THIS PAPER SURE IS A BRASS RING!

A quantitative study on the effect of context for non-native students’ interpretation of English idioms
Abstract

Idioms are a big part of languages but can cause trouble for communication, especially for non-native speakers of a language. Interpreting idioms correctly means that one must derive a figurative meaning from words that individually mean something else. Recent research primarily focuses on the impact of context for successful idiom comprehension and seems to prioritize native speakers’ understanding of them. This study investigates the impact of context for Swedish non-native upper secondary students’ interpretation of English idioms. It further explores if grades and level of education are factors to consider. In a two-part, multiple-choice test, 53 students were presented with 10 idioms in context and 10 idioms out of context with two additional questions regarding level of education and last received grade in English. The students were also asked whether they had seen each idiom before or not.

The results showed that context and grade seem to have impact on non-native students’ interpretation of idioms to some extent, but level of education does not seem to. One interesting finding was that idioms were interpreted correctly even though they were neither presented in context nor were considered familiar by the students. A possible conclusion is therefore that even if context is an important factor for successful idiom interpretation for non-native students, several other factors might be of equal importance.

Key words: idiom, interpretation, non-native students, context, Sweden, figurative meaning, familiarity, transparency
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1 Introduction

Sometimes, communicating can cause much head-scratching and for you to get into someone’s head, you might need to get your head down. If you still cannot make head or tail of what they are saying, then just keep a cool head and ask what they mean. It is a widely held view that idioms, such as the italicized expressions above, comprise a whole arsenal of different expressions that can be used to embellish a language. As portrayed in the opening sentences of this paper, idioms can function as both disruptive and ambiguous but more importantly, they can add humor and flavor to a language. Idioms are expressions that do not mean what they literally say, which could cause tremendous trouble for comprehension of written or spoken language. Over a lifetime of 60 years a native speaker of English uses English idioms approximately 20 million times (Cooper, 1998). With English today being a global language and many people in many different countries learning English in school as a second or foreign language, one could assume that second or foreign language users of English will also use or encounter many English idioms during their life time. These idioms present a potential problem for both native speakers of English and second language learners of the English language (Cooper, 1998) and many scholars suggest that mastering idioms is evidence of proficiency in a language (see Levorato & Cacciari, 1995; Ellis, 1997; Alhaysony, 2017).

The Swedish curriculum does not explicitly express that the concept of idiom should be taught. Nevertheless, it does state that the students should understand spoken and written English and be able to interpret what is heard or read (Skolverket, 2011). Since idioms can cause comprehension problems for both native and non-native speakers of English, it seems natural that they require the teachers’ attention in second language learning and language learning in general in order to help students enhance their English skills (Cooper, 1998).

Most of the current research regarding idiom comprehension concentrates on native speakers of English and their idiom comprehension strategies (see Nippold & Taylor, 2002; Oakhill, Cain & Nesi, 2016 etc.). Research on how second or foreign language learners of English comprehend idioms seems not to have been prioritized. However, the research that does exist focuses a lot of the attention on the effect of context on comprehension (see Levorato & Cacciari, 1999; Rohani, Ketabi & Tavakoli, 2012 etc.). When encountering an idiom, the reader or listener needs to go beyond the literal meaning of the word string to find a figurative meaning that fits into the surrounding context (Cooper, 1998). Arguably, the lack of
context, or context that is difficult to understand, will therefore complicate the understanding of idioms and by extension communication.

The aim of this study is to investigate to what extent context has an impact on the interpretation of idioms for non-native speakers of English in a Swedish upper secondary school. In addition, the relation between interpretation of idioms and proficiency, as expressed in terms of grades and level of education, is explored. In order to investigate this the following research questions will be posed.

1. To what extent do the students interpret English idioms in context figuratively?
2. To what extent do the students interpret English idioms out of context figuratively?
3. What is the relationship between the students’ grades and their ability to interpret idioms figuratively?
4. What is the relationship between the students’ level of education and their ability to interpret idioms figuratively?

2 Background

2.1 Definition of idiom

Idiom is a very ambiguous term (Moon, 1998), perhaps suitable for the ambiguous meanings it comprises. In research regarding figurative language, a general agreed upon definition for the term idiom does not exist (Moon, 1998). It could, for example, refer to expressing a distinct style in language or art, or, a particular kind of unit (Moon, 1998). Moon (1998) exemplifies the former with the sentence: “the most fantastic [performance] I have seen in the strict idiom of the music hall comedian” (p. 3) and the latter could be the expression keep a cool head, which is a unit that has the possibility of expressing something both literally and figuratively. Although multiple terms and definitions of idioms exist, it is the discrepancy between what is said or written, on the one hand, and what is meant, on the other hand, that remains the vital characteristic of idiomatic expressions (Rohani, Ketabi & Tavakoli, 2012).

Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary (2012) defines idioms as “a group of words which have a different meaning when used together from the meaning it would have if the meaning of each word were taken individually” (p. v). This definition emphasizes the difference between the meaning of the individual words in an idiom and the meaning of them used together. It further characterizes idioms as typically metaphors, although idioms also include other types, for example similes and proverbs. These three types share both
similarities and differences. All three compares one element with another based on one or more shared features. An example of a metaphor is he is a big fish in a small pond and implies that someone is the most important person in a small group (Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary, 2012). The comparison in a metaphor is thus implicit. By contrast, in a simile the comparison is explicitly marked with the use of like or as (Cooper, 1998). For example, he drinks like a fish, meaning someone that drinks a lot of alcohol which compares to the fish that ‘drinks’ a lot of water (Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary, 2012). The third type, proverb, shares the comparison feature with the other two types of idioms, although the comparison is even less obvious. In addition, a proverb contains elements of moral guidance, e.g. Don’t judge a book by its cover (Cooper, 1998). This proverb’s figurative meaning is that you should not judge something or someone by what they look like or what they seem like at first and has moral guidance implying that one should not be judgmental. The literal meaning is that a book with a seemingly dull cover could hold a good story. The comparison is then telling someone not to judge another person to quickly, implicitly comparing the person to the book.

