Teaching Idiomatic Expressions in Language Classrooms – Like the Icing on the Cake

Lära ut idiomatiska uttryck i språkundervisningen – som grädde på moset

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Lärarexamen 300 hp
Engelska och lärande
2013-10-31

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Abstract

This thesis investigates what types of teaching approaches and methods can be used when teaching idiomatic expressions to learners of English. The method used is a small-scale research synthesis where studies are summarized, compared and discussed. An overview of the teaching approaches and methods provide an outline of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach/method in connection to the purpose of teaching idioms to language learners of English. Several different descriptions of idioms are merged into one that is used in this research synthesis.

The results indicate that even though teaching procedures appealing to Multiple Intelligences are most common in the articles used for this thesis, there are several different ways to improve learners’ idiom comprehension. Every teacher should have in mind that all students are unique and learn in different ways but some generalizations can be helpful when planning lessons.

Keywords: idioms, figurative language, teaching method, teaching approach
Preface

The workload of this thesis has been divided as equally as possible between the two authors. Both authors have read all the material that was used, however the person summarizing it has had to be more thorough.

Throughout the writing process there have been discussions concerning individually written parts as well as the whole to create a unanimous research synthesis where both authors would have the same knowledge and ability to defend the work.

Helena Winnberg has written about the importance of knowing idioms in the target language, the presentation of the teaching approaches and methods as well as the introductions to each heading under the results and discussion section.

Jessica K. Rodriguez has individually written the definition of idioms, summarized arguments highlighting the importance of teaching idioms explicitly and presented the method used.

Consequently, the rest of the thesis has been written by both authors or consists of contributions from both Helena and Jessica.
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1. Introduction

Language is constantly changing. However, it is also full of somewhat fixed language use, specifically established idioms that are metaphorical expressions. Glucksberg (2001) proposes that fixed expressions include, in order of relative frequency: compounds, idioms, names, clichés, song, book, and movie titles, quotes and familiar foreign phrases. According to D’Angelo Bromley (1984), idioms exist in all languages and “enjoy widespread use among speakers of every language the world over” (p. 272). Cooper (1998) states that there are four kinds of nonliteral expressions of which idioms are the most frequently encountered in discourse. He presents statistics saying that speakers (and writers) use “about 1.08 novel figures of speech and 4.08 idioms per minute” (p. 255) suggesting that “[o]ver a lifetime of 60 years, a person would use about 20 million idioms” (p. 255).

Idioms make use of mental pictures in order to provide an image of what is being said. For example, one might say that I’m so hungry I could eat a horse giving the listener a quite powerful idea about just how hungry one is. A definition found in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009) states that an idiom is “a group of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word. For example, ‘under the weather’ is an idiom meaning ‘ill’” (p. 870).

Still, the dictionary definition may be inadequate for teachers to use in an educational setting. In comparison, the body of research connected to idiomatic expressions provides explicit classification systems. Barkema (1996) comments on the different ways of referring to lexicalized expressions with idiosyncratic meanings by stating that “[…] later definitions boil down to the same two things: a) idioms are expressions which contain at least two lexical items and b) the meaning of an idiom is not the combinatorial result of the meanings of the lexical items in the expression” (p. 127). The examples show that trying to provide one comprehensive overview is very difficult.

Researchers tend to use different words with similar definitions, for example Wiktorsson (2002) prefabs, Grant and Nation (2006) figuratives as well as Nation and
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Meara (2002), and Wiktorsson (2003) use the term *multi-word units*. This problem is approached in section 2.1, where a description suitable for our research synthesis is provided.

The meaning of idioms is almost impossible to understand unless you make use of your cultural knowledge or have heard them before. For example, instead of saying that someone has died, stopped breathing or does not exist anymore, the expression *kick the bucket* could be used. Nippold and Taylor (2002) claim that, “idiom understanding begins in early childhood and gradually improves throughout the school-age years, adolescence, and well into adulthood” (p. 384).

Idioms are an important part of acquiring a language and often indicate a proficient learner. Burke (1998) claims that “knowledge of slang and idioms is fundamental to nonnative speakers' understanding of the language that native speakers actually use” (p. 5). D’Angelo Bromley (1984) agrees with this statement and remarks that “[i]dioms add confusion and difficulty to learning of language and so they occupy a special place in the teaching of language and reading” (p. 272).

Another important part of idiom acquisition is that these figurative expressions make a language more vibrant. They are useful when *decorating* the language or when searching for new ways of expressing oneself. D’Angelo Bromley (1984) promotes the use of idioms by stating that “[j]ust as idioms are disruptive, ambiguous, and difficult for the language user, so also are they interesting and colorful. Idioms add humor, imagery, and spice to language” (p. 274). Potter (1967) has written that “[l]anguage is like a dress. We vary our dress to suit the occasion” (p. 130), meaning that we choose the most appropriate way of expressing ourselves depending on the social context in which the utterance is made.

According to Gee (2007), “language builds abstractions on the basis of concrete images from embodied experiences of a material world, so, too, does human learning and thinking” (p. 72). In order to grasp concepts we often use words and expressions that relate to our body. A common expression is to say *keep this in mind* making it sound as if the mind was an actual place for storage.

In summary, figurative expressions such as idioms are used frequently in everyday situations and therefore need to be addressed by teachers. Idiom comprehension requires learners to go beyond a simple word-by-word comprehension strategy and to integrate figurative meaning.
2. Purpose and Research Question

In this degree project, several teaching approaches and methods that could be useful when teaching language learners of English idiomatic expressions will be compared and discussed. The starting point will be to exemplify the many definitions existing of idioms to justify the inclusion of texts that all define them differently. We then continue by explaining the importance of knowing idioms in the target language in connection to the Swedish curriculum.

The research question is as follows:

What types of teaching approaches and methods can be used to teach idioms to learners of English?

2.1 Defining Idioms

Idioms belong to the category of nonliteral or figurative language that also includes metaphors, similes and proverbs. As mentioned earlier, there are many definitions available which suggests that researchers have not been able to settle for a single explanation. In the following section we provide examples of how idioms can be defined differently. However, this study (and the search for relevant material) required us to be very broad, and to not settle for a narrow definition. Furthermore, the broad description that was used led to the fact that we ended up with texts that all defined idioms differently.

An idiom is a phrase that is commonly used within a given culture and understood to have a meaning different from its literal meaning. Glucksberg (2001) states that “[w]hat sets idioms apart from most other fixed expressions is their ‘non-logical’ nature, that is, the absence of any discernable relation between their linguistic meanings and their
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idiomatic meanings” (p. 68). This point of view is supported by Cooper (1998) who compares idioms to metaphors; “[a]n idiom can have a literal meaning, but its alternate, figurative meaning must be understood metaphorically. For example, over the hill can mean on the other side of the hill, but the figurative meaning is to be very old” (p. 255). D’Angelo Bromley (1994) goes even further by saying that “its meaning cannot be inferred grammatically, neither can meaning be determined from its literal translation, nor can meaning always be determined from the surrounding material “(p. 274). Without a doubt, this presents language learners with a special vocabulary-learning problem.

Wiktorsson (2003) proposes a similar definition to the ones provided above but she chooses to use the term prefabs. Prefabs are said to be prefabricated expressions that are stored in the memory to be used as multi-word units. Simply put, because they need to be. Their meaning cannot be understood merely by knowing what the different constituents mean. However, the term multi-word units (MWUs) present another dilemma since it is sometimes used to describe idioms. Grant & Nation (2006) state that there are three types of MWUs: core idioms, literal sequences and figuratives. Figuratives are “what most people commonly call idioms. At first sight their part do not make up the meaning of the whole unit” (Ibid., p. 8).

So far, it has been shown that there are a lot of similar definitions and terms used to describe the same language phenomenon. Glucksberg (2001) provides the most detailed description whilst identifying idioms on the basis of compositionality and transparency:

Firstly, idioms can be classified on the dimension of compositionality. They can be noncompositional, partially compositional or fully compositional – explaining the relationship between the idiom’s constituents and the idiom’s meaning. Glucksberg (2001) states that “[i]n noncompositional idioms, no relations between the idiom’s constituents and the idiom’s meaning can be discerned, as in the idiom cheesecake to refer to pinup art” (p. 73). Pinup photos are often called cheesecake photos.

