

A COMPARISON OF FACTORS AFFECTING ESTONIAN EFL LEARNERS' IDIOM COMPREHENSION

Rita Anita Forssten

Abstract. The article discusses a study examining the facilitating effect that analysability (i.e. the degree of transparency) and similarity between English and Estonian equivalents have on Estonian EFL learners' idiom comprehension. A group of (pre)adolescent L1 Estonian learners of English performed an idiom comprehension test, which consisted of idioms categorised into five groups on the basis of the degree of transparency (i.e. the degree to which their idiomatic meaning is inferable from the literal meanings of their constituents or from their figurativeness) and the degree of similarity to their Estonian equivalents. The results revealed that both transparency (in the form of a constituent to be taken literally) and identical L1 idioms facilitate EFL idiom comprehension nearly to the same degree, while the effect of semi-transparency (that is, figurativeness) seems to be clearly lower. However, opaque idioms with partially similar L1 equivalents appear to be even somewhat more difficult than opaque idioms without any L1–L2 similarity.

Keywords: language learning and teaching, non-native language acquisition, idiom comprehension, language transfer, Estonian, English

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss certain characteristics of idioms to be taken into account in foreign language (FL) learning and teaching. Although frequently used in everyday speech, idioms are a somewhat neglected aspect of vocabulary teaching. Prior to presenting the possible factors that may facilitate idiom comprehension, let us review idiom properties and the features that may make idioms difficult to comprehend. Though, for example, according to Cacciari (2014: 27–28), both defining idiom comprehension and defining 'idiom' itself is difficult and controversial: First of all, language structures acquire their idiomaticity

gradually. Secondly, idioms consist of constituent words to which, however, their overall meaning cannot be boiled down. Therefore, idioms are simultaneously both analysable to some extent and explicable only by reference to the whole. Finally, some idioms retain the original meaning of their constituent words while others do not. Furthermore, although Nunberg et al. (1994: 492–493) name inflexibility, figuration, proverbiality, informality, and affect as the basic features of idioms, they conclude that conventionality is the only property that applies to all idioms – that is, based on the use of its constituent parts in isolation, it is not completely possible to predict the meaning and/or usage of an idiom. Even though semantic opacity (the phenomenon that the meaning of an expression cannot be deduced from its constituent words) is typically regarded as a predominant idiom property, Nunberg et al. (1994) and Cacciari and Levorato (1998) among others state that the level of idiom transparency/opaqueness varies. Liu (2008), when discussing idioms from L2 speakers' perspective, distinguishes 'opaqueness in meaning' and 'frozenness in structure' as widely accepted idiom characteristics which also apply to L2 idioms. The theories this study is based on deal with the comprehension of idiomatic language in general, and 'idiom' in this study refers to an institutionalized multiword expression that cannot (completely) be derived from its constituent meanings and is syntactically restricted (at least to a certain extent).

An idiom may confuse an addressee with two different interpretations (i.e. literal and figurative). What complicates both the recognition and the comprehension of an idiom is that it may, depending on its use, carry either its literal or its figurative meaning (Cacciari 2014). Not to mention that some phrases (e.g. phrasal verbs) have several different figurative meanings. Nevertheless, certain factors may facilitate idiom comprehension. Based on earlier research, Titone and Connine (1994) indicate four dimensions contributing to (L1) idiom processing: familiarity (i.e. the subjective frequency of an expression), compositionality (i.e. the level to which the meanings of an idiom's constituent parts contribute to its overall meaning), predictability (i.e. the probability of completing an incomplete phrase idiomatically), and literality (i.e. the degree to which an idiom has a potential literal interpretation). Furthermore, it has been shown – e.g. by Irujo (1986) – that FL speakers rely on their knowledge of their native language in order to comprehend and produce idioms.

