

A HOT-HEADED GRANDMA:
The Use of Idiomatic Expressions in the
Compositions of Finnish Upper Secondary
School Students

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Metaforisuus on tärkeä osa kieltä. Vähitellen myös kielen oppimisessa ja opettamisessa on alettu ymmärtää idiomaattisen kielen merkitys. Uusia tutkimuksia idiomeista ja niiden oppimisesta tehdään jatkuvasti ympäri maailmaa, myös Suomessa.</p> <p>Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena oli selvittää, paljonko suomalaiset lukio-opiskelijat käyttävät idiomaattisia ilmauksia tuotoksissaan. Lisäksi tutkielmassa etsittiin eroja idiomaattisten ilmausten käytössä eritasoisten opiskelijoiden välillä, tarkasteltiin sitä, millaisia ilmauksia käytetään sekä sitä, millaisia ongelmia kyseisten ilmausten käyttö aiheuttaa.</p> <p>Aineisto kerättiin kahdesta koulusta 3. vuosikurssin kursseilta. Abiturientit eli kolmannen vuoden opiskelijat valittiin kohderyhmäksi, sillä he ovat opiskelleet englantia pisimpään ja näin ollen oletettavasti osaavat ryhmänä enemmän kuin alempien vuosiluokkien opiskelijat. Aineiden yhteismäärä oli 42 ja niiden pituus vaihteli 150–250 sanaan. Aineista etsittiin ilmauksia, joita voidaan pitää idiomaattisina. Idiomaattisuuden määrittämisessä käytettiin apuna sekä idiomisanakirjoja että perinteisiä sanakirjoja.</p> <p>Yhteensä vain 44 ilmausta löydettiin ja ne jaettiin kategorioihin (idiomit, fraasiverbit, allegoriat sekä sekalaiset, jotka eivät sopineet muihin kategorioihin). Suppean datan vuoksi yleistysten tekeminen tutkielman pohjalta on mahdotonta. Voidaan kuitenkin sanoa, että lukio-opiskelijoiden idiomaattisten ilmausten käyttö on vähäistä ja etenkin prepositiot aiheuttavat vaikeuksia ilmausten käytössä.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

The term idiomatic can be defined in many ways. It means everything that is vernacular to the language but in the present study Thornbury's definition for idiomatic expressions is used. According to him, in idiomatic expressions the meaning of the whole is not transparent from its parts (Thornbury 2002).

Idiomaticity is an essential part of a language. English is a highly idiomatic language in which idioms and other idiomatic expressions are used constantly. Idiomaticity makes the language vivid and it is strongly related to the culture of the language speakers. There are a vast number of idiomatic expressions unique to each language but also idiomatic expressions that are similar in many languages exist. The similarity can be caused by, for example, language transfer or the universal idea behind the expression.

The importance of idiomatic expressions to language was quite simply neglected by teachers and other language specialists until recent years when it began to receive the recognition it deserves. It has been taken into better consideration in the field of language teaching and learning which can be seen, for example, in the language textbooks where idiomaticity of texts appears to be increasing. Nevertheless, there is an on-going debate among both teachers and researchers whether language learners should actually be taught to use idiomatic expressions or if it is sufficient to learn to recognise and understand them.

Topics that have interested researchers include the use of idioms in textbooks, teachers' views on teaching idioms and the recognition of idioms, to name a few. Most of the research has been done abroad but especially young researchers seem to be interested in the topic of idiomaticity also in Finland. Yet so far there has not been a study on the production of idiomatic expressions in Finland, which is a big gap in research due to the importance of the productive skills to the language users.

The present study starts to fill the gap by studying the use of idiomatic expressions in the written productions of Finnish upper secondary school students. The aim is to calculate

the number of the expressions and to see whether there are any detectable differences in the use of idiomatic expressions between students on different proficiency levels. Furthermore, the differences in the use of different types of expressions will be taken into consideration as well as the problems that using the expressions cause.

In the next chapter the theoretical background of the subject is discussed. The central terms are explained and previous research presented. In chapter three the methods and data for the present study are presented and discussed and finally, in chapter four, the results of the study are presented and analysed. The paper ends with a conclusion about the study and the subject.

2 IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

It is a well-known fact that the English language is very idiomatic. The idiomaticity can be heard for example in the daily communication, in which a great variety of idiomatic expressions are used. What is meant by the term idiomatic expression is that the meaning of the whole is not transparent from its parts (Thornbury 2002). Even though Thornbury defines an idiomatic expression as a “whole”, both multi-word items and single words can be idiomatic (Thornbury 2002). Furthermore, almost all types of expressions can be idiomatic and the context plays an important role in defining the idiomaticity. For example, the word *grab* is not idiomatic in *grab my hand* but is in *the idea didn't grab him*. In this paper six different idiomatic expression types are presented: phrasal verbs, collocations, proverbs, metaphors, similes and, of course, idioms. Definitions of all the categories are provided below.

According to Larsen-Freeman (1991) phrasal verbs consist of two or three parts and they include a verb and a particle, which often is a preposition. They can be either transitive (cannot take an object) or intransitive (can take an object). Although there are plenty of idiomatic phrasal verbs, such as *to bring up* (to raise a child) or *to hand on* (to give to another person), most phrasal verbs are not idiomatic.

