THE ROLE OF CULTURAL AWARENESS ON L2 COMPREHENSION AND RETENTION OF CULTURE-SPECIFIC IDIOMS

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction.............................................................................................................1  
  Idioms and English Language Learners................................................................................3  
  Research Question.................................................................................................................8  
  Background and Role of the Researcher..............................................................................9  
  Summary...............................................................................................................................10  
  Chapter Overviews.............................................................................................................10  

Chapter Two: Literature Review...............................................................................................11  
  What is an Idiom.................................................................................................................11  
  Importance of Idioms.........................................................................................................13  
  Idiom Acquisition..............................................................................................................15  
  Source Domains.................................................................................................................16  
  Dual-Coding Hypothesis....................................................................................................17  
  Metaphorical Awareness....................................................................................................17  
  Cultural Awareness..........................................................................................................18  
  Transparency.....................................................................................................................19  
  Imageability........................................................................................................................20  
  Etymological Elaboration and the Boers Study...............................................................20  
  Call for Future Research....................................................................................................23
Summary...............................................................................................................................................25

Chapter Three: Methods..........................................................................................................................26

Overview of the Chapter..........................................................................................................................27

Quasi-experimental Paradigm....................................................................................................................27

Data Collection.........................................................................................................................................28

  Pilot Study..................................................................................................................................................28

  Participants...............................................................................................................................................29

  Materials..................................................................................................................................................31

    Idiom Selection.....................................................................................................................................31

    Teaching Materials...............................................................................................................................32

    Multiple-choice Posttest.......................................................................................................................32

    Gap-fill Posttest....................................................................................................................................34

Procedure..................................................................................................................................................34

Teaching Session.......................................................................................................................................34

  Experimental Group...............................................................................................................................35

  Control Group.........................................................................................................................................36

  Immediate Posttest..................................................................................................................................36

  Delayed Recall Posttest............................................................................................................................36

Data Analysis..........................................................................................................................................36

Verification of Data....................................................................................................................................37

Ethics.........................................................................................................................................................38

Conclusion...............................................................................................................................................38
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1  Participants’ years living in the United States.................................30
Figure 2  Participants’ levels of formal education..............................................30
Figure 3  PowerPoint slide depicting the idiom “down to the wire”..................32
Figure 4  Percentage of collective correct responses for the experimental and
          control groups on Test #1 and Test #2.................................................40
Figure 5  Percentage of collective correct responses for the experimental and
          control groups on Test #1 and Test #2 excluding and including
          drop one’s guard.................................................................................42
Figure 6  Control group results: percent of students with correct responses
          per idiom...............................................................................................43
Figure 7  Experimental group results: percent of students with correct
          responses per idiom..............................................................................45
Figure 8  Percentage of correct responses by group for each idiom on Test #1...46
Figure 9  Percentage of correct responses by group for each idiom on Test #2...46
Figure 10 Comprehension: Test #1 correct responses by idiom and group........48
Figure 11 Retention: Test #2 correct responses by idiom and group...............48
Figure 12 Experimental group: Average percentage of correct responses in
          relation to years living in the United States.........................................52
Figure 13  Control group: Average percentage of correct responses in relation to years living in the United States......................................................52

Table 1  Individual participant’s scores on Test #1 and Test #2.................................49
Table 2  Summary of highlights from Table 1.................................................................51
Table 3  Comparison of demographics and test scores for select participants........54
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Two political opponents are having a debate on national TV. A debate analyst makes the comment, “Mr. Brown certainly has Mr. Green on the ropes now.” Because on the ropes is a common American English idiom, a native English speaker (NS) would understand its meaning without watching the debate. Moreover, if a NS was asked to imagine where the phrase on the ropes originated, chances are the NS would be able to identify the source as boxing and describe an image of one boxer literally leaning on the ropes in a defensive position.

A non-native speaker (NNS) might understand the meaning from the context of watching the debate and realize that Mr. Green is in a defensive position and doing poorly in the debate. However, if a NNS heard the comment without watching the debate, the NNS might wonder why there would even be ropes at a political debate and why Mr. Brown has placed Mr. Green on these ropes. Indeed, the image an NNS may conjure based upon the literal words of this idiom, outside of any context, would be nonsensical.

The frequency of use of idiomatic language in American English presents a particular challenge to adult English language learners (ELLs), i.e., NNSs learning English in an English-speaking country, who must contend with “formal” English with all of its idiosyncratic rules, as well as informal language, which includes,
among other things, idioms that are opaque to those not well versed in the
dominant culture from which those idioms derive. Imagine a recent immigrant from
Tibet or Somalia trying to learn basic grammar and vocabulary, but also being
confronted daily with idioms derived from sports with which they may have no
familiarity. Because English is a language rich in idiomatic phrases that are
commonly understood and used by NSs, there is a practical need for NNSs, and
particularly ELLs, to find ways to readily comprehend and retain common idioms.

