AN IDIOM A DAY KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY:
Finnish upper secondary school English teachers' attitudes towards teaching idioms

Candidate's thesis
Matti Ylisirniö

HUMANISTINEN TIEDEKUNTA
KIELTEN LAITOS

Matti Ylisirniö
AN IDIOM A DAY KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY:
Finnish upper secondary school English teachers' attitudes towards teaching idioms

Kandidaatin tutkielma

Englannin kieli
15.12.2009   26 sivua + 1 liite

Idiomit ilmaisevat kulttuurille ominaisia ajatuksia ja siten niiden hallitseminen on tärkeä osa kielitaidon kehitystä. Viime vuosina idiomien oppimista ja opettamista onkin tutkittu melko laajasti. Tutkimuksissa on kuitenkin havaittu, että idiomien tärkeästä roolista huolimatta niiden suora opettaminen voi johtaa tilanteeseen, jossa oppilaat käyttävät niitä väärin, koska ovat erehtyneet pitämään idiomeja yleisempinä kuin ne ovat. Yksikään tutkimus ei kuitenkaan ole keskittynyt siihen, miten ja miksi opettajat käsittelevät idiomeja, minkä takia ei loppujen lopuksi tiedetä, kuinka suuri yllä kuvattu ongelma on. Tämä kandidaatin tutkielma syventyi selvittämään, mitä suomalaisen lukion englannin opettajat ajattelevat idiomeista ja niiden opettamisesta, ja kuinka nämä asenteet heijastuvat käytännön opettamiseen.

Aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoidulla sähköpostihaastattelulla, jonka kaikki neljä vastaajaa olivat suomalaisten lukioiden englannin opettajia, joilla osalla oli myös yläasteen opetusta. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että opettajat olivat pääosin hyvin tietoisia idiomien opettamisen luonteenomaisista riskeistä, ja he siten suosivat menetelmiä, joissa oppilaat omaksuivat idiomeja niiden kontekstissa. Toisaalta tuloksista pystyi myös päättelemään, että opetustilanne osin rajoitti opettajien mahdollisuuksia käyttää parhaina pitämiään menetelmiä.

Asiasanat: idioms, formulaic sequences, vocabulary learning, vocabulary teaching

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

The lexicon of any given language includes multiword items with meanings that cannot be deciphered from the constituent words (Moon 2006:46). These items are called idioms. The sequences in question are important for a language learner to acquire because they often reveal culturally sensitive meanings (Dörnyei at al 2004:105) that are essential parts of advanced communication in the target language. The other crucial feature of idioms as a group is that there are considerable numbers of idioms but any individual one is used only rarely (Moon 2006:51). Yet these two features of idioms inevitably create a problem of teaching, which is what to teach and how to do it correctly, as explicit attention can easily cause the students to see idioms as much more common than they actually are, and thus use them in wrong contexts (Moon 2006:60). Recent research has, however, shown that there are methods of helping students acquire idioms in a way that does not cause distortion of learning. It has been suggested (Mäntylä 2004:180-181) that the teaching should favour implicit methods that do not teach idioms as such, but create awareness of the common characteristics of idioms and thus help students recognise idioms and their correct use. In other words, the underlying idea is that one should engender awareness, from which correct use may follow.

As this study was first started, it became clear that research into the field of idioms lacked a crucial point of view. That is, there seemed to be little information on what teachers actually think of idioms and teaching them. Previous research has taken a more theoretical approach into the pedagogics of idioms, but the significance of this knowledge is lessened if it is not compared to the knowledge and practises of the teachers – the primary users of this type of research.

The purpose of the present study is to describe how some teachers of English in Finnish upper secondary school view idioms, their importance and teaching. What is more, the intention is also to see how these attitudes manifest in actual teaching and whether either the practices or the attitude correlate with the current scientific knowledge. The hypothesis that is based on the writer's personal experience is that teachers might favour explicit teaching of idioms which is essentially contrary to aforementioned theories. To test this hypothesis, the present study first introduces some theories on the nature and teaching of idioms in more detail. Secondly, the

qualitative data comprised of four interviews will be compared to these theories. Each question in the interviews will be analysed separately. Finally, the conclusion will combine the results from the individual questions and explain what these answers mean as a whole.

2   IDIOMS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1. The nature of formulaic sequences

In the current study I use mostly Wray's (2005:9) definition of a formulaic sequence. She considers a formulaic sequence to be a chain of language elements that has a shared meaning and is therefore mentally stored as an entity rather than a set of elements governed by generative rules. What is more, I focus on studying the subgroup of formulaic sequences traditionally called idioms. According to Moon (2006:46), an idiom is a multi-word item whose meaning is something else than the combined meanings of its constituent parts. The difference between the superordinate term and the subordinate term is somewhat unsteady but a formulaic sequence can be something as simple as a compound noun (Moon 2006:44) *jet fighter*. The words in the example have a combined meaning but it is not more than the sum of its parts as is the case in the idiom *to ride the gravy train.* What makes formulaic sequences particularly important in any language is that they seem to be a critical part of processing that occurs in the mind. It seems that language is usually not learned on a strict word-by-word basis, but rather as items that are several words long. It is only later that these entities are analysed into their constituent parts (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992:27). Moon (2006:42) calls this theory the idiom principle. What is more, a hypothesis that has been generated from this idea states that formulaic language is a method of diminishing the processing load of the mind (Wray 2005:101). In essence, it takes less time to retrieve a formulaic sequence than it takes to reproduce an entity from its constituent parts. Taking all these views into account, it could be argued that knowing idioms and formulaic language is an important part of every speaker's language capability. Yet it cannot be denied that idioms are a very limited subcategory of the formulaic language and therefore the same idea cannot be completely applied to them.

