

Strategies of Learning Idioms in English as a Foreign Language

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Strategies of Learning Idioms in English as a Foreign Language

Diplomski rad

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Summary

Idioms make up an important part of the acquisition of a second language. Learners who wish to achieve natively like proficiency need the mastery of idioms as well. Thus, this work aimed to explore language learning strategies learners employ while learning idioms. The study was conducted on the sample of second grade high school students by means of individual interviews. During the interview, the think-aloud procedure was used. The students were given a learning task in which they had to learn 10 English idioms, and were asked to say out loud what goes on in their minds as they do so. The interviews were followed by a recall test which was intended to check how well they had acquired the idioms. As a result of the study, a classification of 24 idiom learning strategies was made. These strategies are divided into four groups: memory, cognitive, compensation and social strategies. Among these, cognitive strategies were used the most, particularly various techniques of rote learning, and use of mother tongue (using bilingual dictionary, translations, etc.). Also, the comparison of successful (the ones who achieved high scores on the recall test) and unsuccessful learners of idioms revealed some differences. It showed that successful learners use a greater number and a greater variety of strategies, use context more often, and are aware of the strategies they use.

Key words: language learning strategies, idioms, idiom learning strategies, successful learners, unsuccessful learners

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction..... | 5 |
| 2. Language learning strategies..... | 7 |
| 2.1 <i>Definitions of LLS</i> | 7 |
| 2.2 <i>Features of LLS</i> | 7 |
| 2.3 <i>Classifications of LLS</i> | 9 |
| 2.4 <i>Review of related literature and research on LLS</i> | 10 |
| 3. Idioms | 13 |
| 3.1 <i>Definitions of idioms</i> | 13 |
| 3.2 <i>Features and classifications of idioms</i> | 14 |
| 3.3 <i>Acquisition of foreign language idioms</i> | 16 |
| 4. Strategies of Learning Idioms in English as a Foreign Language: Empirical research ... | 20 |
| 4.1 <i>Aim</i> | 20 |
| 4.2 <i>Method</i> | 20 |
| 4.2.1 <i>Participants</i> | 20 |
| 4.2.2 <i>Materials</i> | 20 |
| 4.2.2.1 <i>Pre - test</i> | 20 |
| 4.2.2.2 <i>Interview</i> | 21 |
| 4.2.2.3 <i>The recall test</i> | 21 |
| 4.2.3 <i>Procedure</i> | 21 |
| 4.2.3.1 <i>Coding process</i> | 24 |
| 4.3 <i>Results and discussion</i> | 24 |
| 4.3.1 <i>Interviews</i> | 24 |
| 4.3.1.1 <i>Classification of idiom learning strategies</i> | 24 |
| 4.3.1.2 <i>Frequency of idiom learning strategy use</i> | 30 |
| 4.3.1.3 <i>Combining strategies</i> | 38 |
| 4.3.1.4 <i>A note on research methodology</i> | 39 |
| 4.3.2 <i>Recall tests</i> | 40 |
| 4.3.2.1 <i>Recall test 1</i> | 40 |

| | | |
|---------|--|----|
| 4.3.2.2 | Recall test 2 | 41 |
| 4.3.2.3 | Correlation analysis | 44 |
| 4.3.3 | <i>Idiom learning strategies of successful and unsuccessful learners</i> | 45 |
| 5. | Conclusion | 47 |
| 6. | Bibliography | 49 |
| 7. | Appendices..... | 52 |

1. Introduction

It is said that every community, from country as a whole to individual families, shares a unique world of expressions. These expressions contain important cultural beliefs, norms and attitudes of that community and serve both as a sign and as a reinforcer of their social cohesion (Glucksberg, 2001). As a consequence, people cannot be considered competent speakers of a certain language until they have acquired those various clichéd, idiomatic expressions (Gibbs, 1995). However, even though students encounter them in the early stages of classroom learning, idioms still remain “the final difficult hurdle for the proficient learner who wants to sound truly nativelike” (Wray and Fitzpatrick, 2008:123). Even the advanced learners have difficulty in acquiring L2 collocations and idioms (Ellis, 2008). These problems call for a closer inspection of the learning process involved in the acquisition of idioms in order to discover their source and eliminate them.

Different authors take into consideration different factors that might influence and determine the learning process and its outcomes. Ellis (1997) distinguishes three sets of variables included in the learning process which all influence each other:

- 1) Beliefs about language learning, affective states (anxiety, self-confidence) and some general factors (language aptitude, motivation, age, learning style);
- 2) Language learning strategies;
- 3) Language learning outcomes (proficiency, achievement, rate of acquisition).

This study will be dealing with only one of these components, namely learning strategies which are sometimes even seen as the essential factor. When a person is challenged by some task or learning problem, s/he reaches for certain strategies in order to solve it. The choice of strategies depends on the level of complexity of a task, its purpose and available materials, but also on the learner and his/her age, sex, aptitude, intelligence, attitudes, motivation, prior knowledge, learning style etc. (Gu, 2003). Furthermore, in the interlanguage theory, Selinker (1972, as cited in Pavičić Takač, 2008) sees the use of language learning strategies as the most important process among the five ones involved in the L2 acquisition (others include language transfer, transfer of training, communication strategies and overgeneralization of linguistic material) and it is precisely the use of various learning strategies that is responsible for the development and advancement of the interlanguage.

Therefore, the purpose of this work was to explore language learning strategies learners employ while learning English idioms. First, some basic terms will be defined and overview

of the relevant literature presented, which will be followed by the results of the empirical study. However, the literature on idiom learning strategies is very scarce. There is no classification, and studies are also rare. If there are some, they mostly deal with only one strategy. Thus, as a theoretical basis for this work, language learning strategies in general were taken, their features and classifications, while a classification of idiom learning strategies will be proposed on the basis of the results of the empirical study.

2. Language learning strategies

2.1 Definitions of LLS

Although language learning strategies (hereafter LLS) have been formally dealt with only in recent years, they have in fact been used since ancient times. However, the term LLS still remains ambiguous and there is no agreement regarding their definition. According to Pavičić Takač (2008) differences that exist in definitions result from the fact that different authors define LLS in the context of their own research.

Rubin (1975, as cited in Stern, 1986:406) defines strategies as “techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire second language knowledge”. Similar definition was given by Rob Ellis (1997:77) who describes LLS as “particular approaches or techniques that learners employ to try to learn an L2.” Pavičić Takač (2008:52) summarized various definition of LLS she encountered into “specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that learners use (often deliberately) to improve their progress in development of their competence in the target language.” However, the most important and most widely used definition of LLS is the one proposed by Rebecca L. Oxford (1990:8) who states that learning strategies are “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations”.

2.2 Features of LLS

LLS are particularly important because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence or the ability to use the language in various settings and situations (Oxford, 1990). In order to achieve that, realistic interaction among learners is required. Furthermore, LLS “change and expand the role of teachers: they help, facilitate, advise, coordinate, diagnose, cooperate, offer ideas and directions, and participate in communication“ (Pavičić Takač, 2008:55). Next, Ellis (1997), Oxford (1990), Wenden (1991), and some other authors emphasize that LLS are problem-oriented and learners reach out for them when they are faced with some learning problem. Another feature of LLS is that they are “specific actions or behaviours accomplished by students to enhance their learning” and are influenced by the “learning style (broad, generalized approach to learning, problem solving, or understanding oneself, or the situation), motivation, and aptitude” (Oxford, 1990:11).

Williams and Burden (2001) see language learners as active participants in the learning process and emphasize the presence of consciousness in the strategy use, i.e. language

learners consciously use strategies in order to organize the language system they are learning. However, this does not concur with Oxford's (1990) report that even though strategies are often consciously employed, this is not always the case because they can also be unconsciously used. This was later supported by Wenden (1991) and O'Malley and Chamot (1996) who reported that after repeated application, the use of LLS can become automatic, i.e. learners employ them without consciously thinking about it. It can be concluded that LLS are conscious, potentially conscious or subconscious depending on individual learners and the task they are engaged in (Pavičić Takač, 2008:55). Thus, Selinker et al. (2000, as cited in Pavičić Takač, 2008:31) define learning strategies "as cognitive activities at the conscious or unconscious level that involve the processing of L2 data in the attempt to express meaning.

Moreover, LLS not only deal with mental processes and language manipulation, but also include processes beyond cognition (metacognitive) like planning, evaluating and arranging learning, as well as emotional and social functions (Oxford, 1990). They influence the learning process directly and indirectly. LLS are observable and some are not, for LLS involve both physical and mental activities (Oxford, 1990; Chamot, 2005). This is supported by the Ellis's (1997) distinction between behavioural strategies, such as repeating aloud in order to remember, and mental strategies, which would be for example using the linguistic or situational context to come up with the meaning of a new word or expression.

LLS are "amenable to change" (Wenden, 1991:18). This means that "ineffective ones can be changed or rejected, new strategies can be learned and well-functioning strategies can be adapted to new situations" (Wenden, 1991:18). This is done most effectively through strategy training which provides a way of helping learners to become autonomous and take care of their learning. Pavičić Takač (2008) also emphasizes that it is important to encourage learners to constantly work on developing the existing strategies and discovering the new ones in order to be able to work with lexical items independently on their own and outside of the classroom. Also, LLS are flexible, i.e. there is no predictable pattern in the sequence of their use, and instead learners combine them individually.

Each learner is different and approaches the learning task in a different way and thus uses different strategies. For example, when learners first encounter a new word, they might guess its meaning and usage from available clues, look it up in a dictionary, take down notes, repeat it a number of times or even try to use it actively. So, the choice of strategy use depends on various factors: "degree of awareness, stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, sex, nationality/ethnicity, general learning style, personality traits, motivation level, and purpose for learning the language" (Oxford, 1990:13).

In addition to features presented by Oxford (1990), Bialystok (1990, as cited in Pavičić Takač, 2008), adds that learners use LLS systematically based on their knowledge, as well as that the number of strategies is limited because not every learner creates its own strategies. Oxford (1990) also indicated that strategies are culture-specific, i.e. the same results may not be obtained in different cultures and with people of different mother tongue. However, this statement was questioned by some other researchers (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; McDonough, 1995; Cohen, 1996, all cited in Kudo, 1999, and Kudo, 1999).

2.3 *Classifications of LLS*

Classifications and taxonomies of learning strategies are numerous. “Early classifications, for example, are based on the distinction between learning strategies of successful and unsuccessful learners, whereas some more recent classifications rely on the criterion of direct or indirect effect that learning strategies may have on learning” (Pavičić Takač, 2008:52). Various researches have produced different inventories of learning strategies, but they mostly consist of more or less similar categories divided up into different ways.

The most comprehensive, the most detailed and thus the most widely used classification is the one developed by Rebecca L. Oxford (1990). Her classification is a system of six strategies classified as direct and indirect, which need to be employed together in order to achieve success in L2 acquisition. *Direct language learning strategies* involve mental processing of the L2 and consist of memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. *Memory strategies* are also called mnemonics. They help students “store and retrieve new information” (Oxford, 1990:37). There are four sets of strategies in this group: creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well and employing actions. Their use is more effective when they are combined with indirect strategies. Memory strategies rely on principles that involve meaning and are particularly useful in vocabulary learning because “they enable learners to store verbal material and then retrieve it when needed for communication” (Oxford, 1990:39). Also, they often involve linking verbal material with pictures, sounds, motion or touch, depending on learners’ learning style preferences (visual, aural, kinaesthetic or tactile). *Cognitive strategies* are an essential in learning a new language because they enable “manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner” (Oxford, 1990:43). Again, there are four sets of strategies: practicing, receiving and sending messages, analysing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output. This is the most popular group of strategies, with the practice strategies being one of the most important.