What information might be helpful to an ELL trying to decipher the meaning
of the idiom on the ropes? Would it be helpful to be aware of the metaphorical
nature of idioms? Would it be helpful to know that many idioms are culture specific
and that American idioms are often derived from sports? Would it be helpful to
know that the original meaning of on the ropes is derived from the sport of boxing?
Would it be helpful to visualize a boxer defensively leaning against the ropes while
his opponent is on the offensive? Could an ELL use all of this culture-specific
information on the origin of the idiom to decipher its figurative meaning without
explicit instruction on the figurative meaning? The purpose of this Capstone project
is to address many of these questions and answer the specific question: Can
providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using
both words and supplied visual images, improve adult ELLs’ comprehension and
retention of these idioms?

Finding the most effective ways to aid ELLs in comprehending and retaining
idioms is important for ELL educators due to the pervasiveness of idioms in
American English. Many idioms, such as *on the ropes*, have culture-specific origins that can make comprehension particularly difficult for ELLs, who often lack the metaphorical awareness and cultural background knowledge that would otherwise assist them in understanding the idiom.

In this chapter I will introduce the issues and key terms associated with the difficulties ELLs face in second language (L2) idiom acquisition and why idiom acquisition is so valuable for ELLs. I will also briefly describe the research study upon which I will be patterning my study.

Idioms and English Language Learners

Despite their high frequency of use, idioms have been viewed as an unimportant aspect of L2 acquisition and, therefore, limited research has been done on how NNSs learn idioms (Boers, Demecheleer, & Eckman, 2004b). However, the perception that idiom comprehension is unimportant for NNSs has changed in recent years. Many educational linguists now view the learning of multi-word units, such as idioms, as central to language (Langacker as cited in Boers, 2000b; Nattinger & De Carrico as cited in Boers, 2000b).

Before continuing, I want to clarify several terms that will be used to describe NNSs. For the purposes of this paper, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are learning English in a predominately non-English speaking country. English as a Second Language (ESL) learners and ELLs will be used interchangeably and denote English learners in an English-speaking country. It is also important to provide working definitions for the terms *figurative language* and *idiom*. Figurative
language is abstract and is first seen as an untruth, or even nonsensical. A person must use imagery or other tools to determine its intended meaning or truth (Grant & Bauer, 2004). For example, *Bob has a frog in his throat* is a figurative expression. One first realizes the untruth in that Bob does not actually have a frog in his throat. If Bob actually had a frog in his throat, the meaning would be literal. However, if a person takes the literal meaning and tries to form a mental image of what it would sound like if someone is trying to talk with a frog in his throat, that person might determine that the true meaning of the phrase is that Bob is trying to clear his throat.

Figurative language comes in many forms (Cooper, 1998). Idioms and metaphors are just two subtypes of figurative language. I focus on idioms rather than metaphors in this research because idioms are the most frequently used subtype of figurative language in discourse (Cooper, 1998). Nonetheless, the concept of metaphorical awareness is central to understanding idioms since idioms can only be understood metaphorically. *Metaphor* is the implied comparison between two dissimilar things, such as *love* and *battlefield*. *Love is a battlefield* only makes sense figuratively.

Although there is no consensus on what constitutes an idiom, several criteria are listed in the majority of definitions (Grant & Bauer, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, the term *idiom* satisfies the following criteria: 1) it is a fixed expression, 2) its meaning is not usually equal to the sum of the meanings of the individual
words, 3) it is recognized in a specific speech community and usually loses its meaning if translated word by word into another language (Hartman & Stork, 1972).

Historically, the meaning of idioms was believed to be arbitrary, or unanalyzable (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). However, researchers have shown that a considerable number of idioms are not arbitrary, but motivated (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Motivated, in this sense, means cognitive processes can be used to derive the idiom's current figurative meaning from the meaning of the original context in which it was used (Kovecses & Szabco, 1996). This original usage is referred to as the source domain (Boers et al., 2004b). Common source domains include warfare, sports/games, agriculture/gardening, and food/cooking.

For many idioms, the source domain is culture specific. For example, English contains a large number of idioms derived from sports and sailing. However, there are variations even within a source domain of the same language if one crosses cultures. For instance, British English sports idioms often reference cricket whereas American English sports idioms are often derived from baseball. These cultural variations are one of the reasons that idioms continue to be identified as one of the most difficult aspects of language for NNSs to comprehend (Cooper, 1999; Kovecses & Szabco, 1996).

In addition to lacking cultural background knowledge, a NNS may also lack a clear idea of the connection between figurative and literal language (Cooper, 1998; Lennon, 1998). Raising the learner’s awareness of the metaphorical connection that can often be made between the original and current figurative meanings has been
shown to aid comprehension and retention of idioms (Kovecses & Szabco, 1996). The mental process of connecting the figurative meaning of an idiom to its source domain is called *etymological elaboration* (Boers, Demecheleer & Eyckmans, 2004a). By thinking about the literal meaning of an idiom, the learner can often form a mental image that can lead to making the metaphorical connection between the literal and figurative. In this way, etymological elaboration incorporates the *dual-coding hypothesis* by providing two pathways to encoding the idiom in the learner’s lexicon and thus increases retention. The *dual-coding hypothesis* states that providing both a visual and verbal/written form of information is a more effective retention method than rote memorization of verbal/written information (Paivio, 1986).