Idioms, tough nuts as they are (particularly for FL learners), should be introduced to learners in a sequence based on the characteristics of their various types. Decomposability and transparency (that is, overlap between literal and figurative meanings of expressions) appear to facilitate the task of deriving the figurative meaning of an idiom from its literal meaning. This facilitating effect seems to be more essential for L2 learners than for L1 speakers (e.g. Abel 2003). As with transparency and figurativeness, L1 knowledge can be utilised to decode L2 idioms. Irujo (1986) and Yoshikawa (2008), for instance, have found that idioms different from language learners' L1 idioms (Spanish and Japanese, respectively) are clearly more challenging than the ones identical to their L1 equivalents.

Due to the challenging nature of L2 idioms, their proficiency-and-fluency-enhancing effect, and the fact that they are frequently encountered in spoken and written discourse (to name but a few reasons), they should be taken into account in language learning and teaching. Fortunately, because of their certain characteristics – like metaphoricity and the fact that some of them are shared across multiple

languages – some L2 idioms are to a certain extent analysable and/or identical to their L1 equivalents, respectively, which qualities contribute (to varying degrees) to understanding thereof. Prior studies on the relevant subject of L2 idiom processing in Estonia and elsewhere have mostly concentrated on more advanced language learners; for example, Saar (2014) studied idiom translation (Spanish into Estonian) to identify, *inter alia*, the idiom properties that cause cognitive load among university students and translators.

The current study, thus, was set out to address a younger group of L2 learners – that is, sixth-formers at the end of elementary (A2/CEFR) level studies in a basic school in Estonia – and to investigate whether the assumed order of idiom intelligibility based on their degree of transparency is realised among Estonian learners of English; whether the subjects show evidence of positive transfer with identical L1–L2 idioms; whether the subjects show evidence of negative transfer with partially similar L1–L2 idioms; and whether the transparency aspect facilitates Estonian EFL learners' idiom comprehension more effectively than the analogy between English and Estonian idioms.

2. Background to the study

2.1. On idiom processing and (de)compositionality

The compositional idiom processing approach, in which the emphasis is on the meanings of idiom constituents, is often contrasted with the non-compositional approach and holistic processing strategies, according to which idioms are mentally represented and processed as 'long words'. For example, Bobrow and Bell's (1973) separate list model (the idiom list hypothesis), Swinney and Cutler's (1979) lexical representation hypothesis, and Gibbs's (1986) direct access model are based on the latter view. However, the results of some studies suggest that the two competing approaches exist in parallel to each other; for example, based on their study of a dyslexic aphasia patient, Nenonen *et al.* (1999: 56) suggested that due to the structural variation not all idioms are processed in a similar way. Furthermore, Cutting and Bock (1997: 69) in their study of idiom storage and retrieval propose the first hybrid account: idioms have their own lexical-conceptual entry, but 'idiom representations are linked to information about the grammatical class of their constituents, about their overall syntactic structures, and about literal meaning'. Based on an eye-tracking study, Titone and Connine (1999: 1670) in turn proposed a hybrid model according to which idioms are processed simultaneously as compositional and non-compositional word sequences. Similarly, the studies, *inter alia*, of Sprenger *et al.* (2006) and Caillies and Butcher (2007) support the hybrid approach. By contrast, Van Lancker Sidtis *et al.*'s (2015) findings support the dual route model, in which the compositional route is reserved for less familiar expressions and the holistic retrieval route for automatized phrases. Libben and Titone's study (2008) supported a constraint-based view on idiom processing. As regards decomposability, they found it having a facilitating effect, but not consistently so. Moreover, according to them, 'idiomatic sequences are directly retrieved to some extent during comprehension' (2008: 1105).