Compensation strategies help learners overcome difficulties that may arise from the limitations in their L2 knowledge and they are “intended to make up for an inadequate repertoire of grammar, and especially, of vocabulary” (Oxford, 1990:47). There are two sets of compensation strategies: guessing intelligently in listening and reading and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. One of the characteristics of good language learners is to make guesses when they do not know all the words, and this is enabled by guessing strategies which involve using linguistic and non-linguistic clues. Compensation strategies occur in both understanding and production of a new language.

Indirect strategies “support and manage language learning without (in many instances) directly involving the target language” (Oxford, 1990:135). They include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. *Metacognitive strategies* help learners “coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centring, arranging, planning, and evaluating” (Oxford, 1990:135). They include strategies for centring your learning, arranging and planning your learning and evaluating your learning. This group of strategies is essential for successful language learning but learners are mostly not aware of their importance and often do not use them appropriately. *Affective strategies* “help to regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes” (Oxford, 1990:135). They consist of strategies for lowering your anxiety, encouraging yourself and taking your emotional temperature. Negative feelings in the learning process can be the source of language learning failure. Thus, good language learners are those who have a good control over their emotions and attitudes, and the proper training and use of affective strategies enables that. Finally, *social strategies* “help learners learn through interaction with others” (Oxford, 1990:135). There are three sets of strategies in this group: asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others. Asking questions enables better understanding of the language input while cooperation “implies the absence of competition and the presence of group spirit” (Oxford, 1990:145). Empathy is important for understanding other people’s perspectives, thoughts and feelings.

For a complete list of strategies, see Appendix 1.

2.4 Review of related literature and research on LLS

The studies of LLS began with the question why there are some individuals who are very effective in learning. As a result, in the past few decades, a lot of research has been done in order to find out which strategies are the most important for L2 acquisition, i.e. which strategies are used by ‘good language learners’. First step of the research was to identify those

learners who have success in learning L2 and then using various techniques to find out which learning strategies they used. Various studies revealed that a good language learner is:

1. A willing and accurate guesser
2. Has a strong drive to communicate
3. Is often uninhibited about mistakes
4. Is willing to attend to form
5. Practices
6. Monitors his speech and compares it to the native standard
7. Attends to meaning in its social context

(Rubin, 1975, as cited in Stern, 1986)

Furthermore, good language learners not just take advantage of potentially useful learning situations but also create them. They also develop strategies that are appropriate for their individual needs (Stern, 1986).

Next, Ellis (1997) states that good language learners pay attention to form and meaning, they are very active (use strategies for taking charge of their own learning), are aware of the learning process, are familiar with their own learning style, are flexible in using learning strategies and use those strategies appropriately. Also, he claims that good language learners use metacognitive strategies the most. The results obtained by Vandergrift (2003a, reported in Chamot, 2005) concur with these findings, and add that more skilled learners question for clarification more often.

Various authors presented in Kudo (1999) stated that good language students used more strategies than the less successful ones; Zimmerman and Pons (1986) came to a conclusion that high achievement track students used significantly more strategies than the lower track students. This was also supported by Ellis (1997). Furthermore, O'Malley and Chamot (1990, cited in Kudo, 1999) found that effective students used greater variety of strategies than noneffective students. Based on this, unsuccessful learners would then be those who either do not use those strategies adequately, do not use them regularly or do not use them at all. (Pavičić Takač, 2008).

The study this research was based on was conducted by Lawson and Hogben (1996) on students learning Italian in Australia. Through the means of think aloud protocol and individual interview, they wanted to find out which vocabulary learning strategies and how frequently experienced learners used, whether there was a relationship between a particular strategy and the success on the recall test and to what extent, learners tried to recall the meaning of new words from the context before resorting to translations or definitions. The

results obtained by this study showed that learners mostly used some form of repetition of new words and their meanings, mostly simple reading of the dictionary-like entries or repetition of the word-meaning complexes. In addition, they paid little attention to the physical or grammatical features of words, and neglected more elaborative procedures. The study also revealed that the paraphrase and deliberate mnemonic strategies result in successful recall. The authors conclude that “elaborative procedures are more useful for recall than are those based on repetition” (Lawson and Hogben, 1996:129). The major interest was aroused by the lack of association between the use of context and recall of word meaning. Even though there is a great stress placed on the importance of context, using cues in sentences to generate possible meanings did not help in establishing representations for the meanings. Students knew how to use contextual clues, but did not want to use them.

3. Idioms

As already mentioned “the accurate and appropriate use of English expressions which are in the broadest sense idiomatic is one distinguishing mark of a native command of the language and a reliable measure of the proficiency of a foreign learner” (Cowie et al, 1988:x). Thus, idioms are an important part of the language and some estimate that there are as many fixed expressions as there are words in American English, about 80,000 (Glucksberg, 2001).

3.1 Definitions of idioms

Idioms are a part of the figurative language and behave quite differently from single words (Glucksberg, 2001). Various authors use different terms for idioms, such as complex unit, fixed expression, fixed phrase, phraseme, phraseolexeme, phraseologism, polylexical expression and conventional expression (Everaert et al., 1995). Yet, according to Glucksberg (2001) idioms are just one sub-category of fix expressions which include:

- 1) Compounds (e.g. *frequent flyer programme*)
- 2) Idioms (e.g. *sitting pretty*)
- 3) Names (e.g. *Count Dracula, John Deere tractor*)
- 4) Clichés (e.g. *no money down*)
- 5) Song, book and movie titles (e.g. *‘All You Need Is Love’*)
- 6) Quotes (e.g. *“Beam me up, Scotty”*)
- 7) Familiar foreign phrases (e.g. *au contraire*)

According to Cacciari and Glucksberg (1995) when people encounter idioms, there are two possible meanings: the specific meaning assigned to the idiomatic expression which most often refers to an abstract event or a mental state, and the second meaning, or the meaning of its constituent parts which refers to a concrete action. Sometimes the relationship between literal meaning and idiomatic or figurative meaning is completely vague and unclear. That absence of a clear relation distinguishes idioms from other fixed expressions and has been a basis for the most common definition of idiom as “a construction whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its constituents” (Glucksberg, 2001:68). Thus, idioms tend to produce comprehension problems (Boers and Lindstromberg, 2008). Furthermore, it has lead to creating a misconception that idioms are simply long expressions which need not be analysed and cannot be explained but only memorized.

Just as names, definitions of idioms are also numerous, to name just a few:

- “syntactic expressions that exhibit lexical co-occurrence restrictions that cannot be explained in terms of regular rule-governed syntactic or semantic restrictions” (Everaert et al., 1995:3)
- “fixed expressions that are semantically opaque, noncompositional [and] unanalyzable” (Everaert et al., 1995:4).
- “...groups of words with the set meanings that cannot be calculated by adding up the separate meanings of the parts” (Bolinger, 1975 as cited in Oxford dictionary of current idiomatic English, 1988)
- “...peculiarity of phraseology ... having meaning not deducible from those of the separate words” (Sykes, 1982 as cited in Oxford dictionary of current idiomatic English, 1988)
- “expressions the meaning of which is not a function of the meanings of the parts” (Everaert et al., 1995:6).

3.2 Features and classifications of idioms

Idioms differ in terms of *compositionality* or the degree to which the meaning of an idiom can be derived from its constituents. They vary from fully compositional to not compositional at all. In *noncompositional* idioms there is no relationship between idiom’s constituents and idiom’s meaning (e.g. *cheesecake* to refer to pinup art). In *partially compositional* idioms there is some relationship between constituents and idiomatic meaning and idiom’s literal meaning constrains its use and comprehension (e.g. in the idiom *to kick the bucket* literal meaning of the verb *to kick* allows for some discourse variations). Finally, in *fully compositional* idioms, constituents map directly onto their idiomatic referents (e.g. in the idiom *pop the question* both constituents map directly onto the idiomatic meanings of *suddenly utter* and *marriage proposal*). The research has shown that compositional idioms are understood more quickly than the noncompositional ones (Glucksberg, 2001).

Another classification is done on the basis of *transparency* or the extent to which an idiom’s meaning can be inferred from the meanings of its constituents. Noncompositional idioms are by definition not transparent, while compositional ones can be either opaque or transparent. In *compositional-opaque* idioms the meaning of the individual words can constrain interpretation and use, while in the *compositional transparent* idioms there is always

a one-to-one semantic relationship between the idioms constituents and components of idiom's meaning.

To sum up, on one end of the continuum are idioms which are syntactically unanalyzable and semantically noncompositional, i.e. their meaning cannot be guessed from the meanings of their constituent parts (e.g. *by and large*). On the other end of the continuum are idioms which behave similarly to metaphors and refer to situations, actions, or events that characterize a class of situations, actions, or events (e.g. *skating on thin ice* can be used to refer to any situation that is as risky as that activity). These idioms are fully analysable syntactically and fully compositional semantically and their meaning is transparent if the literal referent is known. Between these two ends are idioms that vary in terms of transparency, syntactic analyzability and semantic compositionality.

Idioms also differ in their *syntactic properties*, or an extent to which an idiom's meaning depends on its syntactic form, or an extent to which an idiom can be open to syntactic analysis and transformation. This also varies from fully syntactically flexible to not flexible at all. (Glucksberg, 2001). *Syntactically flexible* idioms can for example be used both passively and actively or one constituent can be replaced with a pronoun. Idiom's lexical and syntactical flexibility is influenced by not only formal linguistic factors such as compositionality but also by the constraints of the world knowledge and the conventions of discourse and conversation. Compositional idioms are usually more flexible than noncompositional ones.

Next, idioms may vary in their *predictability* or how fast one can be recognized as an idiom and not understood literally. Some authors also classify idioms in this way as having early or late key words, where the idioms with early key words are recognized faster than the idioms with the late key words (Tabossi and Zardon, 1993, as cited in Glucksberg, 2001). Furthermore, some can be *modified internally* (*he kicked the proverbial bucket*).

In the past it was assumed that all idioms are noncompositional and opaque and thus their meanings cannot be analysed in any way but simply memorized. In accordance with that it was assumed that in understanding an idiom, an idiomatic meaning would be sought only when the literal ones did not make sense. However, this proved wrong very soon and Gibbs (1995) claims that there are also many idioms which are to some extent compositional or analysable because many idioms are motivated by pre-existing metaphorical concepts. Consequently a need for a third type of meaning arose: conceptual metaphors which underlie most of the idiomatic expressions (Gibbs, 1992, as cited in Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1995). Furthermore, Gibbs and O'Brien (1990 as cited in Cacciari and Glucksberg, (2001) claim that

analysing idioms in terms of conceptual metaphors they come from makes the idiom easier to understand and analyse because the relationship between the literal meaning of constituents and figurative meaning is easier to comprehend. However, there is still a great debate about the role of mental imagery in processing a figurative language. Some claim that it has a crucial role (e.g. Harris et al., 1980, as cited in Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1995) while others give priority to semantic-conceptual representations (Honeck et al., 1980; Riechman and Coste, 1980, as cited in Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1995).

