

# Attitudes towards idioms and idiom learning strategies

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J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and German  
Language and Literature – Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Mirna Pucelj

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Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Višnja Pavičić Takač, Full Professor

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Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

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## Abstract

Idioms are powerful figurative expressions that can convey very complex thoughts through just a few memorable words, which makes them very useful in both spoken and written discourse. The present study investigates the relationships between Croatian EFL learners' attitudes towards idioms, learning strategies they utilize to acquire unknown idioms, their gender, academic performance, and experience in English. For the purpose of this research, a questionnaire and idiom quiz were designed and administered to a sample of 96 students of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year BA programme at the Department of English at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek. The findings reveal that the majority of the participants have a positive attitude towards learning idioms and they tend to employ a variety of different learning strategies while acquiring new idioms. The idiom learning strategies that were reported to be the most successful and thus most used were inferring the meaning from context, frequent repetition and a combination of visualization and verbal information. The statistical analysis suggests that there is a statistically significant relationship between gender and learning strategies, while gender does not have a significant role in the participants' attitudes towards idioms. The participants' academic achievement, on the other hand, seems to be positively connected only with their attitudes towards idioms and not with the applied idiom learning strategies. Additionally, the findings have shown a positive correlation between the attitudes and learning strategies, which suggests that learners with a more positive attitude towards idioms will also employ more idiom learning strategies.

Keywords: English idioms, attitudes towards idioms, idiom learning strategies, gender, Croatian EFL learners



## Sažetak

Idiomi su moćni simbolični izrazi koji su u stanju prenijeti veoma složena razmišljanja putem samo nekolicine upamtljivih riječi, što ih čini neizostavnim dijelom usmenog i pismenog diskursa. U ovomu se radu istražuju međusobne povezanosti stavova hrvatskih učenika, koji uče engleski kao strani jezik, prema idiomima, strategija učenja koje koriste pri usvajanju nepoznatih idioma, učenikova spola, obrazovnih postignuća i iskustva u učenju engleskog jezika. U svrhu istraživanja su oblikovani upitnik i kviz o idiomima koji su provedeni među 96 studenata prve i druge godine preddiplomskog studija Odsjeka za engleski jezik i književnost na Filozofskom fakultetu u Osijeku. Rezultati pokazuju da većina sudionika ima pozitivan stav prema učenju idioma i da su skloni koristiti raznolike strategije učenja prilikom usvajanja novih idioma. Strategije učenja idioma koje su se pokazale najuspješnijima, a samim time i najčešće korištenima, jesu izvesti zaključak o značenju na temelju konteksta, učestalo ponavljanje te spoj vizualizacije i usmenih informacija. Statistička analiza ukazuje na međusobnu povezanost spola i strategija učenja, dok spol istovremeno ne pokazuje značajnu ulogu u stavovima prema učenju idioma. S druge strane, obrazovna postignuća sudionika se čine povezanima samo s njihovim stavovima prema idiomima, ali ne i sa strategijama učenja idioma. Također, rezultati pokazuju proporcionalnu povezanost između stavova i strategija učenja, ukazujući na to da će učenici sa pozitivnijim stavom prema idiomima također primijeniti više strategija učenja idioma.

Ključne riječi: idiomi engleskog jezika, stavovi prema idiomima, strategije učenja idioma, spol, hrvatski učenici engleskog kao stranog jezika

## 1. Introduction

Every second (SL) or foreign language (FL) learner and teacher is vividly aware of the fact that vocabulary is, in Brown's words (2001: 377), "the building blocks of language". As of late, the focus has shifted from teaching individual words to teaching whole chunks of language, because they are believed to be more natural and thus more important in language learning (Ababneh, 2016). In the ESL and EFL classroom figurative expressions occupy a special position and idioms stand out among all of them.

Idioms are lexical items whose meanings often cannot be inferred from the individual meanings of their constituents. Therefore, they usually have to be learnt through rote memorization, which is a stumbling block for a majority of language learners. According to McDevitt (1993), idioms are often used in everyday situations and can be an indicator of a speaker's native-like mastery of the target language. When taken into account that idioms also contain cultural aspects and are an interesting way of comprehending the culture of the target language (Bachman, 1990), it is evident that they can enable effective communication and should be given special attention in language teaching and learning.

There have been various studies investigating the relationship between attitude and proficiency in the target language (Bachman, 1990; Gardner, 1985; Malallah, 2000) and all of the findings suggest the same: a positive attitude towards the target language can facilitate the language learning process. However, not much is known about the ESL and EFL learners' attitudes towards learning idioms, as well as what type of idiom learning strategies these learners apply to be able to successfully use a newly acquired idiomatic expression. The present study will attempt to add to the ever-growing body of research in these two fields.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section offers the theoretical background needed as a basis for the research report and is divided into three segments. The theoretical overview will first attempt to define an idiom and then name some of their features and how idiomatic expressions are usually classified, followed by a description of the most common issues associated with idioms. The second theoretical segment focuses on defining attitudes and states their importance in the language classroom, as well as provides an overview of research conducted in this field across the world but also in Croatia. The third and last theoretical portion of the paper is dedicated to learning strategies.

This part will first briefly list and explain the idiom comprehension strategies employed by L1 learners and then turn to L2 idiom comprehension strategies, as this is also how research of this field of study has evolved over the years. What follows is the second major section of the paper, namely the research report. Here the results of the present study will be revealed and discussed. Finally, the most important findings are outlined in the conclusion together with some recommendations for future studies.

## 2. On idioms

### 2.1. Defining an idiom

Aside from metaphors, similes, and proverbs, idioms are the most frequently encountered figurative expressions found in both spoken and written discourse (Cooper, as cited in Asl, 2013). They are, in fact, so often used in everyday communication that Hoffman (1984, as cited in Liontas, 2017) roughly estimates that native speakers of English use approximately 7,000 idioms per week, although these numbers have yet to be corroborated by empirical data.

In the past, idioms were often referred to as “dead metaphors”, which can be defined as “figurative expressions that have acquired conventionalized meanings” (Irujo, 1986: 288). However, linguists today agree that this type of definition fails to encompass all the different types of idioms, a part of which can be at least to some extent defined by the individual meanings of the constituents (Vasiljević, 2015). Even though research into idiomatic expressions has been quite extensive, there is no generally accepted definition of an idiom. There is a myriad of definitions accounting for different points of interest over the years. Makkai (1972, as cited in Liontas, 2017) focused primarily on lexically and grammatically regular idioms, while Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor’s (1988, as cited in Liontas, 2017) research led them the opposite way – to the idiosyncrasies of English, a majority of which are both lexically and grammatically irregular. Liontas (2017), on the other hand, focused mainly on vivid phrasal idioms, which he defines as a type of idiomatic expressions that combines powerful literal visual imagery with a memorable expression (ibid).

Since there is no clear-cut definition of an idiom, a majority of researchers reached out to the classic and very often cited Oxford English Dictionary (1989) sense 3a definition of an “idiom”, using it as the working definition for their articles:

“A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of the language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one” (OED 1989 s.v. idiom).

Nowadays, the sense 1 definition of an idiom that the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary (2018) offers its users is that of “a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words (e.g. over the moon, see the light)” (OED

2018 s.v. idiom). It is evident that this definition, albeit a bit shorter than its precursor, also focuses on the conventional, non-decomposable, opaque nature of idioms. Having made an overview of some definitions of an idiom, the following sections will focus on defining the main features of idiomatic expressions.

## 2.2. Features and classifications of idioms

Liontas (1999, as cited in Liontas, 2017) stipulates that there are at least three relevant dimensions to any given idiomatic expression: the semantic opacity dimension (also known as transparency), the structural dimension, and the conventionalized pragmatic dimension.