The defining characteristic of an idiom is the opaqueness its meaning. This feature can, however, also be seen as a system of dual meaning where the non-literal meaning is dominant. The model in question can be explained through historical development and it has an added virtue of giving an explanation to multiple parallel forms of idioms. (Wray 2008:28-30.) In other words, it can be said that each idiom has both holistic and compositional meaning (Wray 2008:28). The first one is the metaphorical meaning or the one that cannot be deduced from the parts of the expression. In the idiom *to ride the gravy train*, for instance, this meaning would be the allusion to the undeserved and excessive ease of someone doing something. Consequently the holistic meaning is the sum of literal meanings of the constituent words in the idiom. Wray (2008:28) hypothesises that this dual meaning is a result of a historical development where the expression in question was originally directly connected to an instance where its meaning was literal. In time, however, the connection faded to the point of being metaphorical and thus the idiom was born. This theory also accounts for the intances where there seem to be two or more parallel forms of the same idiom as the divergence can be explained as a result of two analogous lines of idiomatic development (Wray 2008:32). An example of parallel forms might be *glued to the spot* and *rooted to the spot.* In conclusion, this model is not so much an alternative explanation but a highly useful clarification to the idiom model by Wray's earlier work. The clarification is important because it allows for and logically explains the variation found in some idioms. What is more, this is achieved by holding onto fixedness as a key issue of idioms.

The concept of idioms and other forms of formulaic language as load bearing building blocks is not the only possible way of seeing the issue. Penttilä (1998:158), for instance, suggests that idioms are not as fixed in form or isolated as a phenomenon as they are traditionally considered to be. Penttilä considers idiomatic language to be one end of a continuum of expressions whose forms are fixed to a varying degree. He calls these expressions constructions and by this he means that they are essentially ready made templates of expressions that vary in their degree of rigidity. Penttilä focuses on the subgroup of these templates that conveys the meanings like *You had to do a Custer* (Penttilä 1998:164). This meaning basically generalizes general Custer's suicidal tendencies to a semi-fixed formulaic sequence that can be used to describe a similar situation or process in any indidual (Penttilä 1998:164). The author wants to find out whether this and other kinds of constructions can be offered as a solution and explanation to the non-literal

meaning of the idioms. In essence, the writer wants to say that even though idioms and constructions are relatively opaque in meaning they do have some internal rules. In other words, they are not completely random as there are such groups of idioms as constructions which are clearly regular in form and thus some of their meanings can be deduced from form. (Penttilä 1998:160-165.) The research question seems important and is technically well argued, although it does not completely refute the traditional views on idiomatic language. Penttilä does, however, manage to show that idiomatic is not completely opaque and random.

There are many parallel definitions for idiom and some of those are even contradictory. For the purposes of the present study, however, I have chosen to employ Moon's (2006:46) definition that an idiom is a fixed sequence of words which has a meaning beyond that of the constituent parts. The reason for the choice is that the definition is the one most widely used in the field of study. I have, however, chosen to include one differing opinion by Penttilä as this choice provides a wider repertoire of tools for the eventual analysis of the data. What is more, it can also be argued that the two views are not completely at odds with each other as Penttilä's definition is also based on rigidity of the expression.

2.2. The pedagogical implications of idiomatic language

Moon (2006:51-52) claims that there are numerous formulaic sequences in the English language but that any individual multi-word item is used very infrequently. What is more, idioms are among the least used formulaic sequences. Teaching them has, therefore, some problematic features. The one most likely to arise from overt attention is what Moon (2006:60) calls stylistic errors. What this means is that the learner misinterprets the idiom to be a common language item and thus uses it in a way that makes the language sound overly formal or outdated. It can, however, be seen that teaching idioms has its place because formulaic sequences seem to have a role in lessening the processing load of the language user, or even giving pseudo-independent communicative capabilities. For instance Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992:116) argue that as formulaic sequences are almost independent entities of meaning and as they seem to be learned and understood before the actual syntax, they give the learner a rudimentary communicative competence even before the entire language system is properly acquired. Keeping these factors in

mind it would seem that while teaching idiomatic language might be risky using explicit methods, idioms can offer considerable benefits to the learner.

Sökmen (2006:240) points out that one good way of directing the explicit vocabulary teaching is to focus the attention to those words that cannot be inferred from the context. As idioms are by definition sequences whose meaning cannot be directly deduced from the surrounding text, it might be that Finnish teachers focus on them for this very reason. The underlying idea might be that without overt attention an unreasonable strain is placed on the language learners. O'Dell (2006:275), on the other hand, has speculated that teachers may use idioms as a motivational device because learners generally are keen on learning them. O'Dell (2006:275) also states that the teaching of idioms is not without merits, if it is done carefully. According to her, the problems traditionally connected with teaching idioms can be partly avoided with methods that make the students more aware of potential problems in using idiomatic language. She, for instance, suggests that idioms could be divided into functional categories of feelings and other concepts, and thus it would be easier for students to focus on the correct usage and not simply on the form and the literal meaning.

Sökmen's view seems to be a logical one but it has a certain minor flaw. Despite its logical nature it leaves a slight uncertainty as to how the learner's idiomatic awareness could be raised. This question is, however, explored by Mäntylä (2004) in her study of idiomatic language. Even this study is not completely explicit but it does give clearer advice and reasoning for the teaching of idioms. According to Mäntylä (2004:180), the potential for problems is so great that idioms should not be taught directly at all. The writer considers teaching especially doubtful if culturally sensitive language like idioms is taught through direct translation analogies between languages (Mäntylä 2004:180). However, Mäntylä considers idioms to be such an integral part of language use and processing that they cannot be excluded from the curriculum even though there are risks. She considers the best policy of teaching to be a method where the students' attention is focused on the common characteristics of idioms. The result should be twofold. First of all, through this method the learner should begin to develop an overall capability to recognise figurative expressions like idioms and thus be able to perceive, use and understand them. The second effect is more indirect as the method indirectly forces the learners to deduce the idioms from language

input. In this way the learner begins to attain the correct context and usage of idioms, and thus also decreases the number of errors in usage. (Mäntylä 2004:180-181.) In essence, the writer's hypothesis seems to be that idioms can and should be learned but they cannot be actually taught. It would seem that teaching can only give learners tools that enable and support the process.

