Summer 2017

Giving English Language Learners A Paddle: Idiom Usage In Two Undergraduate Texts

Michael John Heine
Hamline University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_cp

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Heine, Michael John, "Giving English Language Learners A Paddle: Idiom Usage In Two Undergraduate Texts" (2017). School of Education Student Capstone Projects. 38.
https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_cp/38

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at DigitalCommons@Hamline. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Education Student Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Hamline. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hamline.edu, lterveer01@hamline.edu.
GIVING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS A PADDLE: IDIOM USAGE IN TWO UNDERGRADUATE TEXTS

By
Michael John Heine

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English as a Second Language.

Hamline University
Saint Paul, Minnesota
August 2017

Capstone Project Facilitator: Maggie Struck
Content Reviewer: Bridget Erickson
When I was just out of high school, my family hosted a foreign exchange student from Germany. Our first meeting was a bit awkward and he seemed unsure of his English. Being a good host-brother and wanting to help him, I remember at some point during that initial time teaching him the meaning of some colorful forms of language including idioms. This appeared to greatly aide my new brother’s comfort level with the language. Maybe because of how he felt back then, one idiom in particular he really took a liking to and has never forgotten to this day, *up shit creek without a paddle*. This capstone project is dedicated to my German brother as well as to all English Language Learners that are in need of someone giving them a paddle.
“Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker”

(“That which doesn’t kill me, makes me stronger”)

-Friedrich Nietzsche
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my professor Maggie Struck for all of your constant words of encouragement and to my content reviewer Bridget Erickson for taking time out of her busy schedule to provide me with valuable advice and feedback. Thanks also to Boone in the Writing Center for his valuable help and guidance. Finally, a special thanks to Betsy Parrish who has been my unofficial advisor since I’ve been at Hamline and without whom I may have not made it this far.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction........................................................................................................9

  Prevalence of Idioms...........................................................................................................10

  Background of the Researcher............................................................................................11

  Role of the Researcher........................................................................................................12

  Guiding Questions...............................................................................................................13

  Summary and Overview of Chapters..................................................................................13

Chapter Two: Literature Review.............................................................................................15

  Chapter Overview...............................................................................................................15

  Defining Idioms..................................................................................................................15

  Typology of Idioms.............................................................................................................19

  The Spectrum of Idiomaticity..............................................................................................22

  Idiom Instruction in the Classroom.....................................................................................23

  Prior Studies on Idiom Frequency within a Corpus of Data.................................................24

  Gap in the Research............................................................................................................27

  Research Questions............................................................................................................27

  Summary..............................................................................................................................27

Chapter Three: Project Description.........................................................................................29

  Chapter Overview...............................................................................................................29

  Research Paradigm.............................................................................................................30

  Text Analysis......................................................................................................................31

  Project.................................................................................................................................32

  Summary..............................................................................................................................35
Chapter Four: Conclusions and Reflections

Chapter Overview

Project Findings

Links to Prior Research

Limitations of the Project

Pedagogical Implications

Personal Reflection

Conclusion

Appendix
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – Idiom Typology ................................................................. 22
Table 2 – Spectrum of Idiomaticity .................................................. 23
Table 3 – Idioms by Frequency of Occurrence ................................. 37
Table 4 – Idiom Variety ................................................................. 38
Table 5 – Phrasal Verb Forms ........................................................ 39
Table 6 – Idiom Categories ......................................................... 39
Table 7 – Idioms by Transparency .................................................. 40
Table 8 – Post-secondary ESL Idioms ............................................. 44
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“I want to learn idioms.” This is a request I often hear as an English instructor. I have come to realize that this specific request has almost the same general meaning for me as another statement English Language Learners (ELLs) make, “I want to improve my English.” Both of these statements require a much narrower definition. For the latter, I can ask questions of the student to get at his or her needs so as to be able to define what exactly about English they want to improve. For the former, I am often as stumped as the student. Which idioms should I teach? I cannot in any way teach them all. How do I know which ones to focus on? Are there some idioms that my post-secondary ELLs will more likely encounter? Like others, I deeply want to help students improve their language skills and feel that understanding idioms is essential in this regard (Guduru, 2012; Seidl & McMordie, 1978). It is with all of this in mind that I decided to undertake this project. My goal was to answer the question: What types of idioms are common in two undergraduate texts and how often do they occur?

As a teacher and a student of languages, I have experienced dealing with the difficulties of idioms from both perspectives. These experiences have taught me two main points that I think are important in regards to idioms. The first is that they are very difficult to learn and use correctly in another language. This is mainly due to their non-literal meaning, as well as the fact that they are made up of multiple words and need to be learned as a phrase (Bromley, 1984; Irujo, 1986). The second point is that when students can use idioms correctly in another language, they are perceived and perceive themselves as being much more fluent in that language (Fernando, 1996; Guduru, 2012; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). This has led me to the
conclusion that incorporating instruction on idiomatic expressions is essential in any classroom that attempts to focus at all on fluency. Working from this standpoint, I have come to learn that the main question is not whether or not to teach idioms, but rather which ones to teach.

The ELLs that I currently work with the most are adults in a post-secondary setting. Therefore, my primary goal is that of assisting these students with the learning of idioms. I want to know which idiomatic expressions they will most likely encounter when moving from ELL student to mainstream, undergraduate student. Other studies have focused mainly on either idioms used in spoken academic discourse or those specifically encountered in English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks (Alavi & Rajabpoor, 2015; Liu, 2003). The relative lack of research on idioms used in undergraduate texts creates the problem of not knowing which idioms to teach post-secondary ESL students before they begin to take general, freshman-level classes. This led me to consider analyzing texts that ELLs will likely encounter at a university or college after they have begun taking mainstream courses.

By analyzing these different undergraduate texts, I wanted to identify which idiomatic expressions occurred with the most frequency as well as find any patterns that might be evident. I also wanted to know if the study might reveal that certain types of idioms occur more often than others. My hope was that this could then assist ESL teachers when incorporating idiom instruction into classes that are often required for ELLs before they begin their certificate or degree programs. These teachers will be able to better allocate valuable class time to teaching idioms that they know their students will likely encounter when taking college courses.

Prevalence of Idioms
As both a student and teacher of languages, I have noticed the prevalence of idioms in speech and writing. Although they are by far much more common in the former, the written language does not mean the absence of idioms. In fact, it can be very difficult to both speak and write without utilizing some form of idiomatic language (Seidl & McMordie, 1978). I am not alone in my observations on the permeation of idioms in our everyday speech and writing. Cooper (1998) states that ELLs will inevitably encounter idioms in all aspects of interaction. Guduru (2012) even goes as far as to say that the prevalence of idioms in our language is common knowledge and that “a person's language proficiency level can be assessed based on his/her good grasp of idioms” (p. 1). I believe that idioms are so ingrained into a language that, if ELLs want to sound at all fluent, learning idioms becomes as important as learning any new vocabulary words.

**Background of the Researcher**

I did not become an ESL instructor until later in life. When I went back to school to complete my Bachelor’s Degree, I studied both German and Dutch. Those experiences made me realize my passion for language, and I eventually ended up teaching English at a private language school. My experiences as a language student not only awoke my passion for my own language, but also exposed me to some of the difficulties that learners have when struggling with a new language. One of the greatest of these difficulties is understanding and using idioms in another language.

As a second language learner, I did not really receive any explicit instruction on idioms while studying German for over three years at the university level. When I concluded my studies, I went to Germany for a summer and discovered that my second language skills were not nearly
as good as I had thought. My grammar was sufficient, but much of the vocabulary that I encountered, especially slang and idiomatic language, eluded me. After I returned, I made an intensive effort to learn idiomatic phrases in German. During my next trip there, my friends remarked at how much more fluent I sounded and assumed incorrectly that I had taken more German courses. They also poked fun at several idiomatic expressions I committed to memory that were either inappropriate or outdated. Therefore, I learned two things about idioms. They are important for comprehending a language better and sounding fluent; however, just memorizing ones at random from a book is probably not the best learning strategy.

I have seen my students face many of the same struggles with idioms. They do not know which ones they should be learning. I must admit that I do not necessarily know which ones I should be teaching them. Due to busy schedules, classroom time is very precious for both teachers and students. This means that if, as teachers, we are to spend time on a given topic, it must be important. For me, in an ESL environment, this means it should be something that my students will encounter and actually use in real life. In this sense, I approach teaching idioms in much the same way as any new lexical item. I would not teach random words related to something such as electrical engineering, unless I knew my students would likely use them in their day to day lives. In keeping with this philosophy, I want to be able to identify exactly which idiomatic expressions are the most common and warrant the expenditure of valuable class time. In addition to this, I also want to be able to share these findings with others in my profession in hopes of making their jobs easier.

**Role of the Researcher**
I currently occupy multiple different roles in ESL education. I am an instructor at a private language school in Minnesota where I mostly work one-on-one with students of all ages and skill levels. In addition, I am a private English tutor with clients also of various ages and levels. Finally, I also work at a technical college as a tutor and classroom assistant in several English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes with hopes of finding a full time teaching position in post-secondary ESL education. In all of these capacities, I am tasked with helping ELLs improve both their spoken as well as written language. Other than when I tutor my own clients, none of the classes include any kind of explicit instruction on idioms. This deficiency has become apparent when I have noticed many students trying to utilize idioms in both their speech and writing. The fact that they often struggle with both the syntax and the meaning of the idioms they encounter has made me realize the need for much more research and support in this area.

**Guiding Questions**

My previous experiences with language learning as well as my current position teaching post-secondary ELLs has caused me to identify several questions related to the teaching of idioms. Is there a concrete definition for an idiom and what types of different idioms exist? How common are idioms in undergraduate-level texts that many ELLs I work with may encounter when they begin their general classes? Are there certain types of idioms that occur more frequently than others in these texts, and can patterns of idiomatic usage in these texts be identified? Finally, how can information gained by researching idiom usage in these texts be used to inform idiom instruction within ESL classes in a post-secondary setting? All of these
questions are framed by the post-secondary ESL students I currently work with and it is with them in mind that I have structured this project.

**Summary and Overview of Chapters**

This project studies the use of idioms in two undergraduate-level texts to identify the frequency and typology of such idioms, in order to assist post-secondary ESL teachers in identifying idioms for instruction. This information is important because often teachers, such as I, are at a loss as to which idioms they should be teaching their students. There is a definite desire from ELLs to learn idioms and successful acquisition of these difficult phrases can help them sound much more fluent (Simpson & Mendis, 2003). I have experienced this increased perception of fluency when using idioms personally. My hope is that the findings from this project can be used by others when making pedagogical decisions about idioms in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and post-secondary ESL classrooms.

In Chapter one, I introduced my topic and my personal background. I stated why the topic of idioms holds so much interest for me personally and how I think the project can benefit the field as a whole. Chapter two examines how idioms are defined and how they can be categorized by type. Chapter two also looks at what other researchers have discovered related to the topic as well as identifying the main questions that the study will answer. Chapter three describes how the project was created and includes a description of the methods used. Chapter four will focus on what was learned from the text analysis explained in Chapter three, as well as how this information might be applied within the field.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The purpose of this project was to determine, *what types of idioms are common in two undergraduate texts and how often do they occur?* This was done by analyzing the frequency and typology of idioms used in two undergraduate-level texts. The hope was that this information could then assist post-secondary ESL teachers in making pedagogical decisions about which idioms to teach their ELLs. There is a large body of research on idioms including, but not limited to, what they are, where and when they occur, and how they can be categorized. Various studies have analyzed idiom usage in both spoken and written language. These prior studies helped to inform the design of this project as well as frame its background.

Chapter Overview

This chapter will focus on several topics that require elaboration before moving on to the text analysis portion of the project. First, the definition of an idiom will be explored as well as what common defining characteristics idioms tend to share. Next, different ways of classifying an idiom by type will be looked at including by function and transparency. Then, prior research on the frequency of idioms within different corpora of data will be examined, and a gap in that research will be identified. Finally, the research questions which will guide the project will be outlined.

Defining Idioms
Idioms have proven to be extremely difficult to define (Celce-Murica, 1999; Liu, 2003). They do not fall into an easily defined category, such as verbs or adjectives for which many could readily give a definition (Celce-Murica, 1999). The word idiom itself has been identified by researchers as “an ambiguous term” (Moon, 1998, 3). The Oxford English Dictionary (2017) defines an idiom as:

A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., used in a distinctive way in a particular language, dialect, or language variety; spec. a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from the meanings of the individual words. (3)

Various researchers have attempted to arrive at a conclusion as to the definition of an idiom, but none have entirely succeeded. Some are very inclusive as to what fits the definition. A few, such as Cooper (1998), have even gone as far as including individual words in their definition of idiom. Most would identify single words used in an idiomatic sense to be merely figurative, a larger category to which idioms as well as other forms of language, such as collocations, belong. Many researchers use the term idiom in a much narrower sense and would require that an idiom be a phrase of two or more words (Fernando; 1996; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Liu, 2003; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). Some have debated whether or not phrasal verbs should even be included in such a definition or if, due to their high number, they should be viewed as a separate category (Grant & Bauer, 2004; Moon, 1998). In their ambitious attempt at concisely defining idioms, Grant and Bauer (2004) went so far as to create a new term, that of core idiom, for which they established rigid criteria.

When attempting to pinpoint the definition of an idiom, Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994) identified six properties that they felt idioms possessed which included: conventionality,
inflexibility, figuration, proverbiality, informality, and affect. Moon (1999) narrowed these down to three principal factors which he called institutionalization, lexicogrammatical fixedness, and non-compostionality. While creating criteria for idiom identification based on a compilation of other researchers’ definitions of idioms, Simpson and Mendis (2003) used the same three factors calling them institutionalization, fixedness, and semantic opacity. Grant and Bauer (2004) termed them as institutionalization, frozenness, and non-compositionality and identified the third one as the most important characteristic when defining an idiom.

**Institutionalization of idioms.** The first defining characteristic that many researchers have identified idioms possessing is that they become institutionalized in the language. This means that they are familiar to and widely recognized by a large language community and not merely relegated to use within only a small segment of that larger community (Grant & Bauer, 2004; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). This can be contrasted with slang, another form of figurative language, which is generally specific to certain, small, homogenous speech communities with the goal of inclusion and possibly exclusion (Adams, 2009). An idiom may start out as something such as slang or a novel phrase in limited usage, but then at some point it becomes conventionalized and much more widely recognized (Fernando, 1996). When this happens, the idiom becomes institutionalized within the language and is treated like any other common lexical term in usage. An expression such as *hang ten*, which might only be recognized by those in the surfer culture, would be an example of slang; whereas, the expression *hang in there* would be more readily recognized as an idiom.

**Fixedness of idioms.** Another characteristic that idioms tend to have in common is their relative frozenness or fixedness in comparison to other phrases within a language. An idiomatic
expression contains multiple words that typically need to occur in a fixed order with little variation being allowed. In this sense, idioms are much like proverbs in that within an idiom words are generally not allowed to be replaced, removed or added (Simpson & Mendis, 2003). Additionally, the phrase can often not be passivized, such as trying to change the active voice of the idiom *kick the bucket* into the passive form *the bucket was kicked* (Grant & Bauer, 2004). However, this tendency does not preclude all changes in structure within idioms, and there is debate about how much variation is acceptable (Grant & Bauer, 2004). Examples would be the shortened or truncated form *a little hair of the dog* instead of the full idiom *hair of the dog that bit you* as well as substitutional variations on form, such as *grab/hit/make the headlines*.

Additionally, adverbs can sometimes be inserted into idioms as in the example *keep a (sharp) eye on someone*.

**Non-Compositionality of idioms.** The final characteristic that is widely used to identify a phrase as an idiom is its compositionality or lack thereof. Idioms tend to be highly non-compositional in nature as their meaning often cannot be deduced by their constituent parts. The strongest example of this is the idiomatic expression *kick the bucket*, which has nothing to do with kicking or buckets. This characteristic is additionally related to an idiom’s level of figurativeness as the above example also has a literal meaning. The non-compositionality of idioms has usually been identified as their most important property and the main focus of researchers when discussing idioms (Fernando, 1996; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Liu, 2003; Nunberg, Sag & Wasow, 1994). Instead of non-compositionality, Simpson and Mendis (2003) prefer the term semantic opacity to identify this property of idioms. In his study, Chan (2014) states that the semantic opacity or transparency of idioms is actually tightly related to their non-compositionality. It will be shown that an idiom’s non-compositionality or the degree to which
an idiom’s meaning can be deduced from its constituents varies based on the semantic transparency of those parts as well as the phrase as a whole.

**Toward a working definition.** While it is clear that there is still disagreement about the exact definition of an idiom, it is also clear that there are several things that researchers believe idioms tend to have in common. Idioms are figurative in nature and are widely considered to be phrases or multi-word units. Single words, even if used figuratively, are not generally included in the definition of an idiom. Idioms are also institutionalized within a language and as such are recognized by a large community of speakers. Idioms are often fixed in structure, although some variation is possible. Finally, idioms are very non-compositional in nature and not easily understood by the sum of their individual parts.

Even when using all of these above properties as criteria for identifying an idiom, it can still sometimes be unclear whether a given phrase is idiomatic or not. This is largely due to the fact that what is considered an idiom can be quite subjective in nature. This subjectivity is mainly because the compositionality of idioms ranges based on how easily an idiom’s constituent parts can be analyzed and deconstructed (Kavka, 2000). Therefore, looking at other factors, such as typology, might also be helpful when attempting to identify idioms.

**Typology of Idioms**

Just as it is true that identifying a concise definition of an idiom has proven difficult, it is also true that dividing idioms into types or categories can be equally difficult. Different researchers have looked at various ways to categorize idioms. When dividing idioms up into different classes, Makkai (1972, 2009) grouped some idioms, which he called lexemic, by their
parts of speech. He identified idioms that were formed primarily around verbs as phrasal verb idioms, and those formed around nouns as nominal combinations. Makkai also identified another class made up of idioms that were typically greater in length and could be an entire clause. These he called tournures and identified phrases such as *kick the bucket* as belonging to this class.

Other researchers have instead approached looking at idiom type from the perspective of more than one aspect of linguistics or more precisely not merely based on part of speech alone. Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994) focused on analyzing idioms from the standpoints of both syntax and semantics. Simpson and Mendis (2003) focused on the pragmatic meaning that idioms performed in a discourse. In their exhaustive analysis of defining idioms, Grant & Bauer (2004) synthesized many of these different views into three ways of categorizing idioms. They did this by looking at the typology of an idiom including its pragmatic function, syntax, and semantics.

**Pragmatic Functions of Idioms.** One way some researchers have used to categorize idioms is based on the functions that they serve pragmatically within a discourse (Moon, 1996; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). This categorization tries to identify what an idiom is doing within the context it is being used. Sometimes this has been referred to as discourse function to mean the same thing (Moon, 1998; Nunberg, Sag, & Wasow, 1994). In their study on idiom usage in academic speech, Simpson and Mendis (2003) used the term pragmatic function when discussing this type of usage. They then went on to further subdivide the idioms that they identified into groups based on the different pragmatic functions that the idioms performed within the discourse. These functions included: evaluation, description, paraphrase, emphasis,
collaboration, and metalanguage. They gave examples of idiom usage for description as *out of whack* and for emphasis as *the kitchen sink* (Simpson & Mendis, 2003).

**Syntax of Idioms.** Another way to group idioms is by their constituent parts. If one looks at dictionaries and lists of idioms one will find that they are often categorized alphabetically by one of their parts, such as all idioms using the word *dog* or *up*. This method of classification is syntactic in nature and in fact is how idioms are often organized and taught in ESL classrooms. Although this is a common way to classify idioms, it tends to create a rather large amount of categories based on the constituent units (Grant & Bauer, 2004). Some, such as Nunberg, Sag & Waso (1994), have argued against analyzing idioms on the basis of syntax and that they should rather be assessed based on their semantic compositionality.

**Semantics of Idioms.** One final way to divide idioms by type is through their transparency or ability to be easily understood based on the semantic meanings of their parts. As this is also a core property for defining idioms, many researchers have categorized idioms semantically in this manner based on how transparent or opaque they are (Fernando, 1996; Liu, 2003). An example of a semantically transparent idiom is the phrasal verb *bring out* as well as the phrase *at first*. The meaning of these phrases can be guessed at relatively easily based on their constituent parts. On the contrary, the meaning of an opaque idiom, such as *at each other’s throats*, cannot be easily deciphered from its components. An example like *far cry from* would likely fall somewhere in between the previous two as the only idiomatic element is *cry* with the reminder of the phrase being quite literal. Fernando (1996) chooses to use the terms literal and pure rather than transparent and opaque, and she divides idioms into three categories that she terms pure, semi-literal, and literal. Placing the above examples into Fernando’s (1996) categories yields the following table:
Table 1. Idiom Typology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PURE</td>
<td><em>at each other’s throats</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEMILITERAL</td>
<td><em>far cry from,</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERAL</td>
<td><em>at first, bring out</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Idiom typology examples adapted from Fernando, 1996.*

It is this semantic classification of an idiom based on its range of transparency that then creates what others have called a continuum or spectrum of idiomaticity (Kavka, 2000).

The Spectrum of Idiomaticity

Within this project the term *idiomaticity* will be used to identify the degree to which an expression is idiomatic as opposed to literal. This usage is in line with how other researchers have used the term (Fernando, 1996; Kavka, 2000; Moon, 1999). In fact, Moon (1999) describes it as, “a broad continuum between non-compositional and compositional groups of words” (p. 6). Fernando (1996) identifies the need for a continuum or scale to measure a phrase’s idiomaticity, and others, such as Krajka (2000), have devised tests to align idioms more accurately on such a scale or spectrum. Where a given idiom falls on this spectrum can still depend largely on the individual classifying it, but for many expressions that have both a literal and idiomatic meaning it is quite clear. The phrasal verb *look up* is one such example. This verb in its literal sense means to look upward while it can also idiomatically mean to search on a list or in a book. As discussed, other phrases may be made up of both literal as well as idiomatic constituents. The idioms from Table 1 represent different points on such a spectrum that can be illustrated below as:
Table 2. Spectrum of Idiomaticity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transparent</th>
<th>Semi-transparent</th>
<th>Opaque</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>at first, bring out</td>
<td>far cry from</td>
<td>at each other’s throats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Spectrum of idiomaticity examples sorted by transparency.