The idiomatic meaning of partially compositional idioms can, to some degree, be discerned from its constituents. Glucksberg (2001) gives the expression kick the bucket as an example where “one could not infer the meaning to die from the literal meaning” (p. 73) but “the idiom’s literal meaning can does constrain its use and comprehension” (p. 73).

A fully compositional idiom maps directly onto the idiomatic referents, “as in the idiom pop the questions. In this idiom, the verb pop and the noun phrase the question
map directly onto the idiomatic meanings of suddenly utter and marriage proposal” (Ibid., pp.73 – 74).

Secondly, the issue of transparency refers to “the extent to which an idiom’s meaning can be inferred from the meaning of its constituents” (Ibid., p. 74). A compositional idiom can be either opaque or transparent and the meaning of individual words can constrain both interpretation and use. “In compositional-opaque idioms, the relations between an idiom’s constituents and its meaning may be opaque, but the meanings of individual words can nevertheless constrain both interpretation and use” (Ibid., p. 74). The semantics of the verb “to kick can constrain interpretation. Kicking is a discrete act, and so one could not say he kicked the bucket all week, even though one could say he lay dying all week” (Ibid., p. 74).

An idiom that is both compositional and transparent includes constituents that have one-to-one semantic relations to its idiomatic meaning. For example, in the idiom break the ice, “the word break corresponds to the idiomatic sense of abruptly changing an uncomfortable social situation, and the word ice corresponds to the idiomatic sense of social or interpersonal tension” (Ibid., p. 75).

The quasi-metaphorical idiom refers to idioms that convey meaning via their allusional content. Glucksberg (2001) describes these as similar to metaphors. “They call to mind a prototypical or stereotypical instance of an entire category of people, events, situations or actions” and “they can simultaneously refer to an ideal exemplar of a concept and characterize some event or situation as an instance of that concept” (Ibid., p. 75). An example of a fully compositional idiom that might be used when saying that something is done prematurely is crossing one’s bridges before coming to them. Since it is compositional, it can be varied and still make sense when used in future situations: he burned his bridges behind him or he burned all of his bridges in front of him (Ibid., p. 75).

In conclusion, Glucksberg (2001) identifies four types of idioms: noncompositional (not transparent), compositional opaque, compositional transparent and quasi-metaphorical. However, this section has provided a few different suggestions for how to define idioms. But, as mentioned before, this thesis makes use of the broadest description of idioms in order to find suitable research.
2.2 Why is it Important for Learners to Know Idioms in the Target Language?

Before determining what the best way to teach idioms to second language students is, the reason why idioms are important to know needs to be addressed. Why is practicing idioms a worthwhile activity in the classroom? Why is it important, or perhaps even absolutely necessary, for language learners to understand idioms in the target language?

Idioms are very common in both written and spoken language. Lundblom and Woods (2012) write that idioms “appear in conversation, print (magazines and newspapers), and media (movies, radio, and television)” (p. 203). Cooper (1998) claims that when idioms occur on TV-shows, for example, in order to even understand the plot, the viewer often needs to be able to comprehend the idiom in question. Furthermore, “[o]f the four kinds of nonliteral expressions, idioms are the most frequently encountered in discourse” (Ibid., p. 255). Consequently, since idioms are such a big part of most languages, students should learn them in order to be fluent in the target language. Burke (1998) goes as far as claiming that there is “absolutely no way a nonnative speaker of English could fully understand an American movie, TV show, news broadcast, or even a typical conversation without help because our language is loaded with nonstandard English, i.e., slang and idioms” (p. 1). He explains that if nonnative speakers do not understand idioms, they will never be able to completely integrate and, instead, they will always be outsiders. Cooper (1998) agrees, “sooner or later, imprecise idiomatic usage will cause difficulties even for a student with an excellent knowledge of grammar and a high level of vocabulary attainment” (p. 259). Thus, the fact that students most definitely will encounter idiomatic expressions on a daily basis (whether in a country where the native language is English, or just through TV shows and movies), is definitely a main reason as to why their idiom awareness needs to be developed during their language learning.

Additionally, it seems idioms are difficult to learn and comprehend. The complexity of this area within language learning is another reason why teachers need to explain and teach idioms to students. D’Angelo Bromley (1984), for example, writes that idioms “add confusion and difficulty to the learning of language” (p. 272). Lundblom and Woods (2012) further explain that idioms “occur frequently in classroom language. Students with literacy or language weaknesses are often challenged by idioms;
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therefore, the failure to comprehend idioms can impact academic performance” (p. 202). Moreover, Burke (1998) mentions that teaching students about and explaining nonliteral language thoroughly in school is preferable to students hearing this type of language outside of the classroom. Outside of an educational environment the risk of the student misunderstanding an idiom, for example, is higher. The student might end up in a situation where he or she uses the idiom in the wrong context and gets into trouble or an awkward situation because of it.

To conclude, there are at least two main arguments in favor of teaching idioms in school. Since idioms are so common in everyday language use, and since they seem difficult for foreign language students to learn, “[a]s educators, we need not promote the actual use of slang, idioms, […] but we do have a responsibility to familiarize the nonnative speaker with this type of language” (Ibid., p. 5).

2.3 The Swedish Curriculum

The Swedish compulsory school curriculum mentions that, in the subject of English, students should acquire certain knowledge and skills (Skolverket, 2011a). Some of these are definitely connected to the students’ comprehension of idioms. It is stated in the national curriculum, for years 7-9, (Skolverket, 2011a) that students should be taught “[l]anguage phenomena such as […] words with different registers, as well as fixed language expressions pupils will encounter in the language” (p. 34). Students learning English should also be given opportunities to develop their abilities to

• understand and interpret the content of spoken English […]
• express themselves and communicate in speech and writing,
• use language strategies to understand and make themselves understood,
• adapt language for different purposes, recipients and contexts (Ibid., p. 32)

The students “should also be equipped to be able to use different tools for […] being creative and communicating” (Ibid., p. 34). The ability “to clarify, vary and enrich communication such as pronunciation, intonation and fixed language expressions” (Ibid., p. 35) is also mentioned.

In the curriculum for upper secondary school, the language dimension is not equally visible. Words and phrases are not as evident in the syllabi; however, it does not mean that they (and the aspects of idiomaticity) become unimportant.
2.4 Explicit Teaching of Idioms

This paper suggests that idioms need to be learned so students can develop fluency and fully understand the target language. The question remains, though, if idiomatic expressions should be taught explicitly or could be learned incidentally?

There is a great deal of research available concerning vocabulary learning. However, very little research focuses specifically on learning idiomatic expressions. Instead, idioms are seen as an important part of developing fluency in a language and are often integrated in the term vocabulary. Nation (2001) suggest that “[i]dioms need to be dealt with as if they were words; they should be given attention on the basis of their frequency and range of occurrence” (p. 335). The word used is MWUs (multi word units) – a term that it much broader and more inclusive than idioms. Although Nation and Meara (2002) focus on learning individual words, they state that “learning MWUs can occur across the four learning strands as well (p. 44).

Nation and Meara (2002) and Schmitt (2000) compare explicit and incidental learning as two approaches to vocabulary acquisition. Schmitt (2000) indicates that “[e]xplicit learning focuses attention directly on the information to be learned, which gives the greatest chance for its acquisition” (p. 120). Nation and Meara (2002) support this point of view, adding that “deliberate learning is more focused and goal-directed than incidental learning” (p. 41). The authors also suggest that “[e]xplicit vocabulary teaching is one way of encouraging deliberate vocabulary learning” (Ibid., pp. 42 – 43). However, Nation and Meara (2002) as well as Schmitt (2000) acknowledge the fact that incidental learning is effective. But According to Schmitt (2000) “it is slower and more gradual, lacking the focused attention of explicit learning” (p. 102).