In addition to the explicit actions of the teachers, there are other factors that affect the learning process of formulaic sequences. Some of these factors are the personal characteristics and learning habits of an individual learner. According to Dörnyei et al. (2004:105), the outcome of the learning process is determined my mainly three factors, which are language aptitude, motivation and sociocultural adaptation. The study concluded that although all the factors had a role in the acquisition process the last of the factors is the most important one. According to the study, this imbalance can be explained by idioms being born of and connected to the surrounding culture. Thus the process of learning idioms is influenced to a large degree by the learners' capability, willingness and opportunities to integrate themselves in a native-speaker community of their target language. It is also the case that good enough sociocultural adaptation can compensate deficiencies in the two other factors. On the other hand, it seemed that only very high capabilities in the first two factors could counteract the lack of sociocultural adaptation. (Dörnyei et al. 2004:105.) Essentially, the learning of idiomatic language would seem to be particularly dependent on the quality of language input. In other words, one could make the conclusion that classroom learning and teaching of idioms could be particularly problematic as achieving native community contact might not be possible. As such, the responsibility for maximising the contact would seem to fall on the teacher.

The main pedagocical implications of the research into idioms appear to be fairly clear. In essence, idioms are an integral part of language and they can even accelerate the learning process and thus enable communication. The main problem is, however, that overt attention to idioms can be considerably counterproductive because it can result in language output that sounds and looks artificial. Consequently, studies suggest that the most effective and the least risky policy on idioms is to teach them indirectly and in cultural context, while at the same time raising the learners' awareness on the features of idioms. By following this kind of policy, one can create a situation where the learner not only uses idioms correctly but is able to learn more of them.

3 DATA AND METHODS

3.1 Research question

The current opinion among the scientific community is that idioms and other forms of formulaic language have a key role in language acquisition as they seem to be load-bearing units of a language. Therefore, learning these units facilitates vocabulary learning processes and teaching them seems entirely justified. Yet the problem is that especially idioms are used relatively infrequently, and thus overt attention to them can lead to a situation where learners mistake the idioms for a much more common language item than they actually are. Given this knowledge it is noteworthy that experiences from the Finnish school system seem to indicate that idioms are indeed overtly taught, which in turn results in problems mentioned above. As there would seem to be a gap between the current scientific knowledge and the teaching practices in secondary school, the aim of the current study is to investigate whether the gap truly exists and to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers see the nature and importance of idioms?
2. What do teachers consider to be the best method of teaching idioms?
3. Is there a correlation between teacher's attitudes and actual teaching practices?

3.2 Data collection

The chosen method of data collection for the present study was an e-mail interview of seven questions (see the Appendix). An electronic medium was chosen due to time constrains of both the interviewer and respondents. The interview was conducted with four English teachers in Finnish upper secondary schools. Teachers from this level were chosen based on the hypothesis that they teach the most advanced English of the Finnish school system, and thus were the group most likely to have experiences about teaching linguistic phenomena as complex as idioms. Moreover, two of the teachers were from Jyväskylä normal school and two will be from Mäntsälä upper secondary school. The main reason for this division is the desire to eliminate the potential unrepresentative results that might be the consequence of an interview conducted solely on

teachers of a school connected with a university and teacher training. Furthermore, I have come to the conclusion that the most practical approach to the interview is to use a combination of open ended questions and a structured interview. First of all, clearly limited questions provide a framework for the interview, and thus keep it on topic. Secondly, despite the semi-binding nature of the interview, the questions are formed to give the teachers a possibility of elaborating on their answers, thus providing the study with a wider and more detailed body of data.

The topics of the questions are constructed to be slightly overlapping in order to verify the teachers' actual opinion on the key issues of this study. The interview also does not progress in a linear way from one topic to another. Essentially, this is to decrease possibility of teachers preplanning their responses. It was also decided that the interview would be conducted in Finnish to avoid any suspicion on the respondents' part that their overall language proficiency was being evaluated. This kind of wariness might have influenced their willingness to partake in the study. As a whole, the data collection process lasted approximately two weeks, during which time the four teachers produced written answers in the form of standard text files. These files were then sent to the interviewer's e-mail, and as such the data of the current study exists solely in electronic format. All the four teachers initially approached were willing to participate in the current study, and each of them wrote answers between two and three pages in length. Thus the entire data of the current study amounts to approximately ten pages.

3.3 Methods of analysis

The data of the present study is comprised of interviews, which are analysed qualitatively. As the aim of the thesis is to study the views of teachers on the matter, the main form of analysis will be to search for common features in their answers. It is clear that the test group is only a small part the profession, and thus the results cannot be taken to be universally representative. Special attention is also paid to any answers that are radically different than the common strains of thought found in the study. Consequently, the process of analysis is divided into three distinct stages. Firstly, the data is analysed to find the individual's definition for an idiom. At the same stage it is also studied how the teacher sees the function and the importance of this particular form of formulaic sequences. The second phase, on the other hand, consists of the examination of

teaching practises and ideals of the teacher in question, and whether idioms factor into them. The third stage of analysis is a juxtaposition of answers to see how much correlation there is between the individuals' theoretical knowledge of the nature of idioms and methods he or she employs in teaching them. In its fourth and final phase the study compares the results of the previous stages between the four respondents to see if there indeed is a common strain to be found in the teacher internal theories of idioms, and what might be the causes for these features.