My study is based on research studying the effect of etymological elaboration on comprehension and retention of *figurative idioms* by EFL learners (Boers et al., 2004a). Figurative idioms are “conventional imageable expressions that can be traced back to specific source domains” (p. 58). The researchers used the term *conventional imageable expressions* to mean that a NS can easily visualize a concrete mental image of the literal meaning. For example, when asked what image comes to mind when they hear the phrase *hit a home run*, most NSs of American English can visualize a baseball batter hitting a ball over the outfield fence. NNSs unfamiliar with baseball could not independently create that image because it is not part of their cultural background knowledge. Based upon the above-mentioned research, Boers et al. (2004a) came up with the following conclusions:
1. The high correlation between the EFL learner’s ability to independently identify the source domain and the figurative meaning of an idiom shows successful use of etymological elaboration.

2. Etymological elaboration is more effective for retention rates than rote memorization.

3. Etymologically opaque idioms are less susceptible to dual coding. However, explicit teaching on the source domain makes these idioms more susceptible to the dual-coding benefits of etymological elaboration.

4. With regard to conclusion #3, the one subgroup of etymologically opaque idioms where this explicit teaching was not successful was with culturally opaque idioms.

Boers et al. (2004a) also had the following recommendations:

1. More research is needed relating to culturally opaque idioms and etymological elaboration.

2. More research is needed involving learners from more diverse cultures.

3. More research is needed including more cultural and metaphorical awareness teaching in idiom instruction.

These conclusions and recommendations are the basis of my capstone. I specifically targeted the issue raised in conclusion #4. I looked at whether providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and supplied visual images, can improve adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms. My study followed a framework similar to the Boers et al.
(2004a) study. Both the methodology for the Boers et al. study and this study are presented in more detail in subsequent chapters. However, the following key modifications were made in order to address issues raised in the Boers et al. study:

1. The research involved learners from diverse cultures.
2. There was explicit instruction on metaphorical awareness.
3. Explicit cultural teaching was done via three forms: written, oral, and supplied visual images.
4. Only culturally specific idioms were used.
5. The participants were ELLs, not EFL learners.

By doing this research, I hoped to determine whether adding more detailed cultural background knowledge and imagery to Boers et al. (2004a) methods can make these culturally opaque idioms more available to dual coding. If so, these techniques can be incorporated into a teacher’s idiom lesson plan.

Research Question

Thus far, I have discussed the relevance of idiom comprehension in L2 acquisition and the difficulty it presents to the NNS. I have presented a short overview of research that has been done on the role metaphorical awareness, cultural background knowledge, and imagery can play in the acquisition of idioms by NNS. I have also briefly described the research upon which my research is modeled. This leads to my research question: Can providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and supplied visual images, improve adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms?
Background and role of the researcher

The relationship between culture and idiomatic language has always fascinated me. In fact, the topic of the first research paper I wrote as a student in a Master of Arts in English as a Second Language program was on culture-specific contextual knowledge and its relation to understanding idiomatic language. Despite finding the subject complex and opaque, it piqued my interest and led to the focus of this Capstone project.

I feel that idiomatic language is a topic worthy of further exploration for several reasons. First, the area of figurative language in L2 acquisition is important because of its frequent use in both everyday and academic situations. I have become sensitive to how frequently a NS will use idioms when talking with a NNS. In fact, I have become acutely aware of my own use of idiomatic language in my teaching of ELLs, which sometimes gets in the way of effective communication with my students. Second, it is always a popular topic in the classroom. In my experience as a volunteer at various adult ELL literacy centers and as a current ELL instructor at a local adult basic education (ABE) center, I have seen that adult ELLs in my classes are interested in how to better comprehend the meaning of English idioms. I want to be able to provide the students with the most effective tools to decipher and retain idiomatic language.

For the research phase of my Capstone, I served as both the instructor of the teaching sessions and the administrator of the tests involved in this research.
Summary

In this study, I focus on whether providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and supplied visual images can improve adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms. I have discussed the difficulties NNSs face in trying to interpret these idioms and the high interest adult ELLs have in wanting to understand this important aspect of everyday discourse. I believe that by raising ELLs’ cultural awareness of source domains commonly used in American English, they can utilize this strategy for L2 idiom comprehension and retention.

Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One, I introduced my research by establishing the purpose, importance and need for the study. The context of the study was briefly explained as was the role and background of the researcher. In Chapter Two, I provide a review of the literature relevant to L2 idiom acquisition. This includes definitions of key terminology and concepts, the importance of idioms for NNSs, topics central to the concept of etymological elaboration, the study upon which my research is based, the need for further research, and how my research can help fill some of the gaps left in the research. Chapter Three includes the research design and methodology that guides this study. Chapter Four presents the results of this study. In Chapter Five, I share my reflections on the collected data. I also discuss the limitations of this study, implications for future research and recommendations for using the results of this study to improve teaching practices.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

My research question is: Can providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and visual images, improve adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms? This chapter focuses on the research that has already been done in the area of culture-specific L2 idiom acquisition. It begins with a discussion of figurative language and what constitutes an idiom, the importance of idioms for L2 learners, and idiom acquisition. Next, etymological elaboration, the idiom acquisition strategy of using the literal meaning of an idiom to derive the figurative meaning, is discussed. Key topics related to etymological elaboration are reviewed. These topics are source domains, the dual-coding hypothesis, metaphorical and cultural awareness, idiom transparency, and idiom imageability. Finally, I provide a brief description of the model study for my research and how my research adds to the existing base of knowledge.

What is an Idiom?

There is no uniform definition of the term idiom. Defining idioms is problematic, in part, because idioms are considered a subcategory of the broader category figurative language (Cooper, 1998). Figurative language is commonly defined as abstract language that conveys a non-literal meaning (Findlay, 1998). Figurative language includes, but is not limited to idioms, metaphors, slang, jargon,
and proverbs. Definitions of these subcategories often overlap. *Metaphor* and *idiom* have similar definitions (Gunderson, Slade, & Rosenke, 1988). *Figurative* and *metaphorical* are often used interchangeably (Grant & Bauer, 2004). *Idiom* and *slang* can be synonymous (Lee, 1994).

Deciding what is figurative versus literal language is also a subject of disagreement amongst linguists. *Literal language* is described as non-metaphorical and “language that is not understood, even partly, in terms of something else” (Grant & Bauer, 2004, p. 39). However, some linguists believe literal and figurative meaning never intersect (Glucksberg, 1998). Others argue that there is not a clear distinction between literal and figurative language and conclude that most language lies somewhere between the two ends of the spectrum (Gibbs, 1994). For the purposes of this paper, the term *literal* will refer to the initial established meaning of an idiom; *figurative* will refer to the more recent meaning derived from the literal one. For example, the literal meaning of the idiom *on the ropes*, which was referred to in Chapter One, is that a boxer is leaning defensively against the ropes of a boxing ring. The figurative meaning has now expanded to pertain to anyone who is in a defensive position and close to failing or being defeated. (See Appendix B).

Although there is no universally agreed upon definition of the word *idiom*, there are several criteria commonly discussed in regard to idioms (Grant & Bauer, 2004). These criteria are *institutionalization*, *non-compositionality*, and *fixedness/frozenness*. Institutionalization means the idiom is familiar to a set group of people. For example, *jump the gun* is a common expression recognized by most
native-English speaking Americans. Non-compositionality is the inability to deduce the meaning of the idiom from the individual words. One cannot look at the definition of the words *jump* and *gun* to derive the figurative meaning *to do something before the appropriate time*. Fixedness refers to the inability to change the word order or words within an idiom. One couldn’t say *jump the pistol* or *jump over the gun* and retain the same figurative meaning. To satisfy the above criteria and for the purposes of this study, an idiom is defined as a fixed expression that has a special meaning not usually equal to the sum of the meanings of the individual words which is recognized in a specific speech community. The speech community in this study is speakers whose first language (L1) is American English.

**Importance of Idioms**

With a working definition of an idiom, the discussion will now focus on why idiom comprehension is important to NNSs. Before the 1990s, very little attention was devoted to the study of idioms by NNSs (Boers et al., 2004a). Research on ELL/EFL vocabulary development had mainly focused on individual words, not multi-word units such as idioms (Steinel, Hulstijn, & Steinel, 2007). This attitude is reflected in the fact that most advanced level ELL or EFL university students have had little or no instruction on idioms in high school or college (Mantyla, 2004).

One of the few linguists aware of the importance of teaching idioms prior to the 1990s was Weiner. He authored a book of English idioms in 1958 because he felt there was a great void in the teaching of idioms to NNSs (as cited in Adkins,
1968). This void was incomprehensible to Weiner because he felt that idioms were such an integral part of the English language.

Weiner’s belief is substantiated in corpus-based research that illustrates that idioms are prevalent in academic speech and should be part of any English for Academic Proficiency (EAP) curriculum (Simpson & Mendis, 2003). For example, a study of the 7th grade basal reader and social studies materials for the states of Texas and New Mexico showed an average of 3.32 idioms per page (Adkins, 1968). Furthermore, in a study examining the barriers ELLs face in a college nursing program, of the 42 specific examples the instructor used to explain the main concepts of her lecture, 74% included idioms; 38% of them being specific to Western culture (Hansen, 2010). Moreover, the prevalence of idioms in everyday life has also been studied. A researcher who taped three hours of random television programs discovered an average of three idioms was spoken per minute (Cooper, 1998).