Semantic opacity or transparency is, according to Glucksberg (2001: 74), “the extent to which an idiom’s meaning can be inferred from the meanings of its constituents”. Mäntylä (2004) further classifies idioms in terms of their transparency into three categories: transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque idioms. Transparent idioms, such as *give the green light*, are examples of idiomatic expressions whose figurative meaning is clearly connected to the literal meaning. In the case of semi-transparent idioms, e.g. *break the ice*, the connection between the literal and the figurative meaning is not as obvious and transparent. The figurative meaning of a semantically opaque idiom, however, is impossible to infer from the literal meanings of its individual words, unless the learner is aware of the etymological background of the given idiomatic expression. Such is the case with the idiom *spill the beans*, whose origin can be traced back to the voting tradition of ancient Greece: “When there was a secret vote, white beans were placed in a jar to express support, and black ones to express opposition. Therefore, spilling the beans meant ‘disclosing a secret’ (Vasiljević, 2015). A vast majority of research generally describes idioms as being “semantically opaque” (Glucksberg, 2001; Ababneh, 2016), although this only accounts for one category of idioms. This is probably due to the fact that for English language learners semantically opaque idioms seem unsurpassable when first encountered, so the main focus of idiom research justifiably lies on this category.

Idioms are very special parts of any given language, as they are quite visual figures of speech. From a structural point of view, they are memorized configurations which are identified when those word configurations become unique to the idiomatic expression in the minds of language learners

(Glucksberg, 2001). By being “frozen in time”, their meanings do not have to be deduced and interpreted anew every time they are used by a language learner (Gibbs, 1980). Thus, idioms are capable of conveying complex thoughts through a few memorable words (Liontas, 2017), which makes them indispensable especially in spoken discourse.

### 2.2.1 The influence of culture on idioms

Idiomatic expressions offer a unique opportunity to teach and learn about the vocabulary richness of the target language as well as the cultural aspects hidden behind those fixed expressions. Every culture has developed its own expressions, which second (SL) and foreign language (FL) learners should acquire if they wish to exhibit a “native-like command” of the target language (Wray, 2000, as cited in Asl, 2013). Because language is at any given point “used with a purpose and for a purpose” (Liontas, 2017: 10), idioms can be the source of potential misunderstandings when culture-specific knowledge is implied. This is especially true for those idioms whose literal meaning could hinder understanding (Glucksberg, 2001) or those expressions that reflect themes and ideas not present in the learners’ own culture. Boers and Demecheleer (2001) conducted a study on cross-cultural differences of imageable English idioms on French-speaking students. The idioms in the experiment did not have one-to-one equivalents in French and were also given without context, thus forcing the students to truly guess the meanings of the given idioms. The study showed that their French-speaking students had fewer issues interpreting idioms using the source domain of ‘food’, such as *cry over spilt milk*, than with those exploiting the theme of ‘ships’, such as *sail through something*, as the English language is much more productive in terms of ‘ships’ metaphors while French is more rich in the domain of ‘food’ metaphors.

### 2.2.2. The importance of idioms

As Liontas (2002: 298) states, one cannot “participate fully” in a conversation without having the ability to understand the figurative expressions used. Although idiom competence is not entirely necessary for an effective communication, it is one of the marks of a competent and effective speaker (Liontas, 2017), which every language learner strives to become. Idiomatic competence can be defined as “the ability to understand and use idioms appropriately and accurately

in a variety of sociocultural contexts, in a manner similar to that of native speakers, and with the least amount of mental effort” (Liontas, 2002: 300). As knowledge of the idiomatic expressions of a target language helps language learners to be better speakers (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016) and enables them to use the language in a variety of social situations (Belousova, 2015), it is evident that there is a close connection between the EFL learners’ idiomatic and overall communicative competence. Although it has been proven to be useful and necessary, idiomatic competence is, nevertheless, a skill set not many learners and teachers consciously attempt to develop. The following section will try to provide some answers to this dilemma.

## 2.5. Difficulties connected with idiom learning

The acquisition of idiomatic expressions is one of the most outstanding challenges (Belousova, 2015) in both language teaching and learning and should therefore be appointed special attention in class. Interestingly, Mäntylä (2004) observed that even native speakers have issues with the correct usage of idioms and do, in fact, make mistakes. As already mentioned, idioms are fixed expressions and must be memorized. Consequently, they often have to be learnt by heart, which can be remarkably easy or painstakingly difficult, depending on the learner’s language knowledge and the idiom in question (Glucksberg, 2001).

As Mäntylä (2004) points out, the majority of SL learners is not able to identify an unknown string of words as a figurative expression, which is the crucial first step to understanding and acquiring a new idiom. Thus, they are at an obvious disadvantage as their linguistic competence is at a lower level than that of native speakers (Cooper, 1999). Although there are extensive studies showing how a supporting context can facilitate idiom understanding (Irujo, 1986; Rohani et al., 2012; Asl, 2013; Jelčić, 2014), sometimes not even context is enough to decidedly discard all the possible meanings of a given idiom. This is especially true for idioms without a one-to-one counterpart in the learners’ L1 language (Irujo, 1986; Liontas, 1999) and which cannot be translated literally and maintain their figurative meaning at the same time. Similarly, the majority of researchers are unanimous: students do not know whether to consider the literal or the idiomatic meaning of an idiom in certain contexts (Irujo 1986, Alhaysony, 2017) or tend to reach for the literal meaning even if they are aware of its figurative nature (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Liontas, 2002; Mäntylä 2004; Cieslicka, 2006, as cited

in Vasiljević, 2015). This confusion is probably due to the fact that some idioms do have literal counterparts in other languages (Irujo, 1986), but their meanings are oftentimes either not figurative at all or they possess a completely different idiomatic connotation. Pimenova (2011, as cited in Alhaysony, 2017) argues that all the issues language learners could exhibit while learning idioms can be classified as one of the following five challenges: (1) unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar idioms, (2) no analogous idioms in L1, (3) cultural differences, (4) lack of experience with dealing with idioms, and (5) lack of the broad context for a given idiom.

When it comes to lack of experience with dealing with idioms, in a large number of cases the root of the problem lies in the ESL classroom. Many teachers choose to take a so-called “hands-off approach” (Liontas, 2017: 6) in order to simplify the course materials to their students (Asl, 2013). Alhaysony (2017) believes this to be the result of language teachers traditionally putting more emphasis on the acquisition of grammar than on other aspects of the language such as vocabulary and, by extension, idiomatic expressions. Fact is that there is so much non-idiomatic material to cover that idioms do not seem important enough to be diligently and directly focused on in class. This working principle is noticeable in textbooks. Back in 1986, Irujo pointed out that idioms were either completely omitted from textbooks or just listed in the vocabulary segment of the individual chapters, without being used in any activities that could facilitate their acquisition (1986). Vasiljević (2015) notes that nowadays, three decades later, little has changed. However, it is important not to rely on language learners to master them by themselves. Unless the learners are very independent and internally motivated to achieve language proficiency, there is little hope that they will fulfill one of the most important requirements for a successful uptake – frequent repetition. Another significant reason why learners should not be left to their own devices is the fact that in natural communication speakers usually focus on the overall meaning rather than on the correct linguistic form of an utterance. Vasiljević (ibid) observes that learners will pay no attention to the precise phrasing of the expressions, which is essential for correct idiom acquisition and consequent usage. Therefore, language teachers should not avoid discussing idiomatic expressions in class but rather be encouraged to offer their students the much needed guidance in acquiring these interesting but complex lexical items.



### 3. Attitudes in learning English

#### 3.1. The importance of attitudes in language learning

Every educator is aware that, when his or her students step inside the classroom, they bring with them all their personality traits (Hosseini and Pourmandnia, 2013), also known as individual learner differences. In that moment the real challenge for the profession begins. One of the most significant individual differences is surely motivation, which Masgoret and Gardner (2003, as cited in Hosseini and Pourmandnia, 2013: 67) define as “goal-directed behavior”. It consists of three components: effort, desire to achieve a particular goal, and attitudes. All of them can be viewed as internal factors influencing the motivation level of every language learner differently. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), whilst listing individual learner differences, actually isolated language learners’ attitudes as a socio-psychological factor, side by side with motivation. Gardner (1985: 9) defines an attitude as an individual’s appraisal of a person, situation, idea, etc. based on the individual’s opinion or beliefs. Hosseini and Pourmandnia (2013) expanded this definition by adding the aspect of positive and negative response. Gardner (1985) was also one of the first researchers who investigated the role of attitudes in language acquisition and he reached the conclusion that, when it comes to language learning, the learners’ attitudes seem to be more connected with achievement than in many other school subjects (ibid). However, the overall term ‘attitudes’ in the field of language learning is quite complex, as it can refer to many different types, such as attitudes towards “the target language, target-language speakers, the target language culture, the social value of learning the L2, [and] particular uses of the target language” (Ellis, 2008: 287, as cited in Hosseini and Pourmandnia, 2013), all of which influence language acquisition. Spolsky (1969, as cited in Gardner, 1985) noted that the attitude of the learners towards the target language and to its speakers was one of most significant attitudinal factors and the majority of research has focused on the former type of attitudes. The overall conclusion is that a positive attitude towards the target language can facilitate the language learning process as it can help to conquer challenges and, by doing so, uphold motivation, whereas negative beliefs can potentially lead to “decreased motivation, frustration, and even anxiety” (Puchta, 1990, as cited in Hosseini and Pourmandnia, 2013) and thus hinder the learning process.