4 THE TEACHERS AND IDIOMS

This part of the current study analyses each of the questions separately in their own sections, which both report the individual answers and then compare them against each other. As the first question is a control designed to determine the relative amount of experience the teacher has, it is not analysed on its own. The answer to this question is, however, mentioned, when it is reasonable to assume that it has a bearing on the individual's other answers. It is also worth mentioning that if the answers to any given question seem to answer more than one question of the study, then the answer in question is analysed in more than one section. This is, however, specifically mentioned when it is done. As the teachers gave their answers in Finnish all the examples from the data are also in Finnish. The approximate English translation of each example is given in square brackets below it.

4.1 The teachers' definition of an idiom

The first question (see the Appendix) of the study presented the teachers with the definition of the idiom used in this study, and asked them to provide their own definition. The respondents were also prompted to give an example of what they considered to be a stereotypical idiom.

The most noticeable feature of the answers is that they all took the opaqueness of meaning as the key defining feature of an idiom, and thus they clearly conform to the definition offered by Moon (2006:46) that an idiom is a sequence of words where the meaning cannot be deduced from the

constituent parts. The definitions differ in form, but they are essentially identical in content in this regard, and as such the following quote can be taken as a representative example of them all:

> Example 1. Subject D
> Idiomin merkitystä ei voi päätellä siihen kuuluvista yksittäisistä sanoista, vaan se on ymmärrettävä kokonaisuutena.
>
> [The meaning of an idiom cannot be deduced from its individual words, but one needs to undertand it as a whole.]

This view is very nearly identical to Moon's definition. The only noteworthy exception within this part of the definition was offered by interviewee C in the following contrasting quote:

> Example 2. Subject C
> Usein ilmaisee ajatuksen kuvainnollisesti
>
> [Often expresses the thought metaphorically]

The difference between the views of C and D is slight but meaningful, as C's version suggests that at least a part of the meaning is decipherable by looking at words only. Consequently, C would seem to be expressing a thought similar to the one presented by Wray's (2008:28) theory of literal and metaphorical meaning in idioms. Essentially, this is a view of concrete historical terms becoming abstract idioms, and it is naturally connected with the culturally specific nature of idioms explicitly stressed by three of the four respondents. It seems, therefore, that all the teachers are aware that any specific idiom is a product of a unique cultural and historical development. In conclusion, it could be said that all the teachers interviewed in the current study seem to be relatively unanimous in what they consider to be the key aspects of idiomatic meaning. What is more, the answers were similar enough to current theoretical knowledge to make deviations from it a matter of minor details.

The most surprising feature of the teachers' definitions is that none of them directly states the rigidity of form as a compulsory feature of an idiom, and therefore would seem to at least partially disagree with Wray's (2005:9) definition. Initially, it would appear that the respondents see idioms as slightly more flexible in form than predicted by the current study study. The

clearest indirect reference to fixedness of expression was respondent D's comment in the following example:

    Example 3. Subject D
    Monesti ne on vaan opeteltava ulkoa
    [Sometimes they just have to be learned by heart]

Although the comment is evidently meant as a observation on the opaqueness of meaning, it seems reasonable to assume that it also refers to the fixedness of expression, as the process of learning something by heart requires the subject matter to be of relatively stable form. In light of these facts it would seem that the interviewees see idioms as flexible sequences of words even to the point of agreeing with Penttilä's (1998:158) theory that idioms can sometimes be understood from the constituent words, but it is the opinion of the current study that this conclusion might be too extreme, for two intertwined reasons. First of all, it might be that the fixedness was considered too self-evident to be stated explicitly. This conclusion is especially supported by the teachers' chosen stereotypical idioms which were from the most rigid part of idiom spectrum. Secondly, one cannot discount the influence the definition given in the questionnaire (see the Appendix) may have had. Although only respondent A explicitly agreed with the definition, it might be possible that the respondents saw no reason to restate rigidity. Again this is supported by the idioms given by the teachers. All in all, the most reasonable assumption is probably that the respondents are aware of the role of rigidity of expression but chose not to say so for one reason or another. Other explanations are possible, but the lack of further data precludes any serious conclusions.

4.2 Taking idioms into account in teaching

In the third question of the interview (see the Appendix) the teachers were asked to tell how they take idioms into account in their teaching. In addition to providing a glimpse into actual teaching practises, the question and its answers serve as a baseline for ideal methods presented in question 7. Consequently, the answers fell evenly into two relatively distinct categories. Although the answers had some common characteristics, there was a clear division into those who prefer to teach idioms explicitly and those who choose more implicit methods.

4.2.1 Explicit methods

As stated above, the first pair of answers comprises of those who teach idioms and their use through explicit methods. It is worth mentioning that the two teachers, C and D, are from the same relatively small school, and as such their preferred methods have probably influenced each other. In fact, respondent D expressly states the existence of this interplay. One also cannot overlook that both respondents teach exclusively in the upper secondary school, and therefore one might assume that the more literal orientation of their environment influences their answers. Consequently the most extreme view is stated by interviewee C, as is shown by the following example:

> Example 4. Subject C
> Minulla on ollut jo vuosikausia tapana kirjoittaa joka päivä taululle idiomi. Se katsotaan aina tunnin alussa. Vuoden mittaan opiskelijalle kertyy mukava varasto (edellyttäen että hän todella painaa ne mieleensä). Kokeessa olen aina silloin tällöin laittanut extra-tehtävän näistä idiomeista.
>
> [For years now I been in the habit of writing an idiom on the blackboard every day. We go over it at the beginning of every class. During the year the student can amass quite an inventory (presuming that the student really memorizes them) Every now and then I have had an extra assignment of these idioms in the exam.]