Therefore, idioms can be categorized based on their position on a spectrum of idiomaticity. Although still somewhat subjective, this helps to illustrate how all idioms are not equal in their semantic transparency and as a consequence some will be much more difficult for ELLs to acquire than others.

**Idiom Instruction in ESL Classrooms**

In addition to there not being one clear definition of what should be treated as an idiom, there is also lack of consistency as to how idioms are dealt with in a pedagogical sense. Learning idioms is a huge problem for virtually all ELLs (Cooper, 1998). Although ESL teachers have many tools and resources with which to teach grammar, these do not always include the use of natural language that ELLs will encounter outside the classroom. This can result in students avoiding the use of certain aspects of language, such as idioms, because they were never allowed to practice them in the classroom (Prodromou, 2003). This can cause students to use words or phrases such as *awake* rather than *get up* or *accelerate* instead of *speed* up with the result of sounding awkward in everyday speech. Additionally, when idioms are explicitly taught to ELLs, it is often assumed that it is something that should be left for advanced-level students only. However, due to idioms’ pervasive nature in the language, many in the teaching profession have begun to strongly advocate for the introduction of idioms in beginner level ESL classes (Guduru, 2012; Irujo, 1986).
An additional problem is that many ESL teaching resources are severely lacking in instruction on idioms or give them only a cursory look (Irujo, 1986). In their comprehensive book on grammar, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) mention idioms in passing on only two pages whereas entire chapters are devoted to other topics. When ESL textbooks do allocate time for idiom instruction, there appears to be little thought as to which idioms should be included. In their study of advanced level English textbooks in Iran, Alavi and Rajabpoor (2015) discovered that there was little consistency in idiom usage between the texts and that many of the idioms which they did find had very low frequencies of occurrence. Additionally, instructional materials on idioms, which teachers attempt to use, often seem quite arbitrary as to which idioms are included. Many times these texts organize idioms alphabetically based on one of their components creating extensive lists of idioms that can be very overwhelming to ELLs (Grant & Bauer, 2004)

When ESL teachers do have access to textbooks on idiom instruction, the challenge often becomes identifying which idiomatic phrases to focus on. Frequently, the choice of which idioms to be taught in an ESL class is based primarily on the instructor’s intuition rather than any real empirical evidence (Alavi & Rajabpoor, 2014; Liu, 2003). Researchers have attempted to address this need by trying to identify patterns of idiom usage in natural language. They have done this mainly by analyzing a corpus of data collected from discourse or text in which they have attempted to identify the frequency of occurrence as well as types of idioms they find (Liu, 2003; Simpson & Mendis 2003).

Prior Studies on Idiom Frequency within a Corpus of Data
There have been several studies done on the occurrence of idioms within a corpus of data. In her definitive work on fixed expressions, Moon (1998) performed an exhaustive analysis of a vast corpus of data which covered multiple genres. Her study covered not only idioms, but many other types of fixed expressions as well. She looked at such things as frequency of occurrence, different lexical forms, and variations of fixed expressions. Moon concluded that a re-evaluation of the models that are used for idiom instruction was needed and that this should be based on actual usage patterns. She further concluded that the functional significance of these expressions should not be discounted and that further corpus-based studies were needed.

Liu (2003) looked at idiom occurrence in three spoken, American English corpora. He compared the idioms he found with those in prior research and identified five specific areas of improvement for teaching idioms to ELLs. First, idioms that are listed in reference or teaching materials need to be selected in a systematic way that is based on their actual occurrence. Second, those materials should attempt to give more precise descriptions for the usage and meanings of those idioms. Third, the materials should include information on how widely an idiom occurs and is distributed. Fourth, ESL teachers should consult corpus-based lists when making selections for the teaching of idioms in their classrooms. Finally, when teaching an idiom, ESL teachers should include the variations in form that can occur for that idiom.

Simpson and Mendis (2003) analyzed a corpus of data that focused on academic speech. Their main focus was identifying the numbers of idiom occurrences as well as discovering what pragmatic functions the identified idioms served. They found that idiomatic language was used more often in an academic environment than they previously assumed and that this occurrence was largely dependent on the individual’s idiolect rather than their role or position within their
environment. They also concluded that idioms perform many important functions within a discourse and should therefore not be overlooked. Finally, they felt that their use of a corpus-based approach to idioms would aide teachers in identifying authentic language that they could incorporate into their instruction.

In their study, Alavi and Rajabpoor (2015) looked at idioms occurring in three advanced-level ESL textbooks that were used to explicitly teach idioms to ELLs. They discovered that the books differed sharply in both the frequency of idiom occurrence as well as type. They concluded that idioms chosen for inclusion in English textbooks should be done much more systematically and incorporate authentic language. They further concluded that teachers should consult corpus-based lists when deciding upon which idioms to teach their students. They felt that such lists could prevent teachers from wasting needless time on idioms which students would likely not encounter.

In his study on idiom usage and frequency, Chan (2014) also incorporated analyzing idioms used in ESL texts. He created a corpus of idioms collected from various contemporary sources that included movies, T.V., and other forms of media. Then he collected data from both native and non-native speakers on their use as well as understanding of the identified idioms. Finally, he compared his corpus of idioms to three idiom textbooks to analyze for frequency of occurrence. Chan found that there was a definite disconnect between which idioms occur in real life and which are taught to ELLs. He discovered that only a very small fraction of those that occurred most frequently in authentic language were in the idiom textbooks. This led him to conclude that curricular changes which include more instruction on informal language in the classroom should be implemented.
Gap in the Research

Although there has been a fair amount of research done on number and types of idioms used in academic environments, much of this has mainly been focused on spoken language and not written (Liu, 2003; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). Studies which have been done on idiom frequency in written texts have either incorporated idioms into broader categories such as multi-word constructions (Liu, 2012) or been about English textbooks in which idioms are included as a linguistic point of study (Alavi & Rajabpoor, 2015; Chan, 2014). There appears to be a gap in research as far as what idioms commonly occur in mainstream, academic texts, specifically undergraduate-level college texts, and it is this gap that will be addressed in the current project.

Research Questions

This primary goal of this project was to identify what types of idioms were common in certain undergraduate-level texts and how often they occurred. Having assumed a working definition for an idiom based on various properties including institutionalization, fixedness and above all non-compositionality, the following questions were used to frame the project: How often do idioms occur within a given body of text? Is the number of idioms occurring in two similar texts fairly consistent? Are there certain types of idioms that occur more frequently than others? How much variety is there in which idioms occur? How common is it for idioms to appear in variant forms?

Summary

This chapter first looked at attempts to define an idiom. Several different methods of defining an idiom were discussed including institutionalization, fixedness, and non-
compositionality. Ways of categorizing idioms by type were examined including those based on pragmatic function, syntax, and semantic transparency. Idiomaticity was identified and defined as the degree to which an expression is idiomatic. Next, the current status of idiom instruction in ESL classrooms was discussed. Prior research on the topic was examined and a gap in the research identified. Finally, the project’s guiding research questions were laid out. The next chapter will deal with the specific methods that were used in the project when performing the text analysis to determine idiom usage and type.
CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

This project was created to answer the question of, *what types of idioms are common in two undergraduate texts and how often do they occur?* To accomplish this, two different undergraduate-level texts were analyzed for frequency and typology of idioms. Although, as discussed in chapter two, there is widespread disagreement as to the exact definition of an idiom, the working definition for the purposes of this project was “a phrase whose meaning cannot be easily ascertained by the meaning of its individual constituents.” Institutionalization, fixedness, and non-compositionality were all considered when identifying a phrase as an idiom, and maximum care was taken to only identify phrases that fit the above definition. At times it was necessary for the researcher to make subjective judgments based on whether a given phrase fit into the definition of an idiom. However, as with other researchers, such as Liu (2003), at all times the guiding principle for what was identified as an idiom was whether or not a given expression would likely be difficult for an ESL student based on its lack of transparency.