So, despite evidence to the contrary, idioms were often viewed as useful for stylistic purposes only and, therefore, unimportant for NNSs (Lennon, 1998). Idioms were perceived as too difficult to teach, and as a result, scant attention has been paid to the teaching of idioms to NNSs or the area of L2 idiom acquisition research. Through my research I will address this shortcoming by studying a strategy for teaching idioms to adult ELLs. Specifically, I hope to determine if increasing cultural background knowledge can be an effective strategy in teaching idioms to ELLs.
Idiom Acquisition

Addressing cultural background knowledge as a strategy for L2 idiom acquisition implies that there are ways to acquire idioms other than rote memorization. Historically, an idiom’s meaning has been viewed as arbitrary and could only be learned through rote memorization (Boers et al., 2004a). Recent research has provided evidence that idioms are not arbitrary, but motivated (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Motivated, in this sense, means cognitive processes can be used to derive the idiom’s figurative meaning from its literal one (Kovecses & Szabco, 1996). This cognitive process of using metaphorical awareness to associate figurative idioms with the literal usage is called *etymological elaboration* (Boers, Eyckmans & Stengers, 2007). It is a type of semantic elaboration that requires the learner’s active processing of an idiom with regard to its meaning (Boers et al., 2004a).

Using etymological elaboration to acquire the figurative meaning of an idiom is cited as a frequent strategy for L2 learners (Cooper, 1999). Two other L2 idiom acquisition strategies that are common are: 1) transferring knowledge from a learner’s L1 and 2) using contextual clues (Cooper, 1999; Irujo, 1986; Kellerman & Smith, 1986). However, since this study will focus specifically on etymological elaboration, idioms will be tested in isolation and will not have a 1:1 equivalent in the learners’ L1.

Despite being listed as a common L2 idiom acquisition strategy, etymological elaboration is not helpful in all situations (Boers, 2001; Boers et al., 2004a). There
are multiple variables that determine its effectiveness. In order to understand etymological elaboration it is necessary to discuss several of these interrelated variables in detail. These variables include: source domains, the dual-coding hypothesis, metaphorical awareness, cultural awareness, transparency, and imageability.

Source Domains

The term source domain refers to the historical origin of an idiom (Boers et al., 2007). Corpus research on the frequency of particular source domains shows that certain cultures use specific domains more often than other cultures (Deignan, 2003). For example, the French language contains three times more idioms related to food and cooking than does English. On the other hand, English has a high number of idioms derived from sailing and sports (Boers et al., 2004b). For example, the source domain for the idiom pinch- hit for someone is the sport of baseball. To pinch-hit for someone means that one player will bat for another player. Outside the context of baseball, it means that one person will substitute for another in some capacity. For example, someone might say to a coworker, “I am scheduled to give a presentation at the staff meeting today but I am sick. Can you pinch-hit for me at the meeting?”

Most research on L2 idiom comprehension has used idioms that are from universal, rather than culture-specific, domains (Kovecses & Szabco, 1996). My research will help fill that gap by focusing exclusively on sports idioms. Sports are
considered a prime example of a culture-dependent source domain and are the most common source domain for American English idioms (Boers et al., 2007).

Dual-Coding Hypothesis

The deep level of cognitive processing required to utilize the source domain of an idiom is beneficial in long-term retention (Ellis, 1994). By thinking about the source domain, a learner can often form a mental image that provides an additional pathway for both understanding and remembering the idiom. Providing a visual image in addition to providing verbal or written information has been shown to increase retention rates of words, phrases, sentences, etc. (Paivio, 1986). This is referred to as the dual-coding hypothesis. By incorporating the dual-coding hypothesis, etymological elaboration facilitates both comprehension and retention of idioms (Boers et al., 2004a; Kovecses & Szabco, 1996). However, there is some evidence that when learners are presented with both images and words, they focus on the images to the exclusion of the words (Boers, Piriz, Stengers, & Eyckmans, 2009). This could interfere with the dual-coding benefits of etymological elaboration.

Metaphorical Awareness

Using the dual-coding aspect of etymological elaboration to link the source domain to the figurative meaning of an idiom would not be possible without metaphorical awareness (Cooper, 1998). As noted previously, the term metaphor is closely tied to idioms and figurative language. It can be broadly defined as,
“figurative forms of language that link concrete to abstract conceptual meanings” (Findlay, 1998, p. 123).

Because all cultures use metaphors, teachers can wrongly assume that all students have metaphorical awareness (Lennon, 1998). Students, whether NSs or NNSs, often do not think about or understand the metaphorical connection between the literal and figurative meaning of an idiom (Cooper, 1998). For those who understand the metaphorical aspect of idioms, it can be a useful tool and is frequently listed as a strategy for teaching idioms (Boers, 2000a; Boers et al., 2004b; Cieslicka, 2006; Cooper, 1998; Lennon, 1998). A substantial improvement in the ability of NNSs to comprehend idioms was shown when the students were taught the concepts of metaphor rather than employing rote memorization (Adkins, 1968). If NNSs are familiar with the metaphorical nature of idioms, they can often use the literal meaning and the imagery it evokes to aid comprehension and retention (Mantyla, 2004).