It would seem that the teacher in question does not share Mäntylä's (2004:180-181) opinion that idioms are best learned through inferring from context. In other words, one could extrapolate that in this case the learning process is not seen as a gradual progression in passive understanding that possibly leads to active usage, but a process of collecting useful language items. The explicit testing of idioms is an especially clear indication of this tendency. Although this type of teaching practise is used by both C and D, it does not seem to be absolutely binding. That is to say, at least respondent C seems to place some emphasis on contextual learning of idiomatic sequences as is shown by the teacher's description of the handling of the idiom of the day:

> Example 5. Subject C
> ...jonka merkitystä sitten arvuutellaan esimerkkien avulla.
>
> [...whose meaning the students then try to guess through examples.]

Even though the teacher's main emphasis still seems to be on explicit methods, at least some part of idiomatic meaning seems to be such that it is best learned in context. Respondent D also shows the same tendency to a lesser degree. In effect, the views of the explicit group might be summed

as overall preference for certain types of methods that might be explained at least partially by the nature of the school system.

4.2.2 Implicit methods

The answers of the other two respondents, A and B, seem to indicate, if not an outright preference for implicit methods, then at least a slight scepticism towards paying explicit attention to idioms. Overall, the opinions in this category seem to be much less clear-cut than in the explicit group. However, that in itself might be taken as an indication of the teacher's awareness of the complicated nature of teaching idioms. It is also worth mentioning that the respondents of this group teach in lower secondary as well as in upper secondary school, which might be at least a partial cause for the difference between them and the first group.

One of the most interesting aspects of the answers of A and B, and possible cause for the rest, is that they seem to recognize the relative rarity of idiomatic expression. As Moon (2006:51) states, there are countless of idioms, but any individual one is used rarely. The respondents do not say this directly, but it can be reasonably assumed that this is what they mean given implications of their answers. Teacher A, for instance, says the following:

> Example 6. Subject A
> Varsinkin lukion ylemmillä kursseilla käsittelemme niitä jonkin verran ihan 'sinällään', eli siis opettelemme jonkin verran uusia idiomeja (ainakin niiden tunnistamista/ymmärtämistä).
>
> [Especially on the more advanced course of the upper secondary school we study them 'as subject matter', that is we study some new idioms (at least recognizing/understanding them).]

The choice of words might indicate that the respondent thinks that idioms are too numerous to be taught through learning them by heart. In essence the teacher's opinion is clearly linked to the aforementioned study by Moon (ibid.). Although this is a secondary implication of the answer, it lends credibility to the primary one. It is significant that even when the teacher in question has idioms as the main subject matter and direct attention is given to them, the chosen method is to foster contextual recognition and understanding, which is for all intents and purposes the method Mäntylä (2004:180-181) advocates. In addition to A's tacit support of the methodology, B seems to offer more support to its underlying idea, as is shown by the following example:

Example 7. Subject B
Pyrin aina silloin tällöin kertomaan & näyttämään oppilailleni idiomaattisia ilmauksia ja idiomeja. Yleensä tekstistä löytyy joitakin ja joihinkin tilanteisiin sopii jokin tietty ilmaisu.

[Every now and then I try to tell & show some idiomatic expressions and idioms to my pupils. Usually something can be found from the text and some expressions fit certain situation especially well.]

Apparently B eschews the entire idea of paying direct attention to idioms. This becomes clear when one considers that teacher B only strives to teach idioms as a secondary concern and when something can be found in the context. Thus it might be that teacher B represents an extreme form of the argument (Mäntylä 2004:180) that idioms should not be taught directly at all because of the risks involved. Given the relatively strong opinions of both A and B one should keep in mind that despite all this they still seem to teach idioms to a certain degree. Thus it might be that their actual opinions are more moderate than those in the answers.

4.3 Teaching material and idioms

In the fourth question (see the Appendix) of the current study the teachers were asked how idioms are taken into account in the materials they use and what role idioms play when the teacher in question chooses the materials to be used. The hypothesis behind the question is that as the book and the other materials are the basis of teaching, one could see how much teachers value idioms by asking if materials are chosen with idioms in mind.

The important thing about the answers is that all the respondents are unanimous in their opinion that idioms have a minor role, if any, in the process of choosing the primary materials such as books. This opinion is well summarised by the following quote from B:

Example 8. Subject B
Eivät vaikuta materiaalivalintaan muutoin kuin että lukiokursseja varten etsin niitä koskevaa lisämateriaalia kaikista mahdollisista lähteistä.

[They play no role in the choosing of materials except in the courses of upper secondary school. There look for suplementary material on idioms in all possible sources.]

The example shows quite clearly that idioms are of a very secondary concern when the teachers choose the materials, which might be a natural corollary to the rarity of the idioms (Moon 2006:51). The underlying idea might be that the choosing process would be distorted by the

presence of idioms as a factor. Yet the example also shows another feature of all the answers. Although the primary material is beyond the influence of the idioms, the teachers seem to actively search for or even produce secondary material that includes idioms. Thus it would seem to reinforce the impression that the teachers recognize the role of the idioms but only in the background.

4.4 The teachers' perceptions on the importance of idioms

In the fifth question (see the Appendix) of the present study the teachers were asked how much attention one should pay to idioms while teaching and why. The most noticeable feature of the answers was that the teachers were mostly unanimous in their opinion that idioms deserve at least some attention as integral parts of language. However, there was at least as much consensus on the inherent risk involved with paying attention to them. Yet even more interesting was that the answers did not entirely correlate with those of the previous two questions. Lastly, there were some aspects of the idiom theory that were left completely untouched by the respondents.

