there are so many factors involved in the process. It is impossible to try to control all of them within the same study. Furthermore, the results of this study cannot be considered to represent idiom comprehension of all Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school. The sample was quite small even though collected from three different schools in three different towns.

8.5 Implications

The teaching of idioms is a current issue at the moment. For the first time the level of proficiency the students are expected to reach is determined explicitly in the new *Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2003* (Framework curriculum for senior secondary school 2003). This means that also idioms and idiomatic language are mentioned in the descriptions of proficiency levels. All students are expected to use broad vocabulary including idiomatic and conceptual vocabulary by the end of their secondary education. Nevertheless, they are allowed to have problems with idioms when reading longer texts, i.e. they are not expected to understand idioms particularly well. This is the minimum requirement set for all students and naturally it is desirable that at least some of the students would reach a higher level of proficiency. Moreover, all IB students are required to understand and use a range of vocabulary and idiom at the end of their studies.

It is clear that idioms are considered to be difficult since all students are not expected to understand them in longer texts even at the end of their secondary education. However, Seidl and McMordie (1978) have stated already decades

ago that “the use of idioms is so common in English that it would be difficult to speak or write without them”. Thus, it seems odd that they are not taken more account of in English teaching. Irujo (1986a: 299) has accurately pointed out that the teaching of idiom comprehension should offer students skills that enable them to guess the meaning from context and to deal with figurative language. The results of this study indicate that Finnish third grade senior secondary school students already have such skills since the mean percentage of correct answers in the idiom test was 71 %. It is quite a high percentage and since they understood many idioms better than fourth year university students in Mäntylä’s (2004) study, they must be able to figure out the meanings from the context. These skills only need to be improved further.

Idioms do not have to be the main focus in teaching but occasional exercises would already enhance the understanding. Introducing idioms to students is the least that can be done in language lessons. Once students are aware of these kinds of expressions they can also pay attention to them independently. Teachers and teaching materials should provide students practise on idioms and encourage them to read in English also in their spare time since it improves idiom understanding according to this study. Fortunately many course books already offer exercises that are focused on idioms and they also include authentic reading texts. Moreover, the students from national senior secondary schools who had read the course book that acknowledged idioms as their own exercises had better results compared to others even though there were only few exercises on idioms in the course books. However, a few is better than none. It would not require much more additional time or effort to familiarize students with idioms. After all, idioms cannot be ignored in language teaching because of their role in language. They might play a minor role but it is a very significant one.

In addition, this study has also shown that the transparency of idioms seems to have less effect on the understanding than their equivalence to Finnish. This could be a good starting point for the teaching of English idioms. It would make sense to teach idioms that have some kind of equivalent in Finnish first since they appear to be easier and then move on to more difficult ones. The

present study has also indicated that context helps second language learners to interpret the meanings of idioms. It should be noticed in the teaching, too. Authentic texts from newspapers, magazines, Internet, etc. are a great way to introduce idioms to learners.

9. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to investigate if Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand the meanings of English idioms and to compare students who study according to the national curriculum with the ones who take part in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. The intention was also to examine the effects of the students' backgrounds on idiom comprehension, such as residence in English-speaking countries and involvement with the English language in their leisure time. Further aims were to examine if some idioms were easier or more difficult than others and discuss the possible reasons for them on the basis of previous research. Since the present study was an attempt partially to replicate Mäntylä's (2004) research, there were also comparative and methodological aims. The results were compared to Mäntylä's and the impact of a different methodological decision, i.e. presenting idioms within a brief context instead of no context, was considered.

The study was conducted through a questionnaire and 115 students took part in the study. The idioms in the questionnaire were the same ones Mäntylä (2004) had used in her study but they were presented within a brief context and the multiple choice alternatives were mostly changed to suit the given context.

Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understood idioms very well since the mean number of correct answers was 14,29 out of the 20 idioms. This means that they answered correctly on the average of 71 %. Nevertheless, there was a significant difference between IB and NSS students since IB

students' results were 77 % correct on average but NSS students' corresponding figure was only 68 %. There were eight easier idioms of which 80 % or more of all participants had chosen the correct alternative (*throw off balance, have a chip on your shoulder, bring home, give the green light, the nooks and crannies, with bated breath, vote with your feet and smell a rat*) and three more difficult ones of which less than half, i.e. under 50 % had answered correctly (*be in gear, a lame duck and ahead of the game*).