Grant and Nation (2006) argue that there are three types of MWUs which all require a different approach to learning. These are core idioms, literal sequences and figuratives. In addition, the authors argue that once the meaning of a MWU is known, it is possible to figure out how the words relate to create a whole. Grant and Nation (2006) suggest that the strategy for interpreting figuratives is a commonsense one, “[t]o deal with figuratives receptively, in listening and reading, learners need to have an interpreting strategy and will be greatly helped if they have actually met and learned the most useful figuratives” (p. 9). This suggests that figuratives deserve attention because
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learners need to recognize the different types of idioms and develop strategies for dealing with them.

Schmitt (2000) argues that much lexis consists of multiword units which act as chunks that facilitate fluent language since they do not require as much cognitive effort compared to creating new expressions. He also suggests that “once a chunk is known, it can be analyzed and segmented into its constituent words. In this way, unanalyzed chunks can be analyzed to provide additional vocabulary” (Ibid., p. 128).

In summary, it seems to be clear that explicit teaching of figurative idioms has a beneficial effect. Schmitt concludes, “for second language learners at least, both explicit and incidental learning are necessary, and should be seen as complementary” (Ibid., p. 121). Both types are necessary for an effective vocabulary program, but teachers need to have in mind that words are learned incrementally. In order for learners to acquire them, they need to be met several times and this highlights the importance of repetition in vocabulary learning.

2.5 Acquisition of Idioms

Swain (1993) summarizes the output hypothesis by stating that “through producing language, either spoken or written, language acquisition/learning may occur” (p. 159) and that the essence of the output hypothesis lies in learners taking responsibility for their own learning. The author claims that by using the target language as frequently as possible, the intuition regarding fluency can be developed. This is true not only when learning idioms but for all educational settings, meaningful practice of linguistic resources permits “the development of automaticity in their use (p. 159). Swain (1993) states that when learners produce language they are forced to recognize what they do not know, making the gap in their knowledge base visible. There are at least three responses that learners might have to this gap, one of them being to “identify it and pay attention to relevant input” (Ibid., p. 159) which often is provided by teachers. This gives the learners an opportunity to modify their output, making collaborative activities important.

Cooper (1999) writes that an area clearly worthy of investigation is how second language learners acquire idioms. However, “[…] most of the research on idioms has
involved native speakers of English. Models of L1 idiom acquisition therefore offer a starting point” (Ibid., p. 234).

Cooper (1998) states that “idiom acquisition research [...] has uncovered a number of findings that have pedagogical implication for idiom instruction” (p. 255). The author mentions three competing hypotheses regarding how idioms are processed and these are developed into a systematic plan for teaching idioms in the classroom.

The first one, the *literal first hypothesis*, consists of two modes: one that processes the literal meaning and one that processes the figurative meaning of an idiom. The former is normally the active one while the latter comes into play when the literal meaning does not fit into the speech context.

The second one, the *simultaneous processing hypothesis*, claims that idioms are stored and retrieved in the mental lexicon as chunks. Literal and figurative meaning interact and the interpretation that best fits the context is sorted out.

The *direct access model* is the third one and it only makes use of the figurative meaning of an idiom. This proposes that a literal analysis of an idiomatic expression is very rare.

According to Gronk and Schweigert (1992), “no clearly superior theory for idiom processing has emerged, although support has been mustered for each of the three models” (in Cooper, 1998, p. 256). Cooper (1998) claims that six variables important for idiom comprehension and learning have been revealed. These variables will now be presented and summarized.

The first variable concerns the age of the learner. It reconnects to Piaget’s theory of cognitive development – a child moves through different stages of mental development and he or she has to reach a certain level of maturity before being able to acquire certain knowledge. Lundahl (2009) summarizes by stating that “*Think before you speak* works as an exhortation within this approach” (my own translation, p. 151). Cooper (1998) states that “[y]oung children up to the age of about nine generally tend to interpret idioms (and other figurative expressions) literally” (p. 256).

The second variable concerns teachers and their use of figurative language in classrooms. Idioms occupied the second place when the frequency of figurative expressions was examined, “so that by eighth grade 11.5 percent of a teacher’s utterances, or about one out of ten, contained idioms” (Ibid., p. 257). Since teachers quite frequently use idioms, they can limit learners’ comprehension if they are interpreted literally. 

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Thirdly, the characteristics of an idiom can determine whether the acquisition of it is easy or not. “Frozen idioms are learned more quickly than flexible idioms because they are heard more frequently in only one syntactic form rather than in several and are, therefore, internalized as a single lexical item” (Ibid., p. 257). The closeness between the idiom’s literal and figurative meanings (the metaphoric transparency) is also an aspect that has to be taken into account.

The fourth variable is connected to the context in which the idioms are presented. Idioms that appear in a context are easier for learners to understand since they can make use of previous information to interpret the figurative meaning.

The fifth variable is that it can be helpful to group idioms according to a theme. Cooper (1998) suggests that it can be “according to the main word they contain, such as verbs” or “according to their underlying metaphorical themes” such as “argument is war, e.g., I’ve never won an argument with him” (p. 258).

The final variable concerns second language learners. Previous research has shown that idioms that were identical in the first and the target language were the easiest to comprehend and produce. Similar idioms were produced with some interference from the first language while idioms that were completely different in both languages were the hardest both to comprehend and produce. The idioms that were comprehended and produced correctly “were frequently used in everyday speech, were transparent, and [...] had simple vocabulary structure” (Ibid., p. 259).

All of these research findings on idiom acquisition have been used to create teaching suggestions and procedures that will be presented in section 4.3.3 A Variety of Intelligences.

2.6 Teaching Approaches and Methods

In this paper, different teaching approaches and methods will be discussed and compared in an attempt to figure out which types could be used when teaching idioms to students. However, to define exactly what a teaching approach or method is can be a complicated matter. Richards and Rodgers (2001) mention that “[d]espite the changing status of approaches and methods in language teaching, the study of past and present teaching methods continues to form a significant component of teacher preparation
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programs” (p. 16). Liu and Shi (2007) write that “[t]he names of many of the methods (Grammar-translation Method, Direct Method, Audio-lingual Method, Communicative Teaching Method, etc) are familiar enough, yet the methods are not easy to grasp in practice because a method, however ill-defined it may be, is more than a single strategy or a particular technique” (p. 69).

Nevertheless, it is necessary for this paper to clarify what is meant by an approach or a method in this context. Richards and Rodgers (2001) claim that an approach “refers to theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching” (p. 20). A method, on the other hand, is “a specific instructional design or system based on a particular theory of language and of language learning” (Ibid., p. 245). While approaches leave it to the teacher to decide how to apply it to their own teaching and the particular situation, methods are usually based on specific claims and consist of exact, already made decisions on how and what to teach. So, approaches are concerned with language and learning theories and these may or may not lead to a method. For example, “[t]he linking of structuralism (a linguistic theory) to behaviorism (a learning theory) produced Audiolingualism” (Ibid., p. 23), which led to the Audiolingual method. The method itself is now considered rather outdated, however “Audiolingualism and materials based on audiolingual principle continue to be used today” (Ibid., p. 54).

Richards and Rodgers (2001) define the term procedure as “the actual moment-to-moment techniques, practices, and behaviors that operate in teaching a language according to a particular method. It is the level at which describe how a method realizes its approach and design in classroom behavior” (p. 31). Methods, if not created from an approach, can also be developed from a specific set of procedures that was found to be successful.

This paper will focus mainly on the methods and approaches teachers can use of when teaching idioms. However, the actual, concrete procedures will not be excluded but can be touched upon when necessary in the form of examples of sets of activities and tasks that can be used within a certain method/approach. In this essay, the possibilities of teaching students idiomatic expressions through, for example, peer tutoring, pictorial education, sounds, charades and drama will be explored. The terms approach and method will merge in our discussion since numerous general ideas on how to teach idioms will be included. It would be unfortunate to exclude certain valuable material simply because it deals more with an approach than a method, or vice versa.
3. Method

The method used for this degree paper is a small-scale research synthesis. Research findings on both teaching approaches and methods and idioms will be summarized, compared and contrasted. In order to discuss idioms, we presented several different definitions showing that researchers have not been able to settle for a unanimous one. The description used in this paper had to be very broad in order for us to find relevant research even though researchers tend to use different words describing the same thing.