As said above, the respondents mostly considered idioms to be important enough to warrant some kind of special attention. Yet one needs to state that none of the respondents saw formulaic language in general or idioms in particular important in the sense that learning them might reduce the stress and effort needed for the learning process. In other words, the respondents did not seem to agree with the statement that discrete sequences of words are faster for the mind to retrieve than it is to generate sequences from single words (Wray 2005:101). Although disagreement with the aforementioned theoretical point of view is one potential cause for the lack of certain things in the answers, it pays to keep in mind that this quality could just as well exist for a much simpler reason. In essence, it may just be that the extremely discrete meaning and the relative rarity of idioms causes the respondents to think that anything as rare as idioms cannot be a universally helpful learning tool. Yet this too is as much of a hypothesis as the previous explanation, and thus no conclusive judgment can be made based on the current data.

Yet, despite all this, it remains a fact that the data of the study clearly shows that three of the four respondents saw idioms as items of language that deserve special attention. It is just that the

reason for this attention is slightly different from the processing load hypothesis mentioned above. The main justification that the teachers saw was that idioms are a significant part of communication and use of language. A representative example of this opinion and its underlying reasons is given by respondent C:

> Example 9. Subject C
> Idiomit kuvastelevat mielestäni kielen kulttuuria...
>
> [I think idioms reflect the culture of the language...]

In other words, it might be that the respondents of the study mainly understand the importance of idioms through their culturally specific meaning and the crucial communicative role that naturally follows. This view of meaning that cannot be bypassed due to its crucial communicative role would seem to coincide with the conclusion of Dörnyei et al (2004:105) that learning idioms represents integration into a culture and it is mainly the teacher's responsibility to facilitate the process.

In contrast to the fairly unanimous majority, the fourth respondent offered an opinion that differed radically from the others, as the teacher in question had severe reservations about the need to concentrate on idioms. This analysis incorporates parts of the teacher answers from the seventh question because the respondent explicitly answers this question there too. The opinion of teacher A is best shown by the following example:

> Example 10. Subject A
> Tarvitseeko non-natiivi peruslukiolainen opettaa käyttämään idiomeja???? Mielestäni ei ainakaan siinä tapauksessa, jos peruskielitaito on heikohko.
>
> [Is it really necessary to teach an ordinary non-native upper secondary school student to use idioms???? I think not, especially if the basic language proficiency is weak.]

The opinion of teacher A clearly seems to be that language can be used and communication is entirely possible without idioms. In all likelihood this opinion expresses a natural corollary to Moon's (2006:52) conclusion that idioms are rare. Essentially the teacher seems to think that one should not burden the students with language material that is not likely to be in active use. It is worth mentioning, however, that teacher A expresses some approval for the teaching of the recognition of idioms, and as such the opinion is somewhat tempered.

4.5 The teachers' preferred idioms

In question six (see the Appedix) the teachers were asked what types of idioms they prefer to include in their teaching and what the reason for their choice is. In other words, the question was essentially designed to further reveal why the respondents teach idioms, and what they consider to be important enough to teach. As such, the teachers' answers were mostly within categories predicted by the idiom theory.

The first type of these answers was that which specified the recurrence of the idioms as the deciding factor in what to teach. Regular use was explicitly specified as the primary reason by A and B, but it was also included as a minor factor by respondent C. The opinion shared by the first two is well summarised by the following example from teacher A:

> Example 11. Subject A
> Melko keskeisiä, yleisiä, siis niitä tavallisimpia, koska niiden esiintyminen ja käyttökelpoisuus on yleisempää. Joskus myös tietenkin erikoisempia idiomeja, jos ne tulevat esim. jossain luetussa tekstissä vastaan.
>
> [The rather central ones, the common ones, I mean the most ordinary ones because they appear more often they are more universally usable. Of course, sometimes also the more unique ones, if they are encountered f.ex. in some reading material]

What this extract reveals is an interplay between the rarity of idioms (Moon 2006:52) and their perceived importance in language. The way the idioms are chosen might signal that the teacher sees idioms important enough to merit attention but also rare enough that the teacher has to filter the input. In essence, it might be that the answers of this group share Sökmen's (2006:240) conclusion that one should teach vocabulary that cannot be directly understood from context, but also modify it by stating that the opaqueness of meaning cannot be the sole criterion, but usability rising from frequent application must come first.

The common characteristic of the last two answers is that they both seem to justify the teaching of idioms from the point of the teaching process itself. It is also noteworthy that apart from this common feature, the two answers are quite unlike each other. The first of these answers is provided by respondent C as is shown by the following example:

Example 12. Subject C
Sellaisia joihin liittyy jokin tuttu sana; jotka ovat jollain tavalla hauskoja. sellaisia [sic.] jotka kokemuksesta
tiedän tärkeiksi (=ihmiset käyttävät). Esim. We have to face the music.

[The ones that are connected with some previously known word; the ones that are in some way funny. The
ones that I know to be important (=used by people). F.ex. We have to face the music.]

In addition to the usability criteria discussed in the previous paragraph, the example seems to
reveal that the teacher in question chooses idioms at least partly based on how likely the students
are to learn them. This view comes quite close to the view (O'Dell 2006:275) that teachers often
use idioms as a motivational tool, although it is quite evident that respondent C does not teach
idioms because they are funny, but merely takes advantage of the entertainment factor to make
the subject matter easier. In effect, subject C employs a dual-criteria of usability and motivation,
which is quite different to the teaching oriented method shown by respondent D:

Example 13. Subject D.
Ideaalistahan olisi, että idiomit saisi jotenki ympättyä tekstien teemaan tai kontekstiin, jotta ne jäisivät
helpommin mieleen.