Cultural Awareness

Based on the information in the preceding section, it seems apparent that a NNS must have some degree of metaphorical awareness in order to link the literal and figurative meaning of an idiom. But what if the literal meaning is derived from a culture-specific source domain with which the NNS is unfamiliar? After all, definitions for the word *idiom* often include references to understandability by a particular group or culture, often excluding people who do not have that shared cultural knowledge (Gunderson et al., 1988; Lakoff, 1987; and Lee, 1994). This lack
of cultural knowledge can make the meaning of idioms more difficult to acquire. *Whistlin’ Dixie*, *armchair quarter backing* and *slam-dunk* are all idioms specific to American culture. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for NNSs who are not familiar with the American Civil War, football, or basketball to comprehend these phrases. Not only can this lack of cultural knowledge affect a NNS’s daily communication with others, but it can also affect them academically. Along with lack of knowledge of idioms, insufficient knowledge of cultures has been cited as one of two main factors for NNSs’ reading problems (Han, 1993). This culture-specific knowledge that NNSs often lack is one of the reasons that L2 idiom comprehension can be such a difficult task. It is this aspect of etymological elaboration that is the primary focus of my study. The next topic, idiom transparency, is related to the amount of cultural awareness a NNS possesses (Steinel et al., 2007).

**Transparency**

Culture-specific etymology contributes to the degree of transparency of an idiom (Boers & Demecheeleer, 2001). It also makes transparency subjective. *Transparency* is the ease at which the figurative meaning of an idiom can be derived from the literal one (Steinel et al., 2007). The higher the transparency, the easier it is to derive the meaning of the idiom. This definition puts idioms on a continuum of transparency; the least transparent are described as opaque. For example, an idiom from an unfamiliar culture-specific source domain may not be as transparent for a NNS as it is for a NS. *To hit a home run* is a baseball idiom that would be relatively transparent to a native-English speaking American but may be opaque to a recent
Somali immigrant. One reason it might be opaque is because the learner from Somalia may not be able to independently form a mental image of someone hitting a home run.

Imageability

Imageability is the ability to evoke a mental image and has similar subjectivity as transparency in regards to idioms (Steinel et al., 2007). Imageable idioms are “figurative expressions that tend to call up a conventional scene in a native speaker’s mind” (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001, p. 255). These idioms can be traced back to specific source domains and are also referred to as figurative idioms (Boers et al., 2004a). Hitting a home run would be an example of a figurative idiom. Most American English speakers can visualize someone literally hitting a home run because baseball is a popular American sport. These same speakers probably could not visualize hitting someone for six from cricket because it is not a well-known sport in America. This inability to create a mental image can make the idiom less transparent and limit the ability to use dual coding. In my study I used idioms that are imageable because I wanted to focus on idioms that are considered more etymologically opaque to NNSs because of their cultural specificity.

Etymological Elaboration and the Boers Study

The effectiveness of etymological elaboration on idiom acquisition is affected by the factors discussed: source domain, dual coding, metaphorical awareness, cultural knowledge, transparency, and imageability. My research is based upon a study that was done on the effectiveness of etymological elaboration (Boers et al.,
The central question of the Boers et al. study was: Is etymological elaboration equally effective for the retention of etymologically transparent and opaque idioms? The researchers hypothesized that it would be easier for the participants to create their own imagery and use dual coding with etymologically transparent idioms than with opaque idioms. The study used the following parameters:

1. Figurative (imageable) idioms were used in isolation.
2. Both etymologically transparent and opaque idioms were included.
3. The idioms did not have a 1:1 equivalent in the participants’ L1.
4. The participants of the study were all Belgian EFL college students whose first language was either Flemish or French.
5. All testing and feedback was done on a computer using an online tool the researchers developed called Idiomteacher.

The control group was given a figurative idiom and asked to select the correct meaning from a multiple-choice format. After the test, the control group was provided the correct answers. In contrast, the experimental group was given the same idioms and asked to select the source domain (i.e. gardening, sports, sailing). The experimental group was provided the correct answers as well as a brief explanation of the original usage of each idiom. However, the experimental group was not given the figurative meaning. For example, for the idiom *show someone the ropes*, the control group was given the definition *to teach someone how to do a task*. The experimental group was given the information that the source domain is sailing
and that *to show someone the ropes* means *experienced sailors show novice sailors for which ropes they are responsible.*