Norris and Ortega (2006) define a research synthesis by stating that “we review in order to get a sense of what is already known about a particular question or problem, to understand how it has been addressed methodologically, and to figure out where we need to go next with our research” (p. 5). By generating an understanding and becoming more familiar with the current work we will be able to find out what remains to be done in the area.

According to Norris and Ortega (2006), “the systematic review of accumulated primary research studies” (p. 4) can have great potential value to those interested in language learning and teaching. However, it is also made very clear that conducting a systematic research synthesis is not easy – the result depends “as much on the quality and availability of good primary research as it does on the capabilities of secondary researchers” (Ibid., p. xii).

3.1 Inclusion Criteria

In this research synthesis we make use of articles and studies provided to us through personal communication with teachers and researchers as well as database searches. The starting point was to use Summon at Malmö University’s website. Summon searches simultaneously through the library’s electronic as well as physical materials, providing
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us with articles and studies that match our keywords. The first searches included words (either combined or separated) such as: idioms, idioms in education, figurative speech, sayings, as well as teaching idioms, second language learners. However, the results did not include a lot of research relevant for our thesis and had to be modified to arrive at the final keywords presented below.

The pedagogical databases used include ERIC, Education Resources Information Center, ERIC via EBSCO and ProQuest as well as Google Scholar. Some of our keywords connected to our main subjects – teaching approaches/methods and idioms – were (combined or separated): language teaching methods, language teaching approaches, idioms, vocabulary, prefabs, multi-word units, second language learners and figurative language.

The primary research used in this research synthesis will below be presented and summarized. We recognize that social factors and context can affect English language learning and teaching. However, as Hult (2012) states, “English tends to be framed as an allochthonous language that is penetrating Sweden from beyond its borders” (p. 234) and that “ELT in Sweden, thus, may be characterized as occupying a grey area between these perspectives, serving as a nexus point for the duality of local and global dimensions of English in the Swedish context” (Ibid., p. 235). Therefore, texts regarding both English as a second and as a foreign language are relevant for our research paper. Furthermore, some of the texts used are placed in an L1-context and were included because they make use of teaching approaches/methods that are relevant regardless of teaching ESL or EFL students.

We acknowledge the fact that idioms often are specific to a culture but whatever the target language may be, students still need to learn them. Because of this, studies including, for example, Chinese students learning English have been included.

In addition, the studies presented in this essay focus on learners at different ages and with different native languages. It is the teacher’s responsibility, when “trying to apply approaches or methods” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 248), to consider “the context in which teaching and learning occurs” (Ibid., p. 248). Teachers “need to be able to use approaches and methods flexibly and creatively based on their own judgment and experience” (Ibid., p. 250). Furthermore, “they should be encouraged to form and adapt the methods they use” (Ibid., p. 250). Richards and Rodgers (2001) claim that teachers have to modify methods and approaches, depending on the type of class they are teaching, in order for it to work in the reality of the classroom. Thus, regardless of the
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learners’ age or native language, teachers always have to adapt their teaching style according to the particular learners in question, the level they are at and other factors, such as cultural or social context as mentioned above.

3.2 Exclusion Criteria

While searching for information we found a lot of valuable research regarding idioms. We have included studies, articles and books that were the most relevant when answering the research question stated in the beginning of the paper. The material that was excluded were those studies, articles and books that we could not access since Malmö University did not have a subscription to all relevant databases. In addition, all material that had not been peer reviewed was excluded.

Since we wanted to make use of recent resources we excluded material published before the 1990’s with the exception of D’Angelo Bromely’s article published in year 1984.

3.3 Overview of Sources

The sources in this thesis consist of a mixture of research texts as well as methodological and practical texts. Nine different texts are presented in this essay. The following ones are our primary sources since most of our conclusions were drawn from them, but all nine studies are discussed in the Results section.

Several articles (Boers, Piquer Píriz, Stengers & Eyckmans, 2009, Boers & Lindstromberg, 2005, Boers & Lindstromberg, 2006) have explored the possibility of using imagery and sounds to teach idioms. The articles discuss whether or not images or sounds can help learners to remember, and even re-produce, idioms.

Another relevant source is the article “Teaching Idioms” (1998) by Cooper. The article makes pedagogical implications for idiom instruction “for teaching idioms to native language learners, bilingual students and, foreign language learners” (Ibid., p. 255). These are developed into teaching suggestions including concrete examples and a systematic plan. The author also presents us with a definition of idiom, statistics over
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the use of idioms and different ways of categorizing and processing them. The statement that “[s]tudents seem to benefit most from a plan of instruction that incorporates a wide range of activities that appeal to various intelligences [...]” (Ibid., p. 265) is of great importance to us since we are investigating different teaching strategies. Additionally, D’Angelo Bromley’s article, also titled “Teaching Idioms” (1984), is useful for our paper as it discusses the best ways to teach idioms to young students. D’Angelo Bromley claims that children “do not have the linguistic competence of adults nor do they know as many idioms” (Ibid., p. 273). This is not limited to native speakers but also applies to nonnative speakers. Therefore, it is critical for teachers to consider how to best teach idiomatic meanings. The article mentions three different components to consider when teaching idioms: definition, usage and application.

Firstly, the teacher can define and explain an idiom and its origin, and secondly, “students can be given a variety of opportunities to use it in class” (Ibid., p. 274). Thirdly, the new knowledge needs to be applied outside of school. Students can find idioms while reading in their spare time, or while watching TV at home, for example.

Lastly, a further primary source is Lundblom and Woods’ article “Working in the Classroom: Improving Idiom Comprehension Through Classwide Peer Tutoring” (2012). The importance of understanding idioms is highlighted through the argument that they “are present in academic settings; therefore, the failure to comprehend idioms could impact academic performance—reading comprehension, written composition, and vocabulary—especially as the occurrence of idioms in classroom language increases as students advance in age and grade” (p. 203). The study investigates how the method of Classwide Peer Tutoring (CWPT) can affect learners’ understanding of idioms. The authors suggest that students’ poor comprehension skills are not related to the idioms but to the use of context to derive an interpretation.
4. Results and Discussion

The material found and used for this research paper include some teaching suggestions in line with Cooperative Language Learning (CLL), as peer tutoring is central in Lundblom and Woods’ (2012) study, and cognitive-oriented teaching, such as Chen and Lai’s (2013) study. However, the major trend in these texts seems to be the idea of Multiple Intelligences (MI), as several of the articles were focused around different aspects of it. These include several articles on pictures and sounds as well as ideas from Cooper (1998) and D’Angelo Bromely (1984) involving charades, dramatization and music. The findings in this paper will be organized according to type of approach/method.

4.1 Cooperative Language Learning

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) is based on group activities where students have to exchange information with each other in order to learn. The role of social interaction is central in language learning, and CLL includes peer tutoring and peer monitoring. “CLL is […] designed to foster cooperation rather than competition, to develop critical thinking skills, and to develop communicative competence through socially structured interaction activities” (Ibid., p. 195). Richards and Rodgers (2001) claim that CLL can be used to teach a variety of aspects of languages. CLL is used, for example, when teaching vocabulary. CLL also focuses on the learners’ reflection and evaluation of their own learning. Cooperative Language Learning is generally supported by researchers who claim that it enhances learning and interaction skills. However, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001), it has been questioned when used with learners of different proficiency levels. For this
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paper, one study was found suggesting CLL as a worthwhile activity when teaching idioms.

In their article “Working in the Classroom: Improving Idiom Comprehension Through Classwide Peer Tutoring” (2012), Lundblom and Woods examine if classwide peer tutoring (CWPT) could be useful when teaching idioms to students. Four 7th grade students (all native speakers of American English) in need of intensive reading instruction and with delays in idiom comprehension participated in the multiple baseline single subject study. Three sets of idioms were taught to examine the effects of CWPT. CWPT has been shown to have better results than teacher instruction. “Students have also been reported to benefit from CWPT with mild and moderate disabilities, learning disabilities, hearing impairments, and autism, as well as English language learners and students with a background in low socioeconomic status” (Ibid., p. 203).