[It would be ideal that one could somehow include the idioms in the or the context, so that they would easier
to remember]

The example shows quite clearly the idea of contextual interfencing (Mäntylä 2004:180 – 181),
but it is noteworthy that the teacher seems to choose idioms based on how well they fit the
subject matter, and not how commonly they are used. Thus the filter used in choosing the idioms
is heavily reliant on teaching material such as books, which is the main difference between the
superficially similar opinions of C and D. Additionally, the example might be taken as a sign of
how much value the respondent places on teaching idioms.

4.6 The ideal methods of teaching idioms

In the seventh question the teachers were asked what the best method to teach the use of idioms
would be, and there seems to have been two different ways of seeing the question. Firstly, the
majority of the respondents took the question literally and described the optimal methods of
facilitating the actual active use of idioms. However, some of the respondents also included the
passive understanding in usage and consequently gave it higher priority than active usage. As this

latter part of the answer was also discussed in the fifth question, parts of the answers to that question are included here.

As said above, the first main part of analysis describes respondents C and D who focused their answers on the actual active use of idioms. The most obvious similarity between these two answers is that both teachers see the teaching as a long process where the teacher has to generate the opportunities to practise the use. This opinion is shown well by the following example from respondent D:

> Example 14. Subject D
> Esittelemällä niitä asiayhteyksissään ja mahdollisimman pitkälle kytkettyinä opetettavaan teemaan, riittävän usein toistaen monen kanavan kautta (tekstistä poimiminen, idiomin kuunteleminen kuunteluharjoituksessa, itse sen käyttäminen kirjoituksessa ja puheessa).
>
> [By introducing them in context and tied up as much as possible with the theme being taught, by repeating them often enough through several channels (picking them up from text, hearing the idiom in a listening exercise, using it in written text and in spoken communication).]

The example would seem to be a conglomeration of three theoretical views. First of all, it could be that the rarity of idioms (Moon 2006:52) and the opaqueness of meaning (Moon 2006:42) are seen as a governing factor of teaching to a point that the use of idioms can only be learned through explicit attention and manufactured opportunities of use. The view is not, however, a carte blanche support to explicit methods of teaching which can be seen when one compares it to Mäntylä's (2004:180 - 181) conclusion that idioms are best learned through deduction from context. The method described by subject D would seem to achieve the goal of raising the awareness on the common characteristics of idioms as there is a considerable amount of contextual learning. As this example is fairly representative of both C and D, it could be argued that the ideal method favoured by the two teachers is at a practical midway point between explicit and implicit methods.

The other distinct group of answers is formed by respondents A and B. Their view is characterised by the emphasis they place on passive language skills of recognition and understanding. What is more, there is even scepticism about whether a student needs to use idioms at all. These views are best exemplified by the following example from subject A:

Example 15. Subject A
Ja ne opiskelijat yleensä oppivat idiomit melko helposti sopivan inputin ja selityksen/harjoittelun avulla. Mutta en siis pidä idiomien omaa KÄYTTÖÄ mitenkään itsestäänselvänä tai itsetarkoituksellisena osana peruskielitaitoa. Ymmärtäminen on ensisijaisempaa, käyttö lähinnä sitten kun kielitaito on jo vankkaa.

[And the student usually learn idioms fairly easily through suitable input and explanation and/practice. But I don't that the USE of idioms is in anyway an obvious or a self-purposeful part of basic lanaguage proficiency. Understanding has the primary place, usage only when the language proficiency is already well established.]

The shared feature of this answer and that of B is that they both feel that idioms are best learned from context (Mäntylä 2004:180-181) as that gives the student an opportunity to process them on a deeper level. Yet the one major difference between these opinions and those of C and D is that they have taken the rarity of idioms (Moon 2006:52) to its ultimate logical conclusion. If a language item is rare, one does not use it often, and thus the only practical way teaching it is to foster recognition.

The last aspect of this ideal way of teaching idioms is what the teachers consider to be the risks of teaching idioms. In other words, what happens if the matter is taught in a less than ideal way. What is stressed by all the respondents in one way or another is that idioms need to be learned exactly as they are, which could be taken as a corollary of the discrete meaning of an idiom. What happens when this is not done is best expressed by subject A's answer to the fifth question.

Example 16. Subject A
Varoitain [sic.] kuitenkin opiskelijoita idiomien 'ylikäytöstä' sekä siitä että idiomien merkitys on oikeasti syytä tietää ennen kuin sen kirjoittaa esim. Yo-aineeseen. Väärinkäytetty idiomi voi vaikeuttaa ymmärtämistä tai ainakin luoda oudon vaikutuksen

[However, I warn the students not to 'overuse' idioms and that you should really now the meaning before you use it in, for example, in a matriculation exam essay. A misused idiom hampers understanding or at least creates a odd impression.]

This view is highly similar or even almost identical to Moon's (2006:60) conclusion of stylistic errors that can follow from non-ideal teaching of idioms. In other words, teacher A seems to be aware that the greatest risk involved is that a mistaken use of idioms can lead to communication that is not authentic in style.

5   CONCLUSION

The main research hypothesis of the present study was that there would be a noticeable gap between the current theoretical knowledge and the teachers' thoughts, which would result in a situation where idioms are given too much overt attention. The hypothesis was confirmed, but only partly.