As demonstrated above, the term idiom could include various types and definitions. It is therefore important to be explicit about how it will be used in the present study. The term idiom is used here to refer to a multi-word expression whose meaning is “not the sum of its parts” (Moon, 1998, p. 4). In other words, figurative expressions that force the reader or listener to go beyond the literal meaning of the string of words to find a different suitable meaning, e.g. kick the bucket. The figurative meaning of kick the bucket cannot be derived solely from the individual words, hence is not the sum of its parts. However, a literal interpretation could be the physical act of kicking a bucket with one’s foot. An idiom can thus have both a figurative and a literal meaning, and the surrounding context functions as the determiner (Cooper, 1998).

Furthermore, idioms can be characterized in terms of familiarity, transparency and compositionality. Familiarity refers to the frequency with which a certain idiom occurs in the language (Nippold & Taylor, 2002). Transparency measures to what degree the literal and the nonliteral meanings correlate. The idiom is considered transparent if the two meanings (literal and figurative) are comparable. For example, go by the book is transparent since the figurative meaning, to do something strictly according to the rules, and the literal meaning, to

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1 Another term for the same phenomenon is frequency (Nippold & Taylor, 2002).
follow directions in a cookbook, are closely comparable (Nippold & Taylor, 2002). However, when the meanings are unrelated the idiom is seen as opaque. *Keep one’s shirt on*, for example, is considered opaque because the literal meaning, to continue wearing one’s shirt and the figurative meaning, to stay calm, do not correlate (Nippold & Taylor, 2002). Most idioms are neither completely transparent nor opaque and some researchers claim that transparency is not a fixed feature but should be regarded as a continuum from highly literal to highly figurative comparability (Rohani et al., 2012). This definition allows for idioms not to be either transparent or opaque but more or less transparent or opaque and thus leaves each idiom’s degree of transparency a non-fixed characteristic.

As an extension of transparency, an idiom can also be characterized by the degree of its compositionality (Rohani et al., 2012). The concept of compositionality comprises the degree to which the literal meaning of an idiom’s components contributes to the overall figurative meaning (Le Sourn-Bissaoui, Caillies, Bernard, Deleau, & Brulé, 2012). That is to say, the figurative meaning of a decomposable idiom can be derived from a semantic analysis of the individual words in the expression. For example, the previously mentioned transparent expression *go by the book* would be rated as a decomposable idiom since its figurative meaning can be deduced from an analysis of the literal meanings of *go* and *book*. While the opaque *keep one’s shirt on*, would be rated as non-decomposable since the literal meanings of *keep* and *shirt* do not contribute to the figurative meaning of the expression (Le Sourn-Bissaoui et al., 2012). A connection between transparency and compositionality can be found, in that a transparent idiom will most likely be decomposable. The difference seems to lie in the fact that transparency deals with the entire expression as a whole whilst compositionality focuses on the correlation between the individual components.

In this study the definition of the term *idiom* is, to a degree, fairly extensive. No division will be made in terms of proverbs, similes or metaphors, provided that the idioms used adhere to the definition above – an expression whose meaning is not the sum of its parts.

## 2.2 Comprehension in second or foreign language

A considerable amount of research into second language acquisition (SLA) has focused on the role of comprehension. One influential hypotheses for SLA regarding this focus is the Input Hypothesis, with another being an extension, the Input and Interaction Hypothesis (Loschky, 1994).

The Input Hypothesis, developed by Krashen, argues that for language acquisition to occur the learners must be exposed to comprehensible input of the target language (Krashen,
1989). That is, input that contains grammatical and semantic forms slightly more advanced than the current state of the learner’s proficiency level. According to this hypothesis, successful acquisition of L2 is achieved by using the contextual situation to comprehend messages (Ellis, 1997). Evidence for the necessity of comprehension for language acquisition was found in a study where the participants’ only input of the target language was from television. Despite the frequent and substantial input, the children showed no evidence of neither comprehension nor acquisition (Loschky, 1994). It would seem, then, that SLA is dependent on comprehensible input, although it is not solely sufficient (Loschky, 1994; Ellis, 1997; Fang, 2010).

Swain and White criticize the Input Hypothesis (as cited in Fang, 2010) and argue that negative feedback, the requirement to make oneself more coherent, during both comprehension and production is vital for SLA. In relation to both input and output, the learner is required to modify the already known structures in order to either understand or to be understood in the target language. Being challenged by incomprehensible input or by having to produce comprehensible output, can provide new learning experiences necessary for SLA (Fang, 2010).

Input and interaction in one language are often related (Long, 1981). That is why the Input and Interaction Hypothesis combines the argument put forth by Krashen in the Input Hypothesis regarding the importance of comprehension for SLA, with the importance of being able to modify both input and output in order to be understood (Loschky, 1994; Fang, 2010). In other words, the Input Hypothesis and the critic of it are combined to create the Input and Interaction Hypothesis. In conclusion, for language acquisition to occur, learners of a second or foreign language must encounter input above their current proficiency level and be able to modify this input and output to both comprehend and be comprehended. For idiom comprehension, this would mean that L2 learners of a language need to be exposed to unfamiliar idioms in order to increase their proficiency.

### 2.3 Idiom comprehension theories

Different theories exist in the literature regarding how idioms are comprehended, and throughout the years several advances have been made in the field. One of the first theories was observed in an investigation by Swinney and Cutler (1979) and was labeled the Lexical Representation Hypothesis. This theory claims that the entire idiomatic word string is stored in the same mental lexicon as any other word. When encountering an idiom, the Lexical Representation Hypothesis holds that both the literal and figurative meanings are processed.
simultaneously, with context as the final determiner as to which interpretation fits the best (Cooper, 1999).

In contrast, a second theory, the Idiom List Hypothesis states that idioms are stored in a special mental lexicon separate from the normal word lexicon (Swinney & Cutler, 1979) and according to which idiom comprehension process begins with a literal interpretation of the word string (Swinney & Cutler, 1979). Only if the literal interpretation does not fit will the mental idiom lexicon be searched for a figurative meaning (Rohani et al., 2012).

A third theory that agrees with the Idiom List Hypothesis’ idea that figurative and literal meanings are not processed simultaneously, is the Direct Access Hypothesis. However, this theory claims that the figurative interpretation precedes the literal one and that the figurative meaning is accessed directly, while the literal meaning is only used if the figurative meaning fails to integrate with the context (Gibbs, 1980; Schweigert, 1986). This implies that idioms out of context are harder to comprehend than those within context since they do not have a context to use to determine whether the chosen interpretation fits.

A fourth theory argues a simpler view of figurative understanding and states that the amount of exposure to idioms decides the level of idiom comprehension. This theory is called the Language Exposure hypothesis (Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993). The argument of this theory suggests that if the idiom is rated high in familiarity, the possibility of it being interpreted correctly is more likely.

An alternative theory for idiom comprehension, that questions the previously mentioned more traditional views on idiom comprehension, is the Global Elaboration Model (GEM). This theory contradicts the others’ perception that idiomatic expressions are comprehended as long words whose meanings are retrieved from a mental lexicon (Levorato & Cacciari, 1999). Instead it suggests that acquisition and comprehension of idiomatic expressions are based on the same processes required for language acquisition in general rather than depending on specific mechanisms (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995; Levorato, Roch & Nesi, 2007). Needless to say, this theory does not imply that all kinds of idioms are acquired similarly (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995). GEM also postulates that successful idiom comprehension derives from the ability to go beyond a local explanation of an idiom to search for the figurative meaning (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995).

According to GEM, learners of a language do not derive the meaning of an idiom on a word-by-word basis. Instead they use the context and the awareness that what is said or written and what is meant do not always coincide and go beyond the purely literal interpretation to find a suitable meaning. However, Levorato and Cacciari (1995) argue that
this does not mean that the speaker first analyzes the idiom literally as other more traditional views imply. If the learner interprets the idiom first as its literal meaning it only implies that she or he employs a processing strategy that proceeds word by word (Levorato & Cacciari, 1995). GEM holds the use of context when interpreting an idiom as the most relevant strategy as it allows a back and forth process between the idiom and the context.

### 2.3.1 Factors for idiom comprehension

Regarding complexity and ambiguity, idioms can be hard to comprehend for both native and non-native speakers of English. Previous research has established that there are three main factors that affect the ease with which idioms can be comprehended and acquired (Cooper, 1998; Rohani et al., 2012). These factors correspond to the characteristics of an idiom described in section 2.1 and comprise the degree of familiarity, the degree of transparency, compositionality and the context.

One factor for idiom comprehension is **familiarity**. The language exposure hypothesis states that more exposure to the target language, meaning more exposure to idioms, is one reason for good idiom comprehension (Nippold & Rudinzinski, 1993). In other words, the more familiar the idiom is the higher the chance that it will be interpreted correctly. Although frequently encountering an idiom might be helpful, researchers have agreed that it cannot solely explain idiom comprehension (Levorato et al., 2007). Simply being familiar with an idiom does not entail knowing its meaning (Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2005).

Another factor for idiom comprehension is the degree of **transparency**. Researchers found that transparent idioms were easier to comprehend than opaque idioms (Nippold & Rudinzinski, 1993; Nippold & Taylor 1995). Put differently, idioms whose literal and figurative meaning correlate were easier to understand than idioms whose literal and figurative meaning are unrelated. As discussed in section 2.1, one could consider an idiom more or less transparent and consequently the same continuum would be used with regard to comprehension. As with transparency and familiarity, decomposability appears to be a factor for idiom comprehension (Le Sourn-Bissaoui et al., 2012) and it has been found that decomposable idioms were easier to understand than non-decomposable ones. (Le Sourn-Bissaoui et al., 2012).

The importance of context when comprehending idioms is well known (see, Gibbs, 1980; Cooper, 1998; Al-Khawaldeh, Jaradat, Al-momani & Bani-Khair, 2016 etc.). As specified in section 2.1, an idiom is characterized as an expression that is not the sum of its parts, it is therefore evident that idioms hold two meanings – one literal and one figurative.
This would mean that unfamiliar expressions out of context are harder to interpret than unfamiliar expressions in context. As previously presented, there are several factors to successful comprehension of an idiom and hypothetically a familiar, highly transparent idiom out of context could be easier to comprehend than an unfamiliar, highly opaque idiom in context. However, the absence of context and the inability to comprehend the given context, have been found to make interpretation of an idiom significantly harder. The complexity of interpreting an idiom either figuratively or literally forces the reader or listener to rely on the situation in which the idiom is presented. For example, to interpret the phrase *like the cat that ate the canary*, without any contextual support could be difficult. The literal interpretation could be that one is full after eating. However, when put in a sentence: “after pointing out her teacher’s mistake, she smiled *like the cat that ate the canary.*”, a connection to food can be deduced since the idiom seems to be in relation to being satisfied with one’s actions.

### 2.4 Previous research with context in focus

The relation between context and idiom comprehension is well-established (Cain et al., 2005) and the influence of context on skilled or less skilled comprehenders has been explored by both Cain, Oakhill and Lemmon (2005) and Cain, Oakhill and Nesi (2016). It has been argued that if context is as important as research seems to suggest, then using context for idiom comprehension should prove more difficult for children with poor reading comprehension (Cain et al., 2005). The aim of these studies was to investigate how comprehension skill and age influenced the use of context to comprehend unfamiliar idioms. In both studies, the participants were native English speakers and 8-10 years of age. The skill level of the participants was established through a number of tests\(^2\) and they were then divided into separate groups according to their skill level. The idioms were presented in a questionnaire and the familiarity of them was manipulated by including real English idioms and translated Italian idioms. The English idioms were selected from the Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary. The transparency was also established by including both opaque and transparent idioms. To ensure the validity of the idioms, undergraduate students and adults rated the familiarity of the idioms and wrote down the meaning of them.

The studies differ in how the idioms were presented to the participants. Cain, Oakhill and Lemmon (2005) did the questionnaire orally whilst Cain, Oakhill and Nesi (2016)

\(^2\) Gates–MacGinitie Primary Two Vocabulary Test and the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability–Revised Test
administered it in writing. The latter study chose twenty idioms in total, 10 of which were real English idioms and 10 were translated Italian idioms, to represent familiar and unfamiliar idioms respectively. All idioms were presented in two different contexts, one in which the idiom would have a literal meaning and one in which it would have a figurative meaning. Each real English idiom had the same figurative meaning as a corresponding translated Italian idiom, for example the English idiom *to be in the red* has the same figurative meaning as the translated Italian idiom *to be at green*, i.e. to be in debt (Cain et al., 2016). This allowed the same context to be used for the real English idiom and the translated Italian idiom.

