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Learning while Gaming: Second Language
Students' Acquisition of English Idioms

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Abstract

Idioms are found in every language, and if one wants to master a language it is important to learn and be able to use idioms while communicating. The English language is no exception. As well as in other languages, idioms are used extensively in the English language.

There is also a difference between a literal and an idiomatic meaning of a sentence. If one wants to understand different shades of meaning it is important to know the meaning of idiomatic expressions. For example, “break a leg” is an idiom used commonly when speaking. The literal meaning of the sentence would be an instruction by the speaker telling someone to break a bone in their leg. However, the idiomatic meaning of this expression is: good luck and do your best. This idiomatic expression is often used among actors when they tell each other to “break a leg” before entering the stage to perform.

Furthermore, computers have become an increasingly important and widely used medium of communication over the past two decades. Researchers have viewed this positively, and noted how it is especially helpful when it comes to language development.

The aim of this study is to investigate whether playing computer games as a leisure activity improves the usage and knowledge of idioms among students in the secondary school. A total of 22 students participated in the study, 12 male students and 10 female students. The methodology is based on a quantitative method (Dörnyei 2007). The data is collected with the help of questionnaires in which students had to answer questions about their video gaming habits and attitudes towards idioms. Apart from this, they then had to work with idiomatic expressions in three different ways to measure their knowledge of idioms. Even though the data collected is limited, some evidence was found which indicated that playing video games or online computer games does have a noticeable impact on the English language, regarding idioms. The observation measured the participants’ usage and knowledge of idioms. The main conclusion of the study is that video games and online games might influence the players’ language proficiency in a positive way with regards to idiomatic expressions. Moreover, most of the students state that they consider idiomatic expressions important, and that they are necessary to learn to acquire a more nuanced English language.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introductory remarks

This study investigates whether video games and online games improve the use and understanding of English idioms among L2 learners. There are several reasons that motivate this work. Computers play an increasingly central role in modern life. According to Beatty (2003:16), the first computer that was used for language learning was only seen on university campuses or at research facilities in the 1950s. However, this has changed. Today gaming is something that connects people. Playing video and online computer games has also increased since the 1990s, and many young people in modern society spend much of their free time at the computer playing different kinds of computer games, both online and individually (Berger 2002:25). As English is often the main language used for communication, playing online games gives the players an opportunity to meet people from all over the world, and increase their exposure to the English language. Therefore, studies on the usage of the computer in L2 acquisition constitute an important area of research.

Learning a foreign language used to take place in the classroom. However, in contemporary society, Swedish pupils are exposed to the English language outside of school for example through music, films, and television. In fact, technological devices such as computers and computer games can sometimes help learners to develop their language skills. Computer games have developed over time and are now much more interactive which facilitates communication with other people. Griffith (2002:48) suggests that video games can stimulate learning by allowing the participants to experience challenges, and he also claims that games give the participants opportunity to learn while interacting in a game. Moreover, gamers have been coining their own idiomatic expressions showing their group affiliation and identity. So far as can be established, there is currently little research on the impact of computer games on L2 learners' proficiency (Crawford 2012:2). It is therefore worthwhile to investigate the extent to which the computer or online games can influence L2 learners' understanding and use of English idioms in a positive way.

1.2 Aims and scope

The aim of this study is to investigate whether video games and online computer games facilitate L2 learners' knowledge and use of English idioms. As seen in Section 1.1, above, L2 language learning often takes place in school especially when English is taught in non-native countries. However, this is not the only place in which learning can take place. Due to

the increasing use of computers in homes and children's access to them, and the variety of computer games available on the market, children now encounter English in a wider range of situations. In fact, it is also possible that games played during their leisure time can help and develop the child's L2.

Idioms are “expressions where the individual words have ceased to have independent meanings” (Saeed 2009:60). Idioms comprise a large part of the language, and it is therefore important that students come in contact with different idioms to enrich and develop their English skills. This study aims to investigate the impact of computer games on L2 learners' acquisition of English idioms by using the following research questions:

- To what extent are secondary school students familiar with English idioms?
- Are frequent players of computer games more able to recognize and use *English idioms* than those that do not play computer games?
- Is there a difference between genders when it comes to the knowledge of idioms?

In Section 2, I will introduce previous studies on the impact of computer games on the players and their development in society. Furthermore, a brief explanation of different types of video games will be given. Thereafter, I will briefly discuss the sociolinguistic aspect of gaming with respect to genders differences (cf. Seidlhofer 2012). The importance of idiomatic expressions will be explained and Section 3. In Section 4, the participants and the methodology of the study will be presented while the findings and results of the study will be given in Section 5. Finally, in Section 6, the conclusions of the study will be outlined.

2. Theoretical background

The aim of this section is to provide definitions and examples of video games and online games based on previous research within the field. Furthermore, the effects of video games on gamers will be explored with regard to their linguistic competences.

2.1 Computer games and online games

The design of video games was originally very simple (Berger 2002:115). However, over time these designs have been developed and computer games are now much more interactive and complex. Many people around the world play MMORPG games, i.e. massively multiplayer online role-playing games. According to Brun (2005), more than 50 per cent of the young people between the ages 11–16 play video games or online games every week. Brun (2005) states that boys play more than girls. Video games and online gaming have, for most of their history, been widely regarded as activities primarily for males, and there is still

not much written about the female gamer. However, over the past decade, girls have begun to take more interest in this male-dominated activity (Crawford 2012). Taylor (2003) claims that female players have started playing MMORPG such is *World of Warcraft* which is seen as a traditionally male-dominated game. MMORPG, massively multiplayer online game, is a term coined by Richard Garriott in 1997. He is the creator of the Ultima online game. The term refers to games such as World of Warcraft (Asbjorn 2010:98). *World of Warcraft* is an online game created by Blizzard entertainment and is a game where the players control a character avatar. The players explore the landscape, fight various monsters and complete different quests. During the play the players interact with one another. It is suggested that females tend to enjoy these kinds of games as it gives them the opportunity to compete with men on a more equal footing (Crawford 2012:53).