One week after the multiple-choice tests, both groups were given a gap-fill exercise on the figurative meaning of the idiom to test their comprehension and retention. The experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group. There was a high correlation between being able to correctly identify the source domain in the multiple-choice posttest and correctly completing the gap-fill posttest. The researchers believed this lent credibility to the hypothesis that etymological elaboration was more effective than rote memorization. Even if the participants in the experimental group did not chose the correct source domain in the multiple-choice test, the brief etymological explanations that were provided by Idiomteacher were deemed sufficient in most cases of etymologically opaque idioms to allow the learners to employ dual coding. The one subgroup of etymologically opaque idioms where this explicit feedback did not benefit the experimental group was with idioms considered opaque because the source domain was less salient in the participants’ L1 culture. For example, the participants scored higher on sailing idioms than they did on baseball idioms. The baseball idiom *to touch base* was cited as one of the most opaque idioms. The feedback provided by Idiomteacher was, “*base* refers to each of the four points which a baseball player has to reach to score a run.” If the NNS had never seen a baseball field, this explanation was not sufficient to help the learner independently create a mental image. The researchers concluded that culturally opaque idioms are less susceptible to dual coding, which resulted in
lower retention rates for this type of idiom. My research focuses upon this subgroup of idioms.

Call for Future Research

Boers identified several areas where further research is needed:

1. Focus on culturally opaque idioms and etymological elaboration.
2. Include participants from more diverse cultures.
3. Assess effectiveness of including more specific cultural awareness instruction.

Two areas he did not identify, but which require further study, relate to acquisition of idiomatic language among NNSs with varying levels of formal education and acquisition of idiomatic language among those who live in the culture from which the idioms originate, rather than studying English in their native countries. In the literature I reviewed, all of the research had been done with adult NNS students at the university level. There appears to be a gap in the research with regard to adult learners with less formal education. Because of this gap, I chose to conduct my study with adult ELLs at the ABE center where I currently teach because the students at the center have educational backgrounds ranging from no formal education at all to being college graduates. Since my experience has been that the concepts of metaphor and figurative language are often discussed in high school or college level literature and writing classes, my belief – going into this study – was that many of the students with little formal education might not have the metaphorical awareness that a college student may possess. Furthermore, greater
than 75% of the studies I reviewed were done with EFL learners, not ELLs. It stands
to reason that ELLs hear American culture-specific idioms more frequently than
EFLs because the former are living in the culture that is the very source of much of
its idiomatic references. Therefore, understanding idioms is more critical for an
ELL’s everyday communication. I hope this research project provides me and other
ELL teachers with insights and strategies for the teaching of idioms.

This research encompasses the aforementioned gaps in the following ways:

1. The idioms used in this study are culturally specific and derived from a
   common American source domain: sports.

2. The participants are from diverse cultures. Also, whereas the
   participants in the Boers study were all college students, my participants
   come from diverse educational backgrounds. Many participants have
   experienced an interrupted education or did not have any formal
   education in their native countries.

3. The participants are ELLs living in the United States, not EFL learners.

4. More explicit cultural background teaching was provided via
   etymological elaboration than in the Boers study. The Boers study
   included a brief written description of the literal meaning of the idiom as
   feedback in the multiple-choice posttest. I expanded the explanation and
   supplied visual imagery in order to determine if it helps to activate dual
coding.
By focusing on cultural awareness and culturally opaque idioms, it was my hope that insight would be gained on the stated research question in this study: Can providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and supplied visual images, improve adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms?

Summary

In this chapter I have reviewed the relevant literature with regard to: (a) definitions of key terms, (b) the importance of L2 idiom acquisition, (c) key topics related to etymological elaboration, including cultural awareness, (d) the primary study used as a model for my study, and (e) how my study helps fill gaps in current research.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the research paradigm, data collection, data analysis and ethical issues related this study.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The goal of this study was to determine if explicit cultural background teaching (i.e. source domain) using oral, written, and visual cues can increase comprehension and retention of culturally opaque idioms. As noted in the literature review, research has demonstrated that etymological elaboration, in the form of identifying the source domain, is beneficial in the comprehension and retention of culturally transparent idioms. However, culturally opaque idioms are less likely to receive dual coding. Many NNSs, even with brief written explanations of the literal meaning, cannot independently create the imagery that is necessary for dual coding (Boers et al., 2004a). I wanted to know whether providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and supplied visual images, facilitates dual coding and therefore improves adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms.

To briefly summarize, this study was conducted with a control and an experimental group. Both groups received a 30-minute lesson on culture-specific idioms. The experimental group received explicit teaching, including supplied visual imagery, on the origin of the idiom. The control group received explicit teaching on the figurative meaning of the idiom. Both groups were given the same immediate multiple-choice posttest. One week later, both groups took a delayed recall gap-fill
posttest. Comprehension and retention rates were compared after assessing results of the control group and the experimental group on the immediate and delayed recall posttests.

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter describes the methodologies used in this study. First, I present the rationale for using the quasi-experimental paradigm for this study, along with a description of the paradigm. Second, the participants, setting, and methods for data collection are discussed. Finally, I describe how I analyzed the data and what ethical procedures were needed to conduct this study.