3.3 Acquisition of foreign language idioms

Vocabulary learning in general and learning multiword expressions in particular, has long been given very little attention in the scope of second language learning. Most vocabulary research to date has primarily focused on individual words, while idioms along with other figurative expressions have been highly neglected. However, in the recent decades, research of idioms has begun to attract more and more attention. This is partly due to the fact that “linguists have come to realize that idioms and idiomlike constructions make up a large part of our knowledge of language” (Everaert et al, 1995: 1-2). Furthermore, it was realized that phraseological competence is at the centre of linguistic competence and not periphery. (Siepmann, 2008). Thus, acquisition of idioms must be given more attention.

As Kennedy (2008) claims, there is no perfect method for teaching or learning idioms. L2 learners presumably learn idioms “in a rote manner or simply infer the meanings of idioms from context” (Gibbs, 1995: 98). Lately, it was assumed that memorization should be avoided. However, that need not be the case because if effectively applied, memorization can be highly beneficial to those who already have the knowledge of a language (Ding, 2007 as cited in Wray and Fitzpatrick, 2008). The success and speed of the process of memorizing idioms depends on the idiom type and the learner and his/her characteristics. It is particularly effective when it is directly used to consolidate and/or facilitate understanding (Cooper 2004, as cited in Wray and Fitzpatrick, 2008).

Some (Kirsner, 1994; Ellis, 1994, as cited in Kennedy, 2008) state that they should be learned implicitly by meeting them repeatedly in context, because the more often they are encountered, the better command of them learners have. Learners also usually rate guessing from context as another useful strategy (Schmitt, 1997; Zechmeister *et al.*, 1993, cited in Schmitt, 2008). Moreover, it is one of the most frequent and preferred strategies for dealing with unknown words in reading, especially when it comes to phrasal vocabulary and idioms. (Schmitt, 2008). Again, this does not mean that it is an effective strategy. Learners

undoubtedly can learn a lot from context, sometimes even more than from a translation, definition or synonym. Furthermore, often it is the context that makes the meaning of a polysemous word clear (Webb, 2007). However, Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) warn that guessing word meanings from context is problematic because learners tend to overestimate their understanding of those words. Also, Nation (2001) states that lexical items need to be met many times in many different contexts in order to be learned so one encounter is just not enough, instead it requires a long-term approach. Also, it should be noted that the type of context used in vocabulary acquisition research often varies from study to study. They usually differ in the amount of information they provide and different types of context may have different effects on vocabulary knowledge. Richer contexts may have greater effects on vocabulary knowledge while a single glossed sentence context may have little effect on gaining vocabulary knowledge (Webb, 2007).

Others, on the other hand, advocate explicit learning which implies awareness. The focus of such teaching and learning should be frequent items (Kennedy, 2008). Schmitt (2008) also advocates intentional vocabulary learning because it almost always leads to greater and faster gains, with a better chance of retention and of reaching productive levels of mastery. However, Griffin (1992, as cited in Webb, 2007) suggests that contextualized tasks may be superior for advanced learners and inferior for beginners who may benefit more from explicit learning of word pairs.

Next, learners also typically employ their L1 in learning an L2, mostly through using bilingual dictionaries (Schmitt, 2008). Mother tongue can be useful in establishing the initial form–meaning link. Prince (1996, as cited in Schmitt, 2008) found that more newly learned words could be recalled using L1 translations than L2 context, particularly for less-proficient or beginning learners. However, after this initial stage, the value of L1 lessens and meeting lexical expressions in a new context becomes more important. In learning new idioms, using L1 may particularly cause problems because idioms cannot be translated literally.

The most commonly mentioned strategy for learning idioms lately is *etymological elaboration*. It rejects the old belief that idiomatic expressions are arbitrary and emphasizes their ‘motivated’ nature. This issue was of particular interest to Boers et al. (2004) who conducted numerous studies on that topic and proved that learners can be helped to comprehend and remember figurative idioms by raising their awareness of the literal origins or source domains of those expressions. This strategy is useful for two main reasons:

- 1) The activation of the literal sense of an idiom usually results in a mental image of a concrete scene

- 2) Identifying the source domain happens at a deeper level of processing than rote learning which enhances memory storage

For the purpose of his research as well as for pedagogical purposes, Boers (2004) developed *Idiomteacher* – a battery of on-line exercises for mastery of figurative idioms. *Idiomteacher* consists of three types of exercises: two multiple choice tasks; one where learners need to hypothesise about the origin of the idiom, and the other where they need to identify the correct figurative meaning of the idiom. The third type is a gap-filling exercise where learners need to insert the keyword of an idiom into an appropriate context. The research Boers et al. (2004) conducted proved that although meaning of idioms is not fully predictable, most figurative idioms are ‘motivated’ and insight into their origins can be beneficial for interpretation of the meanings of those expressions. However, this strategy only works well for idioms whose origins are transparent enough for students to figure them out independently. If the idioms are opaque, the strategy works only if the learners are given a concise explanation about the origins.

Boers et al. (2007) continued examining the benefits of etymological elaboration and wanted to find out whether this strategy could be used as a guide for comprehension and a guide for usage restrictions such as appropriateness in certain registers. The results showed that etymological elaboration can be used as additional input for the problem-solving task of figuring out the meaning of idioms encountered in context. Also, these results suggest that knowledge of the idiom’s origin can help learners estimate whether they might be typical of informal discourse.

Cacciari and Glucksberg (1995) examined whether the visual images people associate with idiomatic expressions reflect the appropriate underlying conceptual metaphors and found that people form highly conventional and systematic visual images. They assigned the consistency of people’s intuition about mental images for idioms to specific conceptual metaphors that motivate the figurative meanings of idioms. Some idioms are highly semantically transparent, i.e. literal meaning is related to figurative meaning and there is little if any difference between an image of a literal meaning and an image of a figurative meaning. However, the problem arises with the opaque idioms where the literal and the figurative meanings are unrelated to one another. If the idiom’s literal meaning expresses a possible concrete action, visual images usually reflect that literal meaning. Cacciari and Glucksberg (1995) conducted a study to see which of the two possible meanings of idioms, concrete literal or abstract figurative, prevails in mental images people produce of those idioms. The study revealed that the vast majority of images were related to literal meaning even with the

highly familiar and transparent idioms which were expected to elicit figurative images. Thus, the mental images people create do not reflect conceptual metaphors underlying idioms' meanings but concrete actions and events denoted by an idiom's constituent parts. One of the possible explanations for this, they see in the fact that "images, by their very nature, are concrete, whereas figurative meanings, by their very nature, are abstractions" (Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1995). Hence, they conclude that just as concrete concepts are easier to imagine, so are concrete, literal meanings of idioms easier to understand than abstract, figurative meanings.

4. Strategies of Learning Idioms in English as a Foreign Language: Empirical research

The present research was partially based on the study conducted by Lawson and Hogben (1996) who used the think-aloud protocol to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies of foreign language students. Their procedure and instruments were adapted to explore the strategies of learning idioms in English as a foreign language.

4.1 Aim

The main purpose of the study was to explore LLS students use in learning idioms in English as a foreign language. It was designed to seek answers to the following questions:

1. What idiom learning strategies (hereafter ILS) do learners use when asked to undertake a deliberate vocabulary acquisition task, i.e. while learning new idioms, and how frequently are these different strategies used?
2. Is there a relationship between the number of strategies used and the score on a recall test?
3. What strategies are used by successful learners and what by unsuccessful ones?

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Participants

Twenty four high school second grade students, aged from 16 to 17 years, took part in this study. All of the participants belonged to the same class and attended The Language Grammar School in Osijek. Four of them were male (16.67%) and twenty were female participants (83.33%). All of the participants had English as their first foreign language and had been learning English for approximately six years.

4.2.2 Materials

4.2.2.1 Pre - test

For the first part of the research, a written pre-test was used (see Appendix 2). The pre-test consisted of 25 idioms taken from *New Headway Intermediate Students' Book* and *New Headway Upper Intermediate Students' Book*, the textbooks used in this school in the first, second and third grade. The textbooks were carefully examined and idioms were mostly taken from texts, while in the part of the book used in the second grade, a special section with

idioms was found. It was assumed that the students would be familiar with the idioms taken from the first book (first and second grade), while the idioms from the second book would be completely new to them. The students were then given a test in which they were asked to explain the meaning (either in English or in Croatian) of the idioms listed. The pre-tests were not anonymous because it was very important to know which idioms each student did not know in order to prepare a set of learning cards for the learning task and a recall test.

4.2.2.2 Interview

The second part of the research were semi-structured individual interviews where think-aloud procedure was used. Information for the idiom-learning task was provided on individual learning cards (see Appendix 3).

4.2.2.3 The recall test

The recall test consisted of 10 idioms the students had been learning. The students had to write down their meanings, but they could choose in which way they wanted to answer: in English, or in Croatian, to give example sentences or the combination of those. The order of the idioms on the test was random and differed from the order in which the cards were given. No time limitation for the test was set. The same material was used for the second recall test (see Appendix 4).

4.2.3 Procedure

The pre-test was conducted in a randomly chosen second grade class in the Language Grammar School in Osijek. Only volunteers participated in the study. The participants were given a written pre-test and were explained the purpose of the study. They were asked to try to explain the idioms listed and it was especially emphasized that they can write either in English or in Croatian. The students were asked to write down their names, but it was explained to them that the reason for that was simply because the data obtained in this test were necessary for the interviews, and that their names would not be mentioned in the report, nor would the results be available to anyone but the researcher. The participants were given approximately 20 minutes to complete the test.

Next, the pre-tests were analysed. The twelve least familiar idioms were selected for the further study. The only purpose of the pre-test was to obtain information for the further study, i.e. to find out which idioms students did not know, thus no analysis was undertaken. All the tests were examined and corrected and a list of idioms was made based on the frequency of

correctness. The students' responses were scored either 1 or 0: 1 point was awarded where the idiom was correctly and clearly explained, and wrong or left out answers were scored 0.

Eleven idioms the majority of students did not know were taken for the second part of the study, the learning task. For each participant a set of ten of those idioms was individually prepared. If the student knew some of those 'core' idioms, they were replaced with the ones s/he did not know. Also, for each interviewee, a test containing 'his/her' ten idioms was prepared (see Table 1).

Table 1: List of idioms taken for the learning task

| | | Idiom | Number of students who knew the idiom |
|--------------------------|-----|----------------------------------|--|
| 'Core' idioms | 1. | Put your foot in it | 0 |
| | 2. | Take your life in your hands | 0 |
| | 3. | Put the world to rights | 0 |
| | 4. | Take its toll (on sb/sth) | 0 |
| | 5. | Too much of a good thing | 0 |
| | 6. | On the mend | 0 |
| | 7. | Keep sb/sth at bay | 1 |
| | 8. | Kick up a fuss | 3 |
| | 9. | Take the trouble to do sth | 3 |
| | 10. | Drop sb a line | 4 |
| | 11. | Kiss sth goodbye | 5 |
| Additional idioms | 12. | Be at your wits end | 7 |
| | 13. | Answer a description (of sb/sth) | 10 |
| | 14. | Fit somebody like a glove | 15 |

For the second part of the study, the interviews which were conducted a couple of days later, a think-aloud procedure was used. It was carried out on thirteen volunteers from the first group of participants, four male (26.67%) and nine female participants (73.33%). The think-aloud technique usually involves some task or a problem that needs to be solved and an immediate verbalization of the undergoing thought processes. The protocols are usually taped and later analyzed (Nunan, 1992). Even though these verbalizations may not exactly

correspond to the actual mental processes involved, they still give more insight into the learners' thoughts than pre-prepared questionnaires (Van Somern et al., 1994).

In the course of the interviews, the students were asked to learn 10 English idioms given on individual cards. All the interviews were recorded. They lasted 22 minutes on average (ranging from 14 to 33 minutes). They were conducted individually, i.e. on a one to one basis and were carried out in Croatian because interviewees chose it as a preferred language of communication. The schedule for the first couple of interviews was previously arranged, while later the students simply volunteered. The interview with each student had the same procedure. The students were first reminded of the general purpose of the research and of the test they had taken a couple of days earlier. It was explained that the test had been corrected and 10 idioms chosen from the ones they did not know.

Then, they were given a set of ten learning cards and shown what they consisted of. Each card contained one idiom of the twenty five from the pre-test. The idioms chosen were the ones the student did not know in the pre-test. The front of each card contained the particular English idiom followed by two example sentences containing that idiom, while the other side contained the explanation of the idiom in English and its Croatian translation. The participants also had at their disposal a monolingual English dictionary, bilingual English-Croatian dictionary, paper and a pen. They were instructed to use the cards however they thought best: in whichever way they thought would best help them learn the idioms.

Next, the think-aloud procedure was described. They were told that their task was to think aloud as they attempted to learn the meanings of those new idioms by whatever means they chose. The interviewer explained that in order to gather information, they were required to say everything what went on in their mind while they were learning, the way in which they were making connections, what was useful for them (context, meaning or translation), which they examined first, etc. It was also mentioned that in the end they would have to write the meanings of those idioms in order to check the success of the learning task.

They were also told they could use dictionaries and paper and pen. While the interviewees were learning the idioms, the interviewer occasionally asked them additional questions. When it seemed necessary, the interviewer prompted students to keep talking and reminded them to say everything, even the smallest detail. Sometimes retrospective reports were also requested.

The interviewees were allowed to ask for clarification. When the students estimated that they had finished the learning task, they were presented with the recall test paper in order

to check how well they had acquired the idioms. All the interviews were later transcribed and the data analysed.

Finally, the last part of the research was carried out approximately three months after the interviews. It was conducted on the same thirteen participants as the interviews. The students were reminded of the purpose of the study and again given the same recall test as the one following the learning task. The purpose was to see how many of the idioms they remembered.

4.2.3.1 Coding process

The data obtained from the interviews were carefully transcribed, coded and analysed. Before the coding process began, the researcher went through all the interviews in order to roughly get the idea about the strategies used. Next, the taxonomy of LLS by Oxford (1990) was consulted. Her grouping of strategies was the basis for the analysis. Oxford's taxonomy covers a wide range of strategies, but it does not focus on any part of the language specifically, so some of the strategies were too general for this study. As a result, a classification developed by Lawson and Hogben (1996) was also used. Finally, Oxford's (1990) and Lawson and Hogben's (1996) descriptions of strategies were brought together and adapted in accordance with the students' answers and strategies they mentioned while doing the learning task (see Appendix 5).

4.3 Results and discussion

4.3.1 Interviews

4.3.1.1 Classification of idiom learning strategies

A total of 24 categories, divided into four main groups, were identified. Three of these groups fall into the category of direct strategies based on Oxford's (1990) classification, while the last one is an indirect strategy (see Appendix 5).

The first group of strategies are MEMORY STRATEGIES. Their function is to help students store and retrieve new information (Oxford, 1990). Two categories of memory strategies have been reported in this research: creating mental linkages and applying images and sounds. In the set of the strategies for creating mental linkages there are three strategies: *grouping*, *associating* and *placing idioms into a new context*.

Grouping is considered to be “classifying or reclassifying language material into meaningful units, either mentally or in writing, to make the material easier to remember by reducing the number of discrete elements” (Oxford, 1990:40). Even though Oxford (1990) mentions that grouping can be based on topic, practical or linguistic function, similarity or dissimilarity, etc., participants in this study only grouped idioms based on their physical appearance, i.e. shorter versus longer ones. This strategy was used only once in this study, but one student also mentioned that she usually does that at home:

“Kod kuće ih nekad podijelim u grupe po 3 ili 4 pa ih ponavljam tako na razne načine i onda se uvijek nakon nekog vremena vraćam na njih da ih ne zaboravim.” (Student 12)

On the other hand, **associating** is “relating new language information to concepts already in memory, or relating one piece of information to another, to create associations in memory” (Oxford, 1990: 41) Even though sometimes these associations seem to make no sense, they are all meaningful to the learner who created them. There are three types of associations made in this study:

- **Associations with personal experience** – connecting new expressions with things learner experienced in his/her life:

“Kick up a fuss znači stvoriti problem, dizati frku pa ja sebe zamislim kako kad nisam naučila recimo 5 minuta prije testa frku pravim oko toga.” (Student 9)

- **Associations with previous knowledge** – connecting new expressions with the things learned before, e.g. in order to remember *on the mend*, a student remembers a synonym they did a couple of weeks before:

“On the mend, aha, to smo u prvom razredu radili sinonime i mend je sinonim od repair.” (Student 12)

- **Associations with mass media (songs, movies, TV shows)** – connecting new expressions with songs, movies or TV shows where that expression is either mentioned or reminds them of it, e.g. :

“Take its toll znači nešto što je donijelo velike posljedice. To ima u jednoj pjesmi, to ću zapamtiti.” (Student 7)

“Take its toll je iz Uvoda u anatomiju, to ću se po tome sjetiti” (Student 13)

Placing idioms into a new context is trying to make up a new sentence with the previously learned idiom in order to remember it:

“Ja si uvijek probam napraviti neku svoju rečenicu da prije zapamtim, naprimjer ‘The breakup had taken its toll on her; she’s really depressed now.’”(Student 5)

In the group of strategies which apply images and sounds there are two strategies: **using imagery**, and **using keyword**. Just as in Oxford (1990) **using imagery** refers to learning new expressions (here idioms) by relating them to concepts in memory by means of meaningful visual imagery. Pictures learners create in their mind are various and can be based on different things:

- Meaning of an idiom: *“Keep sb/sth at bay je nešto držati dalje da ne budeš u opasnosti pa sam ja to sad sebi zamislila kao ostaviti nekoga na udaljenom otoku.”(Student 12)*
- Meaning of one or more constituent parts: *“Kiss sth goodbye, aha, to si vidim nekog na željeznici jer kao nešto odlazi i više se neće vratiti, pa ono mašeš goodbye, farewell.”(Student 12)*
- Example sentence: One of the example sentences for take your life in your hands is ‘Every time you go parachuting you’re taking your life in your hands.’ As a result, one student creates a picture in her mind of a man parachuting:

“Take your life in your hands...to si ja sad zamislim ono kad skačeš s padobranom.” (Student 6)

Another strategy in this group, **using keyword** refers to connecting an idiom with a particular word or expression in order to remember it. Thus, on the mention of the keyword, students remember the idiom, or vice versa. The most common keyword in this research was chocolate for an idiom too much of a good thing because one of the example sentences mentions it (*‘Too much of a good thing can make you sick, especially if the good thing is chocolate.’*). Most of the participants while revising idioms in the learning task simply said chocolate when they came across this idiom:

“Too much of a good thing...aha to je čokolada”(Student 6)

It is also interesting that after a couple of repetitions visual image created in mind becomes a keyword:

“Znači, keep sb/sth at bay je otok. Take your life in your hands skakanje padobranom.”(Student 12)

The broadest category are COGNITIVE STRATEGIES whose function is “manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner” (Oxford, 1990:43). They are said to be the most popular strategies with the language learners and considered essential in learning a new language (Oxford, 1990). Cognitive strategies are divided into four subcategories: practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning and creating structure for input and output.

The most important among these are strategies for practicing using **repetition**, i.e. “saying or doing something over and over” (Oxford, 1990:45). Repetition techniques used in this study include **simple rehearsal (rote learning)** and **testing**.

Simple rehearsal is a rote learning technique and includes repeating at least once simply an idiom or a sentence, or a combination of an idiom and its translation, meaning or sentence:

- Rehearsing an idiom: “*Pa ja uvijek puno govorim take its toll, naprimjer najmanje jedno 5 puta i onda nakon toga kažem prijevod ili tako nešto.*” (Student 12)
- Rehearsing an example sentence: “*I really put my foot in it with Ella – I didn’t know she’d split up with Tom.*” (Student 2)
- Rehearsing an idiom and its translation: “*Put the world to rights sanjariti o boljem svijetu, put the world to rights sanjariti o boljem svijetu, put the world to right sanjariti o boljem svijetu...*” (Student 4)
- Rehearsing an idiom and its meaning: “*Put the world to rights: talk about how the world could be changed to a better place.*” (Student 9)
- Rehearsing an idiom and an example sentence: “*On the mend ...My leg is definitely on the mend now.*” (Student 2)

Although it did not happen during the interview, one student mentioned an interesting rehearsing strategy, singing:

“*Ja kod kuće ako ne mogu zapamtiti neki tako izraz, onda si uzmem melodiju koju jako volim i počnem pjevušiti si baš taj izraz, naprimjer take its toll. Pa si to onda tako samo to ponavljam i brže zapamtim.*” (Student 12)

Testing strategy includes covering the idiom, its meaning, or the Croatian translation, and trying to produce other parts:

[The student covers the example sentences and reads the idiom] “Take the trouble to do sth je potruditi se učiniti nešto. [turns the learning card] Da, to je točno.” (Student 3)

Strategies for receiving and sending messages include **getting the idea quickly** and **using resources**. Under the strategy **getting the idea quickly** it is simply considered reading the example sentences in order to get the main idea, without trying to guess the meaning, i.e. the student simply reads one or both sentences but does not try to figure out the meaning of an idiom from them. Instead, s/he turns to other available resources (meaning and/or translation). Another strategy in this group is **using resources**, i.e. “using print or nonprint resources to understand incoming message or produce outgoing message” (Oxford, 1990:46). Meaning and translation provided on the learning cards were considered resources here because they were taken from monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, respectively, and represented additional information. Participants also had those dictionaries at their disposal, but only the monolingual dictionary was used once.

Strategies for analysing and reasoning concern logical analysis and reasoning often used to understand the meaning of a new expression or to create a new one (Oxford, 1990). **Translating** is one of the strategies in this set. This strategy is used before consulting the translation provided, and students try to translate the idiom based on the expression itself, example sentences or meaning in English:

[After reading example sentences and meaning in English] “Znači, answer a description je baš ono što po opisu odgovara svakoj karakteristici nečega ili nekoga, znači točno onako kako treba biti.” (Student 7)

Translating can happen at various levels. Most often only the idiom is being translated, but occasionally students also try to translate example sentences containing that idiom:

“Ok, keep sb or sth at bay. ‘If we can keep the rabbits at bay, we should have a good crop of vegetables in the garden.’ Ja bi to sad shvatila kao da držiš nekoga podalje od nečega. Znači, ako bi držali zečeve podalje od našeg vrta, trebali bi imati dobar urod.” (Student 7)

Another way of analysing and reasoning new expressions is by **paraphrasing** them. This strategy is considered to be identifying synonyms of the new expression, using some already known expression to explain or remember the meaning, or simplifying it to make the remembering process easier.