The first research question of the current study was the dual topic of the nature and importance of idioms, and the study yielded some surprising results on the issue. First of all, the respondents mainly saw idioms as fixed expressions that are culturally specific. The point of view also had a natural corollary that idioms derive their importance from their role in communication. This is interesting because the near uniformity of opinion was not anticipated. It might be that the processing load theory used by the present study was both too theoretical and too self-evident to be stated. In other words, the mind's internal processes were deemed secondary to surface function of the idioms, which is perhaps inevitable considering that it is a theory with little bearing on practise, and that teaching works with practical issues. Although the teachers saw idioms as cultural tools to be used, it is good to bear in mind that for the teachers using idioms mainly meant passive understanding. Not only does this show knowledge of the rarity of idioms but it also indicates a clear understanding of the risks of teaching idioms. This knowledge is not overly surprising when one considers the nature of the profession. If the students begin using idioms too often and incorrectly, the teacher is likely to notice this fairly quickly. The teacher essentially receives constant fast-paced feedback on his or her methods and thus naturally understands how to teach idioms. It might therefore be that the practical nature of the profession leads to certain kinds of views on the nature and importance of idioms.

The results of the present study clearly suggest that the teachers placed relatively high value on idioms. What is interesting, however, is that value did not always manifest in their ideal or actual teaching practices. The first part of the dilemma is that for the most part the teachers seemed to favour contextual learning as an ideal method of teaching idioms, which can be partly explained by the aforementioned consciousness of the risks. Thus it might seem slightly contradictory that in spite of their opinions the teachers used some forms of explicit teaching, but when one

considers this fact it becomes fairly evident that it is an effect of the school system. In other words, it is probable that the limits of the classroom force the teachers to explicitly focus on important idioms as there is simply not enough time for reliable contextual learning. Another similar noteworthy issue was that certain respondents taught idioms despite having grave reservations about the need to do so. Ergo, it would seem that some feature of the school system creates a divide between what the teachers would like to do and how they actually teach. Considering that all the respondents teach in upper secondary school, one might form a tentative hypothesis that something like the matriculation examination favours idioms enough to create the divide. The hypothesis receives more credibility from the fact that paradox was much less evident in the teacher depiction about teaching in the lower grades. Thus it seems that the school itself might be the single greatest governing factor in idiom teaching.

Consequently, the main hypothesis and its implications are also the main limitation of the current study. As was shown, there was indeed a difference between theoretical knowledge and what the teachers think. In fact, some of the theoretical background chosen for this study was almost too theoretical to be meaningful. In other words, the theories were so far removed from the teachers' answers that they could serve only remotely as tools of analysis. This, however, in itself is a result that confirms the hypothesis of the study. The second main limitation of the current study comes from its scope, as it is fairly clear that data derived from four interviews cannot be generalized very far. The current study is essentially a case study of some thoughts within the teaching community, and it can even be taken as a clue of overall opinions, but care should be taken when making any further extrapolations.

There has been some fairly extensive research into the field of idiomatic learning. There are, however, some areas that would benefit from further study. First of all, a study with a large group of respondents would be needed to properly gauge the attitudes and practices of teachers. This type of interview study would properly bridge the gap between the extensive body of theoretical knowledge and practise. Thus it might serve as a baseline comparison for development of teacher training regarding idioms. A second advantageous line of study would include the point of view of the students, because such an approach would yield tangible results on how the teachers' chosen methods actually affect the idiom learning process. Consequently, a study of that type

would make the best basis for analysis if it combined both interviews of the students and some kind of learning test, as this would reveal both attitudes and actual learning results and whether they correlate.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dörnyei, Z., V. Durow and K. Zahran 2004. Individual differences and their effects on formulaic sequence acquisition. In N. Schmitt (eds.), *Formulaic sequences. Acquisition, processing and use.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 87-106.

Moon, R. 2006. Vocabulary connections: multi-word items in English. In N. Schmitt and M. McCarthy (eds.), *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 40 – 63.

Mäntylä, K. 2004. *Idioms and language users: the effect of the characteristics of idioms on their recognition and interpretation by native and non-native speakers of English.* Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities. University of Jyväskylä.

Nattinger, J. and DeCarrico J. 1992. *Lexical Phrases and Language teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Dell, F. 2006. Incorporating vocabulary into the syllabus. In N. Schmitt and M. McCarthy (eds.), *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 258-278.

Penttilä, E. 1998. Constructions and idiomatic expressions. *Studies in Languages* 34, 157-167.

Sökmen, A. 2006. Current trends in teaching second language vocabulary. In N. Schmitt and M. McCarthy (eds.), *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 237 – 257.

Wray, A. 2005. *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wray, A. 2008. *Formulaic Language: Pushing the Boundaries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix

The questionnaire

Tutkimuksessani idiomi määritellään seuraavalla tavalla. Idiomi on useamman sanan pituinen kokonaisuus, jonka sanoilla on yhteinen merkitys. Tämä merkitys on kiinteä, eikä sitä voi päätellä idiomin osien merkityksistä.

Olkaa hyvä ja vastatkaa seuraaviin kysymyksiin suomeksi. Olisi mukavaa, jos voisitte valaista vastauksianne esimerkeillä, sillä ne auttavat minua kysymysten analysoinnissa.

1. Kuinka kauan olette opettanut englantia?

2. Kuinka itse määrittelisitte idiomin? Antaisitteko esimerkin mielestäsi stereotyyppisestä englannin idiomista ja perustelun valinnallesi?

3. Kuinka otatte idiomit huomioon opetuksessanne?

4. Kuinka idiomit otetaan huomioon käyttämissänne materiaaleissa tai kuinka suuri vaikutus idiomeilla on siihen, mitä materiaaleja otatte käyttöön?

5. Kuinka paljon huomiota idiomeihin tulisi kiinnittää opetuksessa ja miksi?

6. Minkälaisia idiomeja suositte opetuksessanne ja mikä on syy valinnallenne?

7. Millä tavalla oppilaat saadaan parhaiten oppimaan idiomien käyttämistä?