### 3.2. Overview of research on attitudes towards the English language

Since English has maintained its status as a lingua franca for several decades now, it does not surprise that it is still worldwide the first choice second and foreign language. Accordingly, a multitude of research has been conducted to investigate the language learners' attitudes towards the English language (Al-Tamimi and Shuib, 2009; Ahmed 2015) and whether or not a relationship existed between these attitudes and language success in English (Gardner, 1985; Bachman, 1990; Malallah, 2000).

Ahmed (2015) conducted a study on undergraduate EFL students in Malaysia in order to find out their attitudes towards learning English but also some causes that might have obstructed their learning process. His findings show an extremely positive attitude towards English and identify classroom instruction as being problematic for some students, in addition to not having interesting, versatile lessons and practical textbooks.

Another study that was interested in students' motivation and attitudes towards learning English was carried out by Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2009) on Petroleum Engineering students of the Hadhramout University in Yemeni. The results revealed highly positive attitudes towards not only the social relevance and educational status of the English language in Yemeni society but also the English culture. Their research also evaluated the participants' motives behind English learning, with instrumental and personal motivation proving to be more important to them than integrative reasons.

Similarly, Malallah (2000) investigated the attitudes and motivations of Kuwait University undergraduate students towards learning English and found that they appeared to have strong positive attitudes towards the English language. Additionally, the students who exhibited a more favorable attitude towards English were also the ones with a higher proficiency level in English.

#### 3.2.1. Overview of research on attitudes towards the English language in Croatia

As already mentioned, English is the most common foreign language and usually the first means of communication people tend to reach for when finding themselves in a different language community. Moreover, it is still the primary language in both the business and the academic world, which makes it appealing to a wide range of potential language learners. English also dominates the

language learning world in Croatian primary and secondary schools as well as foreign language schools. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that there are a few studies about Croatian students' attitudes towards learning English.

Mihaljević Djigunović (2007) was one of the first in Croatia to conduct this kind of study. Her research was on a larger scale, as it included as many as 2 137 participants from both primary and secondary schools, and it focused on affective learner traits, such as attitudes towards the English language, attitudes to learning and teaching of English, language learning motivation and many more. The aim was, among others, to determine whether learners' affective traits could be used to predict their achievement in English. The study showed that both primary and secondary students have a positive affective profile towards learning English, and the secondary school learners even more so. The results also confirmed an important relationship between the learners' attitudes and success in language learning. Primary school learners exhibited a more significant correlation regarding their productive skills.

Badžoka (2017) also looked into the attitudes of Croatian primary and secondary students towards learning English as a second language and came to a similar conclusion – Croatian students do have an overall positive attitude towards English, regardless of their education level.

How ESL and EFL learners' in Croatian vocational schools feel about English was the main goal of Batur's study (2016). Her results disproved her initial hypothesis about vocational school students having mostly negative attitudes towards English. On the contrary, they recognize English as an important factor of their education, probably due to work-related reasons.

Overall, research into Croatian ESL and EFL learners is not as extensive as in other parts of the world, which merely suggests that this field is in need of further investigation.

### 3.3. Overview of research on attitudes towards learning idioms in English

As already noted, extensive studies have been conducted to examine the influence of attitudes on learning English, as well as on language proficiency (Hosseini and Pourmandnia, 2013). However, the body of research about learners' attitudes towards English idioms is still in its early stages.

Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014), for example, conducted a study on the attitudes Iranian EFL learners' have towards learning and producing idiomatic expressions in English. Their participants were 40 university students whose major was English literature and translation, who reported to have a very high positive attitude towards both learning and producing English idioms.

Ababneh (2016) carried out a field study also with the purpose of identifying EFL students' attitudes towards idioms. His participants were, interestingly, also university students majoring in Translation and English language and literature. His findings are very much in line with that of Tadayyon and Ketabi (2014) - the majority Jordanian EFL students' have positive beliefs towards learning English idioms. Moreover, the participants are well aware of the fact that idiomatic competence is important for achieving a native-like command of English.

Be that as it may, to the best of our knowledge, no study on language learners' attitudes towards English idioms has yet been published in Croatia. Jelčić (2014) has concerned herself with idioms among Croatian EFL learners but with an emphasis on the factors influencing their idiom comprehension. The study reported in this paper will attempt to fill this gap.

#### 4. Strategies of learning idioms in English

The second major point of interest of the present study are idiom learning strategies applied by EFL and ESL learners. These strategies belong to the field of language learning strategies, which have been extensively researched over the past few decades, as the focus of language teaching has shifted to a more learner-centered approach. Language learning strategies have, much like idiomatic expressions, various definitions. Oxford's (1990: 8) definition of language learning strategies has, to this day, remained one of the most widely used, as she established them as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations". A similar position has also been advocated by Pavičić Takač (2008: 52), who summarized the diverse definitions into the following one: "specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that learners use (often deliberately) to improve their progress in development of their competence in the target language".

According to Oxford (1990), they can be divided into direct and indirect learning strategies. Direct learning strategies include cognitive, memory-related and compensatory strategies, whereas indirect

ones are metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Idiom learning strategies, however, cannot be so clearly categorized, as all of these types of learning strategies could be used to acquire new idiomatic expressions.

#### 4.1. Overview of research into L1 idiom comprehension strategies

When children learn their native language (L1), they consider idioms “simply [as] instances of ordinary language” (Glucksberg, 2001), which is why Vasiljević (2015) believes that native speakers usually acquire figurative language through exposure. This process usually starts in early childhood and is never-ending, as “there is no clear point when it can be said that idioms have been mastered” (Nippold, 1991: 101, as cited in Cooper, 1999).

There are numerous theories of L1 idiom comprehension, but four of them remain the most prevailing. The first is *the idiom-list hypothesis* by Bobrow and Bell (1973) which indicates that native speakers, when encountering a new idiom, will always first interpret it literally. If this literal meaning does not match the given context, then speakers will search their mental lexicon (like they would do with a vocabulary list) and only then choose the figurative meaning. The second hypothesis was introduced by Swinney and Cutler (1979) and is called *the lexical representation model*. The authors refuted *the idiom-list hypothesis* by arguing that, although idioms as long words are retrieved from a person’s mental lexicon, the figurative meaning will be processed alongside the literal one, with context determining the more fitting interpretation. The next model is that by Gibbs (1980) and Schweigert (1986), which is referred to as *the direct access hypothesis* and is often deemed as an extension of the previous hypothesis. Again, the mental lexicon is the starting point, but the literal meaning is almost never considered, meaning that native speakers will process an idiom by directly retrieving its figurative meaning. The fourth L1 idiom-processing hypothesis is *the idiom decomposition model* (Gibbs et al., 1989). This hypothesis states that idioms are processed as any other language phrase – the literal meanings of the individual words generally assist in deciphering the overall figurative interpretation. Thus, decomposable idioms (whose figurative and literal meanings are very close) will be understood much faster than non-decomposable idioms.

#### 4.1.2. Relationship between L1 and L2 idiom comprehension strategies

In the past, research on L2 idiom comprehension primarily used theoretical models of L1 idiom acquisition as a starting point (Cooper, 1999). But, as already noted, native speakers generally process idiomatic expressions instantaneously and without giving it much thought. L2 speakers, on the other hand, are at a distinct disadvantage as the acquisition and subsequent use of idioms is much more deliberate and, for the most part, slower. Thus, simply transferring learning strategies of L1 into L2 idiom acquisition does not suffice as the L2 learning process is much more complex.