The study was based on the following research questions:

1. Does a positive change in idiom comprehension occur after the implementation of CWPT procedures within the general education classroom? 2. Do the students and teacher implement the idiom CWPT protocol with fidelity within the general education classroom? 3. Do the students and teacher report satisfaction with use of CWPT for idioms? (Ibid., p. 204).

The students participated in three 20-minute-sessions per week. 30 idioms were selected for CWPT training and then divided randomly into three training sets. The figurative meaning was presented and the participant chose the corresponding idiom from four alternatives. The stimuli consisted of the idioms in short stories.

For example, the narrative context presented for the idiom ‘to go into one’s shell’ was: Juan was a new student at school this year. Juan was shy and he had trouble in new places. Juan’s parents told his teachers that Juan might go into his shell. (Ibid., p. 205).

The students were taught the CWPT procedures through explanation, modeling and practice with feedback and got to try them out. The students were divided into two teams and, within each team; they were paired with a peer. The four participants in the study were not paired with each other. Each session consisted of 8-minute periods, after which the tutee and the tutor switched roles. Firstly, the tutor read the story and the alternatives out loud. Secondly, the tutee had to choose an answer in order to earn points for their team. The tutor then corrected and awarded 2 points if the answer was correct. If the answer was wrong, the tutor read the story again. If the tutee got the answer right this time, 1 point was awarded. The teacher supervised and recorded points. By the end of each week, a winning team was announced.
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After the CWPT procedures, the participants’ understanding of idioms improved, and “only at a point after implementation of the intervention did student idiom performance remain stable at or near the ceiling score” (Ibid., p. 211). Additionally, CWPT is “flexible, effective, and time-efficient” (Ibid., p. 213).

The teacher and all the students filled out a questionnaire. On a scale of 1-5, the teacher’s general satisfaction with CWPT was 4,7 while the students’ mean was 3,53. The students enjoyed peer tutoring.

4.2 Cognitive-Oriented Learning

Three texts exploring how to further develop cognitive-oriented teaching and learning were found for this research synthesis. In their article, “Teaching English Idioms as Metaphors through Cognitive-Oriented Methods: A Case in an EFL Writing Class” (2013), Chen and Lai write that traditional methods and approaches, involving, for example, rote learning and memorization, can be “time- and effort-consuming” (p. 13). Recent research has shown that “idioms should be learned through the process of raising L2 learners’ awareness of conceptual metaphors behind these expressions” (Ibid., p. 13). The authors claim, though, that this process “fail[s] to notice culture entailments embedded in conceptual metaphors” (Ibid., p. 13). Elements such as cultural background, living environment and cross-cultural differences will affect learners’ ability to understand idioms. Boers (2008) supports this statement, claiming that, even though some idioms are derived from our physical experiences and are therefore similar in different cultures, most idioms “are likely to differ across cultures, even cultures that are closely related” (p. 2) because of what is considered important within the culture and its history. Boers (2008) writes that ”[f]or example, English is particularly rich in expressions that are derived from the domain of sailing, and this is hardly surprising when we consider England’s long history as a seafaring nation” (p. 2).

In their study, Chen and Lai (2013) suggest teaching idioms in an alternative cognitive-oriented manner, “by incorporating the idea of metaphoric mappings” (p. 13). Before the study and results are presented, the limitations of existing methods/approaches and procedures are explained.
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When teaching idioms through memorization, reference books are often used. These books can be useful to find an idiom’s translation quickly. However, reference books are lacking because they do not provide any background information or explanation for the idioms. Additionally, “this type of rote learning that may result in short retention of what they have learned is impractical” (Ibid., p. 14). To teach idioms through awareness-raising activities, though, by “seek[ing] logical arrangements of idioms and put[ting] them in a more meaningful learning context for L2 learners” (Ibid., p. 14) and comparing the learners’ L1 and L2, can help them to observe the differences between the languages and, thus, be able to discuss the L2 idioms’ possible origins and remember them through imagery. Unfortunately, this does not work with all idioms and “may be particularly difficult for L2 learners who do not share a similar cultural and historical background with native speakers of English” (Ibid., p. 15).

Another type of activity involves teaching idioms as metaphors through conceptual metaphors. “Researchers [...] have systemized idioms based on their common concepts” and “[t]he idioms are motivated conceptually by general knowledge of the world” (Ibid., p. 15). For example, a connection between fire and anger in idioms can be found. This has been useful for improving “meaning comprehension” and “extends retention of the expressions learned” (Ibid., p. 15). Nevertheless, it is not always easy to find the patterns and connections between the idiomatic expressions. If learners fail to do this, they will misunderstand the idiom in question. Also, it is more difficult for EFL learners to comprehend “metaphor-based expressions whose conceptual metaphors were distinct from their native language” (Ibid., p. 16).

In order for L2 learners to understand the connections between concepts, such as fire and anger, materials containing so called metaphoric mappings are suggested. Chen and Lai (2013) write that metaphoric mappings represent the processes that illustrate, as well as elaborate, the associating relations between the source and target concepts. There are two types of mapping processes: ontological mappings characterize the correspondences between basic constituent elements in the source concept and in the target concept. [...] The other type of mapping process, epistemic mappings, elaborates on the knowledge of the concepts and draws on more detailed but complex correspondences. (p. 16)

Consequently, if L1 and L2 have similar metaphors, ontological mappings can be used to teach learners the corresponding idioms. If not, epistemic mappings can help learners to understand the foreign idiom and link it to an appropriate one, with similar meaning, in their native language.
19 university students participated in the case study. They were Chinese native speakers who had learned English for at least seven years. According to “a TOEIC full-length non-official simulated test; [...] their English proficiency was at the intermediate to high-intermediate level” (Ibid., p. 16). They were asked by their teacher and instructor to write a short narrative essay about “an experience of being extremely angry. After submitting their first draft, the students were introduced to the concept of metaphors and conceptual metaphor” (Ibid., p. 17). Firstly, the students were to read an article and to find the idioms in it. Secondly, the teacher led discussions regarding general metaphoric themes and the students were asked to draw linking diagrams. Thirdly, the students had to “create metaphoric mappings for the idiomatic expressions of anger” (Ibid., p. 17).

After learning about, understanding and creating metaphoric mappings, the students edited their first draft of the essay and added as many idioms to it as they could. A week later, they turned in their essays to the instructor who analyzed and investigated “how the students used idiomatic expressions as well as to measure the effects of the new cognitive-oriented teaching method” (Ibid., p. 17).

The results showed that the participants had increased their awareness of cultural differences (they used more idioms that exist in their L1 as well as their L2, than idioms that only occur in their L2) and that they “were schematizing the concepts when producing idiomatic expressions” (Ibid., p. 18) (this was evident since they, on occasion, mixed some of the concepts).

Teaching idioms this way involves teaching the students about not only language and vocabulary, but about world knowledge and cultural awareness, too. Teacher presence is necessary for instruction and assistance. Chen and Lai’s (2013) conclusion is that “learners need explicit instruction that point out differences between cultures and languages in order to avoid miscomprehension or overgeneralization” (Ibid., p. 18). Also, the authors claim that

the fact that not every idiom is metaphorically interpretable should be made clear to L2 learners. Methods incorporating awareness-raising activities, conceptual metaphors, and metaphoric mappings could assist learners in comprehending and systemizing idioms as metaphors; however, the traditional method should not be abandoned completely. EFL teachers should lead L2 learners to use suitable methods to acquire English idioms in an effective efficient manner. (Ibid., p. 18)

In addition to Chen and Lai’s (2013) article, Boers (2001) explains that the ‘traditional’ view, where figurative idioms were seen as dead expressions needed to be memorized,
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has been questioned. “[C]ognitive semantics offers the prospect of more systematic and insightful learning of vast numbers of figurative expressions” (p. 35). He mentions three dimensions that may have a beneficial effect on raising learners’ awareness to the metaphorical aspects as well as benefit vocabulary retention.

Firstly, when idioms are organized according to, for example, metaphorical theme they become easier to learn and remember than through random input.