Developmental studies on L1 idiom comprehension throughout childhood and adolescence support the understanding that analysability facilitates idiom comprehension: Cacciari and Levorato (1998) found that semantic analysability clearly affects the way how both children (their participants were fifth-formers) and adults tackle figurative expressions. Gibbs (1987, 1991) investigated the idiom comprehension of kindergarten children and first-, third-, and fourth-formers and found that at each age level idioms in which the literal and figurative meanings are closely related were easier to comprehend than idioms lacking that semantic connection, although the connection was particularly useful for the younger children (i.e. for kindergartners and first-formers). Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) looked into the role of transparency in idiom comprehension of fifth-, eighth-, and eleventh-formers (ages 11, 14, and 17), and their results showed that semantic analysis facilitates the acquisition of some idioms; the higher an idiom's transparency degree is, the easier it is to understand. Similarly, Levorato and Cacciari's (1999) study among second- and fourth-formers (ages 7 and 9) contributes to the understanding that children employ semantic analysis as an L1 idiom comprehension strategy. Even though, the above studies suggest that children's idiom learning is not based on rote learning, it develops gradually in accordance with their linguistic and metalinguistic skills; therefore, the need and competence to resort to semantic idiom analysability somewhat depends on a child's age and ability to understand figurative language.

With regard to L2 idiom processing, there are – similar to the above-described L1 idiom processing models – two somewhat contradictory views (and their mergers). Gibbs (1995: 98) proposed that, as regards idioms, young children and L2 speakers either use rote learning or infer their meaning from context. He referred to the fact that some idioms are lexically frozen, which may be explained by their non-compositional nature. Hence, Gibbs suggested that 'speakers learn the meanings of idioms by forming arbitrary links between idioms and their non-literal meanings'. Yet, several studies suggest that L2 speakers utilise compositional analysis in idiom processing (particularly that of constituent elements taken literally). For instance, Carrol and Conklin's (2015: 16) eye-tracking experiments among university students (in which they compared native speakers of Mandarin Chinese with English as their L2 and native speakers of English) supported the idea that non-native speakers are more likely to process idioms compositionally.

Abel (2003) suggested a model of dual idiom representation based on her experiment findings showing that L2 speakers of English tend to rate idioms as more decomposable than L1 speakers. However, Nordmann et al. (2014: 90–95), in their study of the reliability of ratings given by native versus non-native speakers of English on several idiomatic aspects, indicated poor reliability on all of the investigated aspects – including decomposability. Although, in Nordmann et al.'s study L1 speakers rated idioms significantly as more decomposable and literal than non-native speakers representing a variety of native languages, Nordmann et al. suggested that decomposability may be altogether a problematic variable for this kind of comparisons because 'each participant interprets the concept of decomposability in a different way, assigning differential semantic weight to the individual components of idiomatic phrases'. According to Liontas's (2002) idiom diffusion model (based on experiments among adult native speakers of Spanish, French, and German), non-native speakers have a tendency to resort to the literal meanings of

idiom constituents. The model consists of the following two stages: in the prediction phase, L2 learners first use a literal analysis of the idiom constituents, and in the next phase they either confirm the inferred meaning or replace it with a new one. As stated by Cieślicka (2006) in her literal salience model, L2 speakers' primary reliance in understanding idiomatic expressions is on literal (over figurative) meaning.

Conversely, as in the studies of Carrol and Conklin (2015), Abel (2003), Nordman et al. (2014), Liontas (2002), and Cooper (1999), some research findings suggest that when it comes to idiom processing there are no significant differences between L1 and L2 users. For example, Beck and Weber (2016) found that both L1 and proficient L2 users (the latter speaking German as their L1) employed access to both figurative meaning and literal constituent meanings and that, in general, proficient L2 speakers' English idiom processing was very similar to that of native speakers. Nonetheless, they refer to earlier studies to point out that at lower language levels learners have a preliminary procedure: they first resort to the literal meaning and translate it into their L1, which function disappears as their language proficiency increases.