Collocations are “related word pairs, joint immediately or through prepositions” (Bolshakov and Gelbukh 2000). In other words, collocations are words that often go together, such as *fire escape*. It is often said that it is sometimes extremely difficult to make a distinction between an idiomatic collocation (for example, *Achille's heel*) and an idiom. For example in Falcão (n.d.) it is stated that idioms and collocations often overlap but, nevertheless, idioms are more fixed than collocations. However, Mäntylä (2004) argues that making that distinction is not so difficult because the literal meaning of the collocations is often salient.

Proverbs are expressions that teach a moral lesson or “some traditionally held truth” (The Phrase Finder 2010). They are usually separated from idioms because their idiomatic

meaning can sometimes be understood from their literal meaning and also because moral lessons are not included in idioms. As examples of often heard proverbs *a leopard cannot change its spots* and *a rolling stone gathers no moss* could be mentioned.

Metaphors and similes are very alike and the single difference between the two is the use of *like*. In metaphors something is said to be *like* something, whereas in similes *like* is not used. For example, *her eyes are like plates* is clearly a metaphor and *men are pigs* is a simile. Chiappe et al. (2003: 51) say that both “metaphors and similes are devices used by poets and lay people to express idiomatic comparisons” and that both of them can be used to express all kinds of idiomatic comparisons. In some studies (see for example Runosalo 2005) similes have been considered to be one category of idioms.

Finally, also idioms are, of course, idiomatic expressions. There have been many theories and much debate among researchers about the definition of an idiom. Referring to the disagreement on definitions, Mäntylä (2004: 36) states that it is impossible to define an idiom in “an undebatable way”. It is very difficult to decide whether a multi-word item is actually an idiom or another type of expression, such as a proverb or a collocation. According to Mäntylä (2004), most theories share the idea of idioms being multi-word items and having an idiomatic meaning. Moreover, many theories see idioms as fixed phrases with no or little room for changes (Runosalo 2005). Furthermore, some researchers have categorised idioms further, for example, in semi-idioms, idiomatic idioms and pure idioms according to their fixedness or idiomaticity. Idioms like *to kick the bucket* and *to move Heaven and Earth* are widely known and used.

2.1 The importance of idiomatic expressions to foreign language students

The ability to recognise and use idiomatic expressions increases the learner’s proficiency. For example, Chambers (1997) discusses the concept of fluency in her article. According to her the term fluency is difficult to define but often it is taken as an ability to speak either in a native-like way or naturally whether sounding native-like or not. Native speakers use idiomatic expressions frequently so by using idiomatic expressions language learners

sound more native-like and therefore are more fluent in their speech. Furthermore, Kainulainen (2006) as well states that it is necessary to use idiomatic expressions in order to be fluent and natural in speaking a language. Moreover, in contemporary language textbooks idioms and other type of idiomatic language are present (Runosalu 2005) which indicates that the knowledge on idiomatic language is in general considered as important.

Mäntylä (2004: 181) believes that the idiomatic expressions are such a big part of the English language that they simply cannot be neglected in foreign language teaching no matter how difficult they might be for foreign language learners. Nevertheless, she also believes that although it is important for foreign language learners to use some types of idiomatic expressions, such as collocations and greetings, the explicit teaching of idioms is unnecessary due to their complexity. She says that merely recognising idioms and understanding their meaning in a context is difficult enough, not to mention the difficulties that producing them might bring. However, it can be argued that as the idiomatic language (e.g. idioms) is a central part of English and its use affects the fluency of speech, students should be encouraged to use at least the most common idioms and other idiomatic expressions.

In the The Framework Curriculum for Senior Secondary School 2003 (p.100) (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2003) it is clearly stated that after studying foreign languages in the upper secondary school, the students should be able to communicate as is characteristic to the language and to the culture. Furthermore, the Framework Curriculum also states that after the foreign language studies, the proficiency level of the students who study English as an A1-language and have started their English studies at the age of 9 should be B2.1, adapted from the Common European Framework of References (2001). The students on the B2.1 level should be able to use wide vocabulary, including idioms, in their speech and they should be able to use wide vocabulary and complex sentence structures in their writing. (The Framework Curriculum for Senior Secondary School 2003: 242-243).

2.2 Idiomatic expressions and foreign language teaching and learning

Idiomatic expressions in foreign language teaching and learning have become a topic of studies just recently. For a long time idiomatic expressions were not considered to be important and thus idioms and other idiomatic expressions did not get the attention they deserved. However, the view has changed and the importance of idiomaticity is now widely recognised.

Outside Finland, the topic has been studied by, for example, Nezhad and Hashemian (2006) who tested the metaphor comprehension and productive skills of Persian university students. The study was conducted so that the participants (juniors) did a pretest before joining a course where expressions such as idioms and metaphors were taught. After the course they took a posttest and the two results were compared. The results showed that after the course the participants were able to understand and produce more metaphorical texts, which indicates that the metaphorical competence can be improved in a classroom.

In addition, Elkiliç (2008) was interested in discovering how well Turkish students understand transparent (those whose meaning can be easily discovered e.g. *to bury a hatchet*) and opaque (those whose meaning cannot be easily seen e.g. *to wet behind the ears*) idioms. The data was gathered from intermediate and advanced students who were asked to write the English equivalents for 40 Turkish idioms and the Turkish equivalences for 40 English idioms. Elkiliç found that transparent idioms were understood better than the opaque ones. However, the easiest ones seemed to be the most common idioms, both transparent and opaque.