Chapter Overview

This chapter will lay out the methods used in the project by first identifying the research paradigm that was used. This will be followed by a brief explanation of text analysis and why it was an appropriate method of research for this type of project. Next, the intended audience will be identified and the setting explained in detail. The actual texts used in the study will be described as will the reasons for their being chosen. The chapter will finally conclude with a
description of the procedures used for the text analysis as well as how the collected data was
categorized.

**Research Paradigm**

This project adopted the framework of a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach. This mixed approach was due to the inherent subjective nature of idioms. As has been discussed, there is no completely agreeable definition for an idiom. This means that, although criteria were identified in the project for identifying an idiom, there was still a level of subjectivity that could not be removed. Since quantitative and qualitative research exists on what Mackey and Gass (2016) term a continuum, an approach that blends these elements is common and was determined to be the best fit for this project.

A quantitative study is one that objectively measures statistical research data (Mackey & Gass, 2016). This project was mainly quantitative in nature as a very narrow set of research questions was identified, which were the guiding force behind analyzing the collected data. It was also quantitative because much of the data that was collected was numerical in nature and the study was completed in a short amount of time. In addition, the researcher was far removed from the material being analyzed as there were no human subjects and he had no involvement in creating the texts. Finally, the project focused on identifiable and measurable data by identifying idioms in two texts based on predetermined criteria. These criteria, however, were somewhat subjective in nature, and this, along with several other factors, necessitated that qualitative elements also be included.

A qualitative study, by contrast, is one in which the data is analyzed in an interpretive manner. Qualitative studies tend to be more open-ended and subjective in nature (Mackey & Gass, 2016). Due to its subject matter, this project was forced to take on qualitative elements.
Since idioms are not so easily defined, the researcher was at times forced to make decisions based on his own informed interpretations of the data. Additionally, the study was qualitative because, due to the relatively short timeline of the project, only a small amount of the texts were analyzed.

**Text Analysis**

The research method used in this project was a text analysis. Text analysis is a form of research that falls under the larger term of discourse analysis, which itself is a form of content analysis. Bazerman & Prior (2004) define content analysis as

> ... The identifying, quantifying, and analyzing of specific words, phrases, concepts, or other observable semantic data in a text or body of texts with the aim of uncovering some underlying thematic or rhetorical pattern running through these texts. (p.14)

Discourse analysis has most often focused on spoken text. In some social areas, however, written text is much more common, and text analysis can therefore be a more appropriate method of research (Bazerman & Prior, 2004). Text analysis can be divided into two main types depending on the main focus of the research being done. The first type is structural in nature as it analyzes grammatical components of the text, such as words, phrases, and sentences. The second type of text analysis focuses on the function of the text, such as being informational or expressive function (Bazerman & Prior, 2004). This project was structural in that it focused on analyzing the occurrence of idioms rather than any functional purpose that they or the text itself had. Therefore, a text analysis was an appropriate method for this project because the goal was to
identify certain structures, namely idioms, which occurred in two written texts and to categorize these structures by type.

**Project**

When structuring this project, several important factors needed to be taken into consideration. These included the intended audience, the setting of the project, the actual texts being analyzed, and finally the procedure used to identify and classify idioms from the texts themselves.

**Audience.** The intended audience for this project is other teachers who are working with ELLs preparing for post-secondary studies. These classes commonly fall under the umbrella of the term English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This includes ESL students in high school as well as those currently enrolled in colleges or universities who are taking prerequisite ESL courses before they can begin mainstream classes. Others that might be included in the intended audience are additional stakeholders such as school administration officials and ESL textbook designers.

**Setting.** It was determined early on in the project that a post-secondary setting would be most appropriate as the focus is on idioms likely to be encountered by undergraduate ESL students. The classes that were chosen were determined based on several criteria. First, the classes are 1000-level survey courses in the liberal arts. They are not required classes, but are ones that students can take to fulfill general requirements at the university. Many ELLs are required to take ESL courses before they can begin survey courses in their areas of study. It was also thought that there would likely be more idioms used in texts from a liberal arts program as opposed to others, translating into more data to analyze. Secondly, the classes are from a well-
known subject, History, which will likely have a high enrollment and therefore a higher probability that ESL students will find themselves in these classes. In addition, it was thought that there would be a higher occurrence of idioms in a History course as opposed to a Math or Science one. Finally, the specific university was chosen due to reasons of convenience for the researcher as the texts from the university were easily accessible there.

**Texts.** The texts were from two different 1000-level History courses, as chosen by their respective instructors. The first book was used in an Introduction to History course and was titled *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* by Margaret MacMillan. It discussed how leaders and groups of people have manipulated history throughout time to fit their own agendas. The second book was used in an Introduction to US History class and was titled *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush V. Gore*. This book gave a historical account and interpretation of U.S. history from the impeachment of Nixon to the election of George W. Bush. These specific texts were chosen for several reasons. First, they are not traditional textbooks and so it was thought there would likely be more usage of idioms and consequently more data to collect. Textbooks that many would consider to be more traditional were looked at early on in the project, but these were dismissed due to the relative lack of figurative language they were thought to contain. The two books were written to a wider audience than only college students and could likely be found in any bookstore. This again was thought to increase the likelihood of idiom occurrence. Finally, the books were also chosen because of their ease of accessibility for the researcher.

**Procedure.** The two texts were analyzed for frequency of idiom occurrence as well as typology. Fifty pages from each text were analyzed for a total of one hundred pages. The sections of the texts that were analyzed were each carefully read through three times. Phrases
were identified as idioms based on the criteria determined in chapter two. Unlike in some prior research (Grant & Bauer, 2004; Moon, 1998), phrasal verbs were included in this analysis. A list was then compiled to create a corpus of idioms, and this corpus was compared to three idiom dictionaries that were consulted. The dictionaries used were *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (2013), *A Dictionary of American Idioms* (2013), and *NTC’s American Idioms Dictionary* (2000). These dictionaries were chosen because of their comprehensiveness and ease of access for the researcher. If an idiom identified by the researcher from the texts was found to be in at least two of the three dictionaries, it remained in the corpus. Additionally, variations in form were noted for the idioms in the corpus, and if an idiom had more than one figurative meaning that definition was also given.

The total frequency of occurrence within an individual text for each idiom was then tallied, and those numbers were added together to attain a total count of idiom occurrence. Each idiom was also noted for the number of times it occurred in the texts in order to identify which idioms had the highest frequency of occurrence. Additionally, each initial occurrence of an idiom in each text as well as in both texts as a whole was recorded. The number of these discreetly occurring idioms was then compared to the number of total idiom occurrences in order to identify the percentage of variety that existed among the idioms. Finally, the number of variations in form occurring among all of the idioms was also noted as a percentage.

The idioms in the created corpus were then categorized into several different types. First, due to their large number of occurrence, phrasal verbs were singled out and analyzed separately for frequency. In addition, such things as tense, aspect and voice were also noted for those phrasal verbs appearing in a different form than the infinitive. This was done to assess the
frequency of variation that occurred among phrasal verbs, so that this could be added to the previously identified idiom variations, and a total count obtained.