The studies indicate a connection between context and comprehension of unfamiliar idioms. More importantly, they suggest that skilled comprehenders were more likely to choose the correct figurative meaning in both familiar and unfamiliar idioms than poor comprehenders. However, poor comprehenders were able to interpret idioms but the surrounding context seemed to distract and complicate the interpretation. These results propose that context is significant for comprehension of unfamiliar idioms, but comprehension skill and age of the students are also factors to consider. The ability to use context to interpret an idiom seems to rely on comprehension of the context and the two could therefore be considered closely related. Since these studies involved younger native speakers of English it might not be completely transferable to the present study and therefore it would be interesting to find out how idioms are comprehended by non-native speakers of English. Furthermore, how the authors in these studies chose to ensure validity of the idioms can be questioned since adults and undergraduate students might be more skilled than 8- or 10-year-olds and therefore, the clarity of the contexts might still not be plausible for the younger participants. This might have been far more useful if the adults and undergraduate students instead were a test group of the same age as the selected participants.

Idiomatic comprehension for non-native speakers of English was investigated in a study by Cooper (1999). The participants’ age ranged from 17 to 44 years, and all varied in their native language. The author specifically used idioms of high familiarity and presented them in context. To acquire the result, a Think-Aloud Protocol was used. A Think-Aloud Protocol requires that the participants verbalize their thoughts while trying to interpret the idioms. This puts focus on the strategies used rather than a correct response. Factors that could influence the comprehension of the idioms were hypothesized by the author beforehand and given to the participants during the testing to keep in mind as they verbalized their thoughts. Among these factors were the context, the literal meaning and an expression in the native language. However, a key problem with this method could be that the participants might be influenced
by these given factors when trying to interpret the idioms. The findings might have been much more convincing if the author included a group of participants who were not given these factors to consider. The result did, however, show that although several of the participants used more than one strategy, the strategy for comprehending idioms used most frequently, and most successfully, was guessing from context. This indicates that the use of context when interpreting an idiom might not only be useful for native speakers of English but could also be a necessity for L2 learners of English.

The case of frequently used idiom comprehension strategies for non-native English speakers, was also investigated by Al-Khawaldeh, Jaradat, Al-momani and Bani-Khair, (2016). The aim of the study appears to be fourfold: to investigate (1) the importance of learning idioms, (2) the most frequently used idiom learning strategy, (3) the difficulties faced when trying to learn idioms and (4) the most useful idiom learning strategies. The study’s participants were English language learners at University level aged between 20 and 24 years old. A test was performed to examine their perception and knowledge of some idioms. To determine what strategies the students use to learn idioms, the difficulty they face and suggested solutions, a questionnaire consisting of a Likert scale was developed. The students were asked to answer questions that required them to have previously reflected or at that moment must reflect on what strategies they use in relation to idiom learning. The result showed that the majority of the students more frequently used the context to guess the meaning of idiomatic expressions than any other strategy, correlating with the study by Cooper (1999). This strategy was not only the most used but also the most efficient in terms of high success rate in comprehending idioms for the participants in both studies.

As mentioned previously, the aim of the study is fourfold and consequently, a fairly large study. This makes it difficult for the reader to determine where the focus is, and the study could therefore have benefitted from a narrower aim. The authors fail to provide information on how the idioms were selected and only present them in an appendix without further discussion which leaves the question regarding the reasoning behind the chosen idioms.

Thus far, previous studies have linked the importance of context with successful idiom comprehension and the result of the study by Cooper (1999) and the study by Al-Khawaldeh, Jaraday and Bani-Khair (2016) could be used to argue this for non-native English speakers as

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3 a multi-indicator measurement regarding a specific set of attitudes of a certain theme (Bryman, 2011)
well as native speakers of English. However, none of the studies presented have dealt with the impact of context or a possible relationship between proficiency and idiom comprehension for Swedish upper secondary students. This paper explores the ways in which context and other factors, such as familiarity and transparency etc., impact the interpretation of idioms for Swedish upper secondary students in an attempt to provide more insight to this.

3 Method and material

This is a quantitative study for which a test was developed to investigate the students’ ability to interpret idioms in context and idioms out of context and to compare whether one or the other was easier. The students’ grades and level of education were also taken into consideration as factors that could influence interpretation of idioms. The study was piloted to four students of the same course level as the sample. These students did the test and were then asked if anything seemed unclear or otherwise confusing. The test was then adjusted accordingly. The following section is divided into four main subsections: 3.1 Test, 3.2 Selection of idioms, 3.3 Selection of participants and 3.4 Ethical considerations.

3.1 Test

The test was administered online but in class and with both the students’ teacher and myself present to assist if there were any questions raised. Two of the students did the test on paper because of lack of computers. These were later transferred to the online version by me. A sample of the test in paper form can be found in appendix 2.

3.1.1 The structure of the Test

The test consisted of two sections, idioms in context and idioms out of context, and two additional questions regarding the participants’ last received grade in English as well as whether they were currently in the higher level of education (English 6) or the lower level of education (English 5).

In the test the students were asked to choose the appropriate definition for a selection of twenty idioms, half of which were presented out of context and half in a context of more or less one sentence. Each idiom was accompanied by three possible definitions, only one of which counted as ‘the right one’, being the figurative meaning. The figurative meaning was taken directly from the dictionary (Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary, 2012) to ensure correctness. The two other choices consisted of one literal meaning of the idiom and one
distractor. The distractor was constructed to be similar to either the figurative, or the literal meaning but with some minor differences, for example question 5 on the second part of the questionnaire (idioms out of context):

1. *A golden boy*
   
a. A boy made of gold  
b. Someone very successful  
c. A gold trophy

The figurative meaning of the idiom *a golden boy* is (b) someone very successful. The literal meaning constructed for the response was (a) a boy made of gold and the third, distractor, response was (c) a gold trophy, alluding to e.g. the Oscars’ golden trophy which literally is a gold covered human body. The contexts used in the test were directly taken from the example sentences under each idiom in Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary (2012) to ensure that the context was correct.

To measure familiarity each idiom was followed by a question that asked the students if they had heard or seen the idiom before, using a yes or no response. This did not allow any further reflection regarding if the idioms had been seen more than once or if the students believed that they knew the meaning of the idiom, and thus limits the paper to some degree. The students were then asked to check the box that indicated their current level of education in English (English 5 or English 6).

The final question regarded their last received grade in English. They were presented with the possible grades (A, B, C, D, E, F) and asked to check the box that corresponded to their grade. Their chosen grade, together with how many idioms they understood is believed to indicate how important context is for understanding idioms and how idiom comprehension is related to proficiency. Important to address is the possibility that the students might not have been sincere when asked about their grade. Since the anonymity of the students creates a situation of uncertainty regarding the students’ grades, the possible correlation must be viewed with caution. Although, the anonymity could also have caused the students to be sincere. To check the accuracy of the grade they said to have and the grade they have received was not possible within the scope of this study and limits the study to some degree.

### 3.2 Selection of idioms

The selection of idioms in this study was aimed at units believed to be unfamiliar to the students. Criteria for selecting the idioms for the test were as follows: (1) they had to be found
in Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary (2012), (2) they had to agree with the outlined definition of an idiom found in section 2.1, i.e. an expression whose meaning is not the sum of its parts, (3) they had to be considered unfamiliar.\(^4\) Lastly (4) the figurative meanings of the idioms used in part one had to be similar to the figurative meanings of the idioms used in part two, for example to go ballistic in part one, and the fur flies in part two. The figurative meanings of both idioms concern anger; to be very angry and an aggressive argument, respectively.

When choosing the idioms for this study, neither the degree of transparency nor compositionality of the idioms was taken into consideration. However, since transparency and compositionality both have been shown to be factors for idiom comprehension (see section 2.3.1), the criteria should probably have included these factors too in order to ensure the validity of the study. The selected idioms are considered by the Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary (2012) to be not the most common. However, only using the dictionary as a familiarity measurement would limit the study since it alone does not ensure the unfamiliarity of the idioms and therefore the question of whether the students had seen the idiom before was included. Even though some of the idioms might be familiar to the students, this question would make that noticeable.

### 3.3 Selection of participants

The initial sample consisted of 55 students, two of which chose not to participate in the study, leaving 53 participants. Two groups of students participated in the test, namely students in English 5 and English 6, all of which were attending an upper secondary school in Sweden. The students in English 5 were 26 in total and the students in English 6 were 27 in total.

The factor of level of education was based on the Swedish curriculum, and for this study students that either attended English 5 or English 6 were chosen. The English 5 course is normally attended during the 10\(^{th}\) grade and English 6 course is normally in the 11\(^{th}\) grade. Students that attend the English 6 course could therefore generally be considered more proficient in English for the sole reason that they have been exposed to more education in English. However, exceptions are possible since English skills can be acquired in other situations than in relation to school. The grades also function as a sign of proficiency.

\(^4\) In Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary, common idioms were marked with an asterisk (*), these were discarded and the ones left were considered unfamiliar.
although it is based on what the students have produced in relation to the course, which does not necessarily completely correspond to their actual proficiency.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from each student before the questionnaire was administered. Vetenskapsrådet (2017) was consulted to ensure that the study followed the four concepts of good research ethics, namely secrecy, professional secrecy, anonymity and confidentiality. The students were guaranteed that their participation was anonymous and on a voluntary basis before answering the questionnaire. No personal information was collected, and the students could answer as many or as few questions as they wanted.

4 Results and discussion

In order to present the result in a clear and structured manner, this section has been divided into four subsections each of which represents a research question. Each subsection also includes a discussion of the presented results. Before the detailed account of the results for the research questions, the results will be presented in more general terms.

The overall comparison between upper secondary non-native students’ figurative interpretation of idioms in context and idioms out of context indicates that idioms in context are easier to interpret figuratively. Figure 1 below illustrates that out of 53 students 68% were able to interpret the idioms out of context figuratively and 75% of the students were able to interpret the idioms in context figuratively.

Figure 1. Overall figurative interpretation of idioms out of context and in context.
This small difference between idioms in context and idioms out of context will be further elaborated on and possibly made clearer in the following sections.

4.1 Student interpretation of idioms in context

The first part of the test aimed to investigate the impact of context for the interpretation of idioms. Figure 2 shows the percentage of correct answers per idiom as well as the familiarity rating. Overall, 53 students participated and the orange bar in figure 2 represents the percentage of the students that chose the correct definition and the blue bar represents the amount of students that had seen the idiom before. For example, 72% of the students answered that the correct definition of *the fur flies* is ‘an aggressive argument’ and 11% of the students had seen that idiom before.

![Figure 2. Correct answers for idioms in context and their familiarity rating.](image)

As can be seen in figure 2, nine out of ten idioms presented in context were correctly answered by at least two thirds of the students. One idiom scored below 20%, *the brass ring*, and the distractor for that idiom (failure) was chosen by 83% of the students. This indicates that the students did not interpret the idiom literally but failed to find the correct figurative meaning. This idiom also had the lowest familiarity rating (2%) out of all ten idioms in context.

What stands out in figure 2 is that most of the students succeeded in choosing the correct figurative meaning even though very few students had seen the idioms previously. Nevertheless, the figure does illustrate a positive correlation between the amount of correct
answers to the idiom *crystal clear* and the familiarity of it (79% and 66% respectively). This idiom is also the only idiom presented in context that over two thirds of the students had seen before.

As illustrated in figure 2, the amount of students that had seen the idioms before were quite low and overall not even a fifth (17%) of the students found the idioms familiar.

**4.1.1 Discussion – the interpretation of idioms in context**

A strong relationship between idiom comprehension and context has been reported in the literature and although other factors such as familiarity, transparency and compositionality have been deemed important for the comprehension, context has shown to be of great significance (see Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2005; Cain, Oakhill & Nesi, 2016). The results in this study indicate that context does play a noteworthy role in non-native upper secondary students’ interpretation of English idioms. The general results seem to be in line with those of previous studies and theories, specifically the Global Elaboration Model (GEM). It suggests that unfamiliar idioms can be comprehended if they are encountered in context since students then would be able to interact with the surrounding information and assess that a literal interpretation might not be appropriate. This is shown in the high amount of correct answers for the idioms in context. However, since previous research (see section 2.3.1) indicate that transparency might be a factor for good idiom comprehension, the high amount of correct answers might be the cause of a high degree of transparent idioms. The idiom that appeared the hardest to interpret was *the brass ring* (19%) and it could also be considered the least transparent idiom. The correct figurative meaning is ‘success’ which is fairly far from the literal meaning ‘a ring made of a mixture of copper and zinc’. The low amount of students interpreting this idiom figuratively could thus be explained by its opaqueness. In the same way, the idiom with the highest amount of correct answers *full of beans* (96%) could be considered transparent. The figurative meaning is ‘to be very energetic’ and the literal meaning ‘to be well-fed’ are more related than the figurative and literal meaning of *the brass ring*. Energy comes from food, therefore if one is well-fed one might assume that said person has energy. The high amount of correct answers for this idiom could thus be explained by its degree of transparency. Stating to what extent the possible transparency of the idioms affected interpretation is not within the scope of this study, but might be worth investigating in further research.

The overall relationship between low familiarity of the idioms and high amount of correct answers seems to contradict the Language Exposure Hypothesis, which suggests that
exposure to an idiom i.e. familiarity, is a factor for good idiom comprehension (Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993). Instead it indicates that even though the students had not seen the idioms before they interpreted the idioms by using the context, or the idioms’ degree of transparency, to derive the figurative meaning. If the results had shown an overall familiarity rating that correlated with the amount of correct answers, it then would suggest that students’ exposure to individual idioms is significant. However, in two instances the correlation between familiarity and amount of correct answers could indicate that students’ exposure to idioms matter to some extent. For the idiom *crystal clear* the familiarity correlated with the amount of students choosing the correct definition (66% and 79%, respectively). Moreover, the idiom *the brass ring* also had the familiarity to some extent correlate with the amount of students choosing the correct definition (2% and 19%, respectively). Nevertheless, both idioms had a higher amount of correct answers than familiarity, suggesting that on the occasions where a student was able to interpret the idiom correctly but had not seen it before, the context would have been what helped the student choose the correct answer. Another important aspect to consider is possible language transfer. The idiom *crystal clear* is directly transferable to the Swedish *kristall klart*, and could have been a reason for the high percentage of correct answers.

One unanticipated finding were the instances where students were not familiar with the idiom but chose the answer meant as a distractor. For example, the idiom *the brass ring* had both a low familiarity (2%) and a low amount of correct answers (19%) and the definition generally chosen was ‘failure’ as opposed to the correct figurative meaning ‘success’. This finding could indicate two things: first, that the low exposure to the specific idiom affected the students’ interpretation and second, that the students seem to have attempted to use the context to interpret the idiom correctly but failed to do so, thus indicating that the state of the context, i.e. it being comprehensible to the student, also is of importance as argued in the Input and Interaction Hypothesis (Fang, 2010). As described in section 3.1.1 the contexts used were directly taken from the Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary (2012) to ensure that the use of the idioms was correct. However, as pointed out by Cain, Oakhill and Lemmon (2005) poor comprehension proficiency can be the cause for misinterpretation of idioms. Since the sentences were not adjusted to suit the level of the students, the students might have had a problem comprehending the entire sentence, not only the idiom. The design of the context and the possible inability to understand the context might have been a reason for this misunderstanding. If the sentences had been adjusted according to the students’ proficiency level, then the result might have shown higher figurative interpretation for idioms in context.
However, if so, it would only have increased the difference between the interpretation of idioms in context and idioms out of context, not changed the overall result.

4.2 Student interpretation of idioms out of context

The second part of the test aimed to investigate idiom interpretation for idioms presented out of context. Figure 3 shows an overview of the percentage of correct answers for each separate idiom (orange) as well as the percentage of students having seen the idiom before (blue).

What is striking about the data in this figure is the low amount of correct answers (36%) for the idiom *to have fire in the belly*, no other idiom had less than half of the students interpreting it correctly. The distractor answer for this idiom (to be nervous) scored 45%, suggesting that the majority of the students did not interpret the idiom literally but still did not choose the figurative meaning.

Both *a golden boy* and *clear as day* had a high amount of correct answers (87% and 81% respectively) and the familiarity for those two idioms were slightly higher than for the majority of the other idioms (40% and 47%). In the same way, the amount of students that had seen the idiom *in the blink of an eye* before (74%) was consistent with the amount of correct answers (72%). In other words, the familiarity of the idiom was higher than the amount of students being able to interpret the idiom figuratively.

Illustrated by figure 3, the familiarity of the majority of the idioms was lower than the amount of correct answers. Overall, 26% of the students had seen the idioms before.

![Figure 3. Correct answers for idioms out of context and their familiarity rating.](image-url)
4.2.1 Discussion – the interpretation of idioms out of context

As with the idioms presented in context (75% correct answers), the idioms presented out of context had a fairly high amount of correct answers (68%). The Global Elaboration Model suggests that the level of idiom comprehension is related to whether or not the idiom is surrounded by context. This high result could therefore be regarded as surprising. However, the test effect needs to be taken into consideration. Since the students were given three options they might have guessed correctly based on the options or simply inferred the interpretation. Furthermore, the overall familiarity of the idioms out of context is higher (26%) than the familiarity for the idioms in context (17%) and the high amount of correct answers could therefore be explained through the Language Exposure Hypothesis. The students had been more exposed to the idioms out of context and hence the high amount of correct answers. However, there is still a discrepancy between the amount of correctly interpreted idioms and the familiarity of them and therefore, some additional explanation might be required. As discussed in section 4.1.1, transparency of an idiom is a factor to consider for good idiom comprehension. The idioms out of context might not only have been more familiar to the students but it can be argued that they are generally more transparent than the idioms in context. For example, there is a discrepancy between the familiarity and the amount of correct answers for the idioms make your blood run cold and spit in the eyes of someone. The degree of transparency of these idioms might be considered rather high. The correct meanings of the two idioms are ‘to be very frightened’ and ‘to upset of annoy someone’, respectively, and their figurative meanings correlate to some extent with the respective literal meanings. On the one hand, the literal meaning of the idiom to make your blood run cold might be that someone freezes and when someone is scared they might freeze in the sense that they might not be able to move. On the other hand, the literal meaning for the idiom spit in the eyes of someone is the actual act of spitting in someone’s eyes which presumably would upset or annoy that person. In comparison with the idioms in context discussed in section 4.1.1, these two idioms might be considered more transparent. Similarly, it is important to consider that students might have guessed and managed to guess the correct definition more often for the idioms out of context than the idioms in context. The test does not exclude the possibility of lucky guesses. Nevertheless, these findings were unexpected and combined with the findings for idioms in context that supported GEM, they suggest that there can be more to idiom comprehension than current theories and models seem to focus on.