In Finland, a few studies have been conducted on idioms in foreign language teaching and learning. For instance, Runosalo (2005) compared three books of two upper secondary school English textbook series (Blue Planet and Culture Café) and the way idioms were presented in them. She found that the books of both series had various idioms in both texts and exercises (BP had 64 and CC 92). Culture Café is a newer series than Blue Planet and Runosalo suggests that it might explain the difference as well as the chapter on idioms

in the first book of the Culture Café series. Even though both series contained idioms, rarely were the idioms taught explicitly and little chance was given to the students to practice their use.

In her comprehensive Master's Thesis, Kainulainen (2006) studied several aspects of teaching and learning idioms. Her main aim was to test the idiom recognition of third graders in national Finnish upper secondary schools and in IB Diploma Programme by giving them a list of idioms to recognise. In addition to the idiom recognition test, Kainulainen also gave a brief look at two English textbook series (In Touch and English Update) to see how much attention was drawn to idioms in them. Furthermore, she interviewed foreign language teachers on their opinions on teaching idioms.

In the idiom recognition test, Kainulainen found that Finnish upper secondary school students know idioms quite well, with an average of 13.6 out of 20. The students in the IB Diploma Programme recognised more idioms (15.48/20), which is not surprising taking into account that all the teaching in the IB Diploma Programme is done in English. Furthermore, in the textbooks idioms were dealt with differently. While in In Touch idioms were often a theme and the series had an exercise type called "idioms", in English Update no clear teaching of idioms was found. Kainulainen suggested that in both books the authentic texts probably included idioms but, unlike in In Touch, no attention was drawn to them in English Update.

In addition to Kainulainen, also Ylisirniö (2009) studied English teachers' attitudes towards teaching idioms to Finnish upper secondary school students. Both studies showed that most teachers think that at least implicit teaching of idioms is important. However, some of the teachers Ylisirniö interviewed did not encourage their students to use idioms in their writing because of a high risk of misusing them. On the contrary, the students were advised not to use idioms on the assumption that they would not know how to use them. Additionally, in Ylisirniö's study it became clear that some teachers think that teaching upper secondary school students to use idioms in addition to recognising them is neither useful nor necessary. Kainulainen also discovered that, according to the teachers,

time constraints limit the possibilities to teach idioms, which was seen as a problem by some teachers but not all.

To summarise, the idiomaticity of language has started to gain more interest across the world on different language research areas. For example, there has been a growing amount of research on idioms and language learning and teaching. In Finland, studies have been conducted on the recognition and interpretation of idioms, on the ways in which idioms are presented in language textbooks and, in addition, on the teachers' views on teaching idioms. However, a study on the production of idioms and other idiomatic expressions is lacking and this is the gap the present study starts to fill.

The research questions for the present study are:

1. How much do Finnish upper secondary school students use idiomatic expressions in their compositions?
2. What differences are there in the use of idiomatic expressions in the compositions of different proficiency levels?
3. What problems can be detected in the use of idiomatic expressions?

3 DATA AND METHODS

The data of the present study consists of 42 compositions of upper secondary school third graders, aged 18-19. The students wrote compositions of approximately 150-250 words for a specific course and the compositions were graded by the teacher on a scale of 45-99. The compositions were written for the courses and not for research purposes.

There are various reasons for collecting the data from compositions and from upper secondary school third graders. First of all, the choice was made to collect written compositions since it is the best alternative for searching idiomatic expressions because of the compositions' length. Secondly, third graders in upper secondary schools are most likely studying their final year in the secondary education before continuing to the university level. Therefore they have studied English for the longest (approximately ten years) and are supposedly the most advanced English students in the Finnish schools, excluding the IB-programme students. Thirdly, they write the longest compositions so individuals' language skills are shown better and there are more chances for idiomatic expressions to occur. Furthermore, preparing the students for the matriculation examinations held at the end of the third year usually increases the teaching of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions so it could be assumed that third graders use idiomatic expressions more in their compositions than the students on lower levels.

The data was collected during December 2010 and January 2011 from two schools: an upper secondary school in Eastern Finland (23 compositions) and another in Central Finland (19 compositions). In both schools, in the courses from which the compositions were collected, giving speeches had been practised and it can be seen in the compositions, the majority of which are written speeches.

The data was analysed to find answers to the research questions and the analysis was produced in phases. First the idiomatic expressions used in the compositions were listed and patterns, similarities and generalisations were searched for the purpose of getting an overall picture of the use of idiomatic expressions. Later each expression used was

categorised into the six categories mentioned earlier (idioms, collocations, proverbs, similes, metaphors and phrasal verbs) and a miscellaneous category was created for the expressions that did not fit any of the six categories. This was done in order to see whether expressions in some categories were used more than others. Attention was also paid to the differences in the use of idiomatic expressions in compositions of different proficiency levels by listing the grades of the compositions and calculating how many expressions had been used in each level. In addition, the mistakes made in the expressions were counted and categorised to prepositional mistakes, grammatical and spelling mistakes, pragmatic and semantic mistakes and mistakes in translation.