The other typological classification was based on an idiom’s transparency. Although it was shown in chapter two that idioms exist on a spectrum of idiomaticity, for this project the spectrum was divided up into three categories. These categories were created based on Fernando’s (1996) three categories reflecting the level of an idiom’s transparency. In the project, these categories were identified as opaque, semi-transparent, and transparent. If the meaning of an idiom was not easily distinguishable by any of its constituents, it was deemed to be opaque. An example of an opaque idiom was *no stomach for*, the meaning for which cannot be easily determined by the meaning of any of the individual words, *no, stomach, or for*. If one of the constituents had a close to literal meaning, the idiom was classified as semi-transparent. An example of this was *build up* because the meaning of the word *build* here is close to its literal meaning. Finally, if the meaning of all of an idiom’s constituents were considered to be almost literal, the idiom was determined to be transparent. An example of this was *as soon as*, since the meanings of all of the constituent parts can be seen as very close to literal.

Summary

This chapter first discussed the research paradigm that the project used and explained why a mixed approach of both quantitative and qualitative was best. Next, text analysis was discussed along with why it was an appropriate method for this project. Then the project itself was detailed including the audience, setting, and texts that were used. The exact procedures used during the text analysis were explained, and the rationale behind them was clearly laid out including how idioms were identified as well as categorized.
CHAPTER FOUR
Conclusions and Reflections

This project was undertaken because of several burning questions about idioms and their pedagogical relation to ELLs. The overall aim of the project was to determine: *What types of idioms are common in two undergraduate-level texts and how often do they occur?* This was done by assessing the frequency and typology of idioms used in two freshman-level texts. The overall reason for the project was the hope that the findings might assist post-secondary ESL teachers in making pedagogical decisions about which idioms to teach their ELLs.

Chapter Overview

This chapter will first present the major findings of the project, outline them for analysis, and then discuss them in detail. Next, links to prior research will be explored and commonalities and differences between the project and such research will be identified. The limitations on the project will be explained, and the researcher will discuss possible implications of the project and its findings within the field. The project will conclude with the researcher’s personal reflections on the project including what he learned from the experience as well as his final conclusions.

Project Findings

Upon analyzing 100 pages from the texts, a total of 461 occurrences of idioms were found. The average number of idioms that occurred per page was 4.6. Within the same number of pages, the book *Dangerous Games* had a slightly higher amount of idiom occurrence with 244 idioms; whereas, *Restless Giants* contained 217. Some idioms only occurred once, but many occurred multiple times. The idiom with the highest frequency of occurrence, *such as*, was found
26 times among both texts. The idiom with the next highest level of occurrence, *for example/instance*, was encountered 16 times. The following table breaks down the frequency of occurrence for idioms that appeared more than twice in the texts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Idioms by Frequency of Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idioms occurring three times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a good/great deal (a large indefinite quantity), a number of, as well as, blow up, carry on (continue), dwell on, for the most part, going to, golden age, go on (continue), in any case/event, in turn, lead one to, on the other hand, open up (to become available or accessible), set off (cause to occur), side by side, take for granted (consider as true or real)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Idioms organized by frequency of occurrence in analyzed texts.

Each discreet or unique idiom that occurred in the texts regardless of how many times was also noted. The total number of unique idioms that were found among both texts was 246. There were 149 unique idioms occurring in the book *Dangerous Games* and 133 in *Restless Giants*. The following table shows the difference in idioms by number and percentage for each book and for them together as a whole.
Table 4. Idiom Variety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dangerous Games</th>
<th>Restless Giants</th>
<th>Both books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total occurrence of idioms</strong></td>
<td>244</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occurrence of unique idioms</strong></td>
<td>149</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of unique idioms out of total idiom occurrence</strong></td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Occurrence of unique idioms and percentage as a whole.

As can be seen, there was no real difference between the percentage of unique idioms out of the total occurring in either book, not only that, but they were essentially the same. The percentage was lower when computing unique idioms occurring among all idioms in both books, but as there was some overlap in idiom usage between the books that was to be expected.

Variations in form was also found among the idioms. Although fixedness is often a characteristic of an idiom, as has been discussed, some variation in form is to be expected. A total of 23 variations in form were identified which included, truncation, insertion and substitution. Some of the variations were very slight such as *inch ahead* occurring instead of *inch along* as well as *keep a close eye on* as opposed to *keep an eye on*. Other variations were more dramatic, however, such as *brush under the carpet* in place of the more widely used *sweep under the rug* and *not for nothing* instead of *not for anything in the world*. Sometimes the idiom’s part of speech changed such as the nominal idiom *hands off* becoming an adjective in *hand-off style*. Other times an idiom typically used as a concept took on the meaning of an actor as in *hard-liner*.

As discussed, phrasal verbs (PV) were singled out due to their number. There were 166 occurrences of PVs found in the texts which accounted for a full 36% of all instances of idiom occurrence. Additionally, PVs were analyzed based on variations in form and it was discovered
that 101 occurred in some form other than the infinitive. The following table illustrates the different PV forms that were found.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Phrasal Verb Forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of occurrences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Totals for different phrasal verb forms.

Verbs appearing in the past tense were by far the most common, although there were also a somewhat high amount of gerund verb forms found. When the number of variant PV forms was added to the previously identified number of 23 variant idioms, a total of 124 or 27% was obtained for all occurrences of idioms appearing in some type of variant form.

When idioms were grouped into the three predetermined categories it was found that transparent idioms had the highest frequency of occurrence. This was followed by semi-transparent and then opaque idioms. The numbers were slightly different when unique idiom occurrence were looked at. There were 120 unique semi-transparent idioms found to only 100 transparent ones. The table below shows the total number of idioms occurring in each category as well as the number of unique idioms per category along with their percentage out of total idiom occurrence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6. Idiom Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total occurrence of idioms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occurrence of unique idioms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of unique idioms out of total idiom occurrence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Idiom counts by category with percentage difference.
It can be seen that the more opaque an individual idiom was, the less likely it was to occur multiple times. The highest occurring transparent idiom was *such as*, which was encountered 26 times. Contrast that with the most frequently occurring semi-transparent idiom, *deal with*, being seen 12 times and the most common opaque idiom, *turn out*, occurring only 4 times. Only one other opaque idiom was seen more than twice, *on the other hand* occurred 3 times. The following table shows idioms appearing more than twice for each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7. Idioms by Transparency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transparent</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a number of, as well as, at least, call for(summon someone, something), for example/instance, for the most part, in any case/event, in fact, in order to, in part, in the world, in turn, lead one to, of course, side by side, such as, thanks to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Idioms occurring three or more times categorized by transparency level.

The categorization by transparency level shows that certain types of idioms appear to more commonly occur in one category than others. PVs were most often found to be semi-transparent, whereas short phrases beginning with prepositions dominated the transparent category. Longer idiomatic phrases, or what are sometimes termed tournures, tended to be the most opaque of all the idioms and usually occurred exclusively in that category.
Links to prior research

Several things can be seen from the findings that correlate directly to prior research on idioms within a corpus of data. Much like other researchers (Alavi & Rajabpoor, 2015; Liu, 2003; Simpson & Mendis, 2003), this project identified the importance of using corpus-based lists, which are founded on the actual likelihood of idiom occurrence, when teaching idioms. However, this does not necessarily mean that one should teach only the base forms of idioms from such a list. Like Moon (1998) and Liu (2003) discovered, it was found that there was definitely a good level of variation present in the idioms that needs to be taken into account during instruction, especially when including different phrasal verb forms.