Secondly, an in-depth cognitive processing is required from the learners in order for them to identify an underlying metaphoric theme. According to Boers (2001) “[s]uch categorisation judgements [...] [are] known to enhance memory storage” (p. 36).

Thirdly, by creating an extra pathway for recollection using imagery, processing verbal information is encoded in a dual fashion.

Through a small-scale experiment Boers (2001) investigates if hypothesizing about an idiom’s etymological origin can help L2 learners recall the meaning of the expression. Boers started out by carefully selecting ten figurative idioms, which are presented to a control and an experimental group. They were all given the task to explain the idioms’ meaning and they could use a dictionary if they wanted to. The second task differed between the groups and required the participants to “invest cognitive effort in their processing of the idioms” (Ibid., p. 37). The control group was asked to provide a context while the experimental group was asked to speculate about its origin giving them an opportunity to associate the given idiom with a concrete scene or image. The experimental group used dictionaries more frequently, suggesting that they were more motivated to look for relevant clues.

Two follow-up tasks were given to all participants (after one week and after five weeks from the original exercise). The first one measured the participants’ retention of the form and the second measured their retention of the meaning of the ten figurative idioms. The results showed that “[t]he task of proposing possible origins of the figurative idioms appeared more productive than the task of proposing possible context for usage” (Ibid., p. 39). “[T]he experimental group’s superior recall was quite consistent over the ten figurative idioms under study” (Ibid., p. 40).

Boers (2001) points out that not all participants shared the same intuitions about the origin of the idioms but if the purpose of the task is to involve imagery processing the truth might not be important. As an extra exercise the students can be asked to review their hypotheses against the explanations in an etymological dictionary.
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The limitations of the study are that not all idioms “lend themselves equally well to the task of hypothesizing about their etymological origin” and that cross-cultural differences complicate this since some “idioms are grounded in culture-specific knowledge” (Ibid., p. 40).

Bogaards (2001) presents the reader with an overview of the field and the concept of *lexical units* in connection to L2 vocabulary learning. He continues by reviewing two experimental studies, the first one providing valuable results with regard to idioms (and multiword items).

Bogaards (2001) states that “the learning of foreign vocabulary always implies one or more of the following” (p. 327) of 8 aspects. The third one involves compounds and idioms, “[l]earning a new meaning for a combination of already known forms -- that is to say, learning compounds and idiomatic expressions like *hot dog* or *pull a fast one*” (Ibid., p. 328). Both experimental studies investigate whether knowledge of form can be helpful when acquiring new lexical units.

The aim of the first experiment was to compare how native speakers of Dutch, learning French as a foreign language, learn two types of lexical units (Ibid., p. 328). The participants were at an intermediate level meaning that they would probably recognize the forms of the expressions used since they consisted of words frequently used in French. However, the meaning of the expressions did not correspond to what they literally meant. Bogaards (2001) argue that when learners come across a totally new lexical unit they have to learn both the form and the meaning. When being confronted with an expression consisting out of well-known elements, though,

they have to learn the meaning in the first place, but they have to pay attention to aspects of form as well: the order of the words used, the use of prepositions, and so on. Additionally, the fact that a meaning has already been attached to each of the forms used may interfere with the learning of the meaning of the expression as a whole. (Ibid., p. 329)

This hypothesis was tested through two tests measuring the vocabulary learning outcomes, including a posttest after three weeks to measure long-term retention.

The results of the immediate and delayed posttests showed that “immediately after the learning session, 83.6% of the multiword expressions and 73.6% of the one-word items had been retained. [...] Three weeks later, 30.7% of the multiword expressions and 18.6% of the one-word items were still known.” (Ibid., p. 331). This suggests that multiword units (such as idioms) containing known words are easier to learn and remember over time. Bogaards (2001) concludes that “[i]t seems clear, then, that
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knowledge of forms helps the learning of new vocabulary. The presence of already established meanings does not hinder the learning of new meanings” (p. 332).

Since the results differed quite a lot between the first and the delayed test, it suggests that “lexical units whose form is already known need to be acquired; even if their acquisition proves to be easier than that of totally new items, knowledge of their meaning cannot be taken for granted” (Ibid., p. 332).

4.3 Multiple Intelligences

The idea of Multiple Intelligences (MI) is that human intelligence has “multiple dimensions that must be acknowledged and developed in education” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 115). The supporters of MI criticize traditional IQ tests and claim that there are numerous different types of intelligence, such as musical, spatial or bodily intelligence. Richards and Rodgers (2001) write

Language learning and use are obviously closely linked to what MI theorists label “Linguistic Intelligence”. However, MI proponents believe there is more to language than what is usually subsumed under the rubric linguistics. There are aspects of language such as rhythm, tone, volume, and pitch that are more closely linked, say, to a theory of music than to a theory of linguistics. (p. 117)

In a similar way, some of the texts below suggest the use of pictures, which would fit students with a high spatial intelligence, for example. There are also exercises involving drama and charades, which a bodily intelligent student might enjoy and benefit from. MI encourages variation when teaching since every student is unique. Five articles discussing MI when teaching idioms are presented in this following section.

4.3.1 Musical Intelligence: Sounds

Boers and Lindstromberg (2005) write that most multi-word expressions can be explained either with reference to sound patterns or imagery. In their article “Means of mass memorization of multi-word expressions, part one: The power of sound patterns”, they claim that “an estimated 20% of English idioms could be presented to students as being relatively easy to remember on account of sound repetition” (p. 4). This includes
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alliterations and other types of sound repetitions, such as vowel repetition. For example, we say *Time will tell* instead of *Time will show* and not *It takes two to tango* and not *It takes two to waltz*, because it sounds more catchy. Boers (2008) also writes that

alliteration (in idioms such as *through thick and thin, spick and span, below the belt, rule the roost, meet your match*) and rhyme (in idioms such as *eager beaver, the name of the game, horses for courses, steer clear of*) can help you to remember expressions like these. (p. 3)

Furthermore, the word order of an idiom is usually the order that sounds best, because of its rhythm, or because it is easiest to say. For example, to say *it’s raining cats and dogs* requires less tongue movement than saying *it’s raining dogs and cats.* Additionally, in English, the longest word is usually last, as in the idiom “*part and parcel*” (Ibid., p. 3).

A previous study conducted by Boers and Lindstromberg showed that “students were consistently more likely to remember expressions that happen to alliterate than ones which don’t” (Boers and Lindstromberg, 2005, p. 5) and that “the mnemonic advantage of alliteration was significantly enhanced simply by occasionally raising students’ awareness of particular alliterative phrases in authentic texts” (Ibid., p. 5). Therefore, in this article they suggest a series of activities, “which go beyond mere noticing” (Ibid., p. 5), and “is to harness the mnemonic potential of alliteration in a markedly active fashion” (Ibid., p. 5).

Most of the exercises include a chanting phase because alliterations are more noticeable in speech than in writing. For the first activity, *Alphabetical alliteration,* multi-word alliterations from the students’ recent texts are used. The students are given the expressions and hints for each one. They are to link each idiom to the right hint. The hints can be sketches or in writing. After connecting the idioms and the hints, the students are only allowed to look at the idioms while trying to remember the hints (and vice versa). For example, one student can read an idiom and have the rest of the class answer what hint it is connected to. Later, the hints can be used as test items.

The second activity is called *Remember the ends.* The students are provided with a list of alliterative idioms. They have a few minutes to try to memorize them. The students are divided into pairs, where “Student A should read out the sentences to Student B (whose sheet is turned face down)” (Ibid., p. 7). Student A reads the beginning of an idiom. “Each time A pauses, B tries to say the end of the sentence from memory” (Ibid., p. 7). In the third exercise, *Mini-tales,* some multi-word expressions,
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which the students already know, are displayed. The students are to write a short story (maximum of six sentences) that has (for example) a princess, pirate or parrot as a main character. The story has to have a beginning, middle and an end and has to include at least one of the idioms. The students can also read their stories to each other once they are finished. Potentially, this exercise can also be used as homework.