Quasi-experimental Paradigm

I used the quasi-experimental research paradigm for this study. This differed from Boers et al. (2004a) in that Boers et al. used a true experimental design. The quasi-experimental paradigm is similar to the true experimental paradigm in that they both use a control and an experimental group. Whereas true experimental research uses a control group and experimental group with randomly assigned participants, quasi-experimental research does not (Nunan, 1992). Because I used predetermined groups of adult ELLs, the design was quasi-experimental.

Experimental research continues to be a common approach to L2 research (Johnson, 1991). It is often used because it is intended to determine if one teaching method or learning strategy is more effective than another. The goal of experimental research is to try to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between an independent and dependent variable. The experimental method was well suited
for this study because I examined whether providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and supplied visual images, improves adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms.

For this study, the independent variable was the absence or presence of cultural background information. The treatment was the teaching session. The dependent variable was the degree of comprehension and retention of the meaning of these idioms. I compared the comprehension and retention rates of the two groups to determine whether providing information, including supplied visual images, on the literal origin of an idiom is more effective than providing the figurative definition alone.

Data Collection

Pilot Study

I conducted an informal pilot study with a group of 14 adult ELLs that were similar demographically to the participants in this study. I did so for several reasons. First, the pilot study was done to test the vocabulary and sentence structure on my multiple-choice quiz. Second, it was conducted to see if the ELLs already knew any of the idioms. Lastly, it was conducted to discuss with the ELLs whether their language had a 1:1 equivalent idiom.

I administered a multiple-choice test using 14 idioms. In addition to attempting to pick the correct definition for each idiom, the participants also indicated whether they knew or guessed each idiom’s meaning. The participants
could ask me to clarify if they did not understand a word or the sentence structure of the four answers, but not of the idiom itself. I then collected these tests.

Out of a total of 196 responses, there were 47 correct answers. Of those 47 correct answers, only two were marked to indicate that the participant knew the idioms, rather than guessed. This indicates that, with rare exception, these were opaque idioms to these NNSs. There were no 1:1 equivalent idioms in their L1s that the participants identified.

Participants

The participants were adult ELLs at an ABE site managed by the state’s department of education in a large metropolitan area in the Midwest. The students were in an ELL 5 class, which is a low-advanced class. Criterion for the ELL 5 class is a Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) reading score between 221 and 227. Demographic information collected on each participant included age, country of origin, primary language, education level, years lived in the United States, years studying English, current employment status, time spent speaking English, and time spent viewing English-speaking television (See Appendix A). There was a total of 36 participants, ten males and 26 females, ranging between 20 and 64 years of age. Countries of origin included Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Congo, India, Burma, Venezuela, Ghana, El Salvador, Philippines, Russia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. The participants spoke 17 different primary languages. Years of studying English ranged from two months to 14 years. Years living in the United States ranged from one month to 32 years.
Because this research focused on participants from diverse educational backgrounds who were living in the United States, I have illustrated the participants’ length of residence in the United States and their educational backgrounds in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

**Figure 1.** Participants’ years living in United States.

**Figure 2.** Participants’ levels of formal education.
The control and experimental groups were all from the same class level, but the participants in each group came from separate sections, i.e., classrooms. This minimized any potential discussion of the teaching sessions between the two groups that might have affected the results. It should be noted that I was not the regular instructor for either section. Because I could not take up significant classroom time to conduct the study, I had a limited timeframe in which to conduct the teaching sessions. This also meant both sections were unfamiliar with me as an instructor, which may have made the teaching sessions I conducted more challenging to the students.

**Materials**

**Idiom selection.** I used both a multiple-choice and gap-fill posttest to collect data. I designed all the tests using a compiled list of ten imageable culture-specific sports idioms derived from the source domains of baseball, horse racing, and boxing (See Appendix B). I obtained the definitions and etymology of the idioms from *Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary* (2006) and *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (1997). I chose the definition that I believed to be the simplest and the easiest to understand. For example, *on the ropes* is defined as “someone is very close to failing or being defeated” (*Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary*, 2006, p. 311) or “on verge of defeat or collapse, helpless” (*American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*, 1997, p. 471). I chose the first definition because I thought *very close to* and *failing* would probably be more familiar to the participants than *verge* and *collapse*. The idioms were determined to be unfamiliar to the participants and do not have a 1:1
equivalent in the participants’ L1 per the pilot study. Since imageable idioms form a mental image in a NS’s mind, I showed the list of idioms to five NSs. The NSs confirmed that they recognized each idiom and could identify its source domain. They also verified that the idioms are common in everyday use.

**Teaching materials.** These included photos, videos, and written literal and figurative definitions. The materials were presented as PowerPoint presentations (See Appendix C). For example, to show the literal meaning of the idiom *down to the wire* to the experimental group, the instructor projected the following image and read the description aