

# THE USE OF IDIOM COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES BY ADOLESCENT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS WHO ARE NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ESTONIAN

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**Abstract.** In addition to individual words, the mental lexicon stores lexical chunks, such as idioms, which provide foreign-language learners with the capacity to acquire the language more effectively. Since the role the parts play in the meaning of the whole reduces the learning burden of multi-word expressions, the present contribution addresses the facilitating effect of idiom transparency and learners' tendency to utilise it in the comprehension process of unfamiliar English-as-a-foreign-language idioms. Moreover, as foreign-language learners automatically tend to look for similarities between languages, it was hypothesised that adolescent Estonian (pre)intermediate English-language learners, first and foremost, utilise native-language knowledge in the comprehension process of unfamiliar English idioms. A think-aloud study, which was carried out to provide an in-depth understanding of their strategies, revealed that whereas the majority of the informants relied on semantic analysis, the recourse-to-native-language strategy was more successful.

**Keywords:** idioms, literal meaning, semantic analysis, transparency, compositionality, English

## 1. Introduction

Idioms, like any other formulaic sequences, are prefabricated and frequently occurring phrases representing the native-like choice of expressions. What distinguishes an idiom from other fixed combinations is that its meaning is not the sum of the meanings of its constituents. Some idiom properties (e.g. decomposability, transparency, and identity or similarity between native-language (L1) and second-language (L2) idioms) seem to facilitate the comprehension thereof (Irujo 1986a, 1986b, Zevgoli 1998, Zyzik 2011), while other properties of idioms have the opposite effect (e.g. figurativeness that is based on cultural peculiarities) (Çakir 2011, Kecskes 2006). Therefore, idiom introduction sequences should be

well-considered designs (e.g. Zevgoli 1998) to prevent idioms from creating major challenges for foreign-language (FL) learners.

The aim of this study, which is one of the three experiments in a doctoral dissertation (Forssten 2021), was to gather information on how young Estonian learners tend to process unfamiliar English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) idioms and on how effective their chosen strategies are and hence to assist local EFL coursebook designers and teachers in creating idiom introduction sequences. Moreover, the study was designed to assess the effects of idiom transparency and L1–L2 idiom similarity/identity on Estonian adolescents' EFL idiom comprehension strategies. The research emphasis on the role of a literal lexical constituent word derives from earlier studies (e.g. Cieřlicka, Heredia 2011) indicating that literal meanings of FL expressions have higher saliency than figurative meanings and from the understanding that FL learners have gaps in both linguistic and socio-cultural L2 knowledge resulting in salient idiom meanings that deviate from those of L1 speakers (Kecskes 2006).

Some studies (e.g. Grant, Bauer 2004) regard only completely opaque expressions as idioms. However, whether the link between literal and metaphorical meanings is realised may depend, for instance, on an individual's extralinguistic knowledge. Thus, as transparency is a somewhat subjective and relative concept, the concept of *idiom* in this study also includes expressions some of whose constituents are taken literally and expressions whose figurativeness is easy to realise. The definition for *transparency* in this study is *a lexical constituent word that can be taken literally*. The term *transparency* may also refer to the phenomenon that some phrases are ambiguous – that is, they have identical wordings but different meanings so that one can be taken completely literally, while the other has an idiomatic meaning, (e.g. Siyanova-Chanturia, Lin 2018). However, that concept of idiom transparency was not applied in this study. Here, the informants were told that the test phrases have figurative meanings and cannot be taken literally, at least not completely.

The hypothesis of the current study that young (pre)intermediate learners would primarily rely on their L1 as an EFL idiom comprehension strategy is based on the parasitic model (Cieřlicka 2015) and idiom diffusion model (Liontas 2002, 2015). The following research questions framed the data analysis: What strategies do adolescent native speakers (NSs) of Estonian employ to comprehend unfamiliar EFL idioms? What is the most efficient strategy? The informants – Year 7 students, who have studied English as a foreign language for four years and are not yet at an advanced language level – already have the capacity to understand figurative language, albeit not yet fully developed (e.g. Nippold, Taylor 1995).

## 2. Lexical chunks in vocabulary teaching and learning

Words are stored not only as single entities but also in lexical chunks (i.e. collocations, phrasal verbs, idioms along with catchphrases and sayings, sentence frames, social formulae, and discourse markers) in the mental lexicon (e.g. Spiro, 2013). The degree of meaning transparency of these chunks varies. The constituent parts of some chunks quite clearly reveal the meaning of the whole (e.g. *as old as the*

*hills*), while the constituents of some chunks do not seem to contribute to their combined meaning (e.g. *red herring* in the meaning *something that misleads*). According to the lexical approach in language teaching (Lewis 1993), which starts from the premise that grammar is attached to words and phrases in the mental lexicon, it would appear to be justified to teach FLs in chunks as lexical units carry associated grammar (Thornbury 2002). Yet, whereas NSs rely on complex strings, FL learners tend to build up expressions using chopped-up material (Wray 2002). FL multiword expressions, due to the grammar rules they follow, the semantic requirements of their constituent words, and their degree of conventionality, may entail a high learning burden, although this can be reduced, for example, by focusing on how the meanings of the constituent parts build up the meaning of the whole (Webb, Nation 2017).

## 2.1. The usage and effect of L1

Commonalities between L1 and L2 vocabularies are recommended to be used in FL teaching at lower levels (Spiro 2013). Learners are more likely to succeed in producing acceptable FL collocations when the collocations are congruent with their L1 equivalents (Nesselhauf 2004), although more advanced learners' use of lexical bundles is closer to NSs' patterns than that of lower-level students (Juknevičienė 2009), which may render L1 assistance superfluous for them. Earlier studies have identified L1-(e.g. Polish, Lithuanian, Hebrew, Finnish, Chinese, and Persian) associated avoidance of English phrasal verbs due to L1 interference (Barekat, Baniasady 2014, Dagut, Laufer 1985, Garbatovič, Grigaliūnienė 2020, Ghabanzi, Goudarzi 2012, Liao, Fukuya 2004, Sjöholm 1995) at lower levels, in particular, whereas speakers of other Germanic languages (e.g. Dutch, Swedish) have not shown a similar tendency (Hulstijn, Marchena 1989) or they have shown it to a lesser extent (Sjöholm 1995). Mäntylä et al. (2020) found the impact of L1 typology to be a significant factor in non-native speakers' (NNSs) processing of formulaic sequences. NNSs tend to underuse multiword expressions that differ from and overuse the ones that are similar to their L1 (e.g. Jaworska et al. 2015, Waibel 2007), and it has been suggested that EFL teaching materials should be based on existing information on prefabricated patterns in English and learners' L1 and their usage (Granger 1998). The characteristics of Estonian EFL learners' lexical chunk usage may not be directly comparable to that of speakers of other L1s given that the impacts of L1 are numerous and complex.

Whilst it is not likely that L2 speakers understand unfamiliar and opaque idioms that have no native language equivalents, the parasitic hypothesis (Cieślicka 2015) posits a second language idiom comprehension process according to which the activated literal meanings of the constituent words are translated into L1 to find an idiom equivalent there. When an equivalent cannot be found, an L2 speaker utilises either context or literal analysis; the latter process requires some degree of idiom transparency to succeed. However, such an L1-based comprehension process is not necessary at advanced levels as many L2 idioms are already established in the mental lexicon (Gibbs 1980, Cieślicka 2015).

Another viable cognitive strategy for idiom decoding is the idiom diffusion model (Liontas 2002, 2015), where a figurative interpretation is initially hypothesised

based on the degree of transparency, the degree of L1–L2 idiom similarity, and the linguistic context available. If the given contextual clues are not sufficient, the meaning is decoded by literal analysis, which will be fully effective only to the idiom's degree of transparency. On the other hand, an identical L1 equivalent enables the direct retrieval of the L1 meaning and renders context unnecessary, whereas a similar or a completely different L1 equivalent increases the relative importance of context. A plausible interpretation in the given context renders competing interpretations unnecessary.

However, the above strategies may not always be fully successful, and, for instance, Glucksberg (2001) has warned that literal translation may easily lead to fallacies and translation into L1 may not necessarily produce the expected result as idioms are culture-specific. In the current study, though, the chosen EFL idioms have Estonian equivalents, which should reduce culture-related misunderstandings.

## **2.2. L2 idiom comprehension strategies**

Earlier studies have clearly demonstrated the crucial role context has in L2 idiom comprehension (Caillies, Le Sourn-Bissaoui 2006, Cain et al. 2009, Gibbs 1987, Kamanga, Banda 2017, Laval 2003, Levorato, Cacciari 1992, 1999, Karlsson 2019, Wray et al. 2016). Wray et al. (2016) investigated the differences in adult NNS' and NNSs' treatment of unfamiliar formulaic sequences and identified their shared tendency to draw on context, even when it was not rich, as the most popular strategy. It was also found that the NNSs' proficiency level underpinned their choice for a certain strategy and, therefore, caused diversification.

Cooper (1999) used a think-aloud protocol to analyse the idiom processing strategies of NNSs of English with several different L1s (Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Portuguese). The strategies identified (in descending order of popularity) were guessing from the context, discussing and analysing, relying on the literal meaning, requesting information about the idiom and its context, repeating or paraphrasing the idiom, using background knowledge, referring to L1 idioms, and a set of other strategies consisting of personalised discussions of the idioms and their context situations or meta-analytic methods. Cooper suggested that L2 idiom processing is a heuristic model: his informants (aged 17–44) used many different problem-solving strategies by trial and error and demonstrated notable inter- and intra-individual variation, the most frequent strategies being guessing from context, discussing/analysing, and utilising literal meanings. Nevertheless, Cooper noticed substantial differences in the usefulness of different strategies. Guessing from context was the most successful strategy, followed by the reliance on literal meanings, while the use of background knowledge and reference to L1 idioms were far behind. The comprehension assistance that requesting information about the idiom and their context, repeating/paraphrasing idioms, and discussing/analysing idioms provided was only marginal.

Zuo (2008), too, utilised a think-aloud method to investigate adult Chinese NNSs' comprehension of unfamiliar EFL idioms, and, as with Cooper's results, her results indicated that recourse to context was by far the most popular and successful idiom strategy. In addition, Zuo's informants utilised (albeit in a significantly

less marked manner) cohesive devices, literal translation, idiom analyses, reliance on the tone, image associations, reference to L1 idioms, grammatical/background information, and guesses. As was the case in Cooper's study, Park and Chon (2018), too, observed notable differences in the idiom strategies between individuals among adolescent Korean EFL learners. Their study focused on the following strategies: guessing from context, literal translation, using background knowledge, and referring to an L1 idiom. Conforming to the earlier studies, guessing from context was the most popular strategy, followed by the usage of background knowledge and literal translation, while reference to an L1 idiom was seldom encountered.

Karlsson (2019) compared the L1 and EFL idiom comprehension of adolescent NSs of Swedish and noticed that L2 idiom comprehension was determined by their ability to understand figurative language in general, their level of L2 proficiency, their L1 idiom comprehension, context, and idiom transparency. Her results indicated that in both languages context was more relevant than literal meanings or frequency, as the ability to infer develops before the ability to analyse semantically. Based on the findings, Karlsson recommends that particularly learners prone to literal interpretation should be instructed to utilise idiom transparency and that learners should be taught to use context to the benefit of both L1 and L2.

### 3. Materials and methods

The 32 informants of the current study were Estonian Year 7 students (aged 13) with no known learning disorders. They had studied English as their first FL from Year 3 and spoke Estonian as their L1 (with the exception that one informant was a Russian-Estonian bilingual). Moreover, the participants had studied either German or Russian and Finnish as their second and third FLs, respectively. The approximation of their English level (i.e. pre/intermediate, definitely below advanced level) was based on their age and form. Since language groups in Estonian basic schools tend to be heterogeneous, teaching materials (including idiom selections) need to serve all students in a heterogenous group. Therefore, an approximation of the informants' language level was found adequate. The informants were given both written (in English) and oral instructions (both in English and Estonian).

The informants received 24 cards in sequence, each of which introduced an idiom embedded in a short sentence and a question indicating the idiom (e.g. John looks scary, but he wouldn't hurt a fly. What does *wouldn't hurt a fly* mean?). All the idioms were chosen so that they had either an identical or similar equivalent in Estonian, half of them included a lexical constituent word that was meant to be taken literally. The informants were invited to inquire about the literal meanings of unfamiliar individual words.

Similar to Cooper's (1999) and Zuo's (2008) studies, a think-aloud protocol was used here to investigate idiom processing strategies. More specifically, the method used was a concurrent verbal protocol analysis (Kuusela, Paul 2000), where verbalisation occurs during decision making, immediately after aural and visual perception. This was preferred as retrospective data tend to be less reliable (Ericsson, Simon 1993). Although it has been suggested that all efforts should be made to avoid conversations between the observer and informants (Ericsson, Simon 1993),

an approach according to which observers are allowed to intervene to maximise the data quality (Boren, Ramey 2000) was adopted. Bearing in mind that such an approach entails the danger of the thinking process being involuntarily affected by the observer, the observer-interviewer in this study occasionally prompted for additional information, keeping the guidance to a minimum to gather spontaneous and authentic material. Another pitfall of the think-aloud process that required observer-interviewer interference was that when an informant seemed to find an item too easy, they did not take the trouble to give meta-comments. Such behaviour was difficult, if not impossible, to overcome; however, its volume was only minor. On the opposite side, if a task seemed to be too difficult, the observer-interviewer's prompts triggered further thinking aloud. Moreover, occasionally the informants gave an instinctive feeling as an explanation for the result of their thinking process, possibly because it was difficult to discuss language and its usage per se as their metalinguistic skills are not fully developed (Levorato, Cacciari 2002).

Based on the cognitive model of the parasitic mechanism (Cieślicka 2015), the coding scheme alternatives were recourse to L1, recourse to context, and semantic analysis (i.e. deriving from the literal meanings of the individual words, which may also include realising the connection between the literal and transferred meanings; even a mere search for any connection between literal and transferred meanings was considered *semantic analysis*, irrespective of whether such a link was found). Further, the coding scheme was divided into four idiom categories: 1) idioms with an identical L1 equivalent and a literal lexical constituent word; 2) idioms with an identical L1 equivalent, but without a literal lexical constituent word; 3) idioms with a similar L1 equivalent and a literal lexical constituent word; 4) and idioms with a similar L1 equivalent, but without a literal lexical constituent word. The process was undertaken in pairs, which seemingly facilitated the thinking-aloud process as the partner's comments often triggered ideas and encouraged to speak.

The analysis framework was the EFL idiom comprehension strategies used by adolescent Estonian NSs, and the material gathered was reflected against the chosen concepts of idiom and transparency and earlier research on L2 idiom processing. The coding process and data analysis questions were: How are participants trying to accomplish results? What specific strategies are they using? What assumptions are they making? What conclusions can be drawn? (Forssten 2021).

Regarding the limitations of the study, the informants were all from the same school and familiar with the researcher as it was assumed that adolescent EFL learners might not be willing to share their thinking processes (particularly in a language which they do not yet speak fluently) in a problem-solving context with a stranger. The inevitable consequence of this was narrow geographical coverage; therefore, it may be pointed out that although teachers have the national curriculum as their common framework, they differ in relation to their dedication to L1 and/or L2 phraseology, both of which, in turn, have an impact on their learners' L2 idiom comprehension strategies. Moreover, "because concurrent verbalization makes a private event public, subjects may try to manage the impression they give to the researcher" (Kuusela, Paul 2000: 391). Thus, despite the close researcher-researched relationship, it was likely that the informants occasionally censored their thoughts. Furthermore, the use of context as a comprehension strategy has been reported as it was identifiable. Nevertheless, the fact is that the amount of context

was deliberately limited to one sentence per idiom, and, therefore, the study does not seek to describe the actual role of context in comprehension.

## 4. Results and discussion

The think-aloud recordings yielded 26,443 words. As it has already been proved by earlier studies (Cooper 1999, Wray et al. 2016, Zuo 2008) that reliance on context is a frequent and useful L2 idiom comprehension strategy, this study sought to minimise the quantity of context to identify other possible EFL idiom strategies the informants might use and how a lexical constituent word that can be taken literally and English-Estonian idiom similarity or identity may facilitate comprehension and affect the strategies. Nevertheless, the informants relied on context in 19% of the cases, which contributed to Wray et al.'s (2016) finding that the willingness to rely on context is unaffected by its quality. Reliance on context produced the right outcome in 72% of the instances where it was used.

In line with L2 speakers' literal salience model (Cieślicka 2006, 2010), the informants tended to rely on literal meanings. The most popular strategy was semantic analysis, which represented 49% of all identifiable instances. The informants relied on L1 in 32% of the instances where their cognitive process was discernible. These findings are not in accordance with Cooper's (1999) study, where recourse to L1 idioms was not frequently used. The difference is likely to be due the fact that the informants in Cooper's study spoke a variety of L1s (Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Portuguese), while in the current study the informants spoke Estonian as their L1, and all test idioms had either an identical or similar equivalent in Estonian to make recourse to L1 a real option. Although semantic analysis was the most popular strategy, recourse to L1 most frequently led to a favourable outcome: in 75% of the attempts the informants had found the correct idiom meaning when utilising reliance on Estonian, compared to only 65% when they used semantic analysis. In Cooper's (1999) study, recourse to L1 was far less effective than guessing from context or reliance on literal meaning; once again, it appears that the reason for the different findings between the studies is the L1 factor.

A literal interpretation of a phrase was often the first step leading to the connection between the literal and figurative concepts. However, sometimes, even though the informants were aware that the given phrase cannot completely be interpreted literally, they relied on a literal interpretation if no other thought process proved to be successful. Although in general the familiarity with an L1 equivalent was very helpful, sometimes the somewhat incorrect understanding of an Estonian idiom was clearly carrying over into the interpretation of its English equivalent, as was the case, for example, with the idiom *the cherry on the cake*: several informants claimed that the word *cherry* refers to the very best component of something.

Although there were some differences in the percentages of correct answers between the four idiom categories, they were not notable. In the category of idioms with a literal lexical constituent word and an identical L1 equivalent (e.g. *a gentlemen's agreement*), 27% of the instances were recourses to L1, 60% semantic analyses, and 13% reliance on context. In this category, recourse to L1 gave the correct meaning in 27% of the instances, 61% of the correct meanings came through

semantic analysis, and 12% by reliance on context. In the category of idioms with an identical L1 equivalent but without a literal lexical constituent word (e.g. *manna from heaven*), 43% of the instances were recourse to L1, 38% semantic analyses, and 19% reliance on context. The correct meaning of these idioms was found by means of recourse to L1 in 49% of the instances, by means of semantic analysis in 35% of the instances, and with the help of context in 16% of the instances. In the category of idioms with a literal lexical constituent word and a similar L1 equivalent (e.g. *one's foot has gone to sleep*), 24% of instances were recourse to L1, 52% semantic analyses, and 24% reliance on context. 21% of the correct answers were achieved by recourse to L1, 52% by semantic analysis, and 27% with the help of context. In the category of idioms with a similar L1 equivalent but without a literal lexical constituent word (e.g. *a dark horse*), 34% of the instances were recourse to L1, 46% semantic analyses, and 20% reliance on context. Recourse to L1 assisted in achieving the correct meaning in 36% of the instances, whereas 45% of them were produced by semantic analysis and 19% by reliance on context.

In sum, irrespective of the degree of transparency or L1 similarity, semantic analysis was the preferred method, with the sole exception of idioms with an identical L1 equivalent but without a literal lexical constituent word, in which case the most frequent strategy was recourse to L1. A lexical constituent word in its literal meaning (like the word *cry* in *cry one's eyes out*) increased the probability of semantic analysis quite significantly. Although semantic analysis was the most-favoured strategy, the lack of a literal lexical constituent word increased the probability of the recourse-to-L1 strategy, particularly when the idiom had an identical L1 equivalent. Nonetheless, the effect of L1 analogy was not that clear: In addition to identity, similarity between L1 and L2 idioms (e.g. *measure thrice and cut once* or *one's foot has gone to sleep* vs their Estonian versions, *measure nine times, cut once* and *one's foot has died*) assisted the informants in recognising the link between L1 and L2 idioms. Even imprecise, vague recollections of the L1 idioms seemed to facilitate the comprehension of the EFL idioms. However, when an idiom had only a similar but not identical L1 equivalent, the reliance on context somewhat increased; this finding contributes to the idiom diffusion model (Liontas 2002, 2015). Further, the tendency to use recourse to L1 somewhat increased when L1 and L2 idioms were identical (instead of being only similar).

Although the distribution of correct answers roughly followed the popularity of strategies per idiom category, the category of idioms with an identical L1 equivalent but without a literal lexical constituent word was an exception, with the recourse-to-L1 strategy providing proportionally more correct answers than its share of the registered instances, particularly when compared to the helpfulness of semantic analysis.

These strategy findings differ from Cooper's (1999) findings also in the sense that the informants indicated tendencies towards a particular favourite strategy, while Cooper's informants rather indicated intra-individual differences. However, it is likely that the discrepancies may relate to the different segmentations of strategies in the two studies. In the current study, 44% of the informants favoured semantic analysis, and 25% tended to turn to L1 for assistance. The rest of the informants did not show a preference for any particular strategy. However, the results contribute to the understanding that language fluency affects strategy choices (e.g. Gibbs 1987,

Cieślicka 2015), as fluent speakers did not rely on L1 strategy. Conversely, since adolescents' semantic inference skills may vary greatly (Hattouti et al. 2019), the use of semantic analysis may have been halted by poor semantic inference skills; however, this study could not demonstrate a causal link between the two.

The findings of this study were entirely in line neither with the starting point, i.e. the parasitic model (Cieślicka 2015), nor with the research hypothesis that adolescent Estonian L1 speakers would favour recourse to L1. The informants did not consistently translate constituent words into Estonian in the initial phase of the process; they did not systematically search for an Estonian equivalent, even though all idioms in the experiment had either similar or identical L1 equivalents. Assuming that language proficiency plays an important part in the initial strategy choice, the findings suggested that the parasitic mechanism disappears already prior to advanced language levels. Moreover, according to the parasitic model the literal analysis and/or reliance on context come in if an equivalent cannot be found; however, the informants who turned to L1 seemed to leave the matter there if the search failed.

On one hand, the findings contributed to Cooper's (1998) suggestion that component polysemy hampers idiom comprehension. For example, some informants understood the word *hot* in the idiom *hot on the trail* in the meanings *filled with anger* or *sexually attractive*, and the constituent word *fly* in the idiom *wouldn't hurt a fly* in the meanings *depart hastily* or *travel through the air*. On the other hand, the results also contributed to Penttilä et al.'s (1998) observation that the comprehension of biology-based idioms does not require specific cultural knowledge. For example, the meaning of the idiom *at a snail's gallop* seemed to be easy to infer despite the confusing effect of the word *gallop*, which some informants interpreted as a reference to high speed. The biblical idiom *manna from heaven* appeared to be well understood with the help of the cultural clue given by the constituent word *heaven*: the informants seemed to believe that the heavenly origin guarantees *manna's* (whatever it might be) quality. Another idiom reasonably well understood based on extralinguistic cultural knowledge was *the long arm of the law*; the informants' comments referred to the moral code of their society.

The gathered data also revealed colour associations, which in some cases facilitated comprehension and sometimes had the opposite effect. The misleading inferences based on colour associations are not surprising since, as, for example, Kalda's (2022) findings suggest, colours and colour metaphors, to a greater extent than other perception metaphors, are culturally specific. The informants in this study stated, for example, that green (in *green with envy*) is a happy colour, whereas black (in *the Black Death* and *the black sheep*) is either scary, negative, or bad. Moreover, the comprehension seemed to be affected by the degree of familiarity/unfamiliarity of the concept: while *gentlemen's agreement* and *horse trading* seemed to be far from the informants' thinking, they all referred to the eye irritation caused by crying (in *cry one's eyes out*). Furthermore, some idioms (e.g. *the long arm of the law*) were clearly more attractive than others triggering lengthy and fanciful speculations about the context.

In essence, idiom comprehension and even the choice of comprehension strategy are affected by many factors. Although the results indicated that the recourse-to-L1

strategy is more effective than the more popular semantic analysis, L1 strategy is subject to the learner's L1 idiom knowledge, which is not to be taken for granted. The results were in line with Jürgenson's (2020) and Baran's (2008) findings that Estonian adolescents' depth of L1 idiom knowledge leaves something to be desired.

## 5. Concluding remarks and teaching implications

Although the use of prefabricated expressions requires less mental effort and they are quicker to produce and comprehend, the crux is comprehension, as speakers can make themselves understood by constructing novel phrases while the inability to understand idioms may lead to communication breakdowns. This study sought to find answers as to which factors make EFL idioms easier to understand specifically for young NSs of Estonian prior to advanced language levels based on the comprehension strategies they use. Both the effect of transparency (i.e. the existence of a lexical element that can be understood literally) and the effect of L1–L2 idiom similarity/identity on adolescent Estonian NSs' EFL idiom comprehension and their idiom strategy choices were investigated. A think-aloud protocol was used to gather data.

The adolescent informants clearly favoured semantic analysis, but the recourse-to-L1 strategy was also used to a substantial extent. Also, the reliance-on-context strategy was utilised despite the minimal amount of context. However, since recourse to L1 seemed to provide more correct answers than the more popular semantic analysis, it might be justified to start EFL idiom instruction with idioms with identical Estonian equivalents or idioms with both an identical L1 equivalent and a literal lexical constituent word. Moreover, since the students favoured semantic analysis (particularly the students with better language skills), the next idiom category to be taught could include idioms with a literal lexical constituent when the learners' figurative competence has improved with age. Yet, it should be taken into consideration that adolescent Estonians may not be familiar with their L1 idioms; therefore, students could be taught EFL idioms concurrent with the identical and/or similar Estonian idioms. Moreover, based on the observation that many informants had a favourite strategy, it seems reasonable to suggest that language teachers should direct learners' attention to different idiom properties (e.g. L1–L2 identity/similarity and transparency) and instruct them to utilise various strategies with an eye to possible L1 interference.

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# EESTI TEISMELISTE INGLISE KEELE KUI VÕORKEELE IDIOOMIDE MÕISTMISSTRATEEGIAD

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Võõrkeele valmisväljendid nõuavad vähem vaimset pingutust ja neid saab kiirelt nii mõista kui ka kasutada. Eelkõige on oluline nendest arusaamine, kuna kõnelejad võivad ennast väljendada ka uudsete fraasidega, samas kui suutmatuse idioome mõista võib põhjustada kommunikatsiooniprobleeme. Käesoleva uuringu eesmärk oli välja selgitada, milliseid arusaamise strateegiaid eesti emakeelega teismelised inglise keele kui võõrkeele tundmatute idioomide jaoks kasutavad ning kas strateegiate tõhususes ilmneb erinevusi. Andmete kogumise meetodina kasutati valjult mõtlemise protokollit.

Andmed näitasid, et õpilased eelistasid semantilist analüüsi idioomide tähenduse leidmiseks. Teataval määral toetuti ka teadmiste emakeelsetest idioomidest ning kontekstile hoolimata sellest, et konteksti määr oli minimaalne. Kõige tõhusamaks viisiks idioomi õige tähenduse leidmisel osutus emakeelest saadav tugi.

Kogutud andmete põhjal võib anda mõningaid soovitusi idioomide õpetamise kohta. Kuna uurimistulemused viitasid emakeele toele kui kõige edukamale idioomide mõistmise strateegiale, tasuks keeleõppe algtasemel alustada idioomidega, millel on kas identne või sarnane eestikeelne vaste (eriti veel sellistega, millel on lisaks sõnasõnaliselt mõistetav koostisosa). Tulemuste põhjal on õpilastel tõenäoliselt vaja õppida idioome ka emakeeles. Sarnaste eestikeelsete vastete puhul tuleb arvestada ka õpetajapoolse sekkumise suurema vajadusega, et takistada võimalikku negatiivset ülekannet. Kuna tulemused viitasid ka sellele, et edasijõudnumad õpilased eelistavad pigem semantilist analüüsi, siis keeleõpetajad võiksid suunata õppijate tähelepanu idioomi eri omadustele (nt emakeele ja võõrkeele idioomide identsusele/sarnasusele ja läbipaistvusele) ning juhendada neid kasutama erinevaid strateegiaid.

Uuringudisainist tulenevad piirangud rõhutavad edasise teadustöö vajadust. Lisauurimist vääriksid strateegiaelistuste võimalikud põhjused: vähene emakeele idioomide tundmine, keeleoskustase, idioomide omadused ja puudulik võime mõista kujundlikku keelt.

**Võtmesõnad:** idioomid, sõnasõnaline tähendus, semantiline analüüs, läbipaistvus, inglise keel, eesti keel

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