Berger (2002) claims that there are currently many different types of games available. He explains that the advanced technology of video games has also led to a new entertainment form, and many games are a move toward films (Berger 2002:9). By this he means that games have the same high definition quality as films when it comes to images and sounds. What differentiates the games from films is, however, that the viewer now can participate and immerse into the games (Berger 2002:9).

MMOG games constitute yet another type of “the most popular games played on the Internet” (Berger 2002:110). In addition, Asbjorn (2010) claims in his article that these refer to all online games. These games are very popular among young people and are played all around the world.

Also, computer and online games differ from each other depending on the purpose of the game. Berger (2012) asserts that there are different genres of video games, and that the games are used for different reasons of the player. Berger (ibid:12–13) states that games are used to amuse the player while others are used for teaching. Despite this, they have one feature in common, namely the language of communication, and that is that communication often occurs in English (cf. Seidlhofer 2014). Therefore, the young people who spend time playing different games are likely to encounter the English language frequently. It would thus be possible that these young people develop their vocabulary, and would also come in contact with idioms at some point when using English as a lingua franca. Due to globalization, English is seen as the most used language in international communication, or a *lingua franca* in our society (cf. Seidlhofer 2014).

Lingua franca is defined as a language used for communication purposes when speakers have a different first language (Chrystal 2003). Seidlhofer (2014) claims that English as a lingua

franca interactions take place when people share neither a common language nor cultural background but interact and communicate using English. English is often used and practiced as a lingua franca when playing computer games, and many of the participants are non-native speakers. Therefore, using the English language while playing arguably gives the player an opportunity to improve his/her language skills (Gee 2002). The players collaborate in teams in which they share knowledge and values. According to Gee (2002), *this illustrates a wider point about how society works and he says*: “However, in the end, the real importance of good computer and video games is that they allow people to re-create themselves in new worlds and achieve recreation and deep learning at one and the same time” (Gee 2003:3).

2.2 Gaming as extramural

The expression 'extramural activities' refers to L2-learning contexts outside the classroom and traditional education. Video games and online games involve interactive processes. This means that the players need to be active while playing in order to be able to deal with the challenges as they arise in the games. Gee (2003) explains that, “video games offer players a feeling of achievement in a number of different ways”, such as the player does something in the games and sees the results instantly. Gee (*ibid*) also proposes that some good video games encourage different ways of thinking and learning.

According to Sundqvist and Sylvén (2012), digital games are an important part of many young people's lives and consume much of their leisure time activities. They point out that what are known as “massively multiplayer online role-playing games” (MMORPGs) can facilitate the development of the English language as these games provide L2 English learners with a linguistically rich environment. Their study also shows that students who play more games per week also achieved better results in vocabulary tests. It further reveals how games give students the opportunity to develop their vocabulary (*ibid*). As idioms represent a large part of the English language among students' vocabulary, gamers are therefore likely to show greater knowledge of idiomatic expressions.

The Swedish National Agency for Education also refers to Sundqvist and Sylvén's study on the use of computers among secondary school students. The study showed that boys tended to have a larger vocabulary than girls (*ibid*). Sundqvist and Sylvén (*ibid*: 315)

also express the view that this is due to the fact that the boys in the study spend more hours at the computer, either playing games or on the Internet. Video games and online games give players occasions to communicate in English and hear the authentic language use.

Finally, according to Griffiths (2002), video games can improve language skills among the players because they interact with each other by asking questions and solving game-related problems. It should be noted here that Berger (2002:65) asserts that children often try to avoid learning games. There are, however, great possibilities to hide a “teaching” content in a game without advertising this intention to the gamer (Berger 2002:65).

3. Idioms: definition and use

An idiom is, “an expression whose meaning cannot be predicted from the usual meanings of its constituent elements” (Webster's Dictionary 1994). Collins English Dictionary (2006) defines idioms as, “an expression such as a simile, in which words do not have their literal meaning, but are categorized as multi-word expressions that act in the text as units”. In other words, idioms are words put together that mean something different from what the sentence is literally saying.

However, when studying idioms from a linguistic point of view, one encounters several different definitions of what idiomatic expressions are. Fernando’s (1996: 38) classification of idioms is relatively broad i.e. they are: “conventionalized multi-word expressions often, but not always, non-literal.” Moreover, Moore (1998) mentions that it may be difficult to define an idiom. She defines an idiom as “an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways. In lay or general use, idiom has two main meanings. First, idiom is a particular means of expressing something in language, music, art, and so on, which characterizes a person or group”. She mentions that “an idiom is a particular lexical collocation or phrasal lexeme, peculiar to a language” (ibid: p. 3). According to Reihemann (27), idiomatic words are words that “do not exist as independent words with the same meaning, so not all words that occur in idioms are idiomatic words in that sense”. According to Makkai (1972:1), idioms have been used since “antiquity” and in different ways. Moreover, idioms constitute a large part of the language, and it is therefore important that students come in contact with different idioms to develop their English skills. There are many everyday idioms in English, and most likely one uses them without even realizing it.

In some senses, idioms are the reflection of the life, environment, and culture of the native speaker. Idioms are used in both informal and formal language, in both writing and speech. This means that idioms occur in different contexts. They also occur in colloquial conversations and shorthand writing such as text messaging.