[after reading the meaning on the learning card] “Znači, to be on the mend je to get better.” (Student 6)

Finally, among the cognitive strategies are also strategies for creating structure for input and output which are according to Oxford (1990) important for both comprehension and production in the target language. Participants of this study used only one strategy from this set; *taking notes*, or “writing down the main idea or specific points” (Oxford, 1990: 47):

“Put the world to rights, think of sth different ću napisat i u zagradi just think, not do anything.” (Student 13)

The last set of direct strategies are COMPENSATION STRATEGIES which “allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge” (Oxford, 1990:37). They are intended to make up for possible inadequacies in a target language. Compensation strategies used in this study include guessing intelligently using various clues. Guessing is said to be “just a special case of the way people typically process new information – that is, interpreting the data by using the immediate context and their own life experience” (Oxford, 1990: 49). Clues learners use can be linguistic and non-linguistic.

Guessing intelligently using linguistic clues is trying to come up with the meaning of the idiom immediately after reading it, without consulting other sources:

“Drop sb a line ću pokušat odmah pogodit. To je nekome postaviti neki uvjet sigurno.” (Student 10)

Guessing intelligently using other clues includes a simple use of context where learners suggest a possible meaning for the idiom before referring to the back of the card. So, learners read one or both example sentence and try to guess the meaning before reading the meaning and/or translation provided.

“Kick up a fuss znači ‘Our food was cold so my father kicked up a fuss and refused to pay a service charge.’ To je onda 100% onako dignuti buku, dignuti neku frku, započeti svađu.” (Student 11)

Among the indirect strategies, learners mentioned only one, ***asking questions for clarification and verification*** which is a SOCIAL STRATEGY. Social strategies are defined as strategies which “help students learn through interaction with others” (Oxford, 1990: 135). The students usually ask questions when they want to clarify something, that is, when

something is not understood, or they ask for verification when they want to check whether the assumption they made was correct:

“Jel too much of a good thing onda nešto uzimati previše pa ti onda kasnije ili ima posljedice neke nezdrave ili ti dosadi?” (Student 6)

For a complete list of strategies see Appendix 5.

4.3.1.2 Frequency of idiom learning strategy use

As already mentioned, while performing the learning task, the students used 24 different strategies. These strategies are divided into 4 main groups: *memory strategies*, *cognitive strategies*, *compensation strategies* and *social strategies*. *Social strategies* are *indirect strategies* while the other three groups belong to the *direct strategies*. The reason why *metacognitive strategies* do not appear in the study is because they involve dealing with the learning process, planning and arranging the study. The research, however, was not a natural learning situation and learners were asked to do it on the spot; they did not have time to plan or undergo any special preparation.

There is a total of 928 strategies used in the process of learning idioms. Among the four groups of strategies, *cognitive strategies* were used the most, 679 times, while *memory strategies* were the least used, only 53 times. These results concur with the ones obtained by some other authors who investigated strategies of learning single lexical items (Martinez, 1995; Kudo, 1999; O'Malley, 1995, etc.) Thus we can conclude that the cognitive strategies are the most common group of strategies used in both vocabulary acquisition and idiom acquisition. *Social strategies* fall into the second place with 101 times used, and *compensation strategies* closely follow them with a total number of 95. However, in the group of *social strategies*, there is only one strategy, while there are as many as 14 different *cognitive strategies*. Thus, it can be concluded that the most important ILS are *cognitive strategies*. The group of cognitive strategies contains the most varied strategies, and is used the most frequently. When compared to this group, other strategies were only sporadically used. These results show that participants of this study still mostly rely on 'traditional' strategies which mainly involve various techniques of rote learning (see Table 2 and Table 3).

There are seven strategies in the group of *memory strategies* and the most popular one is *placing idioms into a new context* which was both used most times (16) and by most students (6). *Using imagery* was used more times (15) than *using keywords* (12) but by fewer students. Six students *used keywords* to learn idioms while only four students *used imagery* as a learning strategy.

Table 2: Total strategy use

| | Frequency of use | Frequency of use (%) | Number of different strategies |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Memory strategies | 53 | 5.71 | 7 |
| Cognitive strategies | 679 | 73.17 | 14 |
| Compensation strategies | 95 | 10.237 | 2 |
| Social strategies | 101 | 10.883 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 928 | 100 | 24 |

Table 3: Detailed strategy use

| STRATEGY | | Frequency of strategy use | Students using strategy |
|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| MEMORY STRATEGIES | | | |
| 1. | Placing idioms into a new context | 16 | 6 |
| 2. | Using imagery | 15 | 4 |
| 3. | Using keywords | 12 | 6 |
| 4. | Associating with mass media (songs, movies, TV shows) | 4 | 4 |
| 5. | Associating with personal experience | 3 | 2 |
| 6. | Associating with previous knowledge | 2 | 1 |
| 7. | Grouping | 1 | 1 |
| COGNITIVE STRATEGIES | | | |
| 1. | Getting the idea quickly | 117 | 12 |
| 2. | Using translation | 91 | 12 |
| 3. | Testing | 87 | 10 |
| 4. | Using meaning | 85 | 13 |
| 5. | Paraphrase | 69 | 9 |
| 6. | Translating an idiom | 64 | 10 |
| 7. | Rehearsing an idiom and its translation | 44 | 7 |
| 8. | Rehearsing an idiom | 37 | 7 |
| 9. | Rehearsing an idiom and its meaning | 34 | 6 |
| 10. | Rehearsing an example sentence | 18 | 4 |
| 11. | Rehearsing an idiom and an example sentence | 15 | 3 |
| 12. | Taking notes | 10 | 1 |
| 13. | Translating sentence | 7 | 4 |
| 14. | Using dictionary | 1 | 1 |
| COMPENSATION STRATEGIES | | | |
| 1. | Guessing intelligently using non-linguistic clues | 87 | 12 |
| 2. | Guessing intelligently using linguistic clues | 8 | 4 |
| SOCIAL STRATEGIES | | | |
| 1. | Asking questions for clarification or verification | 101 | 11 |

When we take a closer look at the four students who used it, we see that one of them used it 11 times while the others only one or two times. It would be interesting to try to make a correlation between the learning styles and strategies and see if the learner who uses imagery so much is a visual learner. Images created in the learning process were mostly connected with either example sentences (imagining a man jumping a parachute because it is mentioned in the example sentence) or with the idiom itself (imagining a train leaving a train station for the idiom *kiss something goodbye* or a man standing on an isolated island, away from others for *keep somebody or something at bay*). Using imagery in learning idioms has been a popular research topic lately. It is based on the fact that many idioms are not totally noncompositional but their meaning can be inferred from the cognitive metaphors underlying them. There is an assumption that analysing idioms and their constituent parts in terms of those cognitive metaphors makes the understanding of those idioms easier because it makes a relationship between the literal meaning of constituents and figurative meaning of idioms clearer. However, the results of the present study indicate that learners do not rely on this strategy much. Another issue here has to do with whether these images are images of literal or figurative meaning (Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1995). It should be noted that idioms in this study were not analysed in this manner. Nevertheless, based on the images students mentioned, it can be concluded that they did not make a lot of use of figurative meaning. Their images were occasionally not even connected with the idiom itself or its constituents, but an example sentence containing it. When they were connected with the idiom, images were mostly based on one constituent part. On the other hand, the result may have been different and this strategy would have been used more if the students were introduced to the concept of conceptual metaphors and its benefits for learning idioms.

It is also interesting that the idiom on which *using keywords* was used most often is *too much of a good thing* and that is due to the example sentence which mentions chocolate. As a result, the students connected this idiom with chocolate and while trying to memorize or recall it, they simply said the keyword.

Making associations in general was not a popular strategy among the students. It was used only on a couple of idioms and by a few students. Among the three kinds of associations mentioned, *associating with mass media* was the most common. However, it was almost entirely used on only one idiom; *take its toll on somebody or something*. The students connected it with either a song or a TV show. This would indicate that this idiom is present in the popular culture whose devoted consumers the participants of this study are, so it should have been known to them before. However, not one of them wrote its correct meaning in the

pre-test and it was also the idiom which most students did not know in the recall test. Additionally, one student mentions that she pays special attention to that:

“Ja uvijek u filmovima slušam puno idioma pa kad na satu spomenemo neki novi, ja ga pokušam povezati s nekim filmom i onda ga se tako sjećam.” (Student 12)

Associating with personal experience was mostly associated with *kick up a fuss* and the students had a picture of their parents in a similar situation. Although it was not used frequently, some students mention this as a very important strategy for learning idioms:

“Ja to pokušavam povezati s nekim svojim osobnim stvarima iz života što radim sada ili što sam radio ili ću tek raditi ili općenito nekom situacijom u životu i tako mi je nekako najlakše zapamtiti.” (Student 13)

Grouping was used only once and it was done strictly based on a physical appearance of idioms. The student spread the learning cards on the table and divided them into two groups, longer and shorter idioms without at least trying to get the idea of their linguistic features. Again, even though they did not use it during the learning task, some students mention it as one of the strategies they use at home:

“Inače si prvo uvijek tako grupiram jer drugačije ne mogu, pogotovo ako ih ima puno.” (Student 12)

The most commonly used *cognitive strategy* was *getting the idea quickly*, i.e. quickly reading the example sentences in order to get the idea about the idiom. This strategy was used by almost all students and on almost all idioms. Only one student did not use it at all, and two students did not use it on one and two idioms respectively. These data show that when learning idioms students highly rely on the context. For the majority of them, the next step was trying to guess the meaning of the idioms based on the sentences provided and used meaning and translation as a last resort. Of course, some of them simply read the sentences and proceeded further to the meaning and translation. Of *additional resources* (provided on the learning cards), *using meaning* was used by more students (all 13) as opposed to 12 students who *used translation* but it was used more frequently than meaning. The meaning was written first on the learning cards and the assumption was that students usually read everything in the order of the appearance so they would first read the meaning and then proceed to the translation. As a consequence there would be either approximately an equal number of meaning and translation use, or the meaning would be used more often. However,

the assumption proved to be wrong because the students relied more on the translation. Translations were taken from a bilingual dictionary so this could also be considered as using a bilingual dictionary which again concurs with the results obtained in previous research done on vocabulary acquisition (Schmitt, 1997; Kudo, 1999, etc.) Thus, a bilingual dictionary is important in both vocabulary and idiom acquisition. Students also mentioned the translation during interviews:

“Pa većinom tražim prijevod na hrvatski, a nekad ako me nešto baš zaintrigira, onda i na engleskom da bolje shvatim o čemu je riječ.” (Student 12)

The importance of mother tongue could also be visible in the fact that the most common way of repeating an idiom is rehearsing an idiom and its translation. That is, the students tried to memorize a new idiom by constantly repeating an idiom followed by its Croatian translation.

Another strategy that was used a lot among the students is *testing*. This strategy is in fact the main way of repeating idioms they have learnt. It consists of covering an idiom, its meaning or translation, and based on the uncovered parts trying to recall the covered part. The most frequent combination is saying an idiom and trying to recall the translation, which again proves the importance of translation for learning idioms. Translation in mother tongue is not just widely used only when it is already provided; the students also try to *translate the idioms* on their own, before turning the cards around. Very often, they try to guess the *translation* simply based on the example sentences or even merely on the idiom itself. On the other hand, *translating a sentence* was not a popular strategy; only four students used it for translating seven sentences. In contrast, *paraphrasing* is in the top five cognitive strategies. However, despite the frequent usage, the situation is more complex. There are two groups of ‘users’ of this strategy. On the one hand, there are students who used it once or twice, and on the other hand there are those who used it as many as 18 times, that is, sometimes more than once on one idiom. So, although a total number of nine students used this strategy 69 times, it is in fact preferred and regularly used by four of them. Next to *testing*, *rehearsing* is the most common way of repetition. Besides previously mentioned *rehearsing of idiom and its translation* which is undoubtedly the most frequent rehearsing strategy, *rehearsing an idiom* and *rehearsing an idiom and its meaning* also have a wide usage. As with translating a sentence, *rehearsing a sentence* or *an idiom and a sentence* are not used by many students; only four and three students used these two strategies. Rehearsing is a technique of rote learning which again shows that memorization remains a very important strategy in learning idioms. So, despite the new discoveries of the nature of idioms, learners still rely on cognitively simpler strategies.

Even though all students had a paper and a pencil at their disposal and were free to make any kind of notes, only one student *took notes* while learning. He used it with all of the idioms. He made some notes, paraphrased the idioms, and explained them in a way understandable to him. Once he went through all the learning cards, he used only his notes for practice and consolidation. Furthermore, he is aware that for him that was an important strategy for learning idioms:

“Volim sam svoje definicije pisati jer onda si tako bolje predočim.” (Student 13)

Again, some other students also mention that they usually use this strategy when studying at home but did not use it during this particular task:

“Obično ako mi neki idiom nije jasan ili ga ne mogu nikako zapamtiti, onda ga zapišem i napišem prijevod na hrvatski ili neki primjer.” (Student 8)

“Evo baš smo prošle godine radili food idioms i onda sam si ja napisala te idioms, značenje i rečenicu na papire i tak to učila i skužila sam da mi tako najbrže ide.” (Student 4)

The least frequently used *cognitive strategy* was *using dictionary*. All students could use a monolingual English dictionary and bilingual English-Croatian dictionary if found necessary but only one student accepted the offer and sought help from a monolingual dictionary. However, this was due to the fact that the information provided on the learning cards was taken from those dictionaries and learners have been familiar with that. However, the students mentioned using those dictionaries at home:

“Kad čitam, uglavnom fantastiku, i onda naiđem na idiom za koji nisam prije čula i onda uglavnom probam skontati iz konteksta, a onda ako mi stvarno nešto ne uspije, onda odem pogledati iz Webstera.” (Student 7)

The group of *compensation strategies* consists only of two strategies which both involve *guessing the meaning*. One of them consists of *guessing the meaning using non-linguistic clues*, i.e. the context provided. So, students read the example sentences which here serve as a context, and based on the information they get, then try to guess the meaning of the idiom. Some students continued guessing until they came up with the correct answer, while the majority tried once and if they did not succeed, gave up and turned to meaning or translation. In the conversation about their learning habits and strategies which accompanied

the learning task, the majority of students emphasized that context helps them the most, and that they usually try to figure out the meaning of idioms from it because it provides them with more information:

“Meni iskreno je najbolje baš ovako samo kad imam rečenicu i upotrebu u rečenici. Mislim taj idiom upotrebljen u rečenici, ostalo mi čak ni ne treba. Ovako najbolje učim.” (Student 3)

When learning a meaning or a translation, they do not get the full ‘view’ of the idiom. They are aware that idioms are different from single words and thus require different approach. Thus, when they see it used in a sentence they are able to make up sentences of their own and manipulate it better:

“Kad učim idiome onda mi kontekst većinom pomaže jer ja razumijem sve te pojedinačne riječi, ali idiomi imaju drugačije značenje i onda po kontekst vidim što bi trebali značiti i kako bi ih se moglo upotrijebiti.” (Student 2)

It should also be taken into account that the context provided here were two single glossed sentences unrelated to each other and the benefits of context use might have been greater if the idioms had been provided in a broader context. Also, many students combined this strategy with the social strategy of asking for clarification and verification, thus the possibility of learning a wrongly assumed idiom meaning was minimized. Hence, even though learners benefit a lot from guessing from context, if they do not have anyone to correct their wrong assumption, there is a great danger that the context only does damage to the learning process.

Another guessing strategy involves *using linguistic clues*. When applying this strategy, the students, immediately after seeing the idiom, try to guess its meaning. However, it was rarely used; only eight times by four students, five of which by the same student. Here, the students tried to guess the meaning of an idiom from the meaning of its constituent parts. Even though with some more compositional idioms this is possible, it still remains pretty hard. Also, in a conversation about idioms, the students mentioned this inability to figure out the meaning of idioms from the meaning of its constituent parts as the main characteristic of idioms which distinguishes them from other lexical units. Thus, the majority of them did not even try to use this strategy.

Finally, even though the students used only one *social strategy*, it was very frequently used. *Asking questions for clarification or verification* was used 101 times by 11 students and it is the second most frequent strategy employed in learning idioms. As was already mentioned, it is almost regularly preceded by some other strategy where the students try to figure out the meaning based on some linguistic or non-linguistic clues and then expect some

feedback. One student used it 34 times. She was really struggling to discover the meaning on her own, without additional resources so she was constantly asking questions:

Student 10: Drop somebody a line...Jel mogu prvo pokušat pogodit?

Researcher: Može.

Student 10: To je nekome postaviti neki uvjet?

Researcher: Ne.

Student 10 [reading the first example sentence]: 'If you got a minute to spare, you could always drop her a line.' Nekoga podučiti, ili?

Researcher: Nije ni to.

Student 10 [reading the second example sentence]: 'We really do like hearing from you, so drop us a line...' Je li to kao baciti bubu u uho?

Researcher: Ne.

Student 10 [continues reading the sentence]: '...and let us know how you are.' Dopustiti nekome?

Researcher: Ne.

Student 10: Moram onda pogledati značenje. Aha, send a short letter to sb.

(Student 10)

Yet, all 13 participants state that they do not have problems with asking questions in the classroom when they have problems with understanding something. They do not feel afraid or ashamed and they do not fear that their question might be considered stupid:

"Pa mislim da je bolje da pitam nekoga, nego da lupetam pa ispadnem još gluplja."

(Student 4)

They usually ask their classmates for help and if their friends cannot help them then they ask the teacher. Some say that it helps them the most when they ask a question aloud so that the whole class can hear it and then everyone tries to answer it so they work out the answer together:

"Ja uglavnom učim sama, ali mi kod idioma ili tako nekih izreka pomaže kad svi skupa. Naprimjer, netko ne zna pa pita nekog drugog i ta dvojica odgovaraju i onda se još netko udruži i svi dodaju pa tako dođemo do točnog odgovora." (Student 12)

Also, sometimes their friends' help can be more beneficial, because they use analogies which are closer to the student:

"Nekad jednostavno će mi moj prijatelj, na nekakav meni bolji i bliži način pojasniti, nego što će to profesor moći iz knjige iščitati." (Student 8)

It can be seen from this that even though only one social strategy appeared in the study, social strategies are very much present in the classroom and represent a very important part of the learning process. Taking this into account, every teacher should encourage cooperation among his/her students even when that might cause a chaotic situation in the classroom. We can see that the students like working with others so teachers should not quiet them down as soon as someone asks a question.

When asked about their previous experience with idioms, the students said that they hardly mentioned them before this year. Some even said that they only recently heard the term. They encountered them in texts before, but not much attention was paid to them.

4.3.1.3 Combining strategies

There are some frequent patterns of combining strategies. After strategies which in some way involve trying to figure out the idiom meaning the students usually reached for asking for clarification or verification. Thus, both of the guessing strategies are usually followed by this social strategy because learners want to check if their assumptions were correct:

“Take your life in your hands. To sigurno znači preuzeti kontrolu nad svojim životom. Jel tako?” (Student 11)

“Take the trouble to do sth. ‘She didn’t even take the trouble to find out how to spell my name.’ To znači da se uloži više truda da se nešto napravi?” (Student 9)

Next, translating strategy also precedes asking for clarification and verification:

“On the mend. My leg is definitely on the mend now. To bi trebalo značiti na rubu ili tako nešto. Jel tako?” (Student 3)

Finally, paraphrasing also requires some feedback:

“Dakle, be at your wits end znači to be so occupied by some problem that you don’t know what to do next. To si ja onda nekim svojim riječima objasnim. Jesam dobro skontala?” (Student 6)

This combination of strategies would be possible in the classroom setting or at home in a group study, but not when studying alone. In that case, the students would either have to get their feedback from other sources, such as a dictionary. Unfortunately, the majority of them mentioned that they simply acquire the meaning of an unknown idiom from the context, assume that they guessed correctly and remember that meaning, which may not be correct:

“Ako stvarno nisam sigurna onda baš gledam značenje ili prijevod, ali uglavnom pokušavam shvatit iz konteksta.” (Student 7)

“Uglavnom se više oslanjam na kontekst. Jedino ako neki baš ne znam onda tek pogledm prijevod ili nešto.”(Student 11)

Student 10: “Većinom si ja to sama pokušam interpretirat.”

Researcher: “Provjeravaš li onda je lit a interpretacija točna?”

Student 10: “Pa ne jer većinom pogodim.”

(Student 10)

Also, sometimes it is not possible to make a distinction between two strategies so the same thing can be counted as two or more strategies:

“Aha, take its toll on sb/sth ... ‘The civil war has taken its toll on both sides.’ To je onda kako bih rekao, uzeti danak.” (Student 11)

Here we have guessing intelligently using other clues because the student is trying to figure out the meaning from the context, i.e. example sentence, but it is also translation strategy.

Similarly, three strategies may appear at once: again guessing intelligently using other clues, translating and paraphrasing:

“Znači, take your life in your hand. You’re taking your life in your hand just by crossing the road here. ‘Every time you go parachuting, you’re taking your life in your hands.’ Aha, znači taking your life in your hand u smislu stavljáš svoj život u svoje ruke, znači sam si odgovoran za svoje postupke i za ono što će ti se dogoditi.” (Student 4)

4.3.1.4 A note on research methodology

When considering the results of the study, the learning task and learning conditions need to be taken into account. This was not a normal learning situation for learners. In a conversation about their learning habits, some learners mentioned that they prefer studying alone in silence, others said they listen to music while studying. Here, the only possible way was to talk aloud about every step in the learning process.

The presence of the researcher and the recorder, as well as the fact that the students’ did not have any training in the think-aloud procedure, may have also influenced the results. The students named some of the strategies which are usually part of their learning but did not use

those here (grouping, taking notes, etc.) They probably did not mention everything what went on in their minds while performing the task because:

- 1) they were not conscious of the strategies used,
- 2) they did not identify it as a strategy,
- 3) they did not find it important.

Similarly, some strategies would not appear as often as they did in the study. For example, if they had been learning those idioms at home alone, asking for clarification and verification would not appear so much simply because the students would not have anyone to turn to for help.

These limitations could be overcome by using learning diaries where learners would keep them as and when they study.

4.3.2 Recall tests

4.3.2.1 Recall test 1

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the results of the first recall test. The mean was 8.4615, with a standard deviation of 1.33012. The minimum score obtained on the test was 5 points and the maximum was 10 points.

Table 4: Recall test 1

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Recall test 1 | 13 | 5.00 | 10.00 | 8.4615 | 1.33012 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 13 | | | | |

The idioms the students could recall were *take your life in your hands* and *too much of a good thing* which were answered correctly by 12 out of 13 students each. Next, *keep somebody/something at bay* and *on the mend* closely follow by 10 out of 13 correct answers. Finally, *take the trouble to do something* yielded 10 out of 10 correct answers. On the other hand, *take its toll* was acquired by only 6 out of 13 students. *Put the world to rights* and *put your foot in it* follow it with 9 out of 13 possible correct answers (see table 5).