Although fairly small, there was a difference in the amount of correct answers between idioms in context (75%) and idioms out of context (68%) with latter having fewer correct
answers and thus indicating that idioms out of context were harder to interpret. These results agree with those obtained by both Cooper (1999) and Al-Khawaldeh et. al. (2016) where interpreting idioms from context was deemed the most efficient strategy for non-native students. The small difference could be explained by the fact that the idioms out of context were rated as more familiar and therefore the students should be able to interpret them better. However, as can be seen in figure 3, several of the idioms out of context had a low familiarity rating but a noteworthy high amount of correctness. In these cases, neither GEM, the Language Exposure Hypothesis nor any of the other theories or models presented in this study, seem to explain how the students interpreted the idioms. The idiom *a golden boy* had a high amount of correct answers (87%) and low familiarity (40%). This idiom could be considered transparent since the figurative meaning *success* is closely related to the literal meaning *a boy made of gold* which alludes to the golden statuette actors win at the Oscar’s awards. This relation can be found in many of the idioms presented out of context and suggests that other factors such as the degree of transparency and the degree of familiarity might to a large extent be of importance for idiom comprehension. It is possible that the nature of the idioms, i.e. the degree of transparency and the degree of compositionality, effected the comprehension or that the test effect or inferring might also have been involved.

### 4.3 Student interpretation of idioms in relation to grades

The third research question aimed to investigate the relationship between interpretation of idioms and students’ grades in English. The figure below illustrates a decrease in percentage of correct answers that correlates with the lower grades. This would suggest that there is a correspondence between a higher grade and more successful idiom interpretation. Interestingly, there is a small increase in correct answers for students whose last received grade was B, that is the second highest grade, as can be seen in figure 4 below.
The results in figure 4 suggest a relationship between high grades and a high score on idiom interpretation. The highest scores were related to the highest grades. For example, two students whose last received grade was A successfully scored 20/20 and 19/20, respectively and another student who scored 19/20 reported a B as the last received grade. However, a similarly clear connection between grades and idiom interpretation could not be found in the lower grades. The lowest scores were 6/20 and 5/20, both students’ last received grade was E. Even though this is the second to last grade on the scale, there were students with the lowest grade (F) that scored higher than 6/20.

No notable difference was found for interpretation of idioms in context and between idioms out of context with regard to the students’ grades. The results follow the same pattern as the overall study shows. Idioms in context were easier to interpret than idioms out of context and B-students (90%) were a fraction more likely to interpret the idioms in context correctly than A-students (85%).

4.3.1 Discussion – grades and interpretation of idioms
The relationship between good reading comprehension and good idiom comprehension have been assumed in a study by Cain, Oakhill and Lemmon (2005). Transferred to this study, this could mean that good grades can be considered to correspond with good reading comprehension and would suggest that the students with higher grades would also be able to interpret more idioms correctly. In this study, it appears (as shown in figure 4) that higher grades, in most cases, correspond with more correct interpretation of idioms. These results
seem to be consistent with the research previously presented (see Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2005), which argues that good reading comprehension skills mostly equals good idiom comprehension. However, this data must be interpreted with caution since the validity of the students’ grades is unsure. The students were simply asked to state their last received grade and no cross-checking was done. Furthermore, the small number of participants (53) does not give each grade level a fair representation. The sample was selected based on level of education and the spread of grades was thus not controlled.

It is interesting to note that B-students had an overall higher score than A-students although A-students in theory should be more proficient than B-students. The difference is not too vast, but B-students on average scored 86% and A-students 84%. This inconsistency may be due to the fact that the overall gap between these two grades in the Swedish curriculum might be considered small and perhaps it is hard to distinguish between an A-student and a B-student. Another possible explanation for this could be that the grades should symbolize an overall achievement in the English language and the B-students have had some part of her or his achievements not being on an A grade level. However, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be representative and only assumptions can be made to try and explain inconsistencies.

Cain, Oakhill and Lemmon (2005) argued that students with poor reading comprehension would find it more difficult to use context to find the idioms figurative meaning. This study has been unable to demonstrate that as the students with the lowest grade (F) seem to find the idioms in context easier to comprehend than the idioms out of context (50% and 45% respectively), opposite of what Cain, Oakhill and Lemmon (2005) would argue.

### 4.4 Student interpretation of idioms in relation to level of education

The fourth and last research question investigated the relationship between level of education and interpretation of idioms. Figure 5 illustrates the relation between the students’ academic level (English 5 and English 6) and their percentage of correct answers in total (orange), for idioms in context (blue) and for idioms out of context (purple).

What is interesting about the percentage in this figure is that the total amount of correct answers for English 5 is the same as the total amount of correct answers in English 6 (72%). Moreover, the correct amount of answers in context and out of context do not differ between the levels of education. In both levels of education, the idioms in context seem to be easier to interpret and, in it appears to have been harder to interpret the idioms out of context in both
levels. Figure 5 illustrates that 66% of the idioms out of context were interpreted correctly in the higher level of education and 69% of the idioms out of context were interpreted correctly for the lower level of education. The number of participants were 26 in the lower level of education and 27 in the higher level of education this entails a total number of possible correct answers for all 10 idioms in isolation were 260 and 270, respectively. The lower level of education had a total of 180 correct answers and the higher level of education had a total of 179 correct answers.

![Figure 5. A comparison of the correct answers between the levels of education](image)

The overall response to whether the students had seen each separate idiom before showed a notable difference between the higher and the lower levels of education. In the higher level of education 35% and in the lower level of education 52% of the students considered the idioms familiar. In the data presented in figure 6 and 7 in appendix 1, it can be seen that the students in the lower level of education rated the idioms more familiar in both context and out of context (20% and 32% respectively) than the students in the higher level of education (15% and 20% respectively). The figures also show that *in the blink of an eye* and *crystal clear* where the two idioms that were rated the most familiar out of context and in context respectively. In contrast, no one in the higher level of education had seen *to spit in the eyes of someone* before and similarly, no one in the lower education level had seen *the brass ring* before.