Students will often master the skill of idiomatic expressions later in their language acquisition process, and need time to understand and use them correctly. At some point,

second-language learners even encounter difficulties using English idioms. Due to these difficulties, they sometimes prefer to avoid them altogether.

From the L2 students' perspective there are many advantages in learning idioms. First, the language sounds more near-native if one uses idioms when speaking. Besides, by using idioms when writing texts one can make them more colourful, creative, and interesting. Idioms also give the students the opportunity to maximize the vocabulary (targetstudy.com), and allow the L2 learner to express his or her opinion in a more casual way.

According to Ball (1980), students of English soon become aware of the need to be able to interpret informal expressions correctly rather than having an accurate understanding of English grammar and syntax. Moreover, he declares that the colloquial language is the reason why the body of the English language changes. Ball (1980:10) points out that by adding colloquial idioms, the language is revived while short-lived idioms are excluded as they lose their meaning and significance over time.

English Language Learners (ELLs) often struggle with idioms (cf. Smith and Zygoris-Coe 2009) which constitute one of the most difficult aspects to master when studying a second language. Idioms also tend to confuse students that are not proficient in the target language. Therefore, idioms are usually learnt as vocabulary and, when learning, them one usually memorizes them as sentences or fixed expressions instead of single words.

Idioms can be divided into different categories: *transparent items*, *semi-transparent items*, and *opaque items* (Karlsson 2012). Transparent idioms are idioms that are easy to understand because their meaning is close to the literal meaning of the words. The learner sees a connection between the expressions such as *to be frightened to death* means 'to be very scared', or *to lend someone a hand* means 'to help someone'. Semi-transparent idioms, such as *to kill two birds with one stone*, meaning 'to succeed in achieving two things in a single action' are relatively easy to interpret as well. The opaque idioms, on the other hand, are more difficult. The meaning of these idioms cannot be adduced from the meaning of the isolated words they contain, for example *to pull someone's leg* means 'to trick or fool someone' while *to kick the bucket* means 'to die'.

In sum, idioms are a major part of the English Language and are used commonly when communicating. Writers use idioms to communicate a feeling. Second language learners might find idioms difficult to understand and use, and therefore it takes time to master idiomatic expressions. While some speakers may be inclined to avoid idiomatic language where possible it can, when used appropriately, offer a way of expressing individual identity and in-group bonds. In online gaming, players communicate with specific phrases and

expressions by using comments and jokes about things that happen during games. In addition, the inside jokes are only understood by those involved in the game and its rules. Some idioms may be used to indicate a membership of a particular group (<http://www.londonschool.com/language-talk/language-tips/why-teach-idioms/>).

4. Material and Method

4.1 Participants

The study was conducted in a secondary school in, Tranemo, Sweden, with students studying English in the ninth grade. Altogether there were 22 students in the present class, 12 males and 10 females, and they were all between 15–16 years of age. Five of the students, three males and two females, did not have Swedish as their mother tongue, but had studied English at school for at least six years.

4.2 Study

In this study, a quantitative method was used. According to Dörnyei (2007:34–35), the advantage of the quantitative method is that it is used to quantify opinions or, in this case, the participants' knowledge of idiomatic expressions. The empirical data used in the present study include a questionnaire and tests designed to measure the participants' knowledge of English idiomatic expressions. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect information about the participants' background such as their L1, time they spent on playing computer games, their knowledge of idioms, etc. (see Appendix 1). They were also asked to suggest examples of idioms with which they had come in contact. Before completing the questionnaire, the students were given information on both figurative language and idiomatic expressions. Thereafter, the students worked on the questionnaires individually during their ordinary English lessons for 40 minutes. Their answers were then handed in and analysed. The findings of the questionnaire will be outlined in Section 5.

As mentioned above, the second part of the quantitative study involved a test of the students' use and understanding of idioms (see Appendix 2), and was conducted during another 40-minute lesson. This test comprised two parts, namely that the students were first asked to provide an explanation for 15 different idiomatic expressions given to them, and then they were to construct example sentences of their own containing these particular idioms. The idiomatic expressions chosen for the test are common and frequently used in everyday conversation, and therefore the students might be expected to recognise them. These idioms were taken from the webpage www.myenglishteacher.eu. Moreover, the idioms given to the

students were close to a colloquial use of language which gamers might use when communicating. They were selected in order to investigate whether frequent gamers might have an advantage in terms of recognition of idioms.

Each student could thus receive a total of 15 points for providing correct explanations for the idiomatic expressions given. Furthermore, they could be awarded another 15 points for the sentences of their own (one point for each correct sentence), showing their ability to use these particular idioms in context. The students were also asked to write as many idiomatic expressions they could recollect. This was done to ascertain whether the participants knew other idiomatic expressions aside those given in the test. They were not, however, awarded any additional points for these idioms, as doing so might have caused some students to run out of time working on the explanations and example sentences. Finally, the participants' responses, i.e. explanations and example sentences, were analysed and quantified in order to establish the number of correct versus incorrect answers for each part of the test. The results of this procedure will be given and explained in Section 5.

5. Results

In this section, the findings of the present study will be given. First, the results of the questionnaire regarding the students' previous knowledge of idioms and their gaming habits will be presented. Second, the results of the idiom test in terms of students' performance and gender differences will be shown.

Table 1. The students' knowledge of the term *idiom* before the study

Previous knowledge of the term <i>idiom</i>	Male (55%)	Female (45%)
Unfamiliar	12/12	9/10
Familiar	0/12	1/10

As shown in Table 1, none of the male participants was familiar with the term *idiom* before the study while a clear majority of the female participants did not know what an idioms was.