Table 5: Idioms in the Recall test 1

| | Idiom | Number of students learning the idiom | Number of students who knew the idiom | Number of students who knew the idiom (%) |
|-----|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. | Take your life in your hands | 13 | 12 | 92.3 |
| 2. | Too much of a good thing | 13 | 12 | 92.3 |
| 3. | Keep sb/sth at bay | 13 | 10 | 76.9 |
| 4. | On the mend | 13 | 10 | 76.9 |
| 5. | Put your foot in it | 13 | 9 | 69.2 |
| 6. | Put the world to rights | 13 | 9 | 69.2 |
| 7. | Take its toll | 13 | 6 | 46.1 |
| 8. | Take the trouble to do sth | 10 | 10 | 100 |
| 9. | Kick up a fuss | 10 | 9 | 90 |
| 10. | Drop sb a line | 9 | 9 | 100 |
| 11. | Kiss sth goodbye | 6 | 6 | 100 |
| 12. | Answer a description | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| 13. | Fit like a glove | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| 14. | Be at your wits end | 1 | 1 | 100 |

4.3.2.2 Recall test 2

As expected, the mean recall of idioms on the second test, undertaken three month after the learning task was lower, only 3.9231, with the standard deviation of 1.84669. The minimum score on this test was 1 point, while the maximum was 7 points (see Table 6).

Table 6: Recall test 2

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| Recall test 2 | 13 | 1.00 | 7.00 | 3.9231 | 1.84669 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 13 | | | | |

Idioms the least number of students knew were *put the world to rights*, *take your life in your hands* and *put your foot in it*. The first of them none of the students could recall while the other two only one student out of 13 knew. On the other hand, idioms which students

could recall the best were *keep somebody/something at bay* which 9 out of 13 students knew, *too much of a good thing* with 7 out of 13 correct answers and *kick up a fuss* which 7 out of 10 students knew (see Table 7).

Table 7: Idioms in the Recall test 2

| | Idiom | Number of students learning the idiom | Number of students who knew the idiom | Number of students who knew the idiom (%) |
|-----|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. | Keep sb/sth at bay | 13 | 9 | 69.2 |
| 2. | Too much of a good thing | 13 | 7 | 53.8 |
| 3. | Take its toll (on sb/sth) | 13 | 5 | 38.5 |
| 4. | On the mend | 13 | 3 | 23.1 |
| 5. | Take your life in your hands | 13 | 1 | 7.7 |
| 6. | Put your foot in it | 13 | 1 | 7.7 |
| 7. | Put the world to rights | 13 | 0 | 0 |
| 8. | Kick up a fuss | 10 | 7 | 70 |
| 9. | Take the trouble to do sth | 10 | 5 | 50 |
| 10. | Drop sb a line | 9 | 5 | 55.5 |
| 11. | Kiss sth goodbye | 6 | 6 | 100 |
| 12. | Answer a description | 2 | 1 | 50 |
| 13. | Fit sb/sth like a glove | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| 14. | Be at your wits' end | 1 | 0 | 0 |

Idiom students acquired the least is *take your life in your hands*. While in the first test only one out of 13 students did not answer it correctly, in the second one the situation is completely the opposite; only one student out of 13 did answer it correctly. The students' answers on the second recall test were similar to the ones from the pre-test which means that they did not rely on the information provided in the learning task, but on the previous knowledge and simply guessed the meaning.

On the other hand, *keep sb/sth at bay* is the best acquired idiom. The number of students who could recall its meaning was higher in the second than in the first test. When we compare the strategies used with these idioms we can see that there is hardly any difference in

the number of strategies. The total number of strategies is the same and the variety of strategies is slightly greater with *keep sb/sth at bay*; 18 as opposed to 17 different strategies used with *take your life in your hands*. However, the greatest difference was found in the use of strategies of using imagery and using keyword which are more frequent with *keep sb/sth at bay*, as well as with *too much of a good thing* which is the second best idiom acquired. These results indicate that the use of more cognitively complex strategies results in a better and longer retention of knowledge. Thus, language teachers should encourage learners to use more memory strategies while learning idioms.

In order to test whether the difference in the mean scores on Recall test 1 and Recall test 2 is statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. As Table 8 shows, there was a statistically significant difference ($t(7.769), p < .001$).

Table 8: Paired Samples Test

| | Paired Differences | | | | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|---|---------|-------|----|-----------------|
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
| | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Pair 1 Recall test 1 - Recall test 2 | 4.53846 | 2.10616 | .58414 | 3.26572 | 5.81120 | 7.769 | 12 | .000 |

When we compare the results from both recall tests, we can see that the average drop of score on the second recall test was 53% (see Table 9). Only one student maintained the high score with the drop of only 12.5%. There is also one student whose score on the second recall test was 89% worse. She had 9 point on the first test and only 1 point on the second. The scores of the rest of the participants also decreased and the drop ranges from 29% to 78%. These results prove that idioms are indeed difficult to acquire and need special attention in the classroom. Language teachers cannot rely on incidental learning and assume that learners will acquire idioms after encountering them in texts, even if the teacher provides them with the meaning. Also, idioms cannot be simply memorized, without some deeper consideration. It takes too much time and effort, and the knowledge is not durable.

(For more information see Appendix 6)

Table 9: Comparisson of Recall test 1 and Recall test 2

| | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5 | S6 | S7 | S8 | S9 | S10 | S11 | S12 | S13 | TOTAL |
|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Score on Recall test 1 | 5 | 7 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 10 | 10 | |
| Score on Recall test 2 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 4 | |
| Average drop of score on Recall test 2 | 60% | 29% | 33% | 56% | 12.5% | 62.5% | 33% | 78% | 78% | 89% | 50% | 50% | 60% | 53% |

4.3.2.3 Correlation analysis

Correlation analysis using Spearman rank order correlation coefficient showed that there is statistically significant correlation ($r=0.620$) at the 0.05 level between the number of idioms recalled on the recall test 1 and the total number of strategies used. These results indicate that the number of strategies students use while learning idioms influences the success on the recall test, i.e. the more strategies students use, the more successful they are.

Table 10: Correlational analysis

| | | | Recall test 1 | Recall test 2 |
|----------------|---|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Spearman's rho | The number of different strategies used | Correlation Coefficient | .493 | .021 |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .087 | .946 |
| | | N | 13 | 13 |
| | The frequency of strategy use | Correlation Coefficient | .620* | .064 |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .024 | .835 |
| | | N | 13 | 13 |

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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

The correlation, however, did not appear on the recall test 2. Similarly, correlation analysis did not reveal any relationship between the number of different strategies used and scores on either of the recall tests (see Table 10).The lack of greater correlation between the success and

the strategies is probably due to the small number of participants which did not permit the more complex statistical analysis.

4.3.3 Idiom learning strategies of successful and unsuccessful learners

Even though the correlation analysis did not show a statistically significant relationship between the score on the recall test and the strategies used, when we compare the students with the least strategies used and students with the most strategies used, we can see that the student with the least strategies used also achieved the lowest score on both recall tests and vice versa.

Student 1 who achieved the worst score on both tests used only three different strategies and used it 36 times. He simply read the meaning and translation of idioms and repeated the idioms a couple of times. He did not look at the context at all, nor did he ask for clarification or verification. His goal was obviously not a deeper understanding of idioms but simply placing them in a short term memory for the purpose of the recall test. He even said himself that he usually studies ‘for the moment’, i.e. learns something just as much it is necessary to be able to do the task:

“Ja obično učim za trenutak, da mi ostane do testa.” (Student 1)

Also, he provided all the answers in Croatian.

On the other hand, *Student 12*, one of the students with the highest score on the recall test 1 used a larger number and a greater variety of ILS: 16 different strategies, 99 times. She used all the available resources, made associations, used imagery and keywords, placed idioms in a new context, asked for clarification and verification, etc. She provided answers in Croatian, but gave some example sentences in English as well. However, she did not achieve the highest score on the second recall test. The reason for that could be the fact that during the learning task she relied a lot on various ways of simple rehearsal which is a rote learning technique.

Similarly, *Student 13*, the other student with the maximum score on the recall test 1 also used the greatest variety of strategies: 17 different strategies. During the think-aloud, as well as an interview following the learning task, he showed that he is aware which strategies suit him the best and which are the most effective. However, he also did not maintain the highest score on the second recall test. Again, the reason could be using a lot of rehearsing, i.e. rote learning. Also, even though the researcher emphasized that they have as much time as they wanted, the reality was different. The student mentioned that he likes to take brakes while studying and here that was not possible.

Only one student, *Student 5*, managed to maintain approximately the same score in both recall tests. Her score dropped for only 12.5% on the second recall test. Even though she did not achieve the highest score in the first test, she did it in the second. She was able to recall the idioms she learned during the learning task three months later. This means that she really acquired those idioms. When we analyse the strategies she used as well as the whole learning process, we see that she relied on the context a lot as well as putting the idioms into a new context, i.e. she tried to acquire productive mastery of idioms. Furthermore, she is completely aware of her learning strategies and is able to describe each step she takes:

“Evo, take your life in your hands naprimjer. Uzela bih tu rečenicu ‘Your take your life in your hands just crossing the road here.’ Dakle, to je nekakva opasnost izgleda iz te rečenice. I onda bih si ja to nekako prevela, dakle, staviti se u opasnost, dovesti se u opasnost. Zatim to ponovila nekoliko puta i smislila si neku svoju rečenicu za primjer. Evo, npr. Yesterday I took my life in my hands when there was a robbery in the store and I tried to help. I tako bih ja to zapamtila.” (Student 5)

Thus, we can conclude that, just like with the single lexical items, successful learners of idioms use a lot of different strategies. Furthermore, they are aware of the strategies they use. Their goal is not ‘learning for the moment’; just to be able to do the task. Instead, they use strategies which foster more durable knowledge.

For a complete list of students’ learning profiles see Appendix 6.

5. Conclusion

Even though idioms are considered to be essential for mastering a nativelike proficiency of a second language, they are also viewed as the main problem for L2 learners. Regardless, idioms have been highly neglected in the SLA research. The great majority of research in the field of vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies has concentrated on single words, while idioms and other fixed expressions were marginalized. Thus, a need to examine language learning strategies used in learning idioms arose.

The results of this study obtained by means of an interview in which think-aloud protocol was used revealed that the most frequently used ILS were cognitive strategies, while the least used ones were memory strategies. Just as with the single lexical items, using mother tongue (using bilingual dictionaries, translating to L1) and various techniques of rote learning are also the most popular strategies for learning idioms. Despite the findings that creating visual images enables easier understanding of idioms and results in greater gains in knowledge, learners still mostly use ‘traditional’ strategies which rely on the assumption that idioms are noncompositional and cannot be analysed in any way but must be simply memorized. The analysis also revealed that the more complex strategies result in a longer retention of idioms which was proved in the second recall test.

Learners are aware of the complex nature of idioms and that their acquisition requires a different approach from vocabulary learning. As a consequence, they highly value the use of context. However, even though there are undoubtable benefits of context, it at the same time represents the great danger. Here, learners were able to ask the researcher for clarification which reduced the possibility of acquiring a wrongly assumed meaning. However, when learning at home, and where there is no one to turn to for help, using context may not be so effective. As already mentioned, social strategies also play an important role in learning idioms. Learners find it useful to ask other participants of the learning process for help. Moreover, they highly value the group work and the help of their friends when learning idioms.