The percentages of NSS students' correct answers on individual idioms indicated that there were only seven idioms that could be considered easy for them whereas the corresponding figures of IB students showed that they had 13 easy idioms. Both participating groups had three difficult idioms. However, the easiest as well as the most difficult idioms were different for NSS and IB students. The easiest idiom for NSS students was *vote with your feet* and the most difficult one *be in gear*. IB students considered *smell a rat* and *give the green light* the easiest and the most difficult idiom was *a lame duck*. Moreover, even though they had regarded the same idioms as easy or difficult, the order of these specific idioms was completely different. All in all, there were five idioms (*pull faces, across the board, give the green light, get the chop and smell a rat*) that caused statistical differences between the two participating groups. In all of these idioms IB students answered much better than NSS students.

The residences in English speaking countries or environments, reading in English over four hours a week and contacts with native speakers had a positive influence on idiom comprehension. The students who had been in English speaking environments, read in English and had contacts with native speakers got better results than their peers who reported the opposite in the background questionnaire. Watching television or listening to music in English did not affect idiom understanding. Moreover, the purpose of the stay in an English speaking environment, the age at the time as well as the duration of the stay all turned out to be insignificant for idiom comprehension. It seems that the students who had stayed in English speaking environments were generally

more interested in the English language and it was unimportant what they had done there.

The results indicate that Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school comprehend idioms quite well and since idioms can be considered to be difficult for second language learners, one can assume that Finnish senior secondary school students reach a high level of proficiency in the English language by their graduation. However, the differences between NSS and IB students suggest that English idioms are not learned only by taking part in language lessons. Idiom comprehension seems to improve when students show interest in the English language also outside the classroom and are involved with the language in their spare time. IB students' better understanding of idioms is probably due to their greater involvement with the English language. The background questionnaire revealed that IB students had spent more time in English speaking environments, read more in English as well as had contacts with native speakers outside school environment more often than their peers in national senior secondary school classes.

The results of the present study were not completely in accordance with the previous studies when looking at the possible explanations for easy and difficult idioms. The degree of transparency did not significantly help the comprehension process and even though Finnish equivalents assisted the understanding, the participants also considered some idioms easy that were opaque without any corresponding expressions in Finnish. However, Mäntylä's (2004: 172) finding that familiarity of idioms, or frequency of occurrence in language as it was defined in this study, was insignificant for second language learners, was confirmed.

The comparison to Mäntylä's (2004) results indicated the impact of the methodological choice on results. The participants in the present study performed better than Mäntylä's even though her participants were fourth year university students of English. Presenting idioms within a brief context clearly helped the understanding. All in all, the use of context and multiple choice options in the idiom questionnaire were a good choice since there was no need

to test participants' idiom comprehension outside context. Many idioms can have several meanings depending on the context within which they are used. Idioms can be difficult even for native speakers, and therefore, one cannot expect second language learners to know the meanings of idioms outside context or to produce them in their own speech or writing.

The teaching and learning of idioms is a current issue since idioms and idiomatic language are mentioned for the first time in the Finnish *Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2003* (Framework curriculum for senior secondary school 2003). The present study has indicated that Finnish third grade students of senior secondary school understand idioms quite well and they are able to work out the meanings from the given context. These skills should be improved further. Teachers also have an important role in encouraging students to get involved with the language in their spare time since it seems to enhance idiom comprehension. This study has also showed that it is reasonable to begin the teaching of English idioms from the ones that have some kind of equivalence in Finnish since they seem to be easier to understand.

It is difficult to say how much the given brief context and alternatives of the multiple choice task affected comprehension. Further research is needed to examine more carefully their impact since the effects of methodological choices on results cannot be underestimated. Moreover, further study is needed to examine more the effects of the students' background and involvement with the language on idiom comprehension. It cannot be confirmed whether it was the residence in English speaking environments, reading in English and contacts with native speakers or studying in the IB Diploma Programme that improved idiom comprehension since it was mostly IB students who were involved with these activities. In general more idiom studies concentrating on second or foreign language learners should be conducted in order to learn more about the language learning process. It would be interesting to study Finnish second language learners of English who are at different stages in their learning and see how they understand idioms. Does idiom comprehension improve gradually and can it be advanced with suitable exercises? After all, idioms are

an essential part of language and they should not be ignored in language teaching even though they tend to be difficult for learners.

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Appendix 1. Background questionnaire

BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions by circling the alternative that describes you best or by writing a detailed answer to open questions.

Mother Tongue

- a) Finnish
- b) Swedish
- c) English
- d) other, what? _____

RESIDENCE IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES/ENVIRONMENTS

1. Have you ever been in an English-speaking country or environment?
- a) yes (please answer also questions 2.-4.)
 - b) no (move to question 5.)

2. How long did you stay there?
- a) 1-3 weeks
 - b) 1-3 months
 - c) 4-6 months
 - d) 7-9 months
 - e) 10-12 months
 - f) other, how long? _____

3. How old were you at the time?
- a) younger than 6
 - b) 6-12
 - c) 13- 16
 - d) older, how old? _____

4. What did you do there? I was...
- a) on holiday.
 - b) working as an au pair.
 - c) an exchange student.
 - d) working.
 - e) on a language course.
 - f) other, what? _____

LEISURE TIME

5. Please estimate how much time you spend watching television in English so that you pay attention and actively listen to the language.