Dictionaries and other sources were used as help in deciding on the idiomaticity of the expressions and in categorising them. The sources used were *American Idioms: American idioms and expressions* (online), *Englannin Fraasiverbit* (2007), *Frankfurt International School: Common Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs* (online), *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (1998), *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary – 7th Edition* (2005) and *MOT Dictionaries: MOT Gummerus Englanti-Suomi idiomisanakirja* (online).

4 ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this part of the thesis the findings of the study are presented and discussed. This chapter has been divided into three parts. In the first part the whole analysis process is discussed in more detail and the choices made during the process are explained. In the second part the results for the research questions 1 and 2 are presented and discussed. Furthermore, the results for the third research question are presented and also discussed in the third section of this chapter.

4.1 The analysis process

The problem with studying idiomaticity is that instead of having one clear opinion on what is considered idiomatic there are as many views on the matter as there are people interested in the subject. Therefore, finding idiomatic expressions in the compositions was not an easy task. It took several readings to detect all expressions that could be considered idiomatic. However, after five readings, a total of 44 expressions were found in the 42 compositions – 27 in the compositions from Central Finland (School A) and 17 in the ones from Eastern Finland (School B). In other words, 61.4% of the expressions were found in the compositions from School A and 38.6% in the ones from School B. In order to be able to answer all the research questions, it was decided that the expressions used in two or more compositions are counted as many times as they had been used. However, only three expressions were used more than once so the decision had only little effect on the results.

Even more difficult than finding the expressions was categorising them into the six categories listed earlier (collocations, proverbs, similes, metaphors, phrasal verbs and idioms). Many sources were used to discover which expressions are idiomatic and into which categories they belong to. However, many of the dictionaries only mention that the expression is idiomatic without further categorisation. Even the three idiom dictionaries used contained many expressions that, according to many linguists, do not fulfil the definitions of an idiom. For example, many of the dictionaries also contained phrasal

verbs. Therefore a decision was made to count as idioms only the expressions that were categorised as idioms in a dictionary and consisted of more than four words. Due to the difficulty of categorisation, a category of “miscellaneous expressions” was created. Each expression that did not fit any other category, for example single words, were put into this category. With expressions that could not be found in dictionaries (e.g. *it's a real-life Cinderella story*) the decision on their idiomaticity and the categorisation was made by the writer's own judgment. A list of all the expressions included to the study is available in the Appendix.

Furthermore, as the third research question indicates, the correctness of the idiomatic expressions used was also a subject of interest in the present study. The expressions were listed and divided into correct and incorrect expressions. All expressions that had prepositional, spelling and grammatical, and semantic and pragmatic mistakes were considered as incorrect as well as the expressions that the students had translated from Finnish incorrectly. This aspect of the study is discussed in section 4.3.

4.2 Idiomatic expressions used in the compositions

In total, 44 idiomatic expressions were found in the 42 compositions and there were clear differences in the use of different types of expressions. The biggest category was idioms with a number of 18 (40.9% of the expressions). The second biggest category was the miscellaneous expressions with 13 expressions (29.54%), third the phrasal verbs with 8 expressions (18.18%) and the fourth was the similes with 5 expressions (12.5%). Proverbs, metaphors or collocations were not found. 30 expressions (68.18%) were correctly used and 14 expressions (31.8%) contained a mistake. From the correct expressions, 14 were idioms, 9 miscellaneous, 3 phrasal verbs and 4 similes. Additionally, from the expressions that were somehow incorrectly used 4 were idioms, 4 miscellaneous, 5 phrasal verbs and 1 simile. The use of different expressions is shown in Figure 1.

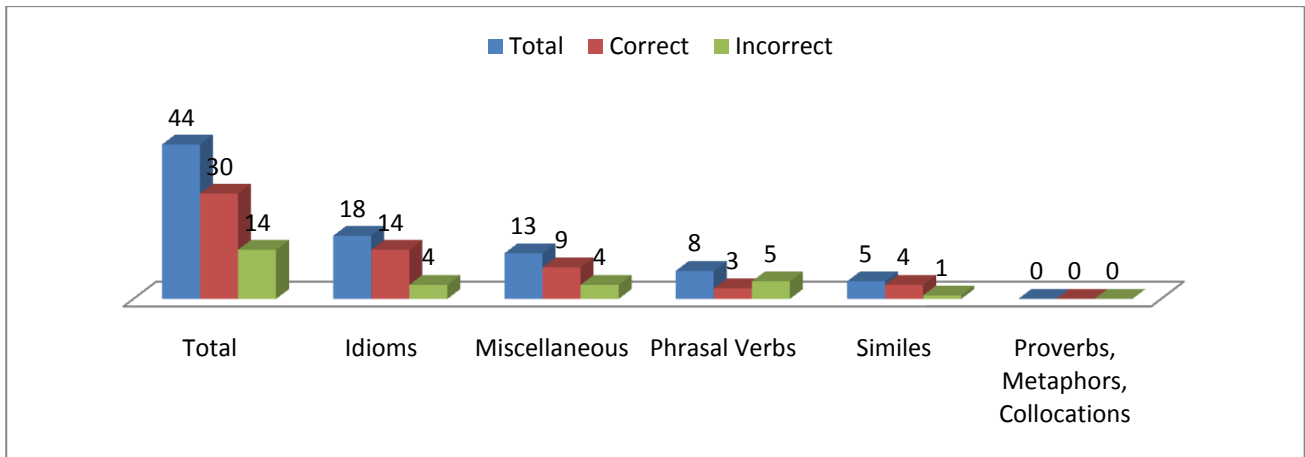


Figure 1. The use of different idiomatic expressions.