The comparison of successful (the ones who achieved high scores on the recall test) and unsuccessful learners of idioms revealed some differences. It showed that successful learners use a greater number and a greater variety of strategies. Also, once again the importance of

context emerged because the unsuccessful learners did not consider seeing idioms in an appropriate context a useful strategy. They simply tried to memorize the idiom's translation. Successful learners on the other hand, not only used the provided context but also tried to put idioms in a new context, making up sentences of their own which resulted in a mastery of idioms which they were able to recall three months after performing the learning task. Also, successful learners are aware of their learning strategies.

Taking these findings into account, language teachers should keep encouraging learners to develop existing ILS, as well as constantly present them with the new ones. Also, they could introduce learners to the concepts of cognitive metaphors and how those can help them in the acquisition of idioms. Also, more group work should be included where learners would work together in discovering the meanings of idioms.

The study was conducted on a small number of participants so it was hard to make any generalizations. In order to get more reliable results, it should be repeated on a larger sample. Also, the students did not receive sufficient training in the think-aloud protocol, which might have also influenced the results. If the students had been given more information about the procedure, or able to see a protocol done before, they might have given more information. Moreover, in order to get more accurate results, in addition to think-aloud protocols, learning diaries could be used.

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7. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Rebecca Oxford's (1990) Classification of Language Learning Strategies

| | | | |
|--|----------------------------|--|---|
| D I R E C T S T R A T E G I E S | MEMORY STRATEGIES | Creating mental linkages | Grouping |
| | | | Associating/elaborating |
| | | | Placing new words into a context |
| | | Applying images and sounds | Using imagery |
| | | | Semantic mapping |
| | | | Using keywords |
| | | | Representing sounds in memory |
| | | Reviewing well | Structured reviewing |
| | Employing action | Using physical response or sensation | |
| | | Using mechanical techniques | |
| | COGNITIVE STRATEGIES | Practicing | Repeating |
| | | | Formally practicing with sounds and writing systems |
| | | | Recognizing and using formulas and patterns |
| | | | Recombining |
| | | | Practicing naturalistically |
| | | Receiving and sending messages | Getting the idea quickly |
| | | | Using resources for receiving and sending messages |
| | | Analyzing and reasoning | Reasoning deductively |
| | | | Analyzing expressions |
| | | | Analyzing contrastively (across languages) |
| | | | Translating |
| | | Creating structure for input and output | Transforming |
| | | | Taking notes |
| | | | Summarizing |
| | COMPENSATION STRATEGIES | Guessing intelligently | Highlighting |
| | | | Using linguistic clues |
| Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing | | Using other clues | |
| | | Switching to the mother tongue | |
| | | Getting help | |

| | | | |
|--|-----------------------------|---|---|
| | | | Using mime or gesture |
| | | | Avoiding communication partially or totally |
| | | | Selecting the topic |
| | | | Adjusting or approximating the message |
| | | | Coining words |
| | | | Using a circumlocution or synonym |
| I N D I R E C T S T R A T E G I E S | METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES | Centering your learning | Overviewing and linking with already known material |
| | | | Paying attention |
| | | | Delaying speech production to focus on listening |
| | | Arranging and planning your learning | Finding out about language learning |
| | | | Organising |
| | | | Setting goals and objectives |
| | | | Identifying the purpose of a language task (purposeful listening/reading/speaking/writing) |
| | | | Planning for a language task |
| | | Evaluating your learning | Seeking practice opportunities |
| | Self-monitoring | | |
| | AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES | Lowering your anxiety | Self-evaluating |
| | | | Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation |
| | | | Using music |
| | | Encouraging yourself | Using laughter |
| | | | Making positive statements |
| Taking risks wisely | | | |
| Taking your emotional temperature | | Rewarding yourself | |
| | | Listening to your body | |
| | | Using checklists | |
| | | Writing a language learning diary | |
| SOCIAL STRATEGIES | | Asking questions | Discussing your feelings with someone else |
| | | | Asking for clarification or verification |
| | Asking for correction | | |
| Cooperating with others | Cooperating with peers | | |

| | | | |
|--|--|-------------------------|---|
| | | | Cooperating with proficient users of the new language |
| | | Empathizing with others | Developing cultural understanding |
| | | | Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings |

Appendix 2 – Pre-test

NAME: _____

GENDER: **M** **F** _____

(circle only one)

Please read these idioms carefully and write down their meanings.

1. Have a (good) head for heights _____

2. Take your life in your hands _____

3. Kick up a fuss _____

4. Hold your breath _____

5. Drop somebody a line _____

6. Kick the habit _____

7. Be/keep/stay in touch (with somebody) _____

8. Keep sb/sth at bay _____

9. Put the world to rights _____

10. Be/put yourself in sb's shoes _____

11. Fit (somebody) like a glove _____

12. Hit the roof _____

13. Have a head for something _____

14. Answer a description (of sb/sth) _____

15. Suck sb/sth dry _____

16. Think twice about sth / about doing sth _____

17. Take its toll (on sb/sth) _____

18. Take the trouble to do something _____

19. Be at your wits' end _____

20. Too much of a good thing _____

21. Have second thoughts _____

22. On the mend _____

23. Have a good head on your shoulders _____

24. Kiss something goodbye _____

25. Put your foot in it _____

Kick up a fuss

Our food was cold so my father kicked up a fuss and refused to pay the service charge.

He kicked up a tremendous fuss about having to wait.

MEANING:

to complain loudly about sth

TRANSLATION:

dići galamu, uzvitlati prašinu, uskomešati se

Appendix 4 – Recall test

NAME:

Please read these idioms carefully and explain their meanings.

- 1. Take your life in your hands _____

- 2. Put the world to rights _____

- 3. Put your foot in it _____

- 4. Keep sb/sth at bay _____

- 5. On the mend _____

- 6. Too much of a good thing _____

- 7. Take its toll (on sb/sth) _____

- 8. Kick up a fuss _____

- 9. Drop sb a line _____

- 10. Take the trouble to do sth _____

Appendix 5 – Complete list of strategies for learning idioms

| | | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------------|--|------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|---|--|--|
| D I R E C T S T R A T E G I E S | MEMORY STRATEGIES | Creating mental linkages | Grouping | | | | | |
| | | | Associating | With personal experience | | | | |
| | | | | With previous knowledge | | | | |
| | | With mass media (songs, movies, TVshows) | | | | | | |
| | | Placing idioms into a new context | | | | | | |
| | Applying images and sounds | Using imagery | | | | | | |
| | | Using keywords | | | | | | |
| | COGNITIVE STRATEGIES | Practicing | | Repeating | Simple rehearsal | Rehearsing an idiom | | |
| | | | | | | Rehearsing a sentence | | |
| | | | | | | Rehearsing an idiom and its translation | | |
| | | | | | | Rehearsing an idiom and its meaning | | |
| | | | | | | Rehearsing an idiom and an example sentence | | |
| | | Testing | | | | | | |
| | | Receiving and sending messages | | Getting the idea quickly | | | | |
| | | | | Using resources | Using meaning | | | |
| Using translation | | | | | | | | |
| Using dictionary | | | | | | | | |
| Analyzing and reasoning | | Translating | Translating an idiom | | | | | |
| | | | Translating a sentence | | | | | |
| | | Paraphrase | | | | | | |

| | | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|---|--|
| | | Creating structure for input and output | Taking notes |
| | COMPENSATION STRATEGIES | Guessing intelligently | Using linguistic clues |
| | | | Using other clues (simple use of context) |
| INDIRECT STRATEGIES | SOCIAL STRATEGIES | Asking questions | Asking for clarification or verification |

Appendix 6 – Learners' learning profiles

| STRATEGY | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5 | S6 | S7 | S8 | S9 | S10 | S11 | S12 | S13 | TOTAL |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| MEMORY STRATEGIES | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Grouping | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| Associating with personal experience | - | 2 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | - | 3 |
| Associating with previous knowledge | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 2 | - | 2 |
| Associating with mass media (songs, movies, TV shows) | - | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Placing idioms into a new context | - | - | - | - | 9 | - | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | - | 3 | 1 | 16 |
| Using imagery | - | 2 | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | 1 | - | - | 11 | - | 15 |
| Using keywords | - | 1 | 1 | - | - | 1 | - | - | - | 3 | - | 4 | 2 | 12 |
| TOTAL | 0 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 9 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 0 | 22 | 5 | 53 |
| COGNITIVE STRATEGIES | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Rehearsing an idiom | 6 | - | 11 | - | - | 1 | - | 1 | 2 | - | - | 13 | 3 | 37 |
| Rehearsing an example sentence | - | 3 | 4 | - | 3 | - | - | - | - | 8 | - | - | - | 18 |
| Rehearsing an idiom and its translation | - | 11 | - | 11 | 1 | 1 | - | - | 10 | - | 1 | 9 | - | 44 |
| Rehearsing an idiom and its meaning | - | - | 10 | - | - | 1 | 1 | 10 | 1 | - | - | - | 11 | 34 |
| Rehearsing an idiom and an example sentence | - | 13 | - | 1 | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | - | 15 |
| Testing | - | 10 | 10 | - | - | 1 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 16 | 6 | 15 | 1 | 87 |
| Getting the idea quickly | - | 10 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 9 | 117 |
| Using meaning | 10 | 1 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 13 | 3 | 9 | 7 | 2 | 10 | 10 | 6 | 85 |
| Using translation | 20 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 16 | - | 8 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 12 | 5 | 91 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Using dictionary | - | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 1 |
| Translating an idiom | - | 3 | - | 6 | 6 | 5 | 10 | - | 7 | 13 | 7 | 1 | 6 | 64 |
| Translating a sentence | - | 2 | - | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | 3 | - | - | 1 | 7 |
| Paraphrase | - | 2 | 8 | - | - | 13 | 2 | - | 9 | 15 | 1 | 1 | 18 | 69 |
| Taking notes | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 10 | 10 |
| TOTAL | 36 | 58 | 72 | 35 | 26 | 61 | 37 | 48 | 58 | 70 | 37 | 71 | 70 | 679 |
| COMPENSATION STRATEGIES | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Guessing intelligently using linguistic clues | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | - | 5 | 1 | - | 1 | 8 |
| Guessing intelligently using non-linguistic clues | - | 10 | 8 | 10 | 7 | 1 | 10 | 7 | 10 | 9 | 9 | 1 | 5 | 87 |
| TOTAL | - | 10 | 8 | 10 | 7 | 1 | 10 | 8 | 10 | 14 | 10 | 1 | 6 | 95 |
| SOCIAL STRATEGIES | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Asking questions for clarification or verification | - | 5 | 1 | 11 | - | 12 | 10 | 1 | 7 | 34 | 9 | 5 | 6 | 101 |
| TOTAL | - | 5 | 1 | 11 | - | 12 | 10 | 1 | 7 | 34 | 9 | 5 | 6 | 101 |
| TOTAL NUMBER OF STRATEGIES USED | 36 | 78 | 82 | 56 | 42 | 76 | 59 | 57 | 77 | 123 | 56 | 99 | 87 | 928 |
| NUMBER OF DIFFERENT STRATEGIES USED | 3 | 15 | 11 | 8 | 9 | 13 | 11 | 9 | 13 | 15 | 10 | 16 | 17 | |
| SCORE ON RECALL TEST 1 | 5 | 7 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 10 | 10 | |
| SCORE ON RECALL TEST 2 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 4 | |