- a) 0 hours a week
- b) 1-4 hours a week
- c) 5-9 hours a week
- d) 10-14 hours a week
- e) other, how much? _____

6. What channels do you watch (e.g. MTV3, Music Television, Eurosport, NBC etc.) and what kinds of programmes? (e.g. comedies, talk shows, sport events etc.) You can also name some programmes.

8. Please estimate how much time you spend reading in English.

- a) 0 hours a week
- b) 1-4 hours a week
- c) 5-9 hours a week
- d) 10-14 hours a week
- e) other, how much? _____

7. What do you read in English? For example, books (e.g. novels, autobiographies, comic books etc.), magazines (e.g. *Cosmopolitan*, snowboard/skating magazines, *Seventeen*, *Newsweek* etc), newspapers (e.g. *the Times*, *the Sun*, *the Observer* etc.)

10. Please estimate how much time you spend listening to music that has lyrics in English so that you pay attention and actively listen to the lyrics.

- a) 0 hours a week
- b) 1-4 hours a week
- c) 5-9 hours a week
- d) 10-14 hours a week
- e) other, how much? _____

9. What kind of music do you listen to? (e.g. pop, rock, hip hop, rap, heavy metal etc.) You can also name some artists or bands.

CONTACTS WITH NATIVE SPEAKERS

11. Do you have contacts with native speakers of English?

- a) yes (please answer also the next question)
- b) no

12. What kind of contacts do you have with native speakers of English (e.g. family and relatives, e-mail/pen friends, boy/girlfriends etc.) and how frequently do you have contacts with them?

Appendix 2. Idiom questionnaire

IDIOM QUESTIONNAIRE

Please choose and circle the correct meaning for the expression from the given alternatives. After each expression there is an example of it situated in a context. It should help you to find the correct alternative. Only one meaning is correct.

1. **throw off balance**

*His directness seemed designed to **throw Michael off balance**.*

- a) make someone change their opinion
- b) make someone feel angry
- c) suddenly confuse or surprise someone

2. **pull faces**

*He was taught from an early age to address people as 'mister' and not to poke his tongue out or **pull faces**.*

- a) repeatedly cheat or deceive others
- b) show dislike by twisting one's face
- c) cause dissatisfaction or annoyance

3. **on edge**

*I was pathetic. I was a bit **on edge** at the start but that's no excuse for playing as badly as that.*

- a) weak or less effective
- b) very nervous and unable to relax
- c) in a dangerous or risky situation

4. **have a chip on your shoulder**

*My father wasn't always easy to get along with; he **had a chip on his shoulder** and thought people didn't like him because of his colour.*

- a) feel guilt and shame for doing something wrong or unjust
- b) feel inferior because of your background and education
- c) lose every chance of succeeding in what one tries to do

5. across the board

*It seems that **across the board** all shops have cut back on staff.*

- a) affecting everyone or -thing equally
- b) under development and planning
- c) completely honest and legal arrangement

6. be in gear

*I have fallen back into my rhythm and stride quickly. I **am** pretty much **in gear** now.*

- a) deal with something effectively
- b) be prepared and ready for something
- c) follow the latest fashion and trends

7. come to a head

*These problems **came to a head** in September when five of the station's journalists were sacked.*

- a) cease to exist or stop completely
- b) begin to decrease
- c) reach the most decisive stage

8. bring home

*I think it is grossly irresponsible that a bar such as this should serve people with alcohol when they are clearly intoxicated. This tragic death **brings** it **home** to people in the drinks trade just how dangerous alcohol can be.*

- a) be directly affected by unpleasant situation
- b) make someone understand the true nature of a situation
- c) have the wanted effect on someone or -thing

9. give the green light

*Despite local planning opposition he has finally been **given the green light** to develop a terrace of 11 derelict houses he owns in South Kensington.*

- a) understand someone in a new way
- b) agree with someone's opinions without hesitation
- c) permit or allow someone to carry out with their plans

10. the nooks and crannies

*In the weeks before Christmas, we would scour the house, searching all **the nooks and crannies** trying to find our presents.*

- a) small corners that are hidden from other people
- b) small holes or openings that are noticeable
- c) small and less accessible parts that are normally unnoticed

11. get the chop

*He had hardly settled into his new job when he **got the chop** due to cutbacks.*

- a) be shocked
- b) be sacked
- c) be excited

12. hedge your bets

*The Rev Donald Reeves **hedges his bets** on whether Carey is the leader the Church needs in troubled times. 'I don't know him so I can't really say.'*