### 4.4.1 Discussion – the level of education and interpretation of idioms

As with grade, level of education can be regarded as an indicator of students’ proficiency in a language. A student that currently is studying the lower level of education (English 5) could
be assumed to be less proficient in the English language than a student that currently is
studying the higher level of education (English 6). Obviously, this is not a completely solid
argument since proficiency in a language can be obtained outside of the classroom. Moreover,
proficiency and idiom comprehension do not necessarily correlate, although, to some extent,
one may assume that they do. This might explain the fact that the results did not show any
difference in overall idiom interpretation between the two levels of education. Some
differences were, however, found between idioms in context and idioms out of context for the
two levels of education. Idioms in context seem to be easier to interpret for both levels of
education, yet surprisingly, the students in the lower level of education found the idioms out
of context slightly easier than the students in the higher level of education (66% and 69%
respectively). These results are likely to be related to the fact that the lower level of education
also rated the familiarity of the idioms higher, but the small number of participants limits the
study and the result might not be representative. The overall familiarity rating of the idioms
out of context (26%) was higher than for the idioms in context (17%). These results
corroborate the idea of Nippold and Rudzinski (1993), who suggested that exposure, i.e. the
familiarity of an idiom, will facilitate interpretation.

Familiarity has, in previous research, been considered a factor, although researchers
have agreed that it cannot be the sole reason for successful idiom comprehension. The
outcome of this study indicates that familiarity might be more important than previous studies
suggest, as shown in the high amount of correct answers for idioms out of context (68%) and
the fact that they were considered more familiar (26%) than the idioms in context. Cain,
Oakhill and Lemmon (2005) argue that being familiarity with an idiom does not entail
knowing the idioms meaning and this study only asked the students whether they had seen the
idioms before, not if they knew its meaning. However, only one out of twenty idioms had less
students being able to interpret the idiom correctly than students being familiar with it. This
suggests that for the students in this study, being familiar with an idiom increases the chance
of understanding its meaning.

5  Conclusion

In this investigation, the aim was to assess to what extent context had an impact on Swedish
upper secondary students’ interpretation of idioms and in addition, explore the relationship
between interpretation of idioms and student proficiency. The expectation of this study, based
on review of previously published studies, was that context would affect the students’
interpretation of idioms. The findings of this study show that context is to some extent important for non-native upper secondary students’ interpretation of idioms. However, the findings also indicate that there could be more to successful idiom interpretation than one currently existing theory or model comprises.

The students in this study interpreted the idioms in context better than the idioms out of context, suggesting that the context might have been used to derive the figurative meaning. Surprisingly, the findings also showed that idioms can be interpreted correctly despite lack of context and familiarity. This might suggest that other factors than the ones specifically investigated in this study might have been involved in the interpretation, e.g. transparency and compositionality. Furthermore, the results showed that high grades in most cases correspond with better idiom interpretation, but a higher level of education does not necessarily do so.

Although the results partly adhere to the expectations of the study, namely that idioms in context would be easier to interpret correctly, the relationship between the transparency of an idiom and successful interpretation raise interesting questions regarding the high status that context seems to hold in current idiom comprehension research. Despite the small numbers of participants, these findings provide the following question for future research: to what extent do transparency, familiarity, compositionality or other factors, such as inference and language transfer, impact idiom comprehension for non-native students? The answers might be beneficial for L2 teaching and therefore it is suggested that the association of these factors and idiom comprehension is investigated in further studies. Further research should use the Think-Aloud Protocol in order to make clearer findings of what is actually affecting the students’ ability to interpret the idioms correctly, as well as a larger sample from a wider range of proficiency levels.
References


Appendix 1

Figure 6. The familiarity rating of idioms in context across levels of education.

Figure 7. The familiarity rating of idioms in isolation across levels of education.
Appendix 2

Idioms within context
What does the underlined idiom mean?
Circle one of the options.

1. *When the fur flies, I'm leaving. There's no way I'm getting into a fight between those two.*
   
   a. Fur flying around
   b. An aggressive argument
   c. A discussion

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

2. *The cat took off like a bat out of hell.*
   
   a. Flying
   b. Very slowly
   c. Very fast

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

3. *The children were so full of beans, they couldn’t sit still.*
   
   a. To have the stomach full of beans
   b. To be very tired
   c. To be very energetic

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

4. *Hold your head up high and believe in yourself, even if you’re quaking in your boots.*
   
   a. To be shaking
   b. To be frightened
   c. To be arrogant

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

5. *We didn’t want to be on a team that went for the brass ring by spending three times as much as everyone else.*
   
   a. Great success
   b. A ring made of a mixture of copper and zinc.
   c. Failure

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No
6. *He always taunts his opponent in order to rattle his cage.*

- To shake someone’s cage
- To upset or annoy someone
- To make friends

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

7. *The picture on this new high-definition TV is crystal clear!*

- Beautiful
- Made of crystal
- Strikingly clean or clear

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

8. *He chose to go after the fool’s gold and lost.*

- A gold-colored mineral
- Something that seems good but is not
- Money

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

9. *Take heart, we may still win this game.*

- Be confident
- Be a coward
- Show some love

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

10. *If he believes that story, he’s really out to lunch.*

- To be crazy
- To be eating food
- To take a break from work

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No
Idioms in isolation:
What does the idiom mean?
Circle on of the options.

1. *To go ballistic*
   a. To be very angry
   b. To be very happy
   c. To be very foolish

   Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

2. *In the blink of an eye*
   a. Something happens very quickly
   b. To blink one’s eye
   c. A very short time

   Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

3. *To have fire in the belly*
   a. Have been eating spicy food
   b. To have passion and determination
   c. To be nervous

   Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

4. *Make your blood run cold*
   a. To be very warm
   b. To be very frightened
   c. To freeze

   Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

5. *A golden boy*
   d. A boy made of gold
   e. Someone very successful
   f. A gold trophy

   Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

6. *Spit in the eyes of someone*
   a. To deliberately upset or annoy someone
b. To spit in someone’s eyes
c. To be angry at someone

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

7. Clear as day

a. Easy to see and understand
b. Free from clouds
c. No darkness

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

8. Not all that glitters is gold

a. Gold does not always shimmer
b. It is not good
c. Everything is not always how it first appears

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

9. Like the cat that ate the canary

a. Full of food
b. Overly pleased with oneself
c. Depressed

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

10. Lose your marbles

a. To become crazy
b. To not be able to find one’s glass balls
c. To have the wrong idea

Have you seen this idiom before? Yes/No

What was your last received grade in English?

A  B  C  D  E  F

I am currently studying:

a. English 5
b. English 6