Table 2. Students' opinion regarding the importance of idioms

Assumption	Male (55%)	Female (45%)
Learning idioms is important	7/12	7/10
Learning idioms is not important	5/12	3/10

As seen in Table 2, 63.6 per cent of the students thought that it was important to learn idioms. This question was asked in order to determine whether students felt that idioms were important and to see what attitude they had towards idioms before the study was conducted. As the students were explicitly asked to explain why it is important or unimportant to learn idioms (see Appendix 1), the results provided by female and male students are given in (1a)–(1e) and (2a)–(2d), respectively.

(1a) It makes the language more fun.

(1b) It is used a lot in every language.

(1c) It makes conversation more interesting.

(1d) You can explain something in a unique way with idioms.

(1e) Idioms are important because it's a way for people to express themselves.

Also native speakers use idioms and you become better in English if you use idioms.

(2a) It becomes easier to talk.

(2b) It makes the conversation fun and it is easier to explain.

(2c) It makes it easier to express yourself.

(2d) Idioms can describe things you can't do with real words.

With regard to the reasons why learning idioms is not important given by both female and male students, they often found idioms difficult to learn. Moreover, these students did not seem to think that idiomatic expressions are important to be able to communicate. They also stated that idiomatic expressions are neither useful nor necessary to make oneself understood in English.

Table 3. Students' time spent on playing computer or online games

Time spent playing per week	Male (55%)	Female (45%)
0–5 hours (Non-gamers)	5/12	5/10
5–10 hours (Moderate gamers)	4/12	4/10
10 hours or more (Frequent gamers)	3/12	1/10

As explained in Section 4, the students were asked to describe their gaming habits. To determine approximately how much time the students spend on playing computer or online games, the students had to estimate how many hours per week they spent playing by choosing one out of three options, this can be seen in Appendix 1. The *non-gamers*, i.e. the students spending from zero to five hours per week playing computer/online games, constituted the largest group. As seen in Table 3, this category consists of an equal number of female and male participants. The second category, *moderate gamers*, comprised four males and four female students. Finally, there were three *frequent gamers* among the male participants, while one female student acknowledged spending 10 hours or more per week on playing computer or online games.

There were slightly more frequent and moderate players among the male students: seven out of twelve, compared to five out of ten in the case of female participants. Interestingly, there were certain differences in the type of games played by male and female students. The majority of the informants preferred adventure games, shooting games, combat games, and sports games, such as *International Federation of Association Football* (FIFA). However, two female students, one frequent player and one moderate player, stated that they preferred playing *Sims*, or *Undertale*. Both of the mentioned games are simulation games in which one creates his or her own person and guide. Two female students claimed that they do not play computer or online games at all.

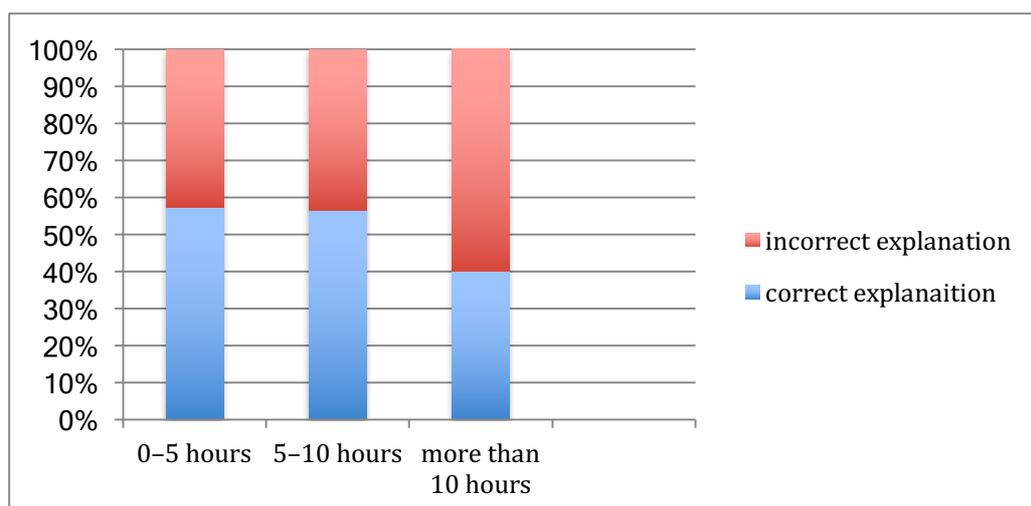


Figure 1. Correctness and incorrectness of the male students’ answers when explaining the meaning of the idiomatic expressions

As explained in the method chapter (see Section 4), the participants were able to receive a total of 15 correct answers if they gave their own explanations of the meaning of the idiomatic expressions provided.

Five male students represented the group that played between 0–5 hours per week. They received a total of 43 correct answers which meant that 57.3 per cent of the explanations were correct. The category “male students who played 5–10 hours” consisted of four male students. They managed to achieve 34 correct explanations, or 56.6 per cent correct answer. Finally, the informants that played more than 10 hours per week comprised three male students. They provided 18 correct_explanations for the idiomatic expressions which correspond to 40 per cent correct answers.

It is also important to emphasize that the thematic idiomatic expressions used could very well occur in everyday talk (see Section 4). It was important that the idiomatic expressions were those which students could have encountered. These expressions were chosen to determine whether the participants who played video or online games had learnt more idiomatic expressions than those who played a few hours or not at all. Besides, the idioms supplied to the students are close to a colloquial style use of language which gamers might use when communicating. The intention was to investigate whether players would have an advantage in terms of recognition of the idioms. It can be seen in Figure 1 that frequent players did not have any advantage in terms of the selected idiomatic expressions. They underperformed

compared to the other two games groups. However, no great difference was detected between the non - gamers and the moderate gamers.