Although opaque idioms appear to be stumbling blocks even for advanced L2 learners, transparency seems to be a facilitating factor in idiom comprehension. Arnaud and Savignon (1997) investigated advanced adult EFL speakers' comprehension of rare words and complex lexical units – that is, opaque idioms without similar equivalents in learners' L1 (French). They found that highly advanced language learners were able to reach passive knowledge of low-frequency words similar to that of native speakers; however, as regards opaque idioms, that was not the case (1997: 167). As Arnaud and Savignon discovered that advanced learners have difficulties in reaching idiomatic competence – partly due to the general lack of appropriate exposure – they encouraged attention to pedagogy in this field. Irujo (1986) maintains the same understanding of the complexity of opaque idioms for advanced learners as Arnaud and Savignon (1997). Despite her focus being in the utilisation of L1 knowledge (Spanish in this case) in the comprehension and production of EFL idioms, she found that idiom comprehension is also affected by other factors such as frequency, structural simplicity, and transparency.

Bearing the above in mind and notwithstanding whether or not L2 idiom processing differs from L1 idiom processing, the current study is based on the view that compositional analysis facilitates the perceptual process of transparent and semi-transparent L2 idioms, at least to some extent. When it comes to compositionality, however, it should be taken into consideration that the term is multi-layered. 'Contrary to the popular conception that the literal meaning of a phrase or sentence is its compositional meaning, many phrases have compositional meanings that are based on the figurative meanings of their individual parts' (Gibbs 2014: 66).

2.2. On idiom processing and the effect of L1 and L2 idiom analogy on idiom acquisition

In addition to literal constituents, L2 speakers may employ their knowledge of L1 idioms in L2 idiom processing. Irujo's (1986) experiments (a multiple-choice test and a definition test) among advanced L2 (English) speakers revealed that they use L1 (Spanish) knowledge to comprehend L2 idioms. Irujo categorized the

idioms of the tests into three types: idioms identical (both in form and meaning) to their L1 equivalents; idioms similar to their L1 equivalents; and idioms different from their L1 equivalents. The results indicated that the identical idioms are the easiest, and similar ones are slightly more difficult showing some L1 interference, whereas idioms different from their L1 equivalents are the most difficult for learners to comprehend. Cooper (1999) asked a group of college students (who varied in their native language) to report the strategies they use for L2 (English) idiom comprehension in a think-aloud session. His study indicated both the use of the literal meanings of idioms and references to an L1 idiom as some of the most common idiom processing strategies. Also Liontas's (2002) idiom diffusion model includes the use of L1 knowledge: during the stage of literal analysis, learners may resort to their L1 equivalents.

Kecskés (2000) found that while processing L2 formulaic expressions, adult non-native speakers rely on L1 conceptual system due to the lack of metaphorical competence and conceptual fluency, which tendency, however, may lead to errors. In his study, Kellerman (1977) noticed that native speakers of Dutch were somewhat reluctant to rely on their L1 when judging L2 (English) idioms; he argued that language transfer greatly depends on learners' understanding of the distance between native and target languages. (Though, Kellerman studied neither idiom comprehension nor production but recognition.) Abdullah and Jackson (1998) found positive language transfer among Syrian-Arabic L1 speakers in comprehension and production of English idioms when they were cognates; negative transfer in the case of false cognates; and the use of metaphoric association and pragmatic knowledge of the world in the case of non-existent Syrian equivalents. They concluded that L1–L2 idiom similarity does not necessarily facilitate idiom comprehension.

