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Idioms in the Classroom

A qualitative study of teaching English idiomatic expressions in Swedish schools

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Abstract
According to research, “out of the different types of nonliteral expressions, idioms are the most frequently encountered in discourse. Without a knowledge of idiomatic expressions a nonnative speaker can never fully understand an English movie, sitcom or even the news” (Burke, 1998: 149). The aim of this study is to investigate how secondary school teachers work with idioms in their teaching. Additionally, the aim is also to see whether or not there are any differences regarding teaching at a secondary school in contrast to a high school. The method of choice is semi-structured interviews. Four secondary school teachers and four high school teachers were interviewed. The material in this study are the interviews, which have been recorded and transcribed. The results show that half of the secondary school teachers work actively with idioms through different activities. The other half stated that the teaching of idioms becomes a natural part of learning when the students read. The main difference between the secondary school and high school teachers’ approach to idioms is that the secondary school teachers put more emphasis on working actively with these types of expressions. Out of the four high school teachers who participated in this study, only one teacher focuses on the teaching of idiomatic expressions.

Keywords: idioms, idiomatic expressions, figurative language, pedagogy
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1. Introduction

“Without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” (Wilkins, 1972: 9). This is to say that vocabulary learning is an essential part of language learning. Making grammatical errors does not prevent communication with others. The message will still be understood. Nevertheless, without vocabulary there would be no spoken communication.

Vocabulary can be learnt by using one of the most common methods for acquiring new words, namely by using a glossary list given out by the teacher. However, what distinguishes a native speaker from a nonnative speaker is the use and understanding of idiomatic expressions or idioms. According to D’Angelo Bromley (1984: 272) idiomatic expressions exist in every language and “enjoy widespread use among speakers of every language the world over.” Cruse (1986: 37) asserts that an idiom is “[…] an expression whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning of its parts.”

The cultural knowledge or the recognition of an idiom must be there in order to understand an idiom. The average native English speaker uses idiomatic expressions approximately 200 million times in a lifetime of 60 years (Cooper, 1998: 255). This shows that idioms are common in the English language. If someone is familiar with the English language as a non-native speaker, for instance through school or TV, they may have heard the expression what’s up? According to the Cambridge Dictionary, this is also considered an idiomatic expression. On one hand, there is the figurative meaning of the expression, which is asking someone how they are and what is happening in their lives. On the other hand, there is the literal meaning, which is a question about the existence or presence of something which is above the speaker in terms of physical orientation.

Burke (1998: 152) asserts that “knowledge of slang and idioms is fundamental to non-speakers’ understanding of the language that native speakers actually use. It is also essential for those who want to integrate our culture; without slang and idioms, students will always be outsiders”

One way to enrich vocabulary is to use idiomatic expressions. Bromley (1984: 274) states that “just as idioms are disruptive, ambiguous and difficult for the language user, so also are they interesting and colorful. Idioms add humor, imagery and spice to language.”
1.1 Primary Data
The primary data for this study will consist of semi-structured interviews conducted with secondary and high school teachers in Sweden. The procedure will be explained fully under the third chapter of the essay. In Sweden, secondary school includes the grades 7-9 and the students are between the ages of 13-15. High school includes the grades 10-12 and the students begin high school at the age of about 16 and finish at the age of about 18. Secondary school is mandatory while high school is optional in Sweden.

1.2 Purpose
The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers’ attitudes and approaches regarding the teaching of idiomatic expressions. In addition to this, it will be established whether there are any differences in teaching idiomatic expressions at a secondary school compared to a high school.

1.3 Research Questions
The purpose has resulted into three research questions which are going to guide this study. These are as follows:

1. How do secondary school teachers teach idiomatic expressions to their students?
2. Why do teachers choose various types of strategies when teaching idiomatic expressions?
3. What, if any, differences are to be found regarding teaching idiomatic expressions at a secondary school in contrast to a high school?

1.4 Disposition
The first chapter of the essay is an introduction to the subject. The second chapter is a theoretical background which aims to explain scholarly works which form the basis of this study. In the third chapter, the methodology of the essay will be explained. A detailed description of how the planning and conducting of the study was undertaken is outlined. In the fourth chapter of the essay, the results from the interviews will be presented. The fifth chapter will discuss and analyze the results based on the theoretical background. The final chapter of the essay is the conclusion. This section aims to give answers to the research questions.
2. Theoretical Background
The theoretical background which can be helpful for this survey will be presented in this chapter.

2.1 Linguistics
Johansson and Manninen (2012: 8) define linguistics: “Linguistics is the scientific study of human language; its goal is to describe and explain the nature and properties of human language.” This essay will utilize approaches from two major sub-disciplines when it comes to the study of meaning in linguistics, namely semantics and pragmatics.

Semantics is the technical term used to define the study of meaning in a language (Palmer, 1981: 1). It can be assumed that semantics is a part of linguistics in the same way grammar or phonetics is, whereas semantics is at one end, phonetics at the other and grammar is somewhere in between (Palmer, 1981: 5). A problematic aspect of semantics is that, even if a person means what he/she says, the meaning can differ depending upon speakers, hearers and context (Palmer, 1981: 7). According to Palmer (1981: 4) “[…] we wish to suggest that the words do not mean what they might obviously mean, that there is some other meaning beside the “literal” meaning of the words.” O’Grady, Archibald, Aronoff and Rees-Miller (2001: 246) claim that the nature of meaning is something that has been speculated about for thousands of years. Apart from its core role in linguistics, semantics has come to be an important aspect of psychology and sociology.

Semantics can be divided into two different aspects of language meaning. Johansson and Manninen (2012: 127-128) make a distinction between literal meaning and associative meaning. The literal meaning of a word is usually similar for most speakers and can be found in a dictionary. The associative meaning can however, differ depending on the speaker. Yule (2014: 110) uses the word needle as an example. A description in a dictionary of the word “needle” could be: “thin, sharp, steel instrument”. The associative meaning could be pain, illness, blood or drugs. The meaning is dependent on the person reading or hearing the word and the context in which the word is uttered or written. Johansson and Manninen (2012: 127-128) offers the word “cat” as an example. For most speakers, the literal meaning of the word “cat” refers to a meowing animal. It is defined, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, as an “animal” or “well-known carnivorous quadruped which has long been domesticated, being kept to destroy mice, and as a house pet” (Johansson and Manninen, 2012: 127). However, the associative meaning differs from person to person.
Some can associate the word “cat” with “softness” or “companionship” others with “furniture damage” or “severe allergies and sneezing” (Johansson and Manninen, 2012: 127-128). Besides the meaning, semantics also describes different lexical relations, such as synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, homophones, homonyms and metonyms (Yule, 2014: 113-118). There are more types of lexical relations, however they will not be referred to in this essay as they are not directly relevant.

O’Grady et al. (2001: 246-247) describe relations between lexemes and this includes semantic phenomena such as synonyms and antonyms. Synonyms are words or expressions that have the same meaning in all or some contexts and are exemplified by examples such as: “youth/adolescent”, “remember/recall” and “purchase/buy”, are a few examples presented to the reader. Perfect synonyms are nearly impossible to find. Besides, having two words with exactly the same meaning is unnecessary. Oppositeness is one of the most familiar lexical relations. Johansson and Manninen (2012:130) describe three different types: “complementaries”, “antonyms” and “converses”. If two words have an “either-or” relation, they are considered to be complementaries. The authors (Johansson & Manninen, 2012: 130) give the following as examples: “[…] the door is either opened or closed, the students either passed or failed the exam, the stone I threw either hit or missed the neighbour’s cat, and the cat is now either dead or alive.” Complementaries are often adjectives or verbs in English. Moreover, complementary adjectives usually lack the comparative or superlative form (Johansson & Manninen, 2012: 131). A living creature is either dead or alive; there is no scope for an in-between state in semantics. It is unlikely to say that someone is “deader” than somebody else. The second type of relation is antonymic. Antonyms are words or phrases that are opposite to each other. The examples written by O’Grady et al. (2001: 246-247) are: “boy/girl”, “hot/cold”, and “come/go”. These words are in contrast to each other in at least on aspect of meaning. The example “boy/girl” are opposites if the aspect of gender is considered, however they are not opposites if they are viewed at from another perspective; they are both human. Furthermore, Palmer (1981: 94) distinguishes between two different forms of antonyms: explicitly graded antonyms and implicitly graded antonyms. Explicitly graded antonyms are placed on a graded scale of comparison. According to Johansson and Manninen (2012: 131) most antonyms are adjectives in the English language, they have both a comparative and superlative form. As reported by Palmer (1981: 94) “The comparative forms of the adjectives […] are EXPLICITLY graded, since to say that one road is wider than another, one boy is older than another or one book is bigger than another […].”
Implicitly graded anonyms are graded “against different norms according to the items being discussed.” (Palmer, 1981: 94). A butterfly can be large, though in comparison to a small elephant, the large butterfly is still considered to be small. Converses are the third form of lexical relations. “Words are each other’s converses if they describe the same relation between entities from alternate viewpoints” (Johansson & Manninen, 2012: 133). Examples of converses are: “before/after”, “student/teacher” or “mother/daughter”. The relation between the two words is exactly the same, the only difference being which word is used as the reference point (Johansson & Manninen, 2012: 133).