- a) hesitate in expressing one's opinion in order not to take sides
- b) be unwilling and hesitant to invest money in fear of losing it all
- c) give someone advice about the best thing to do

13. with bated breath

*The institution is now waiting **with bated breath** to see if the results of the next few surveys confirm its current assessment.*

- a) chokingly or painfully
- b) expectantly or worried
- c) cautiously or slowly

14. a lame duck

*Rover intends to complete the transformation from **the lame duck** of the motor industry into a quality car maker with a series of 'high image' models.*

- a) someone/-thing that has fallen behind others
- b) someone/-thing cannot defend themselves against others
- c) someone/-thing in a weak and uncertain position

15. vote with your feet

*If people didn't like our services, they would be **voting with their feet** and putting their money in other banks.*

- a) get out of a bad situation
- b) think or behave in a sensible way
- c) show dislike of a place or situation by leaving it

16. ahead of the game

*The way scientists keep **ahead of the game** is to use a combination of molecular analysis and careful judgement to predict what strain, or strains, of virus will cause the next outbreak.*

- a) with better chances than others to win a competition
- b) more advanced than anyone else in a particular activity
- c) prepared to deal with changes in a particular situation

17. keep your head down

*I just decided to **keep my head down** and do my job and eventually I was accepted by the male pilots and everything was going well.*

- a) attempt to avoid trouble by being unnoticed and quiet
- b) defend oneself against unjust and harmful criticism
- c) act in a modest way despite one's talents and success

18. be home and dry

*I was watching the competition with Mark and he said, 'Look at that, she's nine seconds up on anyone else – she has to **be home and dry.**'*

- a) do something that is very popular or successful
- b) achieve victory or success
- c) direct your thoughts or attention towards something

19. smell a rat

*Kurt was not a very considerate employer, and when he invited me to dinner I could **smell a rat.***

- a) be disgusted by something or someone
- b) escape an unpleasant situation
- c) suspect that something is wrong

20. make noises

*During his 18th year Paul's mother had started **making noises** about it being time for him to leave home, something which worried him a great deal.*

- a) openly complain about something
- b) speak in an extremely loud voice
- c) talk about something indirectly

Appendix 3. Correct alternatives

1. **throw off balance**

*His directness seemed designed to **throw Michael off balance**.*

- c) suddenly confuse or surprise someone

2. **pull faces**

*He was taught from an early age to address people as 'mister' and not to poke his tongue out or **pull faces**.*

- b) show dislike by twisting one's face

3. **on edge**

*I was pathetic. I was a bit **on edge** at the start but that's no excuse for playing as badly as that.*

- b) very nervous and unable to relax

4. **have a chip on your shoulder**

*My father wasn't always easy to get along with; he **had a chip on his shoulder** and thought people didn't like him because of his colour.*

- b) feel inferior because of your background and education

5. **across the board**

*It seems that **across the board** all shops have cut back on staff.*

- a) affecting everyone or -thing equally

6. **be in gear**

*I have fallen back into my rhythm and stride quickly. I **am** pretty much **in gear** now.*

- a) deal with something effectively

7. **come to a head**

*These problems **came to a head** in September when five of the station's journalists were sacked.*

- c) reach the most decisive stage

8. **bring home**

*I think it is grossly irresponsible that a bar such as this should serve people with alcohol when they are clearly intoxicated. This tragic death **brings it home** to people in the drinks trade just how dangerous alcohol can be.*

- b) make someone understand the true nature of a situation

9. **give the green light**

*Despite local planning opposition he has finally been **given the green light** to develop a terrace of 11 derelict houses he owns in South Kensington.*

- c) permit or allow someone to carry out with their plans

10. **the nooks and crannies**

*In the weeks before Christmas, we would scour the house, searching all **the nooks and crannies** trying to find our presents.*

- c) small and less accessible parts that are normally unnoticed

11. **get the chop**

*He had hardly settled into his new job when he **got the chop** due to cutbacks.*

- b) be sacked

12. **hedge your bets**

*The Rev Donald Reeves **hedges his bets** on whether Carey is the leader the Church needs in troubled times. 'I don't know him so I can't really say.'*

- a) hesitate in expressing one's opinion in order not to take sides

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*The institution is now waiting **with bated breath** to see if the results of the next few surveys confirm its current assessment.*

- b) expectantly or worried

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*Rover intends to complete the transformation from **the lame duck** of the motor industry into a quality car maker with a series of 'high image' models.*

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- b) achieve victory or success

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*Kurt was not a very considerate employer, and when he invited me to dinner I could **smell a rat.***

- c) suspect that something is wrong

20. make noises

*During his 18th year Paul's mother had started **making noises** about it being time for him to leave home, something which worried him a great deal.*

- c) talk about something indirectly