The relatively small amount of idiomatic expressions found was rather surprising. As it is a fact that the English language is very idiomatic and different expressions can be heard on the TV, read in the Internet, books, newspapers and teaching material and also to some extent taught at school, it could be assumed that language learners of this level would use various expressions in their writings especially when they have the opportunity to write at home where all aids are available. Above all the lack of proverbs, metaphors and collocations was a surprise because, for example, metaphors are so often used both in Finnish and in English. Based on this small data it is difficult to speculate reasons why they were not used, though the lack is likely a coincidence.

Another interesting finding was that the majority of the expressions were classified as idioms in many dictionaries. As a matter of fact, because of the previous research done in the field, finding that many idioms (18/44) was unexpected. First of all, teachers tend to advice students not to use idioms due to their complexity (Ylisirniö 2009) and, secondly, the research has shown that textbooks do not usually help the students to use idioms but merely to recognise them (Kainulainen 2006, Runosalu 2005). However, it is probable that the dictionaries have not been as specific in defining idioms as most researchers have. Moreover, idioms have often been divided into further categories, such as semi-idioms, but no such division was made in any of the dictionaries which might explain the findings.

To discuss the results from the two schools separately, the results from both schools are now presented. Again, in the compositions from School A, a total of 27 expressions were found in the 19 compositions. 12 (41.6%) were idioms, 9 (33.3%) miscellaneous, 3 (12.5%) phrasal verbs, and 3 (12.5%) similes. 16 (54.16%) were correctly and 11 (45.83%) incorrectly used. Furthermore, the 23 compositions from School B contained 17 expressions, 6 of which were idioms (37.5%), 4 miscellaneous (25%), 5 phrasal verbs (25%) and 2 (12.5%) similes. 14 correct expressions were found (82.35%) and 3 expressions (17.65%) were incorrectly used. The expressions used in both schools are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

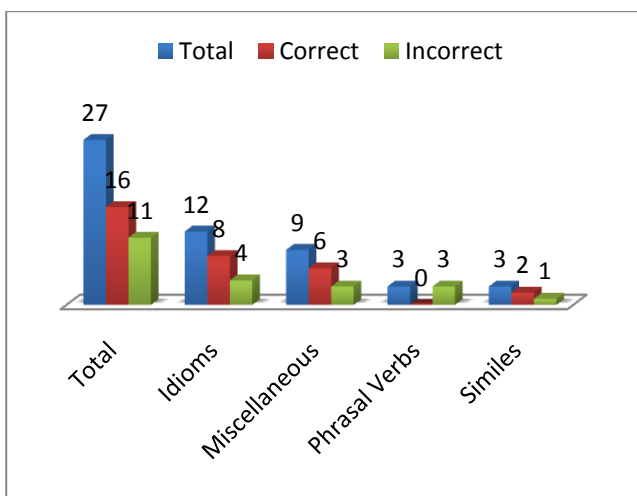


Figure 2. The expressions used in the compositions from School A.

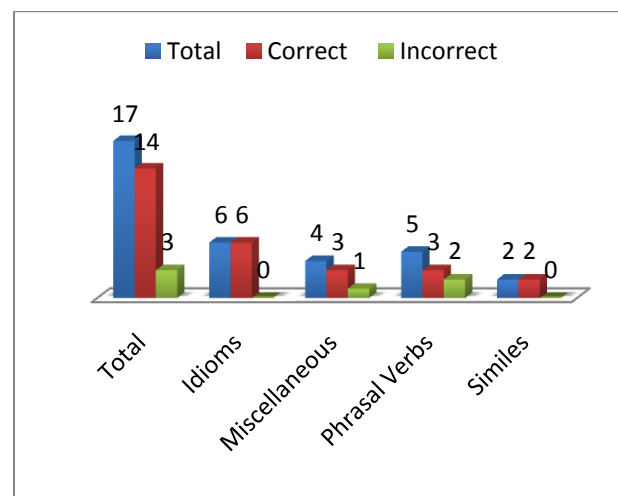


Figure 3. The expressions used in the compositions from School B

The average grade of the compositions from School A was much lower than the average of the compositions from School B. However, as can be seen in the figures above, more idiomatic expressions were used in the compositions from School A. The number of incorrect expressions was higher in School A than in School B, but, nevertheless, it is clear that the students in School A were more eager to use diversified expressions than the students in School B. It is impossible to say based on this small data whether it is a question of regional variation or whether it is just a coincidence. Moreover, the difference might also be explained by the different teachers and teaching materials.

To answer the second research question, idiomatic expressions were found in the compositions of all proficiency levels. A division was made to "better" and "poorer"

compositions by considering the compositions of more than 78 points (on a scale of 45-99) as “better” and the compositions that had got less as “poorer”. The hypothesis was that the more proficient language learners would use more idiomatic expressions than the less proficient because it could be assumed that the students with better grades are better at the language and therefore their language is also more idiomatic. In addition, the correct use of idiomatic expressions usually improves the grade of the composition. Unexpectedly the finding was that more idiomatic expressions were found in the poorer compositions than in the better ones. However, even though also correct expressions were found in the poorer compositions, the number of the incorrect expressions was clearly higher than in the compositions of the more advanced students. To be exact, 78.9% of the expressions used in the better compositions were correct whereas the percentage in the poorer compositions was only 62.5%. The differences in the correctness between the different proficiency levels can be seen below in Figures 4 and 5.

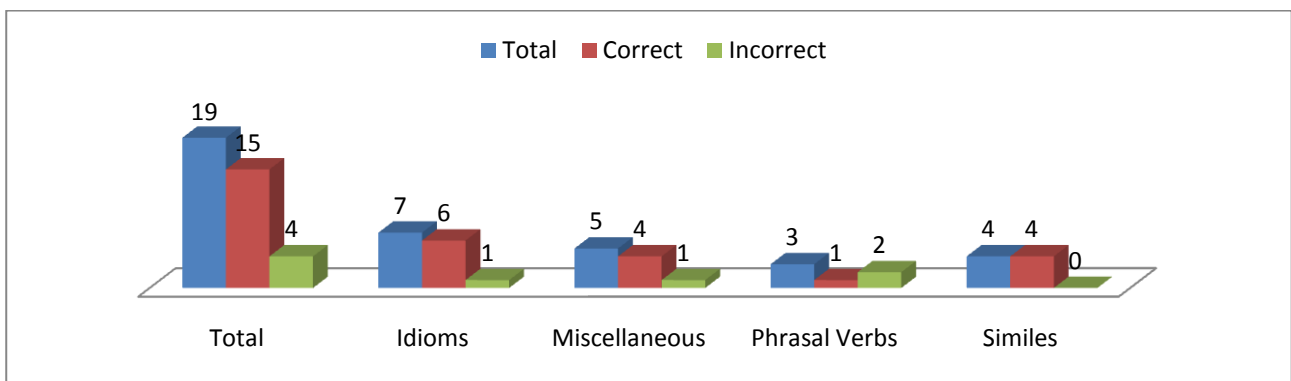


Figure 4. The expressions used in the better compositions.

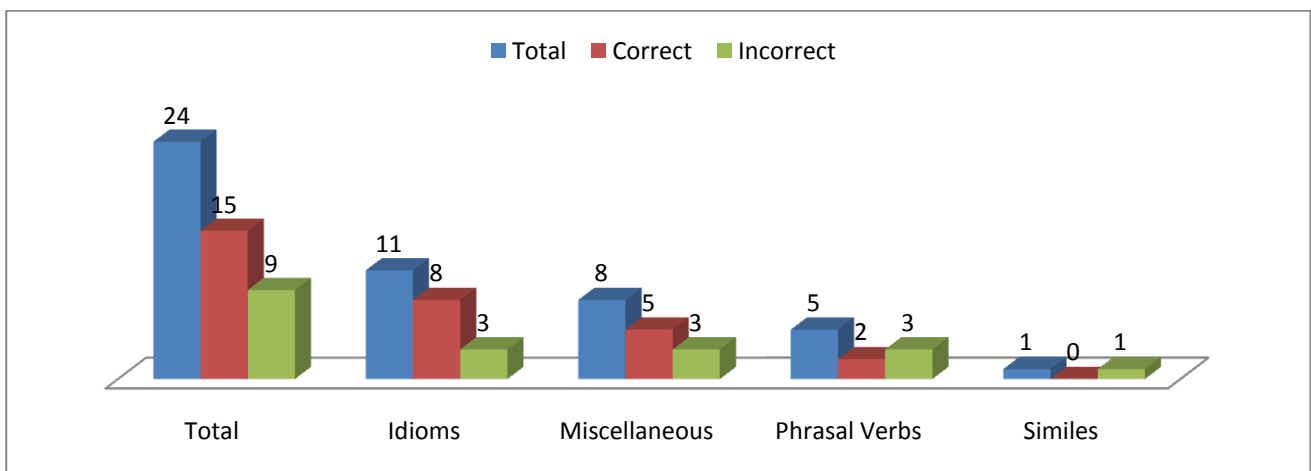


Figure 5. The expressions used in the poorer compositions.

To speculate the reasons behind the differences, it might be that the less proficient learners use idiomatic expressions almost accidentally. Finnish is also very idiomatic and the ability to think figuratively is not related to the learners' English skills. Therefore, they might for example translate what they think in Finnish directly into English without considering the correctness of the expression in English.

The low idiomaticity of the compositions might be explained by the findings of previous studies. In her study Runosalo (2006) noticed that the textbooks contained very little exercises on idioms while Ylisirniö (2009) discovered that the language teachers he interviewed did not find teaching the students to use idioms important or necessary but rather the contrary. Based on their results the students are not encouraged to use idiomatic expression either by their teachers or by the textbooks. If this is the situation in all schools, the lack of idiomatic expressions is understandable.

Furthermore, for example Elkiliç (2008) found that the easiest idioms for learners to learn are also the most common idioms. That is not surprising since the most common idioms are used much in speech, written texts and TV and radio shows, which enables the students to hear them more than more rare idioms. Therefore it is not unexpected that many of the idioms and other expressions used in the compositions are very common. For example, expressions such as *keep one's eyes open for*, *have something on one's mind*, *to play a big role*, *to be in love* or *from the bottom of one's heart* were used. They can be heard constantly in native speakers' speech and probably also in language classrooms.

4.3 Problems and mistakes in the use of idiomatic expressions

The aim of the third research question was to discover what is problematic when using idiomatic expressions and this part of the analysis answers that question. It was detected that prepositions, grammar and spelling, semantics and translations cause problems. However, as only 14 of the expressions were somehow incorrect there are few examples of each mistake. For this reason, it is clear that realistic generalisations cannot be made.

Furthermore, in some cases the mistake could have been categorised into several categories, which made it more challenging to calculate the mistakes in each category.

A total of 5 prepositional mistakes were found which makes them the most common type of mistake made in the expressions (35.7% of all mistakes). For example *look up on you* instead of *to you* was used. In some cases the phrasal verb or other prepositional expression was correct but the meaning was wrong. In other words, the student had confused an expression with another, as was the case with using *at the end* with the meaning of *in the end*. It was not surprising that prepositions caused most of the mistakes since they are known to be problematic especially to learners whose native language lacks in prepositions. Furthermore, fixed expressions caused problems when the student had used a wrong form or the expression was not complete although it was obvious which expression the student had meant. The two mistakes in this category were *give my helpfully hand* and *long story short* (counted as a mistake though in spoken language also some native language users use the expression without *to cut the*). This type of mistakes makes 14.3% of the mistakes.

In addition, 28.6% of the mistakes were grammatical and spelling mistakes. A total of 4 expressions fall into this category, for example *whit all of your heart* and *him's heart-broken*. Furthermore, in one case the writer appeared to know the meaning of the expression *to take after* but had used it in passive as in *things that are taken after...*, which cannot be done (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2005). Also, in one case the words *chief* and *chef* were confused in *he is the masterchief*. Almost all of the grammatical and spelling mistakes were in the compositions that had got a fairly low grade (58-75 points) except one which was in a composition of 85 points (*things that are taken after...*). This is logical since grammatical mistakes lower the grade and, on the other hand, the students who are not good at the language tend to make more grammatical mistakes.

Additionally, on 3 occasions (14.3%) the mistake was due to language transfer. The student had translated an expression directly from Finnish but the expression is either not used in English or the meaning of the expression is different in the two languages. One

direct translation was *at first blink* (ensisilmäyksellä) instead of *at first sight*. Furthermore, when discussing ecological lifestyle, one of the students asked *how many has really managed to keep the same line all the time*. This is a direct translation from Finnish (pitää sama linja) but it is not used as such in English. Another expression was *even the best of us sometimes misses the target*. In Finnish it could be understood as “olla väärässä” or “tehdä virhe” though it is not an actual saying. In English, however, the meaning of the expression is not idiomatic but “missing the target” literally means “missing the target”. Language transfer, which is a term for the influence of one language to another, is very common and it is somewhat surprising that this little transfer was detected in the use of the expressions. The mistakes in different categories are shown in Figure 6.

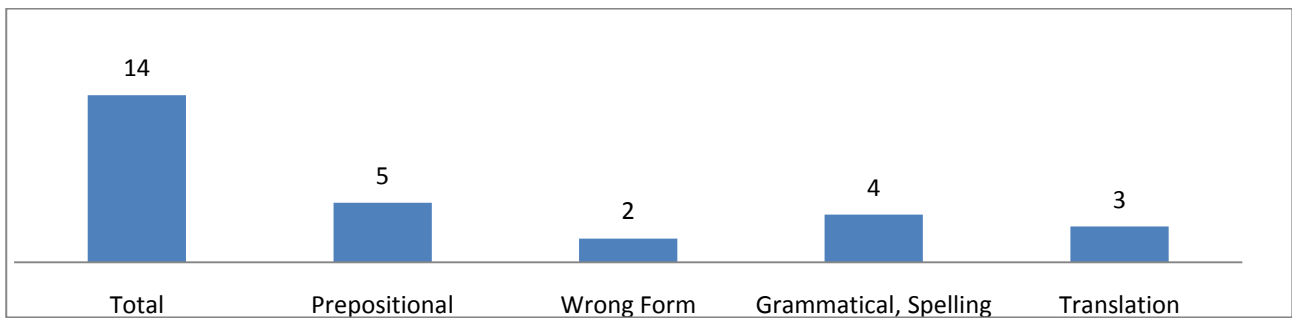


Figure 6. The mistakes made in the expressions.

5 CONCLUSION

A gap was noticed in this field of research as the production of idioms and other idiomatic expressions had not yet been studied. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to see how much the students of English use idiomatic expressions, what differences there are between the more proficient and less proficient students and what problems the use of idiomatic expressions causes.

The purpose of the first research question was to get a general picture of the use of idiomatic expressions. Based on the 42 compositions, the finding was that the compositions are not very idiomatic because only 44 expressions were found. The biggest group was idioms, the second miscellaneous, the third phrasal verbs and the fourth similes. No collocations, metaphors or proverbs were detected from the compositions. Obviously it has to be remembered that the number of the idiomatic expressions found would vary greatly with different researchers since there is no one answer to questions concerning idiomaticity. Even though a lot of time was spent on finding the expressions, deciding on their idiomaticity and categorising them, it must be remembered that it was done by one person and therefore the results depend greatly on personal opinions.