Homonymy is another type of lexical relation. Two words are considered to be homonyms if they are spelled the same yet the meaning of the words are different (Johansson & Manninen, 2012: 133). Words that are homonyms are e.g. bat or mole. The word “bat” can refer both to a flying creature or an instrument used in specific sports. A mole is either a discolored spot on the skin or a small mammal. Homophones, on the other hand, are words which are pronounced the same, but have different spelling and meaning (Johansson & Manninen, 2012: 133). The following words are considered to be homophones: “bare/bear”, “pail/pale”, “to/too/two” (Yule, 2014: 116). When a word has multiple meanings, it is polysemic. An example Johansson and Manninen (2012: 133-134) present to the readers is the word “head”. “Besides the part of the human body […] the word head can also be used more generally to talk about the upper part of something”. When referring to a part of the human body, the word “head” can be used. Moreover, the same word can be used when mentioning the head of a letter or the head of a hammer (Johansson & Manninen, 2012: 133-134).

Using one word to refer to another is an example of metonymy. Yule (2014: 118) describes metonymy in the following way: “There is another type of relationship between words, based simply on a close connection in everyday experience. That close connection can be based on a container-contents relation (“bottle/water”, “can/ juice”), a whole-part relation (“car/wheels”, “house/roof”) or a representative-symbol relationship (“king/crown”, “the President/the White House”). With the understanding of metonyms, the following phrase can be understood: “I drank the whole bottle” for what it actually means, which is “I drank the whole content of the bottle, not the actual bottle itself”. For example, the expression “smoke a pack of cigarettes” is metonymic, as one smokes the cigarettes, not the pack. Another metonymic expression could be: “Can I borrow your Yule for tomorrow’s exam?” Here, the word “Yule” refers to book written by the author named Yule.
Yule (2014: 126) states that pragmatics is “the study of “invisible” meaning, or how receivers recognize what is meant even when it is neither said nor written. In order for that to happen, speakers (or writers) must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations when they try to communicate. […] From the perspective of pragmatics, more is always being communicated than is said.” To illustrate this example, Yule (2014: 127) shows the reader an example from a newspaper advertisement. It is a picture with babies with the text “Baby & toddler sale”. If the reader were to conduct a semantic analysis of this example, it would appear as if the advertisers were trying to sell young children. However, as Yule (2014: 127) explains “we must use the meanings of the words, the context in which they occur, and some pre-existing knowledge of what would be a likely message as we work toward a reasonable interpretation of what the producer of the sign intended it to convey.” By using pre-existing knowledge and interpretation, the reader can understand that the advertisement is in fact a sale for baby-clothing, even if the word “clothes” is not written anywhere. In pragmatics, context is of great importance. Without context, some sentences are more or less impossible to understand. Another way to think about the issue of context is to imagine all the situations in which a person might utter the same words, yet the meaning is different. Grundy (2008: 10) illustrates this by using the example “I’m tired”. Depending on the time of the utterance, it can have various meanings. If a person says “I’m tired” in the evening, it can be used as a way of excusing oneself to go to bed. However, if it is said in the morning, it can imply that the speaker would like his or hers partner to get out of bed and make coffee. There can be as many meanings as contexts.

Literal and figurative meanings must be separated from each other. In figurative or non-literal language, words or phrases mean something different from their actual meaning (Johansson & Manninen, 2012: 128). The statement “The White House wants us to pay more taxes” would probably be interpreted in a figurative way, rather than in a literal way. If the statement were to be interpreted literally, the White House would refer to an actual building, and not the President of the United States or his staff (Johansson & Manninen, 2012: 128). Some sentences have an indirect or non-literal meaning. Both of the following sentences have other meanings besides the literal one: “Are we all here?” and “Right, shall we begin?” (Grundy, 2008: 6). The indirect meaning of the utterance “Are we all here?” could possibly be a question about whether or not a meeting should start. If the other question is understood in a literal manner, it would be a “yes” or “no” question.
However, the indirect meaning could conceivably be a way of attracting everyone’s attention before the speaker continues with what he/she was intending on saying (Grundy, 2008: 6). In order to come to conclusions as to what the speaker is trying to say, it is necessary to be able to draw the intended inferences (Grundy, 2008: 7). From the sentence “Radion removes dirt AND odours” a reader or hearer can draw the conclusion that this particular washing powder removes dirt and leaves clothes smelling fresh. Even if it is not stated in the example that other washing powders fail to remove odours, the reader is supposed to assume this because of the stress on the word “and” in the sentence.

Relevance is an important part of understanding what meaning a speaker intended to convey. When hearing an utterance, the hearer decides which meaning is the most relevant. Grundy (2008: 14) exemplifies relevance with the following example: “Thus for weeks there was a broken chair in our corridor at work with a notice pinned to it which said

(49) Sit down with care
    Legs can come off

It was obviously more relevant to assume the legs belonged to the chair than to the person sitting down.”

Background information or accommodation is of great importance when trying to interpret an utterance. Grundy (2008: 14) portrays this by referring to the following situation:

“PUBLIC ADDRESSER: Will Bobby Thomson please report to reception
PETER: A bit late
MAN IN FRONT OF PETER IN QUEUE: Perhaps they need cheering up in reception”

Without any background information, this conversation makes little sense. However, the people involved in the dialog knew that Bobby Thomson was a famous comedian who had passed away; therefore, this conversation made sense to them since they had the necessary knowledge.

As reported by O’Grady et al. (2001: 253-254), some concepts have clear-cut boundaries. For example, when the concept “senator” is used, it refers to someone who has been elected to a Senate (e.g. in Ancient Rome, or modern USA). However, there are some concepts that do not have clear-cut boundaries. These concepts are referred to as fuzzy concepts (O’Grady et al. 2001: 254). The concept “rich” is not as clear as “senator”.

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This concept can differ from person to person, depending on their interpretation of richness. Other fuzzy concepts are: “tall”, “genius”, “strong” and “clean”.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3) the human conceptual system is metaphorical in nature. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 6) assert that “Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system.” O’Grady et al. (2001: 255) claim that “The concepts expressed by language make up a giant network, with many interconnections and associations. A good example of these interconnections involve metaphors, the understanding of one concept in terms of another.”

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe two different kinds of metaphorical concepts: structural metaphors and orientational metaphors. Structural metaphors are metaphors which are structured in terms of something else. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 7-8) give the reader an example of a metaphorical concept that structures the day to day life: “time is money”. In the Western culture, time is valuable. There are therefore metaphors that go in line with this concept. Metaphors such as: “you’re wasting my time”, “that flat tire cost me an hour” or “he’s living on borrowed time”. This concept where time is money is firmly rooted in Western culture and the values a society has. There are cultures where time is viewed differently (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 9). Metaphors overall are embedded in the values of a society. The other type of metaphorical concept the authors write about are orientational metaphors: “But there is another kind of metaphorical concept, one that does not structure one concept in terms of another but instead organizes a whole system of concepts with respect to one another.” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 14). These metaphors are spatially oriented: up-down, in-out, front-back etc. This can be explained from the way the human body is constructed. Orientational metaphors give spatially orientation a concept e.g. happy is up and sad is down. When feeling low and down, the body tends to have a drooping posture but when a person is up and feeling happy, he/she is standing with a straight posture. Other forms of nonliteral and figurative language are idioms. Idioms are placed in the same category with, among others, metaphors (Cooper, 1998: 255).