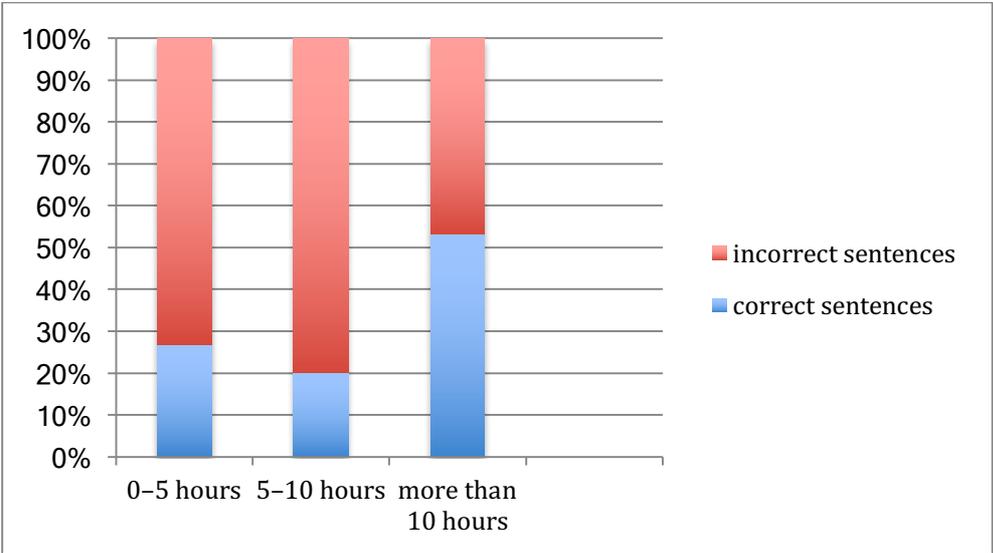


Figure 2. Correctness and incorrectness of the male students’ answers when using idiomatic expressions in their own sentences.

Regarding the male students’ use of idiomatic expressions, the frequent gamers succeeded in producing the largest number, 53.3 per cent, of correct sentences. The moderate gamers achieved the least number of correct sentences, 20 per cent. However, there is no great difference between the non-gamers and the moderate gamers. The non-gamers gave 26.7 per cent correct sentences. Moreover, 66.7 per cent, 8 out of the 12 male students responded in the questionnaire that they spoke English when playing games while the other 3 did not use the English language while playing. This applied to all the frequent and moderate players. However, among the non-gamers none of the players use English for communicating.

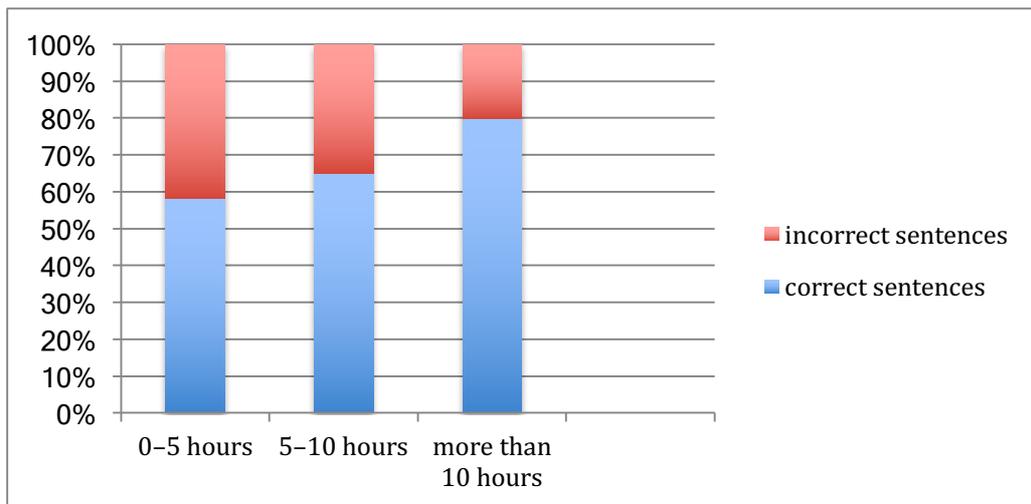


Figure 3. Correctness of the female students' answers when explaining the meaning of the idiomatic expressions.

In the above table, there are obvious differences in the answers given by the female students. The participants who gave the least number of correct answers comprised the group who played computer games or online games between 0–5 hours/ week. As shown in Figure 3, 58.7 per cent of the explanations they provided were correct. However, some of the non-gamers performed very well when asked to use the idiomatic expressions, and could write advanced sentences. As for the players between 5–10 hours, they performed relatively well, with 65 per cent of correct explanations. The student who played more than 10 hours/ week, the frequent gamer, had the largest number, 80 per cent of correct explanations. Also, she managed to give detailed and clear explanations. Further, 50 per cent of the female participants mentioned that they used English when playing games.