Given the findings illustrating the various positions on both decomposability and on L1 influence in L2 idiom processing in several earlier studies, the goal of the present study is to compare these factors in EFL idiom comprehension among (pre)adolescent Estonian learners at the elementary language level.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were 45 students (ages 12 and 13 years) attending a basic school (Form 6) in Estonia. However, after having finished the test and given their background information, four students were excluded as participants for the reason of their native language not being Estonian. The cause for the exclusion was that even though language learners nowadays tend, to an increasing extent, to be multilingual with various language repertoires, this study concentrated on the effect of Estonian as the source of L1 influence on EFL learners' idiom comprehension. The rest of the participants (18 female and 23 male pupils) were native speakers of Estonian, who have learnt English as their first foreign language at school from the third form onwards. According to the curriculum of their school, which is based on the national curriculum and its amendments, their required level of English proficiency by the end of Form 6 is A2.2. The participants were the students of two average

school classes representing learners from weak to strong in the English language proficiency. They have also received either German or Russian classes, two to three lessons per week, from the fourth form onwards. Reportedly, the participants had neither language impairments nor learning disabilities. Preadolescent L2 learners were selected because their idiom understanding in general is still at the developmental stage and because they, at the elementary language level, are not too familiar with English idioms since the current study aimed at investigating precisely the idiom characteristics that may ease the comprehension of unfamiliar L2 idioms.

3.2. Materials

A set of thirty-five English idioms taken from *English-Estonian Dictionary of Idioms* (Hanko, Liiv 1998) were categorized into five types to indicate the aspect of transparency and opaqueness, on the one hand, and the L1 similarity aspect, on the other hand. The first category consists of opaque idioms with identical Estonian equivalents both in their literal and figurative meanings (e.g. *bite somebody's nose off*). The second category comprises opaque idioms with partially similar equivalents – that is, idioms with identical figurative meanings with their Estonian equivalents but with slightly different wording (e.g. *hear the birdies sing*, in Estonian *ööbikuid kuulma*, which literally means ‘hear the nightingales’ and figuratively (identical to its English equivalent) ‘to be rendered unconscious’). The third category is made up of opaque idioms without similar Estonian equivalents – that is, idioms that have equivalents in Estonian with completely different wording or idioms that do not have corresponding idiomatic expressions in Estonian at all (e.g. *a fine kettle of fish*). The fourth category includes only transparent idioms without identical/similar Estonian counterparts (e.g. *the donkey work*), whereas the fifth category is for semi-transparent idioms – in which the figurative meaning should be as clear as day – without similar Estonian counterparts (e.g. *a whale of a* – in the sense of ‘a great amount of something’). In summary, the idioms of the first three categories represent opaque idioms with either identical, or partly similar, or completely different Estonian equivalents, while the idioms of the last two categories represent either transparent or semi-transparent idioms without Estonian equivalents.

With regard to the continuum from transparent to opaque in this study, an idiom is classified as transparent if at least one of its constituent elements can be read literally (as the word *wind* in the phrase *a capful of wind*), and it is classified as semi-transparent if it does not include any component parts that could be read literally but in which the figurativeness is so transparent that even school children should have enough extra-linguistic knowledge to infer its meaning (as in the phrase *put a smile on someone's face* in the meaning ‘to please someone’). Furthermore, an idiom is classified as opaque if it neither includes any component parts that can be read literally nor is its figurativeness crystal clear without remarkable brainwork or specific knowledge of a particular field (as might be the case, for example, with the phrase *read someone the Riot Act* in the meaning ‘to reprimand severely’).

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The data were collected by means of a multiple-choice comprehension test (in paper form) consisting of 35 idioms. Testing was conducted in classrooms. The participants had approximately 40 minutes to complete the test. Each idiom was presented in a brief context followed by a question asking the meaning of the idiom and presenting four possible interpretations. To ensure the participants' comprehension of the multiple-choice options and the sentences in which the idioms were embedded, they were instructed to ask for synonyms, definitions, and/or Estonian equivalents for such multiple-choice options and parts of the sentences (excluding the idioms) they did not understand. The following is an example of an item in the test:

I made a flying visit to my mother-in-law's house, where I had a chance to meet her new best friend. What is the meaning of the expression 'a flying visit'?