Although the body of research into L2 idiom learning strategies is still growing, the results so far reveal a quite diffused repertoire of strategies (Irujo, 1986; Cooper, 1999; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Alhaysony, 2017), probably due to the individuality of each and every learner. No two learners will approach the learning task the same way and apply the exact number and type of learning strategies with the same successful outcome (Škrbić, 2011). Consequently, teachers should be aware of the abundance of learning strategies in order to offer their learners guidance and assistance. Pavičić Takač (2008) further adds that learners would greatly benefit from learning new as well as developing the existing strategies they frequently apply, as it will enable them to become a self-regulated and self-sufficient language learner. Unfortunately, a generally accepted categorization of L2 idiom learning strategies has yet to be formulated, probably because researchers have usually taken it upon themselves to individually name the different categories they came across, often in a quite descriptive manner.

The first studies into the field of L2 idiom comprehension mainly focused on the phenomenon of language transfer. In the field of language learning transfer is defined as a process in which “the forms and patterns of the L1 are imposed on the L2” (Gass, 1979, as cited in Irujo, 1986: 288). Positive transfer happens when the L1 can be used to produce lexical items in the L2 because the forms and patterns from the L1 are identical to the ones in the L2, which results in a correct L2 lexical item. Negative transfer, however, can occur if the forms and patterns do not correspond in both languages but the learner nonetheless uses the L1 to produce phrases in the L2. The result are errors in L2 language production and usage and are often referred to as interference errors (Irujo, 1986).

A study conducted by Irujo (1986) aimed to examine if L1 idioms that are very similar to their L2 equivalents could potentially cause more interference than idioms that are completely different. The results showed that the production of similar idioms exhibited more interference from the L1 than different idioms, probably because the learners assumed that transfer would be a successful method with similar idioms just as it usually is with identical ones. The next section introduces idiom learning strategies that were observed to be used primarily by L2 English learners.

#### 4.2. Overview of research into L2 idiom comprehension strategies

Since the actual act of processing an unknown idiom is quite complex, as the L2 learner has to go through a number of possible meanings and select the most plausible one, this thought process takes time and is not as instantaneous as with native speakers. This allows a researcher, in a way, to follow the thought process by using the think-aloud methodology and thus gain a better insight into how L2 learners arrive at a possible meaning of the unknown idiom in question. Cooper (1999) used the think-aloud protocol to investigate the comprehension strategies of L2 learners when they were exposed to new idioms in a two-sentence context. The results were quite interesting as they revealed that the majority of students applies more than one learning strategy. The most frequently used strategies (71% of the time) were guessing from context, discussing and analyzing the idiom, and using the literal meaning of the idiom. Aside from them, the participants also applied the following strategies: requesting information (e.g. of unknown words), repeating or paraphrasing the idiom, using background knowledge, referring to an L1 idiom, imagining an actual situation in which the expression could be used, and a meta-analysis about the nature of idioms.

These results are comparable to those reported by Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016). The research in question also explored the strategies utilized by L2 learners to understand idioms but with the help of a knowledge test, to give a better overview of the participants' idiomatic competency, as well as a questionnaire. Inferring from context (69%) was reported to be the most used strategy, as was the case in Cooper's study (1999). Although the categories' names somewhat differ, Al-Khawaldeh et al.'s (2016) results also name literal translation, using an L1 equivalent (as opposed to 'referring to an L'), group discussion, retelling and rephrasing (instead of 'repeating and paraphrasing'), and figuring out the meaning of individual words in order to guess the meaning as a whole (instead of

‘request information about individual words’) as the idiom comprehension strategies the L2 learners applied. One additional strategy that was not mentioned in the previous study is reading different kinds of texts and using various media. That is why teachers should encourage their students to explore authentic L2 language materials by themselves, if no additional time can be appointed in class for this type of instruction, because some language learners could greatly benefit from this kind of exposure.

Alhaysony (2017) conducted a similar type of study by employing a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The findings confirm the importance of context as it was, again, the most prevailing learning strategy. Apart from literal translation, figuring out the meaning from an L1 equivalent, and predicting the meaning, the participants in this study additionally reported that verbal information together with visualization help them immensely to acquire new idiomatic expressions. It is also worth mentioning that idioms with rich illustrative individual words were said to be learnt much quicker.

Turning now to the research part of the present study, it is important to note that self-reported strategies have mostly been categorized on the basis of the classifications provided by Cooper (1999) and Alhaysony (2017).

## 5. Attitudes towards idioms and idiom learning strategies: research report

### 5.1. Aim and research questions

The main aim of this research is to investigate the EFL learners’ attitudes towards idioms and explore the role their gender, academic success and experience in English might have in their attitudes. Additionally, the research will focus on the types of strategies the learners apply while acquiring new idiomatic expressions.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- 1) What are the EFL learners’ attitudes towards learning idioms?
- 2) How do EFL learners’ attitudes on learning idioms affect their academic performance in this field?
- 3) What learning strategies do EFL learners employ in learning idioms?



## 5.2. Participants

The study was purposefully conducted among students of the BA program at the Department of English at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek. Their L1 was Croatian and had been studying English as a FL for at least 5 years. Although there was a wide range of the amount of years the participants had been learning English, the average was 13 years ( $M=12.5$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ) for the 1<sup>st</sup> year and 13 ( $M=12.6$ ,  $SD=2.43$ ) for the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students. A small difference is also present in the average grade in the CEL course the students were asked to self-report on – the 2<sup>nd</sup> year participants have a slightly better average grade ( $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=.95$ ) than the 1<sup>st</sup> year students ( $M=3.15$ ,  $SD=.92$ ). The sample included first (1<sup>st</sup>) and second (2<sup>nd</sup>) year students registered in the courses Contemporary English Language (CEL) I and III, respectively. The total number of participants was 96, 40 of which were in their 1<sup>st</sup> year and 56 were in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year. Among the 1<sup>st</sup> year there were 23 female (57.5%) and 17 male (42.5%) participants, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> year consisted of 38 female (68%) and 18 male (32%) participants. The average age was 19 ( $SD=1.29$ ) for the 1<sup>st</sup> year and 20 ( $SD=1.02$ ) for the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students.

## 5.3. Instrument

The present study was carried out using a questionnaire and an idiom quiz, both of which were created for the purposes of this research. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) was designed by combining two already existing ones: 16 items regarding the participants' attitude towards idioms were adopted from Liontas (2002) while 14 items concerning idiom learning strategies were adopted from Ababneh (2016). The questionnaire format was deemed as a suitable instrument for this type of research, because it allowed the researcher to gather a large amount of information in a relatively short time period which could later be easily computed and analyzed (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016). The questionnaire applied in this study was comprised of two parts, both of which were translated into Croatian: the first consisted of demographic information (gender, age, year of university, age at which students started learning English and grade in CEL), while the second and main part contained the above mentioned 30 statements. The statements regarding attitudes and those regarding learning strategies were not grouped together but scattered across the questionnaire. The participants were asked to indicate the degree of their agreement with a statement on a four-point Likert scale: 1 – *I strongly disagree*, 2 – *I disagree*, 3 – *I agree*, 4 – *I strongly agree*. The reliability

of the scale was measured by Cronbach's Alpha to be .844, which suggests a high level of internal consistency. The second instrument was a short idiom quiz (see Appendix B) in which the students were given 8 sentences with underlined phrases that they had to substitute with an appropriate color idiom. If the answer consisted of an idiomatic expression which could be directly embedded instead of the underlined expression, then the students were given a maximum of 2 points. If it was a partially written idiomatic expression or not appropriate to the example sentence, then they were given only 1 point.

The color idioms were chosen by the researcher from a list supplied by the CEL instructor for the 1<sup>st</sup> year BA program, because both the first and second year students had been exposed to the same idioms. The researcher's intention was to investigate the students' idiomatic competence at their respective academic levels and compare it to the one they self-reported on in the questionnaire.

#### 5.4. Procedure

The data was gathered over a period of a few months. First, the questionnaire was administered on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2016. It was administered in printed form at the beginning of the regular classes of the CEL course. The learners were given the necessary information about the research and then they filled in the questionnaires. The whole procedure lasted for approximately 10 minutes. The second instrument, the idiom quiz, was conducted on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May and the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2017, also during the CEL courses. The students were already aware of the purpose of the study because of the prior visit and completed the quizzes in roughly 5 to 7 minutes.

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), in which descriptive statistics, t-test and Pearson correlation were the statistical methods employed. A t-test was administered to determine if there were differences between male and female as well as between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year participants in regards to their attitude towards idioms and the idiom learning strategies they use. Pearson correlation was used to investigate the relationships between the attitudes, strategies, years of learning English, the participants' grade in CEL and their scores on the idiom quiz.

## 5.5. Results

### 5.5.1. Descriptive statistical analysis of attitudes

The findings of the independent t-test reveal that the participants have a positive attitude towards learning new idiomatic expressions in English (M=3.29, SD=.36). There was no statistically significant difference between female (M=3.31, SD=.37) and male (M=3.25, SD=.34) participants, which means that the gender of the students does not influence their opinion on idiom learning. Also, 1<sup>st</sup> year participants' attitude (M=3.28, SD=.35) did not differ significantly from that of those in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year (M=3.30, SD=.36).

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics for five most common attitudes among 1<sup>st</sup> year BA students*

<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
1. Idiom study should progress from the most frequent ones.	3.69	.47	3	4
2. It is necessary to incorporate idioms in English course books.	3.63	.54	2	4
3. Idioms are an important part of English.	3.58	.59	2	4
4. I'd like to expand my knowledge of English idioms.	3.47	.64	2	4
5. I think it is important to encourage EFL learners to learn idioms for effective communication.	3.45	.68	1	4

As the table reveals, the 1<sup>st</sup> year participants are aware of the importance of idiomatic expressions and would like to first learn the ones most used in everyday communication. Every participant stated to either agree or strongly agree with this statement. This is surprising because the fifth most common attitude *I think it is important to encourage EFL learners to learn idioms for effective communication*, as well the sixth one *I think it is important to teach idioms in English classrooms*, were both strongly disagreed with by one participant each, i.e. not the same participant.

Table 2: *Descriptive statistics for five most common attitudes among 2<sup>nd</sup> year BA students*

<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
1. Idiom study should progress from the most frequent ones.	3.71	.49	2	4
2. It is necessary to incorporate idioms in English course books.	3.57	.53	2	4
3. Idioms are an important part of English.	3.55	.50	3	4
4. Idioms should be current, interesting, and useful in real-life situations.	3.54	.60	2	4
5. I think it is important to teach idioms in English classrooms.	3.48	.50	3	4

Similarly, 2<sup>nd</sup> year students also put the most emphasis on idioms that are found in daily life the most. They agree with their colleagues with regards to the second and third most common attitudes, but differ henceforth. This is evident in the rank of the statement *I think it is important to teach idioms in English classrooms* with which every 2<sup>nd</sup> year participant either agreed or strongly agreed with. They focused more on the actual type of idioms they would like to learn first – namely the ones that are not only easier to learn but can also enrich their verbal skills.

Table 3: *Descriptive statistics for five attitudes with lowest mean value among 1<sup>st</sup> year BA students*

<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
1. Overall, I'm satisfied with my present knowledge of English idioms.	2.60	.71	1	4
2. I tend to use idioms in oral communication.	2.60	.78	1	4
3. Learning idioms is important for me to better express myself by using figurative language in English.	3.15	.80	1	4
4. Knowing English idioms is necessary to understand the everyday language better.	3.15	.69	2	4
5. Idioms should be presented in a manner that mirrors real-life language use.	3.2	.68	2	4

Table 3 shows the other end of the scale and reveals some interesting findings. Approximately half of the 1<sup>st</sup> year students find their practical application of idioms in actual oral communication to be

deficient and seem to be equally dissatisfied with this situation. For all the other statements the average is positively rated.

Table 4: *Descriptive statistics for five attitudes with lowest mean value among 2<sup>nd</sup> year BA students*

<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
1. I tend to use idioms in oral communication.	2.57	.71	1	4
2. Overall, I'm satisfied with my present knowledge of English idioms.	2.64	.69	1	4
3. Knowing English idioms is important for me to understand the everyday language better.	3.18	.72	1	4
4. I think that idioms are useful in everyday communication.	3.25	.74	2	4
5. Learning idioms is important for me to better express myself by using figurative language in English.	3.25	.61	2	4

The situation among 2<sup>nd</sup> year students is comparable to that of the 1<sup>st</sup> year ones, as they appraised the same two statements with the lowest value. In fact, 2<sup>nd</sup> year students self-reported on applying the acquired idiomatic expressions in real life less (M=2.57, SD=.71) than their 1<sup>st</sup> year colleagues (M=2.60, SD=.71) while still being more content with their overall idiomatic competence (for 2<sup>nd</sup> year M=2.64, S=.69 as opposed to M=2.60, S=.71 for 1<sup>st</sup> year students). The average values for the other statements are, much like with 1<sup>st</sup> year learners, in the positive domain.

### 5.5.2. Descriptive statistical analysis of strategies

When it comes to idiom learning strategies, the results show that the participants reported using a variety of them. Gender analysis indicated a statistically significant tendency (p=.01) among female participants (M=2.99, SD=.35) to use more learning strategies than male students (M=2.77, SD=.41). An in-depth analysis among 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students reveals that the statistically significant difference (p=.019) in strategies used in idiom acquisition is also present with 2<sup>nd</sup> year female participants (M=2.99, SD=.36) in comparison to their male colleagues in the same year (M=2.69, SD=.43). However, there is no statistically significant difference between 1<sup>st</sup> year female (M=2.98, SD=.33) and male participants (M=2.84, SD=.38). Moreover, no statistically significant

difference exists between the students in terms of their BA program years: the 1<sup>st</sup> year participants have an average of 2.92 (SD=.36), while the second years show an average of 2.90 (SD=.41).

Table 5: *Descriptive statistics for five most common strategies among 1<sup>st</sup> year BA students*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
1. I like to be instructed on how idioms come about.	3.47	.81	1	4
2. I can learn a new idiom if I revise it on a regular basis.	3.40	.63	2	4
3. Authentic texts should accompany the study of idioms.	3.32	.65	1	4
4. I learn idioms better when they are accompanied by a variety of activities.	3.17	.63	2	4
5. I learn a new idiom better when it is found in a text.	3.10	.81	1	4

Table 5 reveals that 1<sup>st</sup> year students self-reported on applying a variety of idiom learning strategies. The most common one, *I like to be instructed on how idioms come about*, can be classified as relying on background knowledge to facilitate idiom acquisition. The second and fourth most common strategies could fall under the category of frequent repetition, while inferring the meaning of a new idiom from contextual cues was reported to be the fifth most common idiom learning strategy.

Since the results of the t-test pointed out a statistically significant difference between female and male participants among 2<sup>nd</sup> year students, this was analyzed in more detail. The following two tables, namely Table 6a and 6b, show exactly where these differences lie.

Table 6a: *Descriptive statistics for five most common strategies among 2<sup>nd</sup> year female BA students*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
1. I learn a new idiom better when it is found in a text.	3.52	.68	1	4
2. Authentic texts should accompany the study of idioms.	3.52	.60	2	4
3. I learn idioms better when they are accompanied by a variety of activities.	3.47	.55	2	4
4. I can learn a new idiom if I revise it on a regular basis.	3.42	.79	1	4

5. I learn an idiom better when it has visual support. 3.10 .83 1 4

As is evident from Table 6a, 2<sup>nd</sup> year female students rely on the accompanying context much more than their 1<sup>st</sup> year colleagues, which is suggested by the highest mean value (M=3.52, SD=.68). Likewise, 2<sup>nd</sup> year female participants rated frequent repetition as being very important and appear to be using this strategy a bit more than 1<sup>st</sup> year participants. Additionally, the female participants self-reported that visualization was the fifth most often used strategy.