2.2 Definition of an Idiom
Moon (1998: 3) states that an “idiom” is an ambiguous term and that it is used in various ways. She states that idioms have two meanings. Firstly, she suggest that an idiom is a special manner of expressing something in language, music and art, which characterizes a person or group. Moon (1998:3) gives the following as an example: “…the most fantastic [performance] I have seen in the strict idiom of the music hall comedian.”
Secondly, an idiom is a particular lexical collocation or phrase which is special to a certain language. Liu (2008: 3) states that the definition of an idiom varies greatly from scholar to scholar. Some scholars, e.g. Cooper (1998), claim that the definition of an idiom covers e.g. all fixed expressions, clichés, formulaic speeches, proverbs, slang expressions and even single polysemic words. According to other scholars, e.g. Moon (1998), the definition of an idiom is much narrower; idioms are considered to be fixed and semantically opaque or metaphorical expressions. However, based on the research, Liu (2008: 23) explains that there are three criteria that most scholars agree upon when identifying and defining idioms. These three criteria are as follows: “(1) Idioms are often non-literal or semi-literal in meaning […] (2) They are generally rigid in structure […] (3) Idioms are multiword expressions consisting minimally of two words, including compound words.” (Liu, 2008: 23).

Cooper (1998: 255) places idioms in the same category as metaphors, similes and proverbs. These forms of language are nonliteral and figurative. Moreover, idioms are difficult to both understand and learn because they do not mean what they literally state. Further, Cooper (1998: 255) claims that an idiom is “an expression whose meaning cannot be predicted from the usual meanings of its constituent elements.” Some idioms can have both a literal and a figurative meaning. Taking the idiom over the hill as an example, it can mean on the other side of the hill, however the figurative meaning is to be very old. Researchers have given different explanations on what an idiom is. Cooper’s definition is the main definition that is used in this essay.

The “non-logical” nature, in other words, the absence of the relation between a linguistic meaning and the idiomatic meaning, is what set idioms apart from other fixed expressions (Gluckberg, 2001: 68). Through a semantic analysis of the idiomatic expression kick the bucket, the figurative meaning to die would never have been produced. Examples such as this one has led to the view that, in order to learn these types of idioms, they must simply be memorize without any further semantic analysis. When hearing a familiar idiom, its meaning is retrieved in the same way that the meaning of a familiar word is retrieved. However, Glucksberg (2001: 69) insists that idioms are not just words. He elaborates: “They consist of phrases and, more important, behave as do phrases […]. Some idioms are syntactically flexible, appearing, for example, in both active and passive forms […].” The idiomatic expression let the cat out of the bag is an idiom which works both ways, e.g. “Who let the cat out of the bag? It was let out by old George, of course.” This is one of the issues with idiom comprehension and use, they are fixed expressions but they can also be modified.
Burke (1998: 149) defines the term in this manner: “A phrase that is commonly understood in a given culture or subculture to have a meaning different from its literal meaning.” The author would like to suggest the idiom “A chip on your shoulder” as an example. The literal meaning of the expression relates that the individual in question has an object upon on shoulder which fits one or other definition of the word “chip” as a physical object. However, the figurative meaning is, according to Ringstad (2013: 24): “If you have a chip on your shoulder, you have a mean attitude and are looking for a fight.”

To increase the understanding of idioms, researchers “have proposed a functional typology of idioms that is based on their degree of compositionality and semantic transparency.” (Glucksberg, 2001: 73). Three groups of idioms will be presented: non-compositional idioms, partially compositional idioms and fully compositional idioms (Glucksberg, 2001: 73). In non-compositional idioms, there is no relation between the idiom’s constituents and the idiom’s meaning. The single word idiom cheesecake, for example, refers to pin-up art, which could never be conveyed by hearing or reading the idiom. In partially compositional idioms, there is some relation between the constituents and the meaning of an idiom. Although, the figurative meaning of the idiom kick the bucket (to die) could not be understood by simply reading it. This idiom can be used in the past, present and future. Also, modal auxiliaries can be added to the idiom without changing the meaning, e.g. he might kick the bucket. The third group is fully compositional idioms. In this case, the constituents refer directly to the idiomatic meaning. Taking the idiom pop the question in consideration, the verb pop and the noun phrase the question tells the reader about the idiomatic meaning immediately. The figurative meaning of this idiom is to ask someone for their hand in marriage. The results of a study show that people do not have any difficulties deciding which idioms are compositional and which are not. Also, logically, the compositional idioms are easier to understand than the non-compositional ones (Glucksberg, 2001: 73-74). Moreover, Glucksberg (2001: 74) asserts that “idioms can also be classified based on their dimension of transparency, that is, the extent to which an idiom’s meaning can be inferred from the meanings of its constituents.” The antonym for transparent is opaque. An idiom can be compositional yet opaque. In these types of idioms, the relation between an idiom’s constituents and its meaning may be opaque.

Katz (1998:3) states that creativeness in language is especially evident in figurative language. There are a number of different types of figurative language, but researchers have shown the most interest in only a few types. They have listed eight commonly used forms of figurative language, metaphors and idioms are a part of this list.
Katz (1998:3) explains the two forms in the following manner: “Among the prominent (and studied) forms are metaphors (an explicit or implicit comparison, which is literally false: “my car is a lemon,” “Juliet is the sun,” “chair leg”) […] idioms (conventionalized expression in which the intended meaning often is difficult or impossible to recover from the words making up the expression: “He kicked the bucket”). In other words, idioms and metaphors are viewed as separate parts of a language. The focus of this essay is on idioms.

2.3 The Importance of Idioms

Learning idioms should be a central part of vocabulary learning in a second language. Teachers should not wait until students reach an advanced level to teach them about idioms. Irujo (1986: 240) asserts that, even at elementary levels, idioms can be included in different types of dialogues and stories. Providing idiomatic synonyms for vocabulary words will inevitably improve the students’ vocabulary.

A non-native speaker of the English language will never fully understand an English movie, sitcom or even the news without the knowledge of idioms, according to Burke (1998: 149). Having a simple conversation with a native speaker can be difficult for a non-native, if that person has never been exposed to idioms. Therefore, according to Irujo (1986: 236-237) “native speakers tend to use simple, concrete, everyday vocabulary when they address second-language learners; the use of idioms is avoided.” Lundblom and Woods (2012: 203) state that idioms are common in both written and spoken language and can be found in magazines, conversations and media. However, this does not necessarily mean that people will acquire the knowledge to understand and use idioms correctly even if there is exposure to English-speaking television programs and print. In order for language learning to progress, there has to be interaction, whether it is interaction with a teacher or a fellow student. Irujo (1986: 237) argues that without providing the right kind of interaction, language learning will not happen. If learners rely on their first language when interpreting idioms, only a few instances will be successful. This is one of the reasons to why idioms should be integrated in classroom activities.

Cooper (1998: 255) states that out of four kinds of nonliteral expressions, idioms are the most frequently encountered in discourse. Furthermore, the author goes on to claim that idioms present a problem for both native speakers and second language learners. D’Angelo Bromley (1984: 272) asserts that idioms cause confusion and are difficult to learn. Idioms are frequent in both written and spoken discourse and are difficult to learn and master for all groups of students.
The complexity of these expressions is therefore yet another reason why educators should focus more on them. Due to this, special attention is required and idioms should not be left until later education or ignored altogether. Imprecise idiomatic usage will, sooner or later, cause difficulties even for a student with excellent knowledge in both grammar and vocabulary (Cooper, 1998: 259). Liu (2008: 13) is also in agreement with this opinion. Idioms are particularly problematic for second language learners. According to Ruhl (1989, in Liu 2008: 13), “mature native speakers do not have any problems understanding these idiomatic expressions.” Choonkyong (2016: 89) states that “vocabulary learning efforts predominantly on words without systematically incorporate the acquisition of multiword expressions […] may lead to a fundamentally deficient lexical knowledge system, which could, in turn, fail to facilitate successful language processing as in listening or reading comprehension.”

Idioms and various forms of informal language should be taught to students. Burke (1998: 152) argues in favor of the teaching of idioms, slang and even some vulgarities in the classroom. He claims that it is better for the students to hear this type of language in the classroom and be familiar with it instead of hearing something on the street and then making their own interpretation of it. A miscalculation of an idiom’s meaning can generate an awkward situation. Moreover, Schmitt (2000: 100) claims that there should be no fear of teaching idioms to students. He states that “Using idioms correctly is one of the things that sets apart fluent speakers of a language, and, realizing this, students are often keen to learn them”.

The influence of culture is apparent in differences in idiom knowledge (Gluckberg, 2001: 87). Since sport is a dominant part of the American culture, many idioms have been created from or influenced by sport references. The expression *take the ball and run with it* is commonly used in the business world. Other idioms that are influenced by sports are e.g. *to take the wind out of one’s sail*, *to hit below the belt* and *jump the gun* (Burke, 1998: 151-152). Idioms are in general deeply connected to a country’s culture. Agar (1991, in Glucksberg 2001: 87-88) proposes that “biculturalism and bilingualism are two sides of the same coin. Engaged in the intertwined process of cultural change, learners have to understand the full meaning of idioms”. He continues with stating that idioms are “rich points” in a language and they “tap deeply into the world that accompanies language”.

2.4 The Comprehension and Acquisition of Idioms
The fact that there are a number of idioms which are frequently used make them an essential part of language learning. According to Cooper (1998: 256): “there are three competing hypotheses on how we process idioms.” The first model is called the literal first hypothesis.
This hypothesis states that there are two modes when it comes to processing idioms. The first mode processes the literal meaning of an idiom and is usually the active mode. The other mode processes the figurative meaning and is the inactive mode. This mode becomes active first when the literal interpretation of an idiom is inappropriate in the speech context. The second model is named the *simultaneous processing hypothesis*. This model states that idioms are stored and retrieved in the mind, much like a word. When encountering the first word of the idiom, both the literal and the figurative meanings are processed at the same time. The meaning most suitable for the context is then retrieved from the mind. The last model, called the *direct access model*, asserts that a literal analysis of an idiom is almost never attempted because when a person hears an idiom, the mind goes straight to the figurative meaning.

Cooper (1998: 256-259) has also listed six different variables that affect a learner’s acquisition of idioms:

1. *Age of the Learner* – children before the age of nine usually interpret figurative expressions literally. Piaget’s theory of cognitive development proposes that with age, the understanding of figurative language is increased. With maturity, people develop a feeling for abstract thinking.
2. *Use of Figurative Language by Teachers* – children develop a wider knowledge of figurative language if it is a substantial part of what is taught in school.
3. *Characteristics of Idioms* – research has shown that idioms that are compositional and transparent, meaning that there is a relation between an idiom’s literal and figurative meaning, are easier for children to acquire and memorize. Moreover, this implies that opaque idioms are the hardest to understand and process.
4. *Role of Context* – according to research, learners of all ages acquire idioms more rapidly if those idioms are presented in a context. This is due to the fact that when learners encounter an idiom in a context, an already constructed representation of what has gone before is used.
5. *Grouping Idioms According to Theme* – many idioms can be categorized by themes. For example if the main word is a verb or a noun, all the idioms containing the main word can be categorized as belonging to the same theme.
6. *Second Language Learners* – when learning a new language, the learners are inclined to adopt the habit of using their first language in order the make sense of the idiom presented to them.
Along with Cooper (1998), Liu (2008: 87) also discusses the importance of a language learner’s first language. The learner’s native language has an impact on how well a learner comprehends and understands idioms in the second language. Research has shown that it is easier to understand idioms which have a similar meaning in a learner’s native language; “L2 idioms that are identical to those in L1, in both form and meaning, pose little difficulty for L2 learners because L2 learners can easily transfer their understanding of such idioms from L1 into L2” (Liu, 2008: 87). It may be considered unfortunate that, even if a second language learner understands an idiom, they are still hesitant in using the idiom in the language they are learning.

Cooper (1998) addresses the issue of how a learner’s age affects the acquisition of idioms. Liu (2008: 105) discusses the importance of a learner’s age. In order for idioms to be acquired, a person has to have developed sufficient cognitive and linguistic skills. This development passes through different phases, all of which are marked by a learner’s age. Irujo (1986: 238) offers examples of what an educator can take into consideration when deciding which idioms to teach their students. Logically, the idioms that are used most frequently in e.g. reading and conversation are the ones teachers should focus on. As stated above, opaque and non-compositional idioms are the hardest to understand and learn, which is why educators should start with transparent and compositional idioms. Another factor is the appropriateness of the idiom. Teachers should also teach idioms that are used with high frequency. The idiom a needle in a haystack can be difficult for learners to acquire due to their low frequency of use, whereas the idiom to play with fire is used more frequently. Moreover, to ease the learning process, teachers could begin with idioms that students are familiar with in their first language. If the teacher wants to involve their students in their own learning, Irujo (1986: 239) suggests that “students can keep idiom notebook in which they write down idioms encountered in reading, conversation and on television; these then become the basis for teaching activities.”

2.5 The Swedish Curriculum
The Swedish Curriculum does not explicitly direct that idioms should be taught, either in secondary schools or in high schools. Nevertheless, it does say that students in secondary school should know “language phenomena such as […] fixed language expressions pupils will encounter in the language.” and “language phenomena to clarify, vary and enrich communications such as […] fixed language expressions…” (Skolverket, 2011). In the curriculum for English at the high school level, no fixed expressions are mentioned; the curriculum simply states that students should understand written and spoken English and be able to interpret both what is heard and read.
However, there are some places where idioms (or figurative language overall) can be included based on the curriculum for English 5 (Skolverket, 2011):

- Content and form in different kinds of fiction. (Content of Communication)
- Spoken language, also with different social and dialect features […] (Reception)
- Coherent spoken language and conversations of different kinds […] (Reception)
- How words and phrases in oral and written communications create structure and context […] (Reception)

3. Methodology
In this chapter, I will present the choice of method as well as describe the course of action of the study. The chapter will be divided into four subheadings.

3.1 Ethical Considerations
According to Stukát (2011: 139-140), when conducting a study there are four requirements that should be considered. These four requirements are: the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirement and the requirement of usage. Each and every one of these requirements have been taken in consideration while conduction the study.

The information requirement is such that that the participants of the study are informed about the purpose of the study and how the material is going to be used. Because of this, a covering letter explaining the investigation, its purpose and methods, was sent to the informants prior to the interview. Before the interviews began, the informants were reminded that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and that the interview could be terminated whenever the informant wished. With consideration to the confidentiality requirement, none of the informants appear under their real names. Participation in the study is entirely anonymous. Lastly, there is the requirement of usage, which means that the information from the interviews is only going to be used in this study and nowhere else.

3.2 Method
This is a qualitative study and the method of choice is semi-structured interviews. Unlike, when using structured interviews, the interviewer has the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and not miss out on important information.
A distinction between qualitative and quantitative studies can be made. In quantitative studies, the studies are conducted mainly through observations of numerical data, obtained through surveys or structured interviews. The results of these types of research are broad and general. The drawback with quantitative studies is that vital data which can be relevant could be missed (Stukát, 2011: 34-35). With qualitative studies however, the author aims to study something in depth and also describe and understand specific experiences and responses. Common methods for qualitative studies include open interviews or unstructured observations. In contrast to quantitative studies, qualitative studies are subjective. The author’s own frame of reference, such as his or her thoughts, feelings or experiences, is of great importance. Since these types of studies are subjective, the outcome can vary from researcher to researcher, depending on the person analyzing the result. Because of this, qualitative studies have been criticized due to their lack of generalizability (Stukát, 2011: 36).

As mentioned above, this study will consist of a qualitative research using semi-structured interviews. The method of choice is based on the fact that I want to ascertain what and how the teachers in question discuss the selected subject.

3.3 Selection Process and Participants
Due to the limitation of time, this research has been conducted with a partner and our focus lies on different levels of education. The focus was on the secondary teachers’ thoughts while my partner’s focus was on the high school teachers. In research Question 3, the aim is to determine whether there are any differences in teaching idiomatic expressions at a secondary school as opposed to a high school. Since our aim is to establish whether there are any differences in how the teachers teach idiomatic expressions, we based our studies on the same research-guide (appendix 1).

A covering letter was sent to all the teachers prior to their acceptance of participation. The letter explained the purpose of the study as well as the four requirements authors are advised to consider when conducting a study (as mentioned above under subheading 3.1 – “Ethical Considerations”). The covering letter was sent to six secondary teachers and four high school teachers. A total of eight teachers responded with interest. Four of the teachers work at a secondary school whereas four work at a high school. The interviews with the teachers were conducted separately. My partner and I tried to conduct as many of the interviews as possible together.
Unfortunately, we were only able to undertake one interview together. The benefit of having both present during an interview is that there is a greater likelihood that all pertinent questions will be considered. Each interview took about 20-25 minutes and was conducted at a place and time which suited the teachers. Even though almost all of the interviews were conducted separately, we transcribed the interviews together. This helped us produce a more accurate interpretation of the answers given, even though we were not present during all interviews.

The participants are listed in the chart below. In order to maintain anonymity, each participant has been given a fictional name.

*Table 1 – participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Years of Working</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andreas</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**3.4 Analysis of the Data**

In our meetings with the teachers, we chose to record each interview using the sound recording app on our phones. Denscombe (2009: 259-260) claims that sound recording is a simple method for collecting material in interviews. The advantage of recording interviews is that the interviewer can listen to the conversation several times in order to make sure that the answers were perceived correctly. However, the disadvantage with recorded data is that the interviewer risks missing the nonverbal communication which takes place whenever there is a conversation.
Depending on the length of the interview, the transcription can take quite some time. This is important to have in mind when choosing interviews as the method of research. When using a questionnaire, the author already has all of the questions in written form and does not need to spend contemporaneously time transcribing the participants’ answers (Bjørndal, 2005: 99).

After all interviews were conducted, each interview was transcribed and collated into a single document. Because there was a limited time-frame for writing this essay, we chose not to include the nonverbal communication when transcribing. Even though the interviews were conducted in Swedish, the quotations presented in the result section will be shown in English, translated by the author.

4. Result
In order to present the results in a structured manner, this chapter will be divided into sections under two subheadings. The subheadings are created based on the research guide (appendix 1).

The first section will present the data collected from the interviews with the secondary school teachers and the second section will present the data from the high school teachers. The quotations from the teachers are translated from Swedish to English by the author. Each translated quote is marked with an asterisk (*). The quotes in Swedish can be found in appendix two and are organized based on their order of appearance.

The teachers do not use the same terminology as presented in chapter two (non-compositional, partially compositional and fully compositional idioms). When this terminology is used, it needs to be stated that that is the author’s interpretation of their responses and not their actual words.

The results are based on the research questions, which are presented in the introduction. These questions are as follows:

1. How do secondary school teachers teach idiomatic expressions to their students?
2. Why do teachers choose different types of strategies when teaching idiomatic expressions?
3. What, if any, differences are to be found regarding teaching idiomatic expressions at a secondary school in contrast to a high school?
4.1 Secondary School
This section will present the secondary school teachers’ answers. The section is divided into two parts. The first part will be the teachers’ discourse about idioms and what an idiom is to him or her.

The second part will present how the teachers work with idioms in the classroom and different problems that may occur when teaching idiomatic expressions. The translations are marked with an asterisk (*).

4.1.1 Teachers’ Descriptions of idioms
When asked about the definition of an idiom, all of the teachers gave similar responses. Maria defined idioms thus:

Words or expressions that are used in order to express oneself.
They are expression you use to enrich your language.*

She stated further:

If you have grown up in a society, where everyone has seen the same movies and read the same books. It has to do with tradition as well. [...] Using this kind of language comes naturally and it exist in every language. It is also one of the things that you learn last, and you learn it by socializing with people who have the language as a first language. *

According to Sara and Maria, an idiom is an expression with a figurative meaning. She gave the expression it’s raining cats and dogs as an example. She also said that there are other, more commonly used expressions such as actions speak louder than words or it’s a piece of cake.

Erik described idioms in a similar way as Sara, however he claimed that students acquire idioms after progressing further in their language development and could perceive language nuances. For Hanna, idioms are used to “spice up the language” (approximate translation by author). The usage of idioms is not restricted to one area of language. According to Maria, idioms can be found everywhere:

When you write songs or poetry, you can use these expressions to paint with the language or to get an extra depth in your language. [...] There are tons of idiomatic expressions. There is street language but you can also find the finest literature that is filled with idiomatic expressions.
This means that you should not be cocky and claim that this is not something that we should work with in the classroom. We are reading Shakespeare with grade nine, and you can find lots of idiomatic expressions there.*

4.1.2 Idioms in the Classroom
How the teachers in question work with idioms varies. However, all the teachers work with different strategies and methods of vocabulary learning. The teachers all agreed that it is not enough just knowing a word; students have to be able to use the particular word in different situations and also know that a word can have different meanings depending on the context.

According to the teachers, the use of glossary lists is unhelpful for a deeper understanding of the language. Sara is one of the teachers who does not use this method of learning in her teaching:

Vocabulary teaching is something that I have given much thought to. Because the research I have read during my years attending university, says that glossary lists, in the traditional sense - learning ten words in order to just translate them. That is just superficial learning and does not give the students anything.*

However, in order to vary her teaching, she sometimes uses flashcards to work with vocabulary. These flashcards can show either a word or a phrase. Instead of simply testing the students’ on word-knowledge, her students use the flashcards as a game in the classroom. On one side, there is a word or a phrase and on the other side the word’s meaning is explained. However, this is not something that she grades. Another teacher who does not work with glossary lists in the traditional sense is Erik. Besides English, he also teaches German. Even though these are both second languages to his students, his approach to teaching differs:

In German classes, I work a lot with glossary lists and glossary homework. German is more of a beginners-language than English is. The students are exposed to English even during their spare time. Normally, when you get new students in the seventh grade, they usually have a good knowledge of the language. Because of this, there is no need to work with glossary lists as we do in German class. [...] In English I focus on the whole, to be able to understand a written text or a conversation.*

The teachers in this study chose to work with idioms in different manners. Maria said that she works with idioms through themes, songs or pictures. When working with themes, she said that she chooses to focus on idioms containing themes, e.g. animals.
She uses idioms such as *busy as a bee, wild goose chase, the world is your oyster* and *hold your horses* and she uses idioms containing the same words, e.g. *jump the gun, jump to conclusions* and *two jumps ahead*. Furthermore, when working with songs, she chooses a song and then she makes activities based on that song:

*Last time I worked with a song, was a First Aid Kit song called My Silver Lining. First of all, we listened to the song and the students were given an exercise sheet where there were words missing and they had to fill in the missing words. The title of the song is also an idiom. So the students were given a sheet with different idioms that they had to translate and then find the right meaning. They used Google to do so.* *

When Sara described her approach to teaching idioms, she explained that she works in a more active manner, in contrast to Maria. As mention above, Sara uses flashcards when she teaches idioms as well as vocabulary. The first exercise is conducted in small groups. The students are given four idioms. Afterwards, both the literal and figurative meanings of the idioms are discussed. The class also had to find out the origins of the idioms. Moreover, a game that she has named *Idiom Pictionary* is played, just like the game *Pictionary* but with multi-word idioms instead of words. When given an idiom, the student was asked to present the idiom to the rest of the class, either by drawing a picture of it or by dramatizing it. Sara stated that this was appreciated by the students. Both Erik and Hanna claimed that they did not explicitly teach idioms to their students. However, the subject does come up, particularly when reading. Erik says that:

*I do not put much emphasis on idioms, because it naturally becomes a part of learning either way. When we read books, which we do every term, questions about idioms come up.* *

The main obstacle regarding the teaching of idioms is, according to the teachers, developing an understanding towards these figurative expressions and when it is appropriate to use them. Moreover, due to the fact that the groups are, in many cases, at different levels when it comes to language development, it is difficult to reach these students. Sara expresses her thoughts in this way:

*Those students who have not reached a certain level in their language development are the ones struggling the most when we work with idioms. Somehow, they cannot comprehend the figurative meaning, they just do not get it.* *
Another obstacle is the time frame, according to Sara.

*We only have two hours of English each week. There are multiple things we need to teach our students and then there are a lot of things that you rarely have the time for. In fact, we are not teaching our students a new language, we give them the tools to learn more. [...] The school provides the students with necessary strategies of learning, but the learning process happens all of the time, when you are exposed to the language.*

When the question regarding the link between idioms and students’ understanding of the English language was posed, the teachers all agreed that knowing and being able to use idioms improve students’ English overall, both in written and spoken production. Sara stated that:

*I had a student, not that long ago, who began his text with “It’s important to think outside the box”. This is an idiom. I don’t think he understood that he used an idiomatic expression, but for me, this shows a higher understanding of the language. You use it to paint with the language so to say.*

Maria claimed that students who, among other things, play computer games have an advantage when it comes to language learning:

*You can say that students who watch a lot of YouTube, play games, both video and computer games, watch American and British movies. [...] or when we watch a movie in school without subtitles, these students understanding will be far better than the students who only expose themselves to “school-English”.*

When the teachers were asked about what types of idioms they worked with the most, the focus was on the same types. Both Maria and Sara, who explicitly worked with idioms in the classroom, confirmed that partially compositional idioms and non-compositional idioms were the most common groups. Sara explained that the reason she mainly works with the two latter groups is that she assumes that the students would already be familiar with the compositional idioms. In order for partially compositional and non-compositional idioms to be understood, there has to be more focus on them. In Sara’s opinion, students need the teacher’s guidance and help to acquire these types of idioms.
4.2 High School
This section will present the answers of the high school teachers. It will cover the same topics as the previous section about the secondary school teachers. As mentioned before, a quotation marked with an asterisk is the author’s translation.

4.2.1 Teachers’ Descriptions of Idioms
Much like the secondary school teachers, the high school teachers had the same interpretation of what an idiom is. In Lena’s opinion, idiomatic expression can be used to describe something in a more colorful manner. According to Amanda, idioms are expressions which can be interpreted both in a literal and figurative manner. Depending on the language, the idioms can differ. The idioms that came to her mind are the ones that she encountered while attending school: *it is raining cats and dogs* and *she has got a bee in her bonnet*. For Andreas, in order to fully understand an idiom, the person has to live in the country where the idiom is used:

> An idiomatic expression is an expression that basically requires you to live in the country where the expression is used in order to understand it. You cannot interpret the words individually, it calls for a cultural understanding in order to truly understand them. *

4.2.2 Idioms in the Classroom
The interviews revealed that the majority of the high school teachers did not work actively with idiomatic expressions. To begin with, different methods and strategies are used when teaching vocabulary. However, the high school teachers agreed that, in order to know a word, the pupil must be able to use it in different contexts. Ellen gave an example of a situation where the student clearly did not understand the word that was used:

> Before working at this school, I was working at a school where the majority of the students were interested in horses. They got an assignment where they had to write about how you take care of a horse in a proper manner. One student wrote that you have to remove dirt from the horses dwelling, and she wrote “suede dirt” instead of “to muck dirt” which is the correct phrase for that. And by using the word suede, which is a type of material, the student clearly showed that she did not understand the word. *

Moreover, Ellen was the only teacher who explicitly works with glossary lists and she works with them in different ways. Either the students pick out a number of words from a text or she has a “word of the day”. Instead of the students choosing their own words, she can choose five words each week for them. Andreas stated that he works with different themes, e.g. medicine. He explained the expressions and words belonging to the theme.
Afterwards, his students usually write a text and use the words and expressions. Sometimes the students are also required to read the text aloud and discuss its contents. When it comes to the traditional glossary lists, Andreas claimed that he does not use this method when working with words. He prefers word gaps where the students have to use the right word based on the context. Amanda said that she prefers to work with oral exercises and discussions.

*We talk a lot in the classroom and have discussions about different topics. In my opinion, it helps the students greatly by being able to use the words and expressions that we work with. Being able to hear the words, the pronunciation and to be given the chance to express their opinion orally. When they work in small groups, I tend to walk around and listen to them. When I do so, I notice that they are really trying to use the new words.*

In addition to working with vocabulary, Andreas actively incorporates idioms in his teaching. First, he chooses a number of idioms he would like to present to the class. The meaning of each idiom is discussed and also whether or not there is a Swedish counterpart. Due to the fact that idioms usually have cultural associations, it can sometimes be difficult to find the Swedish equivalent. Occasionally, the students need to write a story containing as many of the idioms as possible. In addition, he expressly teaches about idioms from time-to-time. According to Andreas, in order for the students to acquire the knowledge needed to understand and use idioms correctly, they have to actively take part in the learning process. Further, Andreas stated that he works with different types of idioms based on the level of English he is teaching. When teaching the English 5 course, he claims to work with fully compositional and partially compositional idioms and these include examples such as *don’t judge a book by its cover*, *feeling under the weather* or *it’s a walk in the park*. However, when teaching English 7, he teaches more advanced idioms, where the meaning of the idiom cannot be understood even with context. These idioms are non-compositional idioms.

*When teaching higher classes, I tend to look online and search for idioms. Usually I can find a ranking of the idioms, from the easiest to the most difficult ones. So when I teach English 7, I always choose the difficult ones, the advanced idioms as they are called on the sites that I have looked at.*

Unlike Andreas, Hanna and Sara claimed that they do not teach idioms in a proactive manner. Both said that when students ask about the meaning of an idiom, which happens while reading, the idiom is explained and discussed with the class.
Amanda explained that working with this aspect of language learning is too difficult for her students because they have been in Sweden for only one or two years.

The students who have been here one or two years are learning Swedish and in the meantime English. They get a lot of information from different directions. Idiomatic expressions are confusing as they are. So in order for them to understand the expressions, they first need to translate it to their own language, and many of my students do not have the same first language, which makes it difficult discussing them in class. It is a long process and that is why I do not put much emphasis on teaching them. [...] I do not think my students would even see how these idioms are helpful to them because their English is still on such a basic level.*

When the teachers were asked about what types of obstacles can occur, different answers were supplied. On one hand, the majority said that due to the students’ lack of language skills and language knowledge, understanding idioms can be problematic. The teachers in question said that idioms are too hard for the students to comprehend. On the other hand, Andreas feels that there are no major difficulties in teaching idioms to the students. He claimed that if an educator explains the idioms in a detailed manner, and explains to the student how and when it is appropriate to use the different idioms, there are no problems. The teachers were all in agreement on how the usage of idiomatic expression can affect the students’ grades and knowledge. Being able to use idioms in written and oral outputs enhances the students’ chances of raising their grade. This shows the teachers that the student can use different strategies in order to improve their language skills.

I would have to say, if you are really confident about a language, then you have to be familiar with these types of expression, not all of course but at least the most common ones. I think that the students definitely will see an improvement of their understanding as well as their own usage of the language in question. The language will contain more nuances when you use idiomatic expressions.* – Andreas

Moreover, Andreas speaks of the importance of teaching students this type of language as well:

I do not think that students come across these types of expressions in their social context. I mean on social media and in their different chatrooms. If we as teachers and educators do not teach this type of language, even if it is considered informal, our students will have a gap in their language.
The students are supposed to know different types of language, both formal and informal and it is our job to teach them when it is appropriate to use which type of language, everything is based on the target audience.*

5. Discussion and Analysis
In accordance with how research has explained the term idiom, all of the teachers had the same explanation. According to Cooper (1998), idioms are a form of language that is nonliteral and could mainly be understood in a figurative manner. Moon (1998) states that idioms can have two meanings. One of these meanings are in relation to Cooper’s definition of the term, while the other meaning, according to Moon (1998:3) is that an idiom is a special manner of expressing something in language, music or art. This is something that Maria also mentions when giving the example of Shakespeare, poems and music.

Even though the teachers in the study described what an idiom was, none of them were able to give a clear and unambiguous linguistic definition of an idiom, or explain the distinction between idioms and metaphors. As mentioned in chapter three, above, idioms fall under the same category as metaphors and other figurative language. If they do not know exactly what an idiom is and which expressions specify as idioms, this can cause confusion and insecurity with the teachers. If the teachers had a more precise understanding of what constitutes an idiom and how idioms function in language, then it is my belief that they would be more confident in teaching it to their students.

Furthermore, the results have shown that out of the four secondary school teachers, only two actively work with idioms. Cooper (1998) offers a list of variables that affect a learner’s acquisition of idioms (explained under section 2.3). Both Sara and Maria work with idioms in context, using various texts including song lyrics. According to Cooper (1998), students acquire idioms more efficiently if they are read in a context or separated by theme. Maria explains that she tends to work with themes when it comes to the learning of idioms. In my experience as a teacher working in this field, this phenomenon applies to every part of learning something new, not just when introducing students to idiomatic expressions.

Glucksberg (2001) as well as Irujo (1986) assert that the idioms which are the easiest for students to comprehend and acquire are the compositional and transparent ones. In contrast to what research has uncovered, the teachers in this study, both secondary school and high school teachers, report that they work with mainly partially compositional and non-compositional idioms.
One of the teachers, Sara, states that she assumes that her students already have the knowledge and ability to understand fully compositional and transparent idioms, which is why her focus lies elsewhere. Instead of just assuming that her students already understand the transparent idioms and ignore them entirely, she could use the transparent idioms as an introduction. This way, her students will gain a broader knowledge and understanding of idioms. This is something that could be seen as an advantage.

Andreas is one of the teachers who works with all three groups of idioms. Depending on the course, and the students’ level of English, he chooses which idioms he wants to teach to his class. When teaching English 5, he uses fully compositional and partially compositional idioms. For English 7, he works with non-compositional idioms only. The idioms used become more advanced the further the students have progressed in their language development. This technique can work well if Andreas has the same class during all three English classes. However, if he is assigned to a new class when teaching the English 7 course, he will have to find a different approach to his teaching. Prior to deciding which idioms he wants to teach, he has to establish if the students have worked with idioms at all before taking his class.

The remaining two secondary school teachers claim that, due to time limitation and the students’ lack of knowledge in the English language, it is not desirable to teach idiomatic expressions to their students. Sara states that the students are on a different level in their language development. The weakest students are the ones struggling the most. Based on my own experience, and numerous conversations with my teacher-colleagues, the fact that students are on different levels in their development is a fact and something teachers cannot avoid. This is one of the most challenging obstacles a teacher has to overcome. When working as an educator, there has to be an adaptation of material based on the group. The teacher can include idioms in their lesson plans; however, not all students have to work with the same types of idioms.

Nevertheless, there are different approaches and strategies in teaching and every teacher has to do their best to find the right way for the students. Cooper (1998) argues that because idioms are difficult to learn and master for all groups of students, special attention is therefore required. Also, according to Irujo (1986), in order for the students to increase their comprehension of idioms, it is a good idea to include idioms in different types of dialogues or stories, even at elementary levels. Unsurprisingly, this will improve the students’ vocabulary. Moreover, Irujo (1986), stresses that without any type of interaction, language learning cannot happen.
On one hand, I can understand that there are more fundamental aspects of the language that have to be prioritized. On the other hand, however, the teacher is not helping students by ignoring idioms completely. Even though these teachers do not explicitly work with idioms, it becomes a natural part of learning when, for example, reading a book or watching a movie. Irujo (1986) proposes a method to enable teachers to increase students’ involvement in their own learning by keeping a notebook where the students can take notes and write down idioms read in books or heard on the TV. For the teachers who have mentioned lack of time as an obstacle, this activity can be used to involve idioms in the learning process without spending too much time on preparing lesson plans. Moreover, if the students are all reading the same book, the implication is that the teacher has already read the book and perhaps composed questions for each chapter. If the teacher encounters idioms while reading, then he/she can include the idioms with the other questions. This way, the students will learn a new expression, which is additionally already in a context.

When it comes to the high school teachers, only one out of the four teachers explicitly mentioned working with idioms in an active manner in the classroom. To enhance the students’ knowledge, Andreas works with themes and use idioms in different contexts. The role of context is an important part of understanding idioms. This is due to the fact that, when seeing an idiom in a context, the students use an already constructed representation of what has occurred previously. Andreas mentioned the importance of teaching idiomatic expression to the students. Without the understanding of figurative language, the students miss out on an important part of the language. This is in line with Burke’s (1998) argument about idioms and also slang. It is important that educators teach students this type of “informal” language as well as formal. Andreas claims that it is not enough just to teach the idioms, it is also necessary to teach the students when it is appropriate to use them.

One of the main obstacles, according to the secondary school teachers as well, was to improve students’ understanding of idioms and when it is appropriate to use them. It seems as if this is a recurring problem. Burke (1998) speaks about the importance of teaching idioms in a classroom in order for students to become familiar with this type of language too. Moreover, one of the variables that Cooper (1998) lists is the use of figurative language by teachers. If idioms are taught in an active manner, the students will develop a wider knowledge. This is also something that Andreas claims to be important. Schmitt (2000) also states that the correct usage of idioms is what sets apart fluent speakers of a language from those less proficient.
As for Amanda, she explains that her students have only been resident in Sweden for a short period of time, which makes it difficult for them to acquire knowledge about idioms. This is in line with what Bromley (1984) discusses. He states that idioms can cause confusion and are very difficult to learn. Learning both Swedish and English at the same time can cause considerable confusion for these students. However, Cooper (1998) claims that idioms present a problem to both native speakers and second language learners, meaning that idioms are very complex. Because of their complexity, educators should focus more on them. In Amanda’s case, it is completely understandable as to why she has decided to disregard English idioms in her teaching. Her students have not lived in Sweden for long, which means that their focus is on learning Swedish and not English. Another reason idioms are difficult to learn is that they idioms are influenced by culture, as observed by Glucksberg (2001) and Burke (1998). This is in accordance with what some of the teachers say as well. Both Maria and Andreas claim that, in order to fully understand idioms, there has to be a cultural understanding. In the national tests in English, both at secondary school level and high school level, the students are graded on their ability to use idioms or figurative language. This will be difficult to assess if the teacher has not actively worked with idiomatic expressions in the classroom. The students are left to depend on their own learning.

Cooper (1998) states that there are three competing hypotheses on how idioms are processed (explained under section 2.3) whereby the first hypothesis is the literal first hypothesis. This hypothesis states that there are two modes when processing idioms. The first mode processes the literal meaning and the other mode processes the figurative meaning. The latter is the inactive mode and becomes active first when the literal interpretation of an idiom is inappropriate in the speech context. However, if educators do not make idioms an active part of language learning, the students will not acquire an understanding of the figurative meaning of an idiom. Idioms can never be processed or learnt without active teaching. As stated above, many teachers said that, because idioms naturally became a part of reading, there was no need for further teaching. This contradicts with what research states regarding this subject. According to e.g. Irujo (1986), idioms should be a central part of vocabulary learning in a second language. Idiomatic synonyms for vocabulary words will improve students’ vocabulary. Cooper (1998) asserts that idioms are frequent in both written and spoken discourse and are difficult to learn and master for all groups of students. The complexity of these expressions is a reason why educators should consciously work with idioms in the classroom.
Every teacher interviewed bases their lesson plans on the curriculum for English. The curriculum for secondary school explicitly addresses the issue of the teaching of so-called fixed expressions, of which idioms are also a part. Since idioms are important to the understanding of a language, it surprises me that only two out of the four secondary school teachers explicitly teach idioms to their students. The results of the high school teachers were unexpected.

Even though it is not explicitly written in the curriculum for English on high school level, the majority of the teachers claim that the reason for not teaching idioms in high school is because the students do not have the knowledge required to understand idioms. There will be a gap in the students’ language understanding if idioms are excluded.

6. Conclusion
In this final chapter, I will present the summarized results of my study with regard to the research questions, as presented in the introduction. Furthermore, I will offer suggestions for further research. The following questions have been the guide to this study:

1. How do secondary school teachers teach idiomatic expressions to their students?
2. Why do teachers choose various types of strategies when teaching idiomatic expressions?
3. What, if any, differences are to be found regarding teaching idiomatic expressions at a secondary school in contrast to a high school?

6.1 Secondary School Teachers’ Methods of Teaching
Out of the four teachers who were interviewed, two of them work with idioms in the classroom in an active manner. These teachers devote time and effort into making lesson plans and constructing activities that the students can use. One of the teachers, Maria, works with idioms in different ways. She stated that she sometimes works with idioms that she groups according to different themes, such as idioms being presented in groups that have the same main verb or main noun. When working with music and the language in music, she always includes idioms and their meanings according to their context, and how the lyrics of the song can be understood in a more profound way if the idioms are understood. In addition to the idioms found in the different song lyrics, she also chooses a couple of other idioms which are later discussed in class.
The other teacher who works with idioms is Sara. She prefers working with flashcards when it comes to the learning of vocabulary, phrases and, in this case, idioms. In contrast to Maria’s method, where the students either work by themselves or have a teacher-led lesson, in Sara’s opinion, the students achieve greater knowledge when working together in groups. Sara’s students work with idioms in small groups and in various ways to increase learning. The other two teachers state that the discussion about idioms is included in a natural way when reading books. Idioms are thereby included in the learning process without explicitly working with them in the classroom.

6.2 Various Types of Strategies
The majority of the teachers in this study explained that they, for various reasons, chose not to work actively with idioms in their classrooms. One reason was the same for two secondary school teachers, Erik and Hanna, and also two high school teachers, Lena and Ellen. According to them, they do not teach idioms explicitly simply because this aspect of language learning is a part of reading. When reading fiction, the students encounter idioms. This often leads to a discussion about the idiom in question. In their opinion, the acquisition of idioms comes naturally when reading. In Sara’s case, the problem lies with students of varied abilities; it is difficult for the students to understand idioms.

Another reason is the time. Sara claims that there are numerous aspects that need to be taught. To even begin with idioms in her classes, her students need to reach a higher level of English. Lastly, Amanda teaches newcomers who have only lived in Sweden during approximately two years. Her students’ focus is on the Swedish language; English is not a priority at the moment. Lena and Ellen say that the students’ lack of knowledge makes it difficult to teach idioms.

6.3 Differences Regarding Teaching
After conducting the interviews, it was that clear the secondary school teachers place much more emphasis on the teaching of idiomatic expressions in contrast to the high school teachers. Two out of the four secondary school teachers stated that they work with idioms actively in the classroom. Out of the four high school teachers only one teacher, Andreas, works with idioms explicitly in his teaching. In this respect, he diverges substantially in his approach to the other teachers. There were no other major differences between the secondary and high school teacher’s approach to teaching. However, Andreas states that he likes to work with idioms intermittently rather than continuously over a few weeks or lessons.
In his opinion, the students gain more knowledge by working with idioms in this manner. Another difference is that neither one of the secondary school teachers works with fully compositional idioms.

6.4. Final Conclusion
The method of choice for this study was semi-structured interviews. The material for the study were the interviews, which have been recorded and later transcribed. There was a total of eight participants in this study; four secondary school teachers and four high school teachers.