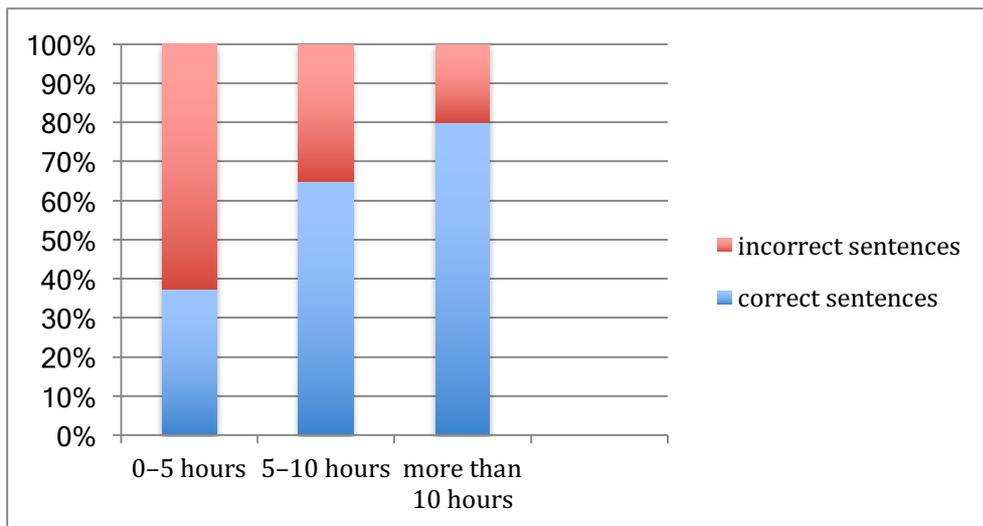


Figure 4. Correctness and incorrectness of the female students' answers when using idiomatic expressions in their own sentences.

The above figure shows differences between the female students when asked to write their own sentences using the idiomatic expressions provided. The frequent gamer performed better than the two other groups: 80 per cent of her sentences were correct. In the case of the moderate players, 65 per cent of the sentences produced by them were correct sentences, while this number was considerably lower at 37.3 per cent among the non-gamers.

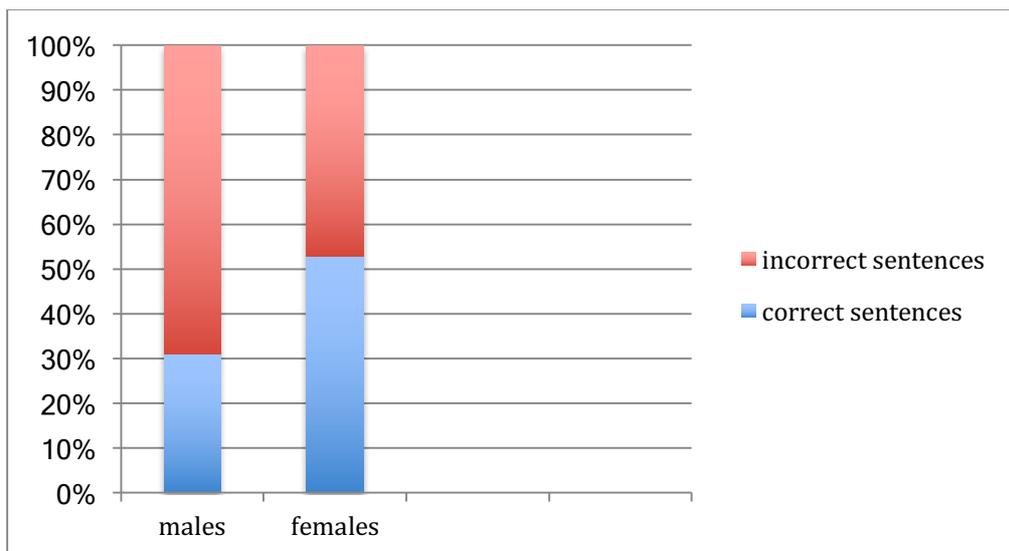


Figure 5. Male and female students' knowledge and use of idiomatic expressions.

Figure 5 shows the dissimilarity between the genders when it comes to using the idiomatic expressions in their own sentences

When it comes to gender differences regarding the students' understanding and use of idioms, the female participants performed better when they were asked to write their own sentences and received higher results, the difference being 21.6 per cent. In total, the females gave 52.7 per cent correct sentences while the male students gave 31.1 per cent. Moreover, the female students wrote on average 7.7 sentences, while the male participants wrote 4.6 sentences each.

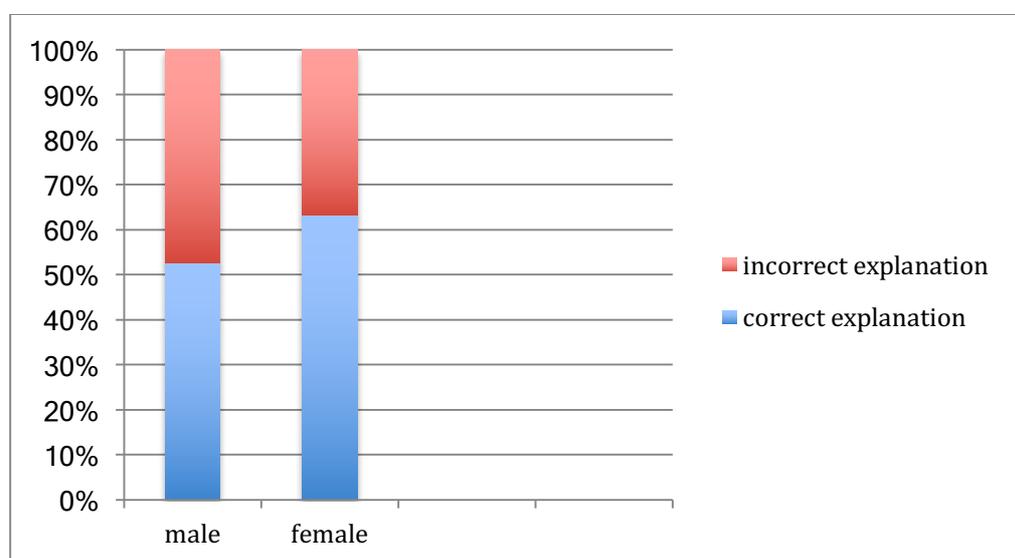


Figure 6. Male and female students' ability to explain the meaning of the idiomatic expression

Figure 6 shows the difference between the male and female participants when analysing the ability to explain the idiomatic expressions. The female students managed to explain the idiomatic expressions better. Altogether, the male students explained 52.7 per cent of the idiomatic expressions correctly, while the female students gave 95 correct explanations altogether which corresponds to 63.3 per cent.