4.3.2 Spatial Intelligence: Imagery

Boers and Lindstromberg’s article “Means of mass memorization of multi-word expressions, Part II The power of images” (2006) aims to explore activities that develop the mnemonic effect of associating figurative idioms with mental pictures. The idea is to explain the idioms’ origin to the learners, which will form a mental picture. This is, according to Boers and Lindstromberg (2006), a useful vehicle when learning an additional language. It has “been shown in various controlled experiments to be very beneficial to learners’ remembering vast numbers of figurative multi-word expressions” (Ibid., p. 1). Knowledge about the idioms’ origins “helps them comprehend and remember the figurative, idiomatic meaning of the expression, and it helps them recollect the expression for active use” (Ibid., p. 1).

A mental picture gives learners an extra pathway for recollection of the idiom. Also, problem-solving tasks are good for long-term memory, as opposed to shallow memorization. The idioms presented in Boers and Lindstromberg’s (2006) article were selected because they are frequently used, can be related to specific source domains and “do not contain words that would make the task of tracing them back to their source domains too easy” (Ibid., p. 3). The activities proposed would work for less frequent idioms as well, but their origin have to create a mental picture. The idioms were divided based on their source domains, in categories such as GAMES and SPORTS: gambling and horse racing, where the idiom neck and neck belongs, or WAR and AGGRESSION, where the idiom fight a losing battle could be placed. Another example is FOOD and DRINKS, a category that include idioms such as not your cup of tea and the icing on the cake.

Boers and Lindstromberg (2006) suggest five different activities for learning idioms. For the first activity, called In the frame, the teacher puts “each of the idioms a separate
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card, also providing a context in which the idiom could be used” (Ibid., p. 6). A diagram of three source domains is drawn on the board and students are to “(a) read the context in which the idiom is used, (b) stick their cards to the board in the domain they believe to be the source of their idioms, and (c) explain to their classmates how they have reached this decision” (Ibid., p. 6). There is also the option of putting the idioms to two or all three domains. The students are then provided with the right answers. Firstly, students deal with corrections, explanations and discussions in pairs whilst trying to work out the figurative meaning of each idiom. Secondly, they individually choose one of the idioms and “invent a verbal context in which they could use the expression” (Ibid., p. 7). These verbal contexts can be presented at the end of the lesson by some of the students.

The second activity, Zooming in, is a continuance of In the frame. The same idioms plus a few additional ones can be used. In this activity, you proceed exactly as in the first one. However, the focus is not on the general source domains but on the subdomains that are more specific (for example, the sub-domain gambling and horse racing under the general source domain GAMES and SPORTS).

In the third activity, Picture this, the learners have to try to explain an idiom’s meaning to their peers, and then draw a picture that will help them to guess. The fourth activity, Goes to show, “mimics activity three, with the exception that students will be asked to mime an action to help their peers identify the idiom” (Ibid., p. 8). Lastly, the fifth activity Story quiz requires the students to, after hearing idioms used in narratives, decide which idioms are used literally or figuratively. Boers and Lindstromberg (2006) developed these types of activities because in order for information to be stored in one’s long-term memory, it needs to be acquired “in an insightful way, for example through a problem-solving task” (Ibid., p. 2). Students are less likely to remember information that is learned through more shallow tasks, such as blind memorization, for a long period of time.

The article “Does pictorial elucidation foster recollection of idioms?” (Boers, Piquer Píriz, Stengers & Eyckmans, 2009) is based on two research questions. Firstly, “[d]oes pictorial elucidation of the original, literal meaning of idioms help learners recollect the constituent words of the given expressions, i.e., retention for purposes of (re-) production?” (Ibid., p. 371). Secondly, “[d]o cognitive-style or learning-style variables impact on the relative effectiveness of pictorial elucidation as a mnemonic aid? More specifically, do high imagers and low imagers respond differently to this kind of
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stimulus?” (Ibid., p. 372). Previous research suggests that pictures of the literal meaning of idioms help some students to understand and remember them and their figurative meaning. It can possibly be distracting for some students, but for self-assessed high imagers, at least, the pictures seem to be helpful. However, when it comes to (re-) producing idioms, in a gap-fill exercise, the results are lower. The question is, though, if pictorial clarification could help students to remember the idioms’ exact lexical composition?

The study conducted for this article had 38 participants between 19 and 21 years old. Their proficiency levels in English were varying. 100 frequently used idioms were introduced. Multiple-choice tests in meaning and origin, and a gap-fill exercise were created and used. There were 30 idioms paired with clarifying pictures in the origin exercise, 30 idioms which origins were just verbally explained and 40 idioms that were excluded from the data analysis since they did not fulfill any of the requirements. The learners worked individually, in class, with 25 idioms at a time during two one-hour-sessions while the teacher supervised. The participants worked with all three exercises, starting with the meaning multiple-choice test. The analysis of the responses focused on the wrongly interpreted meanings of idioms and if pictorial elucidation seemed to help the students to recollect the idioms, compared to when the idioms’ literal origin was only explained verbally.

A questionnaire was also created for this study. It had the participants agree or disagree to statements in order to determine how inclined they were to think in mental pictures as opposed to preferring a verbal explanation.

The results of the gap-fill tests, with pictures or just verbal explanation, were similar. Consequently, “the addition of pictures had little impact on students’ recollection of the lexical make-up of idioms” (Ibid., p. 376). They often wrote a more common synonym instead of the target word, suggesting that the “students tended to remember the pictures and the concepts depicted in them, but failed to remember the precise words” (Ibid., p. 376). So, even though the pictures were supposed to help, they, instead, “tended to distract students’ attention away from the precise verbal input” (Ibid., p. 376). On occasion, the students replied with a word that was, in fact, in the picture but not in the actual idiom. These types of mistakes did not appear in the test with only verbal explanation of the idioms’ origin. Thus, it seems that there was too much focus directed towards the pictures themselves.
The questionnaire was answered by 14 of the students. There was, statistically, a negative relationship “between the students’ inclination towards mental imagery and their recall rates of idioms that had been presented to them with pictorial elucidation” (Ibid., p. 377), which reinforces the possibility that the pictures were distracting.

The conclusion of this study is that “[w]hile [...] (good) pictorial elucidation is likely to facilitate retention of the meaning of idioms, [...] its contribution to retention of the form of idioms - i.e. their precise lexical composition - for purposes of re-production may well be negligible” (Ibid., p. 377). Potentially, pictures can make education more appealing to students, though, and, regardless, teachers will probably always use pictures with other materials in the classroom. The linguistic form needs to be addressed at some point when students learn new vocabulary, so the authors of this article suggest that pictures could, for example, be used in this context after the verbal information has been presented.

4.3.3 A Variety of Intelligences

The two following texts by Cooper (1998) and D’Angelo Bromley (1984) include suggestions of procedures inspired by a variety of the multiple intelligences. The texts focus not only on the previously mentioned spatial and musical intelligence, but also on linguistic, bodily, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence.

The six variables mentioned in section 2.5 Acquisition of idioms, have been revised by Cooper (1998) into 16 concrete teaching and learning suggestions that relate to Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. These will now be summarized:

1. Choosing Idioms – It is important to find those that are frequently encountered in everyday situations that are not grammatically complex and have transparent figurative meanings. As suggested above, L2-learners benefit from starting with idioms identical in both languages before moving on to those that require more practice and explanation.

2. Discussing Idioms – Learners often lack the knowledge to comprehend an idiom, simply because they do not know what figurative language is. “[T]he teacher can lead a discussion about metaphors, similes, and idioms and the purpose they fulfill in speech and writing” (Ibid., p. 262).
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3. Defining Idioms – After the initial discussion, the teacher should “present the new idiom within the larger context of a short paragraph or a dialogue” (Ibid., p. 262). If the information about how the figurative meaning originated is available this can be used to contrast the literal and figurative meaning. The degree of formality should also be explained before letting students practice idioms in different constructed situations.

4. Dividing Idioms into Categories – “Dividing idioms into thematic categories will make them easier to learn, for the student can study them as groups composed of elements that have common features rather than as lists of unrelated expressions to be memorized” (Ibid., p. 263).