The results show that only two out of the four teachers who were interviewed for this essay worked actively with idioms in the classroom. The work procedure varied from teacher to teacher. Some worked with idioms through music and the language in music. One teacher taught idioms through different themes. Flashcards were also used by one of the teachers. The students worked with idioms individually, in small groups or had teacher-led lessons. Even though some of the teachers did not work with idioms actively, it still became a part of teaching while reading books. The reason these teachers did not work with idioms is partly because of the reading, but also because of the time limitation. Due to the students’ lack of knowledge, other parts of the curriculum have to be prioritized. The main difference between the secondary school teachers and the high school teachers were that the secondary school teachers placed much more emphasis on the teaching of idiomatic expressions. Another difference was that neither of the secondary school teachers worked with fully compositional idioms.

The background research described in Chapter 2 of this essay positively advocates for the active teaching of idioms; however, I was not able to find clear descriptions as to precisely how this teaching had been conducted. This was a key aspect of my own study and a matter of particular interest to me. In contrast to what research say about the acquisition and importance of idioms, the results of this essay reveal that half of the interviewed teachers do not work accordingly to what researchers consider to be important. Four out of the eight teachers work actively with idioms while the others work passively, meaning that the conversation about idioms arises only when idioms is heard or read. This is because the curriculum does not emphasis the teaching of figurative language itself. Even if the teachers find idioms to be important to language learning, there is not enough time to teach them explicitly to their students for the reasons discussed. The findings of this essay would have been different if the teachers in question actually worked with this type of figurative language.
Students who are studying to become teachers should be made aware of idioms’ importance in the classroom, how idioms and the curriculum are connected and how to include idioms in their lessons. Furthermore, experienced teachers should, in my view and based on the research conducted for this study, try to incorporate more idioms into their lessons. Another discovery is that the majority of the teachers in this research had not acquired an understanding of precisely what constitutes an idiom. This could mean that the teachers are not confident enough to teach idioms to their students. Teachers’ attitude towards the teaching of idioms should be changed, which can be done if the teacher education focused more on them. In my opinion, not only will the students’ vocabulary expand, they will get a better understanding and knowledge about a country’s culture.

6.5 Further Research
Since this was a small-scale study with only a few participants, the generalizability of the study is very low, in spite of that, the research from this essay has validity because of the fact that the interviews were first recorded and later transcribed and, consequently, the data was comprehensive and complete for a small-scale study. However, to enhance the understanding of how teachers work with idioms, a study with more participants would be far more insightful.

The fact that the teachers did not have a clear understanding of what constitutes an idiom and how idioms differ from literal constructions in language impacted their ability to discuss with this linguistic phenomenon during the interviews without misunderstandings occurring. Even though a question concerning the definition of idioms was included in the questionnaire, their answers were similar to each other in revealing their lack of understanding. However, with regard to the background research, their own definitions were narrow and inaccurate. In order to avoid this problem, the researcher can, together with the cover letter, inform the participants of what an idiom is, so that everyone involved in the study is employing the same linguistic terminology and the same definitions. Moreover, to gain a better insight into how idioms are taught in school, the researcher would have the option to select teachers who consciously work with idioms. Furthermore, the focus of this essay has been on teacher and how to teach idioms to a class from a teacher’s perspective and their discourse about idioms. It would also be informative to interview students and obtain their views as to how they could be introduced to idioms in ways that are both effective and interesting.
Appendix 1

Interview Questions

1. När tog du din lärarexamen? Vilken skola?
2. Hur länge har du varit lärare?
3. Vad är idiomatiska uttryck, för dig?
4. Vad innebär det att kunna ett ord enligt dig?
5. Hur arbetar du med ordinlärning i engelska, specifikt idiom?
6. Hur påverkar förståelsen av idiomatiska uttryck elevernas förståelse för det engelska språket?
7. Upplever du att det finns några hinder när du lär ut idiomatiska uttryck?
8. Arbetar du mer med någon ”grupp” av idiomatiska uttryck än någon annan?
Appendix 2


Om man har växt upp i ett samhälle och sett samma filmer, läst samma böcker och så lite med traditioner [...] Jag tänker att det finns i alla språk och är en naturlig del av språket. Och det är ju något av det sista man lär sig när man har börjat socialisera och umgås med människor som bara pratar det språket.

När man skriver sängen, eller poesi överhuvudtaget så då kan man använda dessa uttryck för att få ett extra djup, eller måla med det. [...] Idiomatiska uttryck det finns ju massor av, det finns street language men det finns även på den djupaste finaste litteraturen kryllar det av idiomatiska uttryck. Så man ska inte vara kaxig och säga att nej, detta ska vi inte lära ut. [...] Vi läser ju Shakespeare med niorna, och där finns det ju massor av idiomatiska uttryck.


Senaste gången så har vi jobbat med ett YouTube klipp från en First Aid Kit låt, my silver lining [...] då har vi först lyssnat på en låt, och sen så fattas det ord som de ska fylla i. Sedan så är det, my silver lining, är ju ett idiomatiskt uttryck och sedan så har vi jobbat med en stencil med andra idiomatiska uttryck och vad dem betyder. Så eleverna har fått googla. Så idiomatiska uttryck, det är inget jag har lagt så stor vikt på, men det kommer ju in i ett naturligt användande. Läser vi böcker, som vi gör varje termin, så får man in dessa uttryck

Eller hinder är ju just dem som inte kommit så pass långt i sin språkutveckling från första början att dem kan liksom förstå den här bildliga betydelsen. Dem har det ju mycket svårare att ta till sig dessa just för att dem inte är bokstavliga, de förstår ju dem inte.

I skolan har vi ju liksom två timmar i veckan. Det är mycket som ska göras och det är mycket man inte hinner med. Vi lär ju dem egentligen inte ett nytt språk, utan vi ger dem verktyg för hur de ska lära sig mer. [...] I skolan kanske man får verktyg till att bli mer korrekt medan den stora inlärningsprocessen sker ju hela tiden, när man hör språket. Så de som helt enkelt utsätter sig för språket.

Nu när vi har tränat på detta så hade jag en elev som började sin text med It’s important to think outside the box, till exempel och det är ju ett idiomatiskt uttryck. Och utan att han ens säkert har förstått att det är ett idiomatiskt uttryck han har använt, så visar han ju på högre språklig förståelse tycker jag. Man målar med språket liksom.
Man kan ju då säga, att de eleverna som ser mycket på YouTube eller spelar spel, både dataspel och tv-spel, ser på amerikanska eller brittiska filmer. [...] eller när vi ser program eller filmer där det inte är textat, de får ju en annan förståelse än dem som, vad ska man säga, bara läser skolengelska.

Alltså ett idiomatiskt uttryck är ett uttryck som man inte kan tolka de enskilda orden individuellt utan det krävs att man nästan har en kulturell förförståelse för att kunna veta vad dem betyder.

Innan jag jobbade på den här skolan så jobbade jag på en annan skola, det var det ju en hästskola och vi skulle få med hästskötsel i engelskan så vi jobbade med det. Då var det någon som skrev att vi mockar skit, att man mockade efter hästarna då, och så skrev hon suade, suade shit eller något liknande. Men suade är ju mocka, tygmateriala mocka och då visade ju eleven att hon inte förstod innebörden av ordet.

Ja, vi pratar rätt mycket i klassrummet och håller diskussioner. Jag tycker att det underlättar mycket om eleverna kan använda orden och uttrycken i diskussion. Att höra uttalen och kunna formulera sin åsikt muntligt också. Som förra veckan, då hade vi diskussiner i smågrupper, då gick jag runt, som jag brukar göra, och lyssna och då märker jag att de försöker använda de nya orden.

Då är det nog ganska så att när jag ska ha de högre kurserna, de finns ju en rangordning på nätet där jag hittar uttrycken. Så finns det dem som är de enklaste till de svåraste. När jag har engelska 7 så väljer jag alltid dem svåraste, eller advanced idioms som de heter på den sidan.


Ska man säga att man är riktigt säker på ett språk då måste man vara bekant med, kanske inte alla uttryck, det kan ju ingen, men åtminstone några av de vanligaste uttrycken. Då tror jag definitivt att de båda blir säkrare i förståelsen men även i den egna användningen av språket så blir ju språket mer nyanserat om man kan använda sig av dessa uttryck också

Jag har svårt att se att de stöter på dem överhuvudtaget i de sociala sammanhang som de figurerar i, jag menar på sociala medier och på alla chatt sidorna som finns, jag tror inte att de exponeras för den typen av språk. Om inte vi som lärare jobbar med den typen av språk, även om det är informellt, för eleverna ska kunna olika typer och inte ha ett ”mellanrum” i språket, de ska både vara formellt och informellt och de ska veta vilken typ av språk de ska använda beroende på the target audience.
List of References


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