Similar to other researchers who have included PVs in their analysis (Alavi & Rajabpoor, 2015; Liu, 2003; Moon 1998), this project found them to make up an inordinately large percentage of the idioms identified within the texts. It could even be argued, as Simpson and Mendis (2003) did, that PVs might be best studied as a separate group. This project’s findings correspond with those of Liu (2003), who identified some PVs as tending to appear more frequently in a specific tense. Like his study, it was found that certain PVs, such as turn out, were often restricted to the past tense.

Finally, the project made some interesting findings about frequency of idiom occurrence. Like Simpson & Mendis’s (2003) study, it was discovered that the occurrence of idioms, in what could be termed an academic environment, was much higher than was anticipated. Unlike Alavi and Rajabpoor’s (2015) study however, this project found the occurrence of idioms across its two analyzed texts to be fairly consistent in both number and type. Also, similar to Moon (1998) and Liu’s (2003) study, it was seen that the occurrences of pure, or what was termed opaque
idioms, was somewhat rare, especially in comparison to the occurrence of idioms in the other two categories.

**Limitations of the project**

This project was limited by several factors that reduced its scope. The biggest limiting factor was by far the time that was given for the project’s completion. With a timeline of only around nine weeks the scope of the text analysis had to be reduced from what might have been more desirable size. Rather than looking at multiple texts in their entirety, the researcher was only able to analyze fifty pagers per text for a total of one hundred pages. With more time it would have been possible to analyze the entire texts for idiom usage, and therefore collect a much larger amount of data for analysis.

Another limiting factor that was also related to the lack of time was the types of texts themselves. Both texts were from history courses at a specific university. These texts were in fact chosen because of their subject matter with the thought that idioms were more likely to be encountered. Additionally, both texts were from survey courses, which were again chosen for their higher likelihood to contain idiomatic language. A comparison with texts from either different subjects or upper level courses was not done and could have yielded additional information about idiom usage.

A final limiting factor that played a role in the project was the subjectivity of the topic itself. It was shown that there is a spectrum of idiomaticity onto which idioms fall depending on how compositional they are. This spectrum had to be translated into three categories essentially representing both ends of the spectrum as well as the middle. These categories did not represent the full range of difference in transparency that exists among idioms and therefore some
subjectivity was necessary when assigning an idiom to a given category. Using the criteria of whether or not any constituent parts were used literally aided in this, but it was still difficult at times for the researcher to determine exactly into which category an idiom should fall. Sometimes it was quite easy to determine the level of transparency of a given idiom. An example such as *a number of*, is quite literal in meaning and therefore transparent whereas another one like *at one’s throat* is very figurative and hence opaque. Other times, however, an idiom’s transparency level was not so clear. In particular idioms formed from the verbs, *carry, get, make, turn,* and especially *take* proved to be quite difficult to categorize due to the varied meanings of these verbs. Sometimes an idiom with the same syntactic structure fell into different categories depending on its use, such as *take on* being semi-transparent when meaning “to acquire”, but opaque when meaning “to oppose in competition”.

**Pedagogical implications**

It is the hope of this researcher that the findings of this project will help to inform other ESL teachers when making pedagogical decisions about idiom instruction in their classrooms. The project findings resulted in several interesting teaching implications. The first one, as other researchers point out (Liu, 2003; Simpson & Mendis, 2003), is that teachers may want to choose idioms for instruction based on actual usage that is determined by corpus research. The findings of this project could assist those teaching college bound students who might need to read books in their classes that are similar to the texts analyzed here. Due to their frequency and difficulty, idioms with a high frequency of occurrence and low transparency level should be focused on first. I have identified the following twelve idioms from the research as most noteworthy of attention from a pedagogical standpoint in my opinion:
Table 8. Post-secondary ESL Idioms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idiom</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>call for</td>
<td>summon someone, something, deal with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for example/instance, in part</td>
<td>handle a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on the other hand</td>
<td>pay attention, point out, such as, take place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>such as, take steps, turn out</td>
<td>to be found to be in the end, used to do something</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Idioms of special attention for post-secondary ESL instruction.

A second implication for teachers is when they are introducing a new idiom, they might want to introduce any idioms with similar meanings as well as any variants. An idiom such as for example should be introduced in tandem with the idiom for instance. When learning the idiom in fact students might want to also learn the very similar idiom in reality. This can save time as students can learn multiple idioms that have roughly the same meaning together. Additionally, teachers should introduce common variants for idioms they teach. Students should understand that although some idioms are frozen, they may also encounter idioms in variant forms. When teaching an idiom such as take a stab at, students need to understand that they may also encounter make a stab at. Students should also be made aware of idioms that might change their form to indicate either a thing or person, such as hardline and hard-liner. Finally, students should know that some idioms with the same syntactic form have multiple meanings, such as the phrasal verbs go on and stand for.

A third teaching implication is that, due to their very high rate of occurrence, teachers may want to approach PVs separate from idioms. Teachers may even want to focus mainly on PVs when teaching idioms as their level of occurrence is very high in relation to all idioms. Although PVs were not considered as separate from idioms in this project, they were analyzed as a subgroup and some interesting facts discovered. First, PVs, even more so than idioms in general, can be encountered in many different forms. They can vary by voice, aspect and tense.
This makes idiomatic PVs perhaps more difficult than many other idioms. Secondly, many of these PVs tend to occur in a particular form. Some, such as *carry on*, were always encountered in the past, whereas others like *build up* were found mainly as gerunds. Of course these are only tendencies and teachers will still need to account for all possible forms when teaching PVs.

**Personal Reflection**

Upon completion of this project I have reflected multiple times on what I have learned from it. Going into the project, I initially thought it would be fairly straightforward for me when identifying idioms. Perhaps as a native speaker and especially as a teacher of English, I felt as though I could readily identify them. I immediately discovered that this was not the case. For sure, I could identify longer idiomatic phrases, such as *get something out of one’s mind*, but I really began to struggle with shorter phrases especially PVs, and this is when my research necessitated that I use idiom dictionaries to cross-reference my findings.

When consulting the dictionaries and adopting my criterion of an idiom needing to be in two of the three of them, I began to identify large numbers of phrases that I did not at all initially consider idiomatic. Such phrases as *for example, in part, at least, and of course*. I would term these “prepositional idioms” for lack of a better term, and I did not find much research on them as a separate type of idiom. The fact that they fit the identified criteria as well as their being found, in most cases, in all three idiom dictionaries meant their inclusion in the corpus. Prior to the project, I would not have thought of these phrases as idioms, but upon further reflection I do know that I have had ELLs struggle with using them correctly. They might be able to use a word such as *partly*, but have difficulty with the similar phrase *in part*. I feel that this, plus the sheer number of these prepositional idioms, warrants their inclusion in ESL instruction on idioms.
I also found the three dictionaries to be somewhat inconsistent with what they identified as an idiom. This was not a major problem as I anticipated this, and it was why I decided to require an idiom to be in at least two of the three dictionaries. What I did find very interesting and a bit frustrating was the fact that there were several phrases, which I had identified from the texts as idiomatic, that were not in any of the dictionaries. Phrases such as fall on one’s sword, cast a spell on, touch a nerve, raise the specter of, dead sure, and on my watch were entirely absent from the dictionaries. All of these phrases were used in an figurative rather than literal sense in the texts, and I was very surprised to not find them at all when cross-referencing. I also thought it curious that the idiom take charge was included in all three, but not the similar phrase take control. In fact, any phrase with take seemed to be slightly arbitrary as to whether the dictionaries treated it as an idiom. Other phrases that I considered to be idiomatic, such as come into play, were only found in one of the three dictionaries and therefore were not included in the corpus.