- A. a family visit
- B. a quarrelsome visit
- C. a domestic flight
- D. a very short visit

Each correct answer produced a point to the category it belonged to; hence, the highest score possible would have been 287 per category (7 idioms multiply 41 participants). An order of precedence for the factors that facilitate (L2) idiom comprehension was qualitatively considered on the basis of the differences in the quantities of correct answers between the categories. The quantitative research method of the study was a one-way analysis of variance with between-categories factors (transparency/opaque and L1-L2 analogy aspects) and within-category factors (7 idioms/category). It was followed by *t* tests to compare the total scores between the categories.

4. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the means of correct answers per question, standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals of each category. In regard to the aspect of transparency/opaque, the transparent idioms were the easiest. A transparent expression resulted in an average figure of 24.7 correct answers. The most uncomplicated idiom in the whole test (*miles better*) belonged to this group: it brought 36 correct answers out of 41. Semi-transparent idioms seemed to be somewhat less challenging than completely opaque idioms; a semi-transparent idiom averaged out to 20.9 correct answers. An opaque idiom yielded, on average, 18.6 correct responses. One of the most difficult idioms, *all mouth and trousers*, was a member of this group; only ten students were able to infer its correct meaning.

As regards L1-L2 idiom analogy, a close identity between L2 and L1 idioms seems to function as a facilitating factor: the mean of correct answers for an opaque idiom with an identical Estonian equivalent was 24.4, whereas in the case of idioms with a completely different (or a non-existing) Estonian equivalent 18.6 students out of 41, on an average, matched an item with its correct definition. However, on

average, no more than 14.9 students were able to infer the correct meaning per item when L2 and L1 idioms were not identical but only partially similar.

Table 1. Correct answers per idiom category

| Idiom category | The mean percentage of correct items | Mean/item (max 41) | SD | CI |
|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------|------|-------------|
| A (opaque, identical L1 equivalent) | 60% | 24.42 | 5.39 | 22.72–26.12 |
| B (opaque, similar L1 equivalent) | 36% | 14.86 | 6.24 | 12.89–16.82 |
| C (opaque, no L1 equivalent) | 45% | 18.57 | 4.17 | 17.25–19.87 |
| D (transparent, no L1 equivalent) | 60% | 24.71 | 7.99 | 22.19–27.23 |
| E (semi-transparent, no L1 equivalent) | 51% | 20.85 | 2.80 | 19.97–21.73 |

In the one-way analysis of variance – based on the gathered points (out of 287) per idiom category – the p value (0.02) was smaller than the limit value (0.05) and the calculated F value (3.28) indicating the statistical significance in the discrimination between idiom groups larger than F statistic (2.69); hence, the overall results were significant, and the null hypothesis that there appear no differences between the idiom categories was rejected (see Table 2).

Table 2. ANOVA, Single Factor

| Source of Variation | Sum of squares | Degrees of freedom | Mean square | F value | p value | F critical value |
|---------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------|---------|---------|------------------|
| Between Groups | 480.97 | 4.00 | 120.24 | 3.28 | 0.02 | 2.69 |
| Within Groups | 1100.57 | 30.00 | 36.69 | | | |
| Total | 1581.54 | 34.00 | | | | |

To confirm where the differences lie, t-tests between the categories were conducted. The differences were statistically significant ($p \leq 5\%$), between the following categories:

- Group A (opaque idioms with identical L1 equivalents) versus Group C (opaque idioms without L1 equivalents);
- Group A (opaque idioms with identical L1 equivalents) versus Group B (opaque idioms with similar L1 equivalents);
- Group D (transparent idioms without L1 equivalents) versus Group C (opaque idioms without L1 equivalents);
- Group D (transparent idioms without L1 equivalents) versus Group B (opaque idioms with similar L1 equivalents);
- Group E (semi-transparent idioms without L1 equivalents) versus Group B (opaque idioms with similar L1 equivalents),

while the differences between the following categories were not statistically significant ($p > 5\%$):

- Group A (opaque idioms with identical L1 equivalents) versus Group D (transparent idioms without L1 equivalents);
- Group A (opaque idioms with identical L1 equivalents) versus Group E (semi-transparent idioms without L1 equivalents);
- Group B (opaque idioms with similar L1 equivalents) versus Group C (opaque idioms without L1 equivalents);
- Group C (opaque idioms without L1 equivalents) versus Group E (semi-transparent idioms without L1 equivalents);
- Group D (transparent idioms without L1 equivalents) versus Group E (semi-transparent idioms without L1 equivalents).