Table 6b: *Descriptive statistics for five most common strategies among 2<sup>nd</sup> year male BA students*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
1. I learn a new idiom better when it is found in a text.	3.44	.70	2	4
2. Authentic texts should accompany the study of idioms.	3.27	.46	3	4
3. I can learn a new idiom if I revise it on a regular basis.	3.11	.67	2	4
4. I learn an idiom better when it has visual support.	2.88	1.02	1	4
5. I learn idioms better when they are accompanied by a variety of activities.	2.88	.83	1	4

At first glance Table 6a and 6b seem identical – the same idiom learning strategies are most frequently applied and are rated almost the same, with context being given the highest value yet again (M=3.44, SD=.70). However, a closer look at the mean values between the five most common strategies among 2<sup>nd</sup> year female and male students shows quite a big difference, suggesting that the female participants reported on applying the same strategies but much more often than their fellow male classmates.

The idiom learning strategies that the participants report to use the least are shown in Table 7 and 8.

Table 7: *Descriptive statistics for five strategies with lowest mean value among 1<sup>st</sup> year BA students*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
1. I usually look up an unknown idiom in a dictionary.	2.25	1.00	1	4
2. I try to guess the meaning of an idiom by translating it into Croatian.	2.30	.72	1	4
3. Authentic audio/video recordings should accompany the study of idioms.	2.40	.81	1	4
4. I like to observe how idioms are used in texts and what functions they fulfill.	2.66	.87	1	4
5. Knowing the etymology of idioms helps me to acquire them more quickly.	2.77	.86	1	4

The results of the descriptive analysis show that 1<sup>st</sup> year students rarely use dictionaries as a helping tool while learning idioms. They also seldom rely on their L1 and do not attempt to translate it word-for-word into their native language. 1<sup>st</sup> year participants put less emphasis on a combination of visualization and verbal information, which can be found in authentic materials such as movies, television programs etc. Additionally, background knowledge, i.e. the etymology of the idiomatic expressions, as well as a meta-analysis about the functions and nature of idioms appear to be of little help.

Their 2<sup>nd</sup> year colleagues seem to agree with them in terms of three idiom learning strategies, as can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8: *Descriptive statistics for five strategies with lowest mean value among 2<sup>nd</sup> year BA students*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
1. Knowing the etymology of idioms helps me to acquire them more quickly.	2.25	.93	1	4
2. I try to guess the meaning of an idiom by translating it into Croatian.	2.37	.86	1	4
3. I like to learn idioms on my own.	2.71	.94	1	4
4. I like to be instructed on how idioms come about.	2.71	1.05	1	4



5. I like to observe how idioms are used in texts and what functions they fulfill.	2.73	.86	1	4
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Background knowledge, namely etymology, was reported to be least helpful in acquiring new idiomatic expressions. 2<sup>nd</sup> year participants, much alike their 1<sup>st</sup> year colleagues, also do not rely so much on literal translation into their native language. Similarly, a meta-analysis appears to be of little help to a majority of 2<sup>nd</sup> year participants.

To summarize, it appears that 1<sup>st</sup> year students mostly rely on context and the cues it can provide about the meaning of an unknown idiom, as well as on frequent repetition. On the other hand, they self-report dictionary usage, literal translation into L1, background knowledge, and authentic materials to be strategies which are not often successfully applied in idiom learning. 2<sup>nd</sup> year students also recognize literal translation from L1 into L2 and background knowledge as not so significant idiom learning strategies. Context, repetition, authentic materials, and visualization were indicated by them to be the strategies they most frequently utilize.

### 5.5.3. Correlation analysis

A Pearson-product-moment correlation was used to explore whether there was a relationship between the participants' opinion on idioms, strategies they apply, years they have been learning English, their grade in CEL and the score they achieved on the idiom quiz.

As previously stated, the participants of the study self-reported their CEL grades at the time of filling out the questionnaire. However, since the quiz they solved a few months later actually targeted only idioms as particular vocabulary items, a statistical analysis was conducted to assess the degree to which the participants' CEL grades correspond to their scores on the idiom quiz. It appears that there is a statistically significant medium positive correlation between these two variables ( $r=.370$ ,  $p<.001$ ); that is, the participants who reported having a higher grade in CEL also scored higher on the idiom quiz.

The correlation analysis revealed that the participants' CEL grade also seems to exhibit a small but statistically significant positive correlation ( $r=.291$ ,  $p=.004$ ) with regards to their attitudes towards learning idioms, which can be seen in Table 9.

Table 9: *Pearson Correlation between Attitude towards Learning Idioms, Years of Learning English, Grade in CEL and Idiom Quiz*

	<b>Attitude towards Learning Idioms</b>
<b>Years of Learning English</b>	.032
<b>Grade in CEL</b>	<b>.291**</b>
<b>Idiom Quiz</b>	.079

\*\**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

This indicates that the higher the grade of a student in the course, the more positive the attitude the student will have towards learning new idiomatic expressions. The other correlations, namely those between attitudes and gender, years of learning English and the idiom quiz score, were of no statistical significance. Evidently the participants overall experience in learning English does not impact their attitudes towards learning idiomatic expressions.

The Pearson correlation analysis also showed interesting results regarding idiom learning strategies and are presented in Table 10.

Table 10: *Pearson Correlation between Idiom Learning Strategies, Gender, Years of Learning English, Grade in CEL, Idiom Quiz and Attitude towards Learning Idioms*

	<b>Idiom Learning Strategies</b>
<b>Years of Learning English</b>	.108
<b>Grade in CEL</b>	.110
<b>Idiom Quiz</b>	.140
<b>Attitude towards Learning Idioms</b>	<b>.493**</b>

\*\**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

The number of years of learning English and the idiom quiz score exhibit no statistically significant correlation with the learning strategies. Surprisingly, the CEL grade is also not important when it comes to the learning strategies. The analysis, however, did reveal a statistically significant and large positive correlation ( $r=.493$ ,  $p<.001$ ) between the participants' attitudes and the idiom learning strategies they employ while acquiring new idioms. The more positive the attitude a student has, the more strategies he or she will use to learn new idiomatic expressions.

## 5.6. Discussion

The first research question in the present study aimed to determine the EFL learners' opinion on learning idiomatic expressions, which was directly measured with a questionnaire consisting of 16 statements. The findings indicate that the majority of the participants have a positive attitude towards acquiring new idioms in English. These results are in line with those obtained by Lontas (2002), whose analysis also revealed the students' strong desire for incorporating idioms in their English studies. Ababneh (2016) arrived at the same conclusion, as the majority of her participants reported having positive attitudes towards learning idioms because they acknowledge idioms as being indispensable for attaining effective communication skills in English. The current study also explored whether the participants' gender had any influence on their beliefs about English idioms. No statistically significant relationship was found, meaning that both male and female participants shared similar if not the same beliefs about idiom learning, which is in line with Ababneh (2016). However, this finding is contrary to some previous studies (Ghazvini and Khajepour, 2011; Gardner and Smythe, 1975, as cited in Gardner, 1985) which have suggested that gender actually affects beliefs about learning idioms in that female learners tend to demonstrate more positive attitudes towards acquiring new idioms and are overall more successful in learning languages than male learners. Evidently, further research should be undertaken to investigate this matter more thoroughly. Surprisingly, the participants' experience in learning English does not seem to significantly influence their attitudes towards learning idioms. These results are in agreement with those obtained by Rifai (2010). However, by taking a closer look at the most and least common attitudes among the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year BA participants, one can note some slight differences even though they are not statistically significant. The answers from the questionnaire suggest that all the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year participants are aware of the importance and frequency of idiomatic expressions in everyday communication, although some 1<sup>st</sup> year participants later on reported not believing idioms to be important enough to be taught in English classrooms. This may be the case because students in Croatia usually do not come into direct contact with idioms during their primary and secondary education. Asl (2013) further comments that English idioms are often neglected or completely avoided by EFL teachers in order to simplify the vocabulary load for their students. This amplifies the effort they have to put in at a later point in life, i.e. in university, so as to come close to a native-like proficiency in English. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the participants does recognize the importance of idioms in that they could enable a high level of conversational fluency (Lontas,

2002), which is what every language learner aspires to achieve. Additionally, both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year participants find their practical application of idioms in oral communication to be insufficient and are dissatisfied with this situation. This finding was also reported by Lontas (2002) and Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016). In Lontas' (2002) research not a single participant reported being completely satisfied with his or her knowledge of English idioms. Although the results presented in this study are not as negative, they are, nevertheless, not to be overlooked. The present study found a statistically significant, albeit small, positive correlation between the participants' academic success, namely the grade they self-reported on having in the CEL course, and the attitudes they share towards learning idioms, meaning that students that have a higher grade in the course also exhibit a more positive attitude. These results are similar to that of Rifai (2010), who noted that students who had above average grades also had significantly more positive attitudes and were more motivated to learn new idiomatic expressions. It's possible to hypothesize that the good grade probably gives the learners' the much needed feedback that their learning efforts do pay off and thus serve as a positive reinforcer towards the second or foreign language learning process overall and thus also on the acquisition of new idioms.

The second research question sought to find out whether these attitudes towards learning idioms would have any effect on the participants' performance on the idiom quiz and the results and it appears that they do not. No statistically significant difference was found between these two variables. A possible explanation for this may be found in the quiz itself. The quiz targeted only specific idiomatic expressions the students were supposed to acquire in the course CEL I, meaning that second year participants were at a slight disadvantage as they were questioned on vocabulary from the previous year. Additionally, the students sometimes provided idiomatic expressions which were not expected but were to some degree appropriate. In these cases, the researcher rated how well the new suggested idioms fit in the context of the example sentences and gave the appropriate number of points. The students were asked to replace the underlined phrases with 8 suitable idiomatic expressions. For each completely correct idiom the participants could have gotten 2 points and scored a maximum of 16 points. Even though the quiz served its purpose of giving a rough idea as to what the participants' idiomatic competency was, the fact that some students had issues solving it suggests that the verbal and written instructions could have been more detailed and clear.

The third and last research question aimed to identify the idiom learning strategies the participants self-reported to apply while acquiring new idioms. Consistent with the literature, the present study found that EFL learners use a wide variety of idiom learning strategies, which are often difficult to categorize. Perhaps the most interesting finding that arose from the study is the statistically significant relationship between the participants' gender and idiom learning strategies. Findings suggest that female learners tend to use more learning strategies than male learners, which has been corroborated in other studies. A possible explanation may lie in the aforementioned belief that female learners have an inclination to be overall more successful in language learning, but further studies, which would take these variables into account, will need to be undertaken. Another interesting finding that emerged from the research suggests that there is no significant difference between the participants' grade in CEL or their idiom quiz score and the number of idiom learning strategies they use. Moreover, no statistically significant difference was found to exist between the participants' years of English experience and the number of strategies they apply. This is somewhat unexpected, as there was the assumption that more experienced English learners, who were exposed to more idiomatic language, would also possess a greater repertoire of idiom learning strategies they found to be efficient. This outcome is contrary to that of Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) who found that students of higher academic years showed a higher idiomatic knowledge which was achieved through many different learning strategies. There are two likely causes for this discrepancy, one being that there the participants simply were not far enough in terms of academic years and that a comparison between 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> year students with those in their 1<sup>st</sup> year would have revealed different results. The other potential reason for these results could lie in the exposure to idiomatic expressions, meaning that the 2<sup>nd</sup> year participants may not have been exposed to that much more idiomatic language and have not had the chance to efficiently promote their idiomatic competency. When it comes to exactly which types of idiom learning strategies the participants tend to apply, it must be noted that categorizing them was not a simple task. However, inferring the meaning of an unknown idiom from the context was rated as the most used and useful learning strategy. These results are in line with those of previous studies (Irujo, 1986; Rohani et al., 2012; Asl, 2013; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016). Mondria and Wit-De Boer (1991) believe new words are best learnt with the assistance of context because the EFL learner can frequently infer the meaning of the unknown figurative expression from the surrounding text. By mentally connecting the context, his or her prior vocabulary knowledge with the newly acquired idiomatic meaning, the learner creates a stronger

basis for a long-term retention of the new idiom (ibid). As Adkins (as cited in Asl, 2013) points out, instructing EFL learners on how to infer the meaning of an unknown idiom from context will help them to generalize beyond the idioms at hand and enable them to understand idioms they have never encountered before. Developing this skill is very important as it allows the students' to be more flexible and not immediately give up when they come across an unknown expression, which will happen more than once in their language learning experience. Another idiom learning strategy, which was reported to be used in various degrees, is visualization, which can be combined with verbal information. While 1<sup>st</sup> year students indicated this learning strategy not to be of much help, 2<sup>nd</sup> year students reported to heavily rely on it. Alhaysony's research (2016) corroborates the importance of visual and verbal stimuli in idiom learning, as these strategies were reported to be used with high means scores. Vasiljević (2015) is also a supporter of pictorial and verbal clues while learning idioms, because the new information, namely the unknown idiom, will be transformed into input which is encoded both verbally and visually, thus helping the learners to better remember them. However, there is an ongoing debate whether visualization promotes remembering the idiom's meaning or its form or both. Boers et al. (2008, as cited in Vasiljević, 2015) found that while pictorial support contributed to the acquisition of idiom meanings, it had little effect on the recollection of their linguistic form. Even though there is no conclusive evidence that visual and verbal cues do, in fact, help learners to both acquire and later on remember new idioms, they were found to certainly facilitate the learning process (Vasiljević 2015). Because the questionnaire did not clearly state and exemplify what these all can include, the 1<sup>st</sup> year participants of this study maybe thought that "authentic audio/video recordings" refer only to standardized CDs for listening comprehension, which are traditionally administered in EFL classes, which does not need to be the case. The other controversial learning strategy scientists cannot agree on is using etymological information to aid idiom acquisition. Again, the assumption would be that clarifying an idiom's origin, which is usually presented in a verbal manner, would induce mental images which could be helpful in connecting the literal and figurative meaning of an unknown idiomatic expression (ibid). Szczepaniak and Lew (2011, as cited in Vasiljević, 2015), however, believe pictorial support to be more influential than etymological instructions, because the latter might only divert the learners' attention from the idiom's form and usage in today's day and age. Contrary to expectations, the present study actually confirmed these findings, especially among 1<sup>st</sup> year participants. They reported to be interested in hearing about the origin of the idiom but found it not particularly useful

in acquiring the same expressions. However, Boers et al.'s (2004, as cited in Vasiljević, 2015) research might have found an acceptable application of etymological information. Teachers should not just give the learners ready-made etymological clues but rather encourage them to find these out for themselves or to try and guess them at first. If not, the cognitive effort of simply listening to a teacher explaining this often very interesting piece of information may not challenge the learners enough and thus not result in the idiom's long-term retention. An additional unanticipated finding was related to dictionary use in the case of an unknown idiom. The findings indicate that the majority of participants does not take the time to look up an unknown idiom in a dictionary. This is in line with Liontas' (2002) research, in which the participants reported finding dictionaries to be only marginally useful. The learners' may find dictionaries to be old-fashioned or do not have the patience or curiosity to find the meaning of an unknown idiom in a reliable source. Thus, they probably rely a great deal on the contextual clues surrounding the new idiomatic expression or simply ignore them altogether (Irujo, 1986). Neither solution is advisable because it is important to pay attention to the exact phrasing of the idiom, otherwise the learner may acquire the new idiom incorrectly or not at all. As Liontas (2002) points out, such situations create a compelling argument for teaching idioms directly in English classrooms. The idiom learning strategy with the lowest mean value reported in this study is an example of literal translation into the L1, which means that the participants reported not attempting to translate the given idiom word-for-word in their native language, probably because they are well aware that the product is unlikely to be correct. Findings of this sort are quite rare in that the majority of researchers found this to be one of the most used strategies (Irujo, 1986; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016). Alhaysony (2016), for example, reported a study in which participants used literal translation as the fourth most frequently used strategy. However, Cooper (1999) observed that L2 students were less likely to resort to their L1 knowledge and literal translation when they are aware that the expression is a figurative one. This was probably the case in the present study, because the participants, being university students of English and having some experience with idioms, were most likely aware of the non-compositional nature of a majority of idioms. Nevertheless, teachers should make use of the learners' native language while introducing new idiomatic expressions and invite the students to try and provide a literal meaning of the presented idiom (Irujo, 1986). By overtly comparing the literal and figurative meaning of the idiom in question, the students will likely see the absurdity of the literal translation and will probably disregard it in the future.

Lastly, the statistically most significant positive relationship was discovered between the participants' attitude towards learning idioms and the strategies they employ while acquiring new idioms. The students who have a positive attitude towards learning idioms will also use more strategies while learning them. This results may be explained by the fact that a students' good grade is likely to lead to a more positive opinion towards language and idiom learning, which will be seen in the application of a greater variety of idiom learning strategies. This indicates that a students' grade in CEL indirectly does affect the number of learning strategies used, though there is no statistically significant direct relationship between the two. The findings in Alhaysony's (2017) research suggest the same – the greater the knowledge of vocabulary, the higher the usage of idiom-learning strategies.

## 6. Conclusion

The modern day classroom puts the language learner in the center of the learning process, which is why learners' attitudes and the language learning strategies they employ have been heavily researched. Be that as it may, little is known about the ESL and EFL learners' attitudes towards English idioms and idiom learning strategies. The present study set out to contribute to the ever growing body of research into these fields and had a threefold aim. Firstly, it focused on the relationship between the participants' attitudes towards idioms, their gender, academic performance and experience in English. Secondly, it sought to identify if the learners' attitudes would influence their achievement in a vocabulary quiz targeting only certain idiomatic expressions. Lastly, it aimed to determine the types of strategies the learners utilize to successfully acquire new idioms.

The findings suggest that the majority of the participants have a positive attitude towards learning new idioms and acknowledge how important this type of figurative expressions is both in spoken and in written discourse. Furthermore, the results indicate that gender along with the participants' experience in learning English are irrelevant determinants and do not affect the learners' attitudes towards idiom learning. However, there appears to exist a small statistically significant positive correlation between the participants' academic achievement, that being their grade in CEL, and the attitudes towards acquiring new idiomatic expressions. It implies that the learners that have a higher grade in the course also possess a more positive attitude towards learning idioms. Moreover, the research did not detect any statistically significant connection between the learners' attitudes



towards idioms and their respective scores on the administered idiom quiz. Additionally, the findings of the present study revealed that participants reported using a multitude of different idiom learning strategies, the most important being inferring the meaning from context, frequent repetition and a combination of visualization and verbal information about the idiom in question. Interestingly, the results have also shown that gender seems to be a relevant factor influencing the application of idiom learning strategies, in that female participants tend to use more strategies. Also, the research did not find the participants' grade in CEL or their idiom quiz score to be pertinent with regards to the idiom learning strategies they employ. Finally, the findings indicate that the participants' attitudes and their self-reported idiom learning strategies seem to be in a statistically significant positive correlation. This suggests that students with a more positive attitude towards idiom learning will also attempt to use more idiom learning strategies.

This study has revealed some very interesting findings which offered valuable insights into the Croatian EFL learners' opinion on idiom learning and the idiom learning strategies they found to facilitate the acquisition of new idiomatic expressions. Be that as it may, the present study had some limitations. The most obvious limitation would be the small number of participants, as the sample was limited to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students of English in their BA program at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek. A larger sample would have made the findings more reliable and thus also more representative and generalizable. Additionally, the administered idiom quiz targeted only 8 very specific color idioms the students were supposed to learn in the course CEL I, which raises the question whether the participants would have got different results if they had been tested on some other idioms. Furthermore, the findings of the present study established a statistically significant difference between the gender of the participant and the application of idiom learning strategies, which was, to this researcher's knowledge, not addressed in any other study. Thus, this could be a potentially fruitful area for future research. Another point for future studies that could be derived from this study could consist of think-aloud protocols used to investigate L2 comprehension strategies so as to complement and authenticate the answers given in the questionnaire.

L2 learners are at a disadvantage in understanding non-literal expressions because they possess a lower degree of linguistic competence in the target language than native speakers (Cooper, 1999). Moreover, learners have reported not being satisfied with their current idiomatic competence and they seem to be interested in learning what other types of learning strategies they can use to

facilitate the idiom learning process. Thus, language teachers should first familiarize themselves with the manner in which their learners acquire new idiomatic expressions in order to find the most efficient way of teaching them and creating teaching materials that would best suit the learners' desires and needs.

Idioms are part and parcel of every language and are capable of expressing very complex thoughts through very few words. This makes them indispensable in both written and spoken discourse. Language teachers have an obligation and responsibility not to ignore idioms simply because they represent a challenge to the profession. As Irujo (1986) points out, even a complete beginner will be able to successfully produce idioms on his or her own if the language teacher chose them based on frequency and simplicity. By doing so, language teachers bring their students one step closer to becoming a competent second or foreign language user.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender (circle): M F

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Year of undergraduate study (circle): 1. 2. 3.

Age at which you started learning English: \_\_\_\_\_

If you were to be graded now in the course Contemporary English Language, what grade would you have? \_\_\_\_\_

The aim of this study is to investigate your opinion as a student of English on learning English idioms and what you do to acquire new idiomatic expressions. Please read each statement carefully and circle the number (1-4) that best indicates to which extent you agree or disagree with the statement.

Scale:

1 = I strongly disagree

3 = I agree

2 = I disagree

4 = I strongly agree

I believe learning English idioms is an important part of the English language.	1	2	3	4
Authentic texts should accompany the study of idioms.	1	2	3	4
I believe it is necessary to incorporate English idioms ins English course books.	1	2	3	4
I try to guess the meaning of an idiom by translating it into Croatian.	1	2	3	4
I learn a new idiom better when a text supports its use.	1	2	3	4
I think idioms are useful in everyday communication.	1	2	3	4
I can learn a new idiom if I revise it on a regular basis.	1	2	3	4
I like to be instructed on how idioms come about.	1	2	3	4

I like to learn and practice idioms in a variety of communicative contexts.	1	2	3	4
I think it is important to encourage English language learners to learn idioms for effective communication.	1	2	3	4
I like to work things out on my own when learning idioms.	1	2	3	4
I learn an idiom better when video-graphic information supports its use.	1	2	3	4
I think it is important to teach English idioms in English classrooms.	1	2	3	4
I would like to expand my knowledge of English idioms.	1	2	3	4
Idioms should be presented in a manner that mirrors real-life language use.	1	2	3	4
Authentic audio/video recordings should accompany the study of idioms.	1	2	3	4
I usually look up an unknown idiom in a dictionary.	1	2	3	4
I tend to use idioms in oral communication.	1	2	3	4
Idiom study should progress from the most frequent ones.	1	2	3	4
Knowing English idioms is important for me to perceive cultural differences and similarities better.	1	2	3	4
I learn idioms better when they are accompanied by a variety of activities.	1	2	3	4
Knowing English idioms is important for me to understand the everyday language better.	1	2	3	4
I like to observe how idioms are used in texts and what functions they fulfill.	1	2	3	4
Knowing the etymology of idioms helps me to acquire them more quickly.	1	2	3	4
Idioms should be current, interesting, and useful in real-life situations.	1	2	3	4
Learning English idioms is important for me to get familiar with the English figurative expressions.	1	2	3	4
Overall, I'm satisfied with my present knowledge of English idioms.	1	2	3	4



Learning to use English idioms in oral communication is necessary for developing my speaking skill.	1	2	3	4
When learning a new idiom I like to image situations in real life in which the idiom could be used.	1	2	3	4
Learning to use English idioms is necessary for achieving effective communication	1	2	3	4

**Thank you for your participation!**

## 8.2. Idiom quiz

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Replace the underlined phrases with the appropriate colour idiom.**

1. Being only a janitor, Jeff is the failure of the family, especially since his parents and siblings are all doctors. \_\_\_\_\_
2. My sister lives in Canada, so I get to see her very rarely. \_\_\_\_\_
3. You would not believe all the paperwork Jane had to cut through to finally open her restaurant.  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. I had lost all hope of ever seeing her again, when one day she just showed up on our doorstep completely unexpectedly. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Mary passed her chemistry test with great success. \_\_\_\_\_
6. The boys were trying to steal a car when the police drove by and caught them in the act.  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Sam's father-in-law gave him an old Rolls Royce for his birthday, but it's a really useless possession, since he can't afford the gas for it. \_\_\_\_\_
8. Tom's wife revealed her true nature by leaving him when he lost his well-paid job.  
\_\_\_\_\_