During the research I also noticed many individual words that were used in a non-literal sense. As these did not conform to my multiple-word criterion I did not include them in the corpus. I feel that had they been included, the corpus would have grown exponentially. I also noticed how some idioms identified from the texts are only still phrases because of spelling conventions. I found myself asking why a word like indeed is one word, but others like in fact and in all are two? Another example that struck me was the phrase inasmuch as. Thinking about why this is not just one word, since the first one is made from three words, made me consider possible frustrations that ELLs might experience as well.

One final reflection I have is overall how difficult it was for me to get a handle on idioms in general. It was not easy for me to quickly isolate and identify them within the texts at first. As
I have mentioned, I thought being a teacher would have given me more of an innate ability to
determine what is idiomatic. At times I grew quite frustrated and felt that I was not making much
progress with my analysis. The fact that, due to the subjective nature of idioms, I couldn’t utilize
a computer program to perform the counts made the work that much more difficult. All of this
made me come to the realization that if idiom identification was difficult for me, I cannot
imagine the difficulties with idioms that ELLs face.

Conclusion

This project was completed to try to answer the question: What types of idioms are
common in two undergraduate texts and how often do they occur? It was found that there are
definitely certain idioms that appear to be used more frequently than others. Many of these
commonly-occurring idioms are fairly transparent, but that does not result in their meaning being
obvious to ELLs. It was confirmed that, although somewhat rare, opaque idioms also occur in
such texts. Additionally, it was discovered that there is a certain amount of variation in the
idioms that do occur. Even though this project was only a small sample, it is hoped that its
findings will help inform ESL teachers about the types of idioms their college-bound ELLs
might want to be learning. Clearly much more research is needed in this area, and it is this
author’s hope that this project might in some small way stimulate additional interest in such
research.
List of References


Bibliography


Spears, R. *NTC’s American Idioms Dictionary*. Chicago, IL: NTC Publishing Group

APPENDIX

**Master list of unique idioms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Above all</th>
<th>At best</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to</td>
<td>At each other’s throats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account for (cause)</td>
<td>At first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act on/upon (conduct oneself based on some prior knowledge or information)</td>
<td>At hand (within easy reach)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add up to</td>
<td>At least</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A good/great deal (a large indefinite quantity)</td>
<td>At times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All over the place/world</td>
<td>At the helm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An end in itself</td>
<td>Back away (gradually retreat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A number of</td>
<td>Back off (abandon one’s stand)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a last resort</td>
<td>Beat up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As much</td>
<td>Bent on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As much as</td>
<td>Beside oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As of</td>
<td>Better off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As soon as (just after)</td>
<td>Bide one’s time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As such</td>
<td>Black and white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As well</td>
<td>Blow up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As well as</td>
<td>Bound to do something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As you please (however you wish)</td>
<td>Break off (stop abruptly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At all (for any reason)</td>
<td>Break into (make a forcible entry into)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>break out (develop suddenly)</td>
<td>cut back (reduce)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bring someone around (convert of persuade)</td>
<td>cut off (stop abruptly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bring on (cause to appear)</td>
<td>deal with (handle a problem)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bring out (present to the public)</td>
<td>die away/down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brush aside</td>
<td>die out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>build up</td>
<td>do one’s best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by mistake</td>
<td>dream up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by no means</td>
<td>due to (likely to, announced as)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>call for (summon someone/something)</td>
<td>dwell on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>call in (summon for aide)</td>
<td>end up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>call on (ask for, choose)</td>
<td>enter into (form a part of)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carry on (continue)</td>
<td>enter into (participate in)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carry out</td>
<td>face down (overcome/intimidate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>catch up</td>
<td>fan the flames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clean up (make clean or orderly)</td>
<td>fill in (complete something)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>close down (force someone out of business)</td>
<td>for example/instance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>close in on (approach)</td>
<td>for sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>come out (be issued)</td>
<td>for the better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>come to (arrive at, learn)</td>
<td>for the most part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>come to an end</td>
<td>from time to time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>come to terms</td>
<td>get across</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cover up (conceal something)</td>
<td>get on with something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creep up on</td>
<td>get rid of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrase</td>
<td>Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>get something out of one’s mind</td>
<td>in a sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give birth/rise to</td>
<td>inasmuch as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give way to</td>
<td>inch along</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>go after</td>
<td>in charge of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>go ahead (act without restraint)</td>
<td>in essence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>going to</td>
<td>in fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>golden age</td>
<td>in general (commonly, usually)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>go on (continue, proceed)</td>
<td>in good faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>go on (take place)</td>
<td>in hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grow out of</td>
<td>in heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grow up (came into existence)</td>
<td>in one’s hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grow up (become an adult)</td>
<td>in order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hail from</td>
<td>in order to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hands off</td>
<td>in other words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hand out</td>
<td>in part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hand over</td>
<td>in particular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hard line</td>
<td>in reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have had enough</td>
<td>in short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hear of</td>
<td>in spite of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>here and there</td>
<td>in the case of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hold up (offer as an example)</td>
<td>in the face of (despite opposition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in all</td>
<td>in the long run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in any case/event</td>
<td>in the loop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrase</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in theory</td>
<td>make sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the right</td>
<td>make up (put together, construct)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the world</td>
<td>make use of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in time</td>
<td>matter of course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in trouble</td>
<td>mend one’s ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in turn</td>
<td>move in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>just in case</td>
<td>move on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keep an eye on</td>
<td>no stomach for/not able to stomach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keep someone in the dark</td>
<td>not for anything in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keep something quiet</td>
<td>of course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knock down (reduce)</td>
<td>once and for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lead one to</td>
<td>on (the) one hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leak out</td>
<td>on one’s own (by one’s own effort)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look back</td>
<td>on the bandwagon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look black/bleak</td>
<td>on the contrary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look down on</td>
<td>on the other hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look for</td>
<td>on the scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look into</td>
<td>on the way (on the route of a journey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look like (have the appearance of)</td>
<td>open up (to become available or accessible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lose one’s mind</td>
<td>out of hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make amends</td>
<td>out of order (not following parliamentary procedure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make/take a stab at</td>
<td>outside of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make one’s way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
pan out
pass by/over
pave the way
pay attention
pay a visit
pay one’s respects
pick holes in
pit against
play down
point out
pull off
pull out (withdraw from an undertaking)
round up
run into (meet unexpectedly)
set off (cause to explode)
set off (cause to occur)
set up (establish, found)
shore up
side by side
side with
signs of
slow down (reduce speed)
small fry

smoking gun
so as to
so/thus far
sort out
spell out (clarify)
stake (out) a claim
stand for (advocate, support)
stand for (represent, symbolize)
stand out (make distinctive)
step by step
step down (resign from office)
stir up (rouse to action)
strike a bargain
stumble across/on/upon
such as
sweep under the rug
swing into action
take advantage of (make good use of)
take an interest (be concerned or curious)
take effect
take for granted (consider true or real)
take on (acquire)
take on (oppose in competition)
take over
take part
take place
take pride in
take root
take shape
take steps
take up where one left off
tear down (demolish)
thanks to
the other way around
to be sure
track down
turn in (surrender, give over to)
turn of the century
turn out (be found to be in the end)
turn over (transfer to another)
under one’s spell
under way
up to (as far as or approaching a certain point)
used to be
used to do something