5. Drawing Idioms – The relationship between the literal and figurative meaning of an idiom can be illustrated by using pictures. The class could create a dictionary of idiomatic sayings, which then can be illustrated or developed by interviewing relatives about their favorite idioms.

6. Dramatizing Idioms – Since misinterpretations of idioms can easily lead to humorous situations, these can be acted out. By creating skits or playing charades the class can create a game where the literal meaning is acted out and the figurative has to be guessed.

7. Retelling Exercise – The students retell a story made up by the teacher, using as many idioms as possible.

8. Add-on Story – The teacher starts the narrative by using one of the idioms written on the board, after which each student adds a sentence including one of the idioms.

9. Discuss Idioms from Newspaper Comic Strips - Each student selects a comic strip containing an idiomatic expression. These are then written down on the board and discussed.

10. Idioms in Cartoons – The teacher collects samples where the literal meaning and the figurative meaning are used to achieve humorous situations and discusses it with the students.

11. Idioms from TV Shows – “Running lists of idioms can be compiled from TV shows” (Ibid., p. 264), shows can be shown in class and the idioms discussed.

12. Paragraph Completion – Students complete a paragraph or dialogue with the appropriate idiom and can be shown that they were able to use the correct one because of the context provided.

13. Interview Classmates – By interviewing native speakers learners can be taught the meaning and appropriateness of certain idioms in specific situations.
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14. Idiom-of-the-Day Mobile – Mobiles created by the students with idioms can be hung from the ceiling.

15. Idiom Board Game – The suggestion is that students create a game using idiomatic expressions and clues connected to their meaning. For example “How do you say you’re really happy? Hint: You’re high in the air! Answer: I’m in seventh heaven or I’m on cloud nine” (Ibid., p. 264).

16. Idiom Jazz Chants – “Students can create the chants and even lead the class in the practicing” (Ibid., p. 265).

In summary, Cooper (1998) proposes that students benefit from activities that appeal to their various intelligences such as linguistic, musical and intrapersonal intelligence.

D’Angelo Bromely (1984) presents several useful pedagogical ideas for how idioms can be taught effectively. She identifies three major components (definition, usage and application) that have to be taken into consideration when teaching.

Definition – When an idiom is encountered in a context (either speech or writing), they can be discussed immediately by comparing the literal and actual meaning. A useful tool is to find out where the idiomatic expression has its origin, providing the learners with a context and concept.

However, idioms can also be taught directly by activities such as an “Idiom a Day” or an “Idiom of the Week” that increase students’ awareness. Another idea is to create lists that classify idioms involving colors, animals etc.

Usage – After the first stage the students should be given as many opportunities as possible to use the idioms in class. This can be done by using both oral and written exercises where the students “identify its equivalent from a number of alternatives” (Ibid., p. 274) or “rewriting sentences to include an appropriate idiom” (Ibid., p. 275).

Dramatizations such as charades can be used to create games where the students act out the literal interpretations while trying to identify the actual or original meaning.

Illustrations with matching definitions of idioms can be done individually or in pairs to create a class dictionary of idiomatic sayings.

Suggestions for oral exercises include giving the students the responsibility of using an idiom once a day for a week or the teacher might use the same idiom once a day for a week asking the students to spot it.

Application – “Understanding idioms used in class need to be accompanied by opportunities to apply this new knowledge outside the school” (Ibid., p. 275). This can be done by creating lists of idioms heard on the radio, TV or in books. They can also be
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used for creative writing such as making up the origin and then comparing it to the actual one. D’Angelo Bromley (1984) suggests using books such as *Amelia Bordelia* (1963) to show students some humorous situations that might occur if an idioms literal and figurative meaning is misinterpreted.
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5 Conclusion

This research synthesis has investigated what types of teaching approaches and methods can be used to teach idioms to learners of English. The research question formulated was: What types of teaching approaches and methods can be used to teach idioms to learners of English?

Firstly, several different definitions of idioms were presented to justify why material that all had different suggestions was included. By showing how broad and/or narrow the term can be we made it clear that we needed to be able to include as many studies and articles as possible. Secondly, the question of why students should be taught idiomatic expressions explicitly was addressed, showing that without this knowledge, a learner of English will never fully understand and be able to use the target language in a native-like manner. In order to answer the research question, several different studies proposing different approaches/methods and procedures have been presented, discussed and compared. These results will now be presented in a summary table (TABLE 1).

TABLE 1. Summary table of results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approaches and Methods</th>
<th>Studies and Articles</th>
<th>Procedures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Language Learning</td>
<td>• Lundblom &amp; Woods (2012)</td>
<td>Peer Tutoring and Monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive-Oriented</td>
<td>• Chen &amp; Lai (2013)</td>
<td>Repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Boers (2001)</td>
<td>Memorization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Bogaards (2001)</td>
<td>Drills</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Metaphoric Mappings</td>
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<td>Contextualization</td>
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<td>Conceptual metaphors</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hypothesizing about Origin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results show that, in these articles/studies, many procedures used when teaching idiomatic expressions to learners of English are those connected to Multiple Intelligences. Teachers have a great responsibility to create educational settings where all students have an opportunity to develop their knowledge of the target language.

Apart from the requirements stated in section 2.5 connected to the acquisition of idioms, additional requirements can be found in relation to the proposed way to teach them. The curriculum for compulsory school states that, “[i]n order to deal with spoken language and texts, pupils should be given the opportunity to develop their skills in relating content to their […] interests” (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 32). Consequently, teachers should take students’ interests into account when planning activities and tasks. In a class where many of the students are interested in theatre, for example, drama activities could be appropriate. The curriculum also states that students should be able to produce oral narratives and use different tools for being creative. Creativity is essential within the fields of art, music (sounds) and drama.

How learners of English acquire idioms is clearly an area worthy of investigation. However, most of the research has involved native speakers of English or focused on the influence of L1 transfer. Cooper (1999) investigates how four ideas on how L1 idiom comprehension can be applied to L2 learners’ comprehension and processing of
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idioms. Cooper (1999) found that neither of the four was adequate enough and therefore proposes a heuristic method. He writes that:

Upon encountering an unknown idiomatic phrase, L2 learners are placed in a position of having to solve a comprehension problem by experimenting and evaluating possible answers or solutions through trial and error. [...] The results of the present study show that the participants employed a heuristic approach in solving the linguistic problem of finding the meaning of the idioms. They usually used a variety of strategies, and they were not afraid to experiment and search for meaning through trial and error. (Ibid., p. 254)

This suggests that, since learners implement a variety of strategies when trying to interpret the meaning of idioms, they should also be given the opportunity to develop and practice these.

Several authors (Lundblom & Woods (2012), Cooper (1998 & 1999), Burke (1998), D’Angelo Bromley (1984) et al.) have suggested that idiomatic expressions deserve special attention in classrooms. But Cooper (1999) highlights that “[s]ome commercial instructional material focusing on teaching idioms do exist [...] however, language teachers frequently must create their own materials” (p. 256). In the studies investigated in this paper several practical teaching suggestions are given but the lack of pre-made material is evident.

In our own personal conclusions, we believe that idioms can be taught successfully in many different, creative ways. In general, it is probably beneficial to use a mixture of procedures to teach students because not all learners are the same type. Books, group work, drama, illustrations, music and sounds can all be used in order to create a variety of tasks and activities that appeal to different students. The teacher can also help raise students’ awareness of idioms’ origins and improve their cultural knowledge through teacher instruction and many other procedures. A few weeks can be spent on these activities and learning a larger set of idioms or the teacher can, potentially, make a habit of integrating idioms into lessons and address them on occasion throughout the school year. There are also many new ways of incorporating idioms in students’ everyday lives by showing them different idiom games and apps that can be downloaded to their smartphones. We believe that when students’ attention is drawn to idioms an entire world will open up and they will start noticing idioms everywhere.

During the investigation of the topic, a number of questions for future research have been raised. Future investigations could focus on how much knowledge of the culture (in which the target language exists) learners need in order to acquire specific idioms. In
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this thesis this aspect has only has been touched upon. Furthermore, research on how learners comprehend idioms needs to be expanded and used to create instructional materials and teaching procedures with regard to idioms.
References


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