All in all, the students completed half the items correctly. Table 1 reports the students' summarized performance (per each idiom category) on the idiom comprehension test. The mean percentage of correct definitions for transparent idioms without an identical Estonian equivalent was 60 and 51 for semi-transparent ones, while opaque idioms reached the average percentage of only 45. Even though idioms classified as semi-transparent were understood slightly better than completely opaque ones, the difference between the groups was not statistically significant. Correspondingly, the mean percentage of correct definitions for opaque idioms with an identical L1 equivalent was 60, while it was only 36 for opaque idioms with a partially similar equivalent.

As regards Estonian sixth-formers, it seems that both transparency and identical L1 equivalents facilitate EFL idiom understanding to the same degree, while semi-transparency seems not to be a particularly noteworthy facilitator. Partially similar L1 equivalents seem to be hindrances rather than facilitators, thus differing from the other investigated factors. Altogether, the results were congruent with the earlier studies (see, e.g. Irujo 1986) indicating that analysability facilitates idiom comprehension and with the earlier studies (see, e.g. Irujo 1986, Yoshikawa 2008) indicating the facilitating effect of identical L1 equivalents. However, the idioms with partially similar Estonian equivalents such as *a storm in a teacup* (in Estonian the storm is usually in a water glass), *kill two birds with one stone* (in the Estonian version, it is two flies with one strike), *the tenth wave* (in the Estonian version, it is *the ninth wave*), *packed like sardines* (the Estonian version is *like herrings in a tub*), *someone's sun is set* (in the Estonian version *sun* is replaced by *star*), and *a twin soul* (in the Estonian version, *relative* replaces *twin*) yielded the least number of correct answers. The results are consistent with the earlier studies focusing on other native languages that have indicated results of negative transfer, e.g. Irujo 1986 (though she found that idioms with similar L1 equivalents are understood better than idioms with completely different L1 versions), Yoshikawa 2008, and Keschés 2000.

Hence, with regard to idiom instruction for Estonian EFL learners, the following recommendations concerning idiom introduction sequence can be made: based on this research, it is advisable to utilise positive transfer and transparency (that is, to start with idioms that have identical L1 equivalents and/or with idioms that carry a literal element or both) and avoid interference and complete opacity by postponing idioms that have partially similar L1 equivalents and opaque core idioms (respectively) to more advanced language levels. Although, it should be noted that, with regard to the idea of opacity, there occurs inter-individual

variation determined by a person's age, world knowledge, and reasoning skills among learners; what is completely opaque to someone may be inferable to someone else. Furthermore, as regards the L1–L2 idiom analogy aspect, there may be great differences in to what extent and which particular idioms a certain language or culture shares with the English language (or Englishes). Therefore, when selecting L2 idioms to be taught or included in teaching materials and considering their introduction sequence, it should be taken into account that both learners' cultural and language background and their age together with their extra-linguistic knowledge play a part in idiom intelligibility.

5. Conclusion

The current article concentrates solely on two factors that may facilitate EFL idiom comprehension (i.e. semantic analysability of the idiom's meaning and English–Estonian idiom analogy) among Estonian language learners. It ranks analysability based on a literal element, analysability based on figurativeness, identical L1 equivalent, and partially similar L1 equivalent in order of their usefulness in EFL idiom comprehension. Though admittedly, there are other factors too playing major roles both in L1 and in L2 idiom comprehension, such as familiarity (see, e.g. Irujo 1986) and context (see, e.g., Gibbs 1995, Liontas 2000, Cooper 1999). However, the aim of the present study was to investigate the understanding of unfamiliar L2 idioms; therefore, on the one hand idiom frequency was not essential, but on the other hand the age (12–13 years) of the participants was chosen so that they already are able to understand figurative language but, ascribable to their language level (A2), not yet very familiar with idioms in their L2.