In the last part of the questionnaire the students were asked to mention any idiomatic expression they had encountered. Even here there is a difference between the genders. The female participants gave fewer examples of idiomatic expressions than the male participants. The female students provided eight idiomatic expressions in total while the boys related 12 expressions. Some of the examples of the idiomatic expressions provided by the female participants are given in (1a)–(1d) below:

- 1a “It is raining cats and dogs, out of the blue”.
- 1 b “Once in a blue moon, going bananas”.
- 1c “You need to chill and cat caught your tongue”.

Some of the expressions mentioned by the male participants were:

- 1d “Rock your socks off, see red, beat it, get rid of and piece of cake”.

Table 5. Do students believe that they learn idiomatic expressions while playing the computer?

Idiomatic expressions learnt when playing	Male (55%)	Female (45%)
0–5 hours	0/5	4/5
5–10 hours	1/4	2/4
10 hours or more	2/3	0/1

The nature of the game seems to be crucial for secondary school students to learn new idioms. The game must afford the student the opportunity to use idiomatic expressions in speech or writing. In the games that offer this, the language is often communicated within an authentic context and there are great opportunities for learning and using idiomatic expressions. The players are forced to communicate to be able to participate in the game. When asked to express their own thoughts concerning the acquisition of idiomatic expressions while playing, the male students who play between 0–5 hours per week stated they do not think that they learn idiomatic expressions through games. On the other hand, four female students who play as much as the male students believe they learn idioms. In the moderate group there is no great difference between the male and the female comments on whether they learn idioms. One male and two females in the moderate group believe that they learn idioms. Finally, in the frequent gamers’ category, two male students consider that they learn idiomatic expressions, while the female participant does not agree with this.

6. Discussion

First, most of the students were unfamiliar with idiomatic expressions. This can be seen in seen in Table 1. They also mentioned that they had not worked with idioms in school. As concluded in Section 3.1, above, this corresponds to what Fernando (1996) relates. He states that idioms often are neglected when studying English. As can be seen in Table 1, only one

female student had heard the term “idiom” before and said that she had worked with it in school. However, In Table 2, most of the students agreed that idioms were important for the target language. In addition, the study shows that the majority of the participants agreed that it was important to enrich their knowledge of idiomatic expressions to, among other things, improve their proficiency and fluency in the language.

Section 2.2, appears to replicate Sundqvist and Sylvén’s (2012) finding that students who spent much time by the computer performed better on the tests concerning the vocabulary. The results from the current study seem to show a similar tendency. There is also a correlation between the participants’ answers and previous research (see Section 2). As shown in Section 2.2, Griffiths (2002), claims that computer games can improve the players’ language skills and this same finding also emerged in the results of this small-scale study.

Interestingly, the study has revealed that male and female students largely play the same type of games, which shows that the sexes are more similar in terms of gaming than may have previously been assumed. As mentioned in Section 2.1, the study confirms Crawford’s findings (2012). He explained that the male group has been the dominant group when it comes to playing games, but that girls are catching up (Crawford 2012). In this current study, the male students still spend more hours playing games even though the difference was not obvious. This shows that female players are gradually entering the gaming world. The girls have started playing the games that are traditionally considered male games. It was interesting to see that these games, World of Warcraft (WoW) and International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), were played by some of the girls that participated in the study because it is consistent with Crawford’s statements (Crawford 2012).

The Agency of Swedish Education asserts that students should develop their language to make it more nuanced and varied in both speech and writing to receive higher grades (Skolverket 2016). By using and learning idiomatic expressions, students are presented with the opportunity to do this. A few students did not believe idiomatic expressions were necessary aspects of language, according to the current study. It is conceivable that students might see it this way when speaking because they are not aware of the fact that idioms are a large part of the English language and are used frequently. Karlsson (2012) also asserts this in her study. However, Karlsson (2012) develops this, and states that students who want to become advanced learners in the L2 need to learn idiomatic expressions.

When it comes to the second research question, it can be seen that the majority of the students use English as lingua franca when they play. In Section 2.1, Seidlhofer (2012) also notes that English is the language most commonly used as international and national

communications, which is consistent with what is said in this study. There are also those who do not speak English when they play. The male students who say this are the students who are non-players and they are found to have less knowledge of idiomatic expression when it comes to using it in their own sentences compared to the frequent gamers. Still, they performed better than the moderate gamers both in explaining the idiomatic expressions as well as using the idiomatic expressions in their own sentences. This was pertinent because, as Sundqvist and Sylvén noted (Section 2.2, above), computer-based activities such as playing certain games can help strengthen the knowledge of English.