The second research question aimed to discover whether there are differences in the use of idiomatic expressions between the better and poorer compositions. Although some differences were found for example in the correctness of the expressions, the main hypothesis that the more proficient students would use more expressions than the others was not confirmed. On the contrary, idiomatic expressions were found in compositions of all levels and most of them in the compositions of lower proficiency levels. However, the average grade of the compositions was low and there were more poor compositions than better ones, which might explain the finding. It can be said that the students with lower proficiency levels made more mistakes than the ones who were better at the language. Although the students with weaker language skills were braver to use idiomatic expressions, it must be remembered that it is possible that in some cases they translated expressions directly from their native language. The students with better language skills,

on the other hand, used the expressions almost always correctly and it is possible that they were aware of the fact that incorrect use might lower their grade and did not want to risk a good grade by using an expression they are not sure of.

The aim of the third research question was to see what types of problems the use of idiomatic expressions causes and what types of mistakes can be found. Only a relatively small number of the expressions used were incorrect or contained a mistake which made it impossible to make generalisations. However, quite expectedly, it can be seen that prepositions cause difficulties for the Finnish students, probably because of the lack of prepositions in their mother tongue. In conclusion, the Finnish upper secondary school third graders use little idiomatic expressions and even the language of the advanced students is not by far as idiomatic as it could be after so many years of studying.

Due to the nature of the study and time limitations, the data for the present study was small. 42 compositions from two schools are simply not enough for getting a realistic picture of the use of idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, reading the compositions written for the matriculation examination would be better than reading the ones written for upper secondary school courses. All the participants of the examination have the same options for the topic, they cannot use dictionaries as help and they have the same time limits. Thus, they would all have the same starting point for writing the compositions. Unfortunately, the matriculation examinations are given to research purposes for bigger scale studies only which made it impossible to use them in a Bachelor's Thesis.

Though the present study is not by far comprehensive, right choices were made for example in choosing the methods of study and collecting the data. Searching idiomatic expressions from compositions that were written for other than research purposes was interesting and beneficial. The students did not know that the idiomaticity of their compositions was examined and therefore did not pay special attention to using them and thus the findings are realistic. Also, gathering the data from different schools enables getting a more realistic and general picture as the circumstances for writing the compositions are different (e.g. teacher, teaching material and environment).

To conclude, further research is needed in order to be able to make generalisations. The data would have to be bigger and it would make the study more reliable if there were more than one person to assess the papers. In addition to discovering more about the topics of the research questions of the present study, it would be interesting to know whether there are any regional differences in the use of idiomatic expressions, because the present study might indicate that there could be. For example, whether the students in Southern Finland use more idiomatic language than the ones in Northern Finland or if there are differences in the expressions they use.

As mentioned earlier, there was a gap in the research of idiomatic language as well as in the research of language teaching and learning because of the lack of studies on the production of idiomatic language. The results of the present study help to fill the gap as it was now discovered that even though the earlier studies suggest that Finnish students of English know quite many idioms (Kainulainen 2006) and that textbooks contain somewhat idiomatic texts (Kainulainen 2006, Runosalo 2005), the students are not yet confident in using idiomatic language productively. However, though it cannot be said whether the use of idiomatic language has improved or increased due to the lack of previous studies on the subject, it could be assumed that as the interest towards idiomatic language seems to be increasing (based on the fact that the number of studies on the subject has been increasing in the recent years) and the importance of idioms is also recognised in the language classrooms (based on the findings about the idiomaticity of textbooks [Runosalo 2005] and about the teachers' attitudes [Ylisirniö 2009]), the students' knowledge on the idiomatic language and their confidence in using idiomatic expressions could be increasing as well. It is interesting to see what the results of the next study on the idiom production indicate.

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APPENDIX : The expressions found

Correct expressions:

Idioms:

1. Keep one's eyes open for
2. Have something on one's mind
3. Take care of one's own business
4. To think over and over again
5. To play a big role in
6. As a matter of fact
7. From the bottom of my heart
8. Last but not least
9. Love at first sight (3)
10. As far as I'm concerned
11. To be in heaven
12. To be in love

Miscellaneous:

1. Lovebirds (2)
2. Right away
3. Hot-headed grandma
4. Idea **behind**
5. Up-to-date
6. Problem **in front of us**
7. To be here for you
8. To take a big step in one's life

Phrasal Verbs:

1. Take up (2)
2. Find out

Similes:

1. It's a real-life Cinderella story
2. Highlights of your relationship
3. To be "in"
4. To be a star

Incorrect expressions:**Idioms:**

1. **(To cut the)** Long story short
2. **Whit all of** your heart
3. Give my **helpfully** hand
4. At first **blink**

Miscellaneous:

1. **At** the end
2. Even the best of us sometimes **misses the target**
3. **Him's** heart-broken
4. To keep the same line

Phrasal Verbs:

1. Look back **at**
2. (things that are) taken after sb
3. Look up **on** you
4. Catch **up** (on to)
5. **Be** through sth **for** (go through sth because of)

Similes:

1. He is the master**chief**