In general, the evidence from the study suggests that the transparency aspect facilitates Estonian EFL learners' idiom comprehension more effectively than the analogy between English and Estonian idioms. As regards identical L1–L2 idioms, the findings support the presumption of positive transfer; an identical L1 (Estonian) equivalent and a constituent element that can be read literally seem to improve EFL idiom intelligibility the most. However, the findings indicate evidence of negative transfer with partially similar L1–L2 idioms: such idioms seem to be more difficult than opaque idioms with completely different (or non-existent) L1 equivalents. Easy to understand figurativeness appears to somewhat assist learners in comprehending L2 idioms, although its effect appears to be modest. Nevertheless, the data support the assumed order of idiom intelligibility based on their degree of transparency: transparent idioms are easier than semi-transparent idioms, while the latter, in turn, are more intelligible than completely opaque ones.

The current study is limited in terms of its generalizability because of its measuring instrument (a multiple-choice test), which always tends to leave something to chance. Therefore, further data collection would be needed to determine exactly how Estonian EFL learners tackle unfamiliar idioms. However, in spite of their limitations, the aforementioned findings should assist coursebook designers and Estonian EFL teachers in incorporating a premeditated idiom introduction sequence into their course programmes.

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INGLISE KEELE KUI VÕÕRKEELE IDIOOMIDE MÕISTMIST HÕLBUSTAVATEST TEGURITEST

Rita Anita Forssten

Tallinna Ülikool

Artikkel analüüsib uurimust, mis võrdles kahte inglise keele kui võõrkeele idioomidest arusaamist hõlbustavat tegurit: esiteks sõnasõnalistel elementidel ja figuratiivsusel põhineva analüüsivuse mõju ja teiseks inglise idioomidega sarnaste ja identsete eesti keele kui emakeele idioomide mõju. Rühm Eesti põhikooli kuuenda klassi õpilasi sooritas idioomidest arusaamise testi, milles idioomid olid liigitatud viide erinevasse kategooriasse: 1) läbipaistmatud idioomid, millel on identne eestikeelne vaste; 2) läbipaistmatud idioomid, millel on osaliselt sarnane eestikeelne vaste; 3) läbipaistmatud idioomid, millel pole eestikeelset vastet (või on see täiesti erineva sõnastusega); 4) läbipaistvad idioomid (milles on vähemalt üks sõnasõnaliselt võetav element) ilma eestikeelse vasteta ning 5) poolläbipaistvad idioomid (ilma sõnasõnalise elemendita, aga kergesti arusaadava kujundlikkusega) ilma eestikeelse vasteta. Ilmnes, et läbipaistvus ja identne eestikeelne vaste hõlbustavad arusaamist peaaegu samal määral. Samas näib poolläbipaistvuse (figuratiivsuse) hõlbustav mõju olevat selgelt madalam ja idioomid, millel on ainult osaliselt sarnane vaste eesti keeles, osutusid kõige keerulisemateks. Vastupidi identse vaste olemasolule, mõjub osaliselt sarnane eestikeelne vaste pigem segadust tekitavalt kui toetavalt ingliskeelsest idioomist arusaamisele.

Võtmesõnad: keeleõpe, võõrkeele omandamine, idioomide mõistmine, lähtekeele ülekanne, eesti keel, inglise keel

Rita Anita Forssten's (Tallinn University) research interests are vocabulary acquisition, coursebook evaluation and intercultural communication.
Narva mnt 29, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia
rita.forssten@gmail.com