The results from the male group show it cannot be concluded that the non-gamers have limited English skills compared to the moderate and frequent gamers. One can see a connection between using the language and learning idiomatic expressions. The study shows that frequent users of computer games perform better when asked to use the idiomatic expressions in their own sentences. The frequent gamers did not perform as well when asked to explain the meaning of the idiomatic expressions. In this part of the study, the non-gamers received much better results. This was surprising since the idiomatic expressions should likely appear in certain contexts when playing different games. However, as can be seen in Table 5, the frequent gamers consider that they learn idiomatic expressions. The frequent gamers also invent new idiomatic expressions that are used in their in-group. This is done to facilitate the gaming process and give them a sense of belonging to a group. These idiomatic expressions have been adopted by the group, and are difficult to understand for those outside the group. This demonstrates that the language evolves and changes constantly which corresponds to Ball's theory (1980) that colloquial idioms and language change through time. A connection can, however, be observed between playing computer games and the knowledge of idiomatic expressions in the female group. The frequent player outperformed the other groups and received better results both in terms of using and explaining the idiomatic expressions. The participants that performed worst were the non-gamers. As stated in Section 2.2, above, these findings are thus consistent with Sundqvist and Sylvén's study (2012) that students that play more games per week also achieve better results.

Finally, it appears that female students are able to use idiomatic expressions more than male participants yet, the male students are better at explaining the idiomatic expressions in their own words. The reason for this result may be that the female participants are more likely to construct their own sentences. Female students show that they perform better when they have the opportunity to write in a free writing assignment. It might be the case that male students have more difficulties formulating what to write. Therefore, a clear difference can be

seen between the male and female focus group when it comes to the usage of the English language. A total of 66.7 per cent of the male focus group used English as the language of communication, while only 50 per cent of the female group communicated in English.

More female participants reported that they learn idiomatic expressions when they play games and this may be because they communicate more during the game. They have a more nuanced language with other players, but it can also depend on the character within the game that they have adopted. When examining the usage of common idiomatic expressions, a 21.6 per cent difference between the genders is found to exist. The female students achieved a slightly higher score when writing sentences with the expressions. Lastly, the male students spent more time playing games even though the difference was not of great significance, which is also noted by Brun (2005) in Chapter 2.1

7. Conclusion

This section summarizes the results of the survey by emphasizing its most essential aspects. The purpose of this study was to establish whether playing computer games and online games improves the awareness and usage of English idiomatic expressions by secondary school students, and to detect any gender differences when it comes to their familiarity with idiomatic expressions. To investigate this, three research questions were formulated, namely:

- Are secondary school students familiar with English idioms?
- Do frequent users of computer games know more idioms than those that do not play the computer?
- Is there a difference between the genders when it comes to the knowledge of idioms?

First, when studying the results, they indicate that most of the participants in the focus group were relatively unfamiliar with English idioms before the study. The majority of the students had not worked with idiomatic expressions before the study and did not believe they were necessary to master the English language. This may be due to the fact that the students had not been taught about idiomatic expressions in school and thus had not understood the importance of idiomatic expressions in the English language. The students that used the English more performed better on the test, although there may have been other causes for the students' achievements. The present study did not investigate other leisure activities in which English is involved such as reading, TV habits, social media, and so on. Additionally, the study shows that the majority of the participants agreed that it was important to learn idiomatic expressions to better achieve fluency in the target language. The results also indicate that there is often a positive correlation between the participants' idiomatic

proficiency and the number of hours spent on playing computer or online games. No great difference in choice of games between the genders was identified in the study even though the male participants spent more time playing computer games.

Furthermore, despite the fact that the girls spent slightly less time in terms of hours playing video games in the frequent and moderate category, they had more knowledge of idiomatic expressions. They outperformed the male participants in their ability to use the idiomatic expressions as well as explaining the expressions in their own words. The reason for this result may be that the female participants are more likely to construct with their own sentence, possibly because the girls read more and come in contact with idiomatic expressions. Despite the fact that the girls spent slightly fewer hours playing video games in the frequent and moderate category, they had more knowledge of idiomatic expressions. They outperformed the male participants when using the idiomatic expressions and explaining the expressions in their own words but, since the study did not ask about students' recreational activities, one cannot be sure of this.

Moreover, the study is based entirely on a quantitative study and it might have been appropriate to include a qualitative method in the current study as well. Through a qualitative study, the students could possibly have given more detailed responses. Also, due to the small scale of the study in terms of the number of students, the study will inevitably be less robust than one with a substantially larger sample group. Nevertheless, it is still possible to make an assessment of the skills and attitudes that students who study English as an L2 possess from this research.

Finally, due to a lack of research on the impact of computer games in terms of idiomatic expressions, this is an area that can be studied further. Several questions were answered in this current study. However, further research is needed to investigate how and if computer games and online games improve second learners' knowledge of idiomatic expressions. Therefore, this study might be useful as an inspiration and source for further studies.

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Appendix 1

Please take your time and answer the following questions. Thank you for your cooperation! Good luck!

Please answer the following questions:

1. Are you female male?

2. How old are you?

3. Is Swedish your mother tongue? Yes No

If not, what is your mother tongue?

4. Did you know what an idiom was before this study? Yes No

5. Do you think that idioms are important? Yes No

6. Why do you think idioms are or aren't important? Please, explain why.

7. How many hours per week do you estimate that you spend on playing computer games per week? Please choose one alternative

0–5 hours

5–10 hours

more than 10 hours

8. If you play computer games, what games do you play?

9. Do you speak English when you play computer games? Yes No

10. Do you learn new idioms when playing? Yes No

11. What idioms have you come across while playing?

12. Do you work with idioms in school? Yes No

13. Please rate your English skills on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (fluent)

Appendix 2

What do the idioms, expressions given below, mean? Please write an explanation for them, and try to come up with a sentence of your own for each one.

Watch my back

I'm falling in love

Keep an eye on

Get out of hand

Leave no stone unturned

Get it out of your system

Step up your game

Pick yourself up

Come out swinging

Hang in there

Shoot from the hip

Blew me away

Costs an arm and a leg

You rock

Lose it

2. Are there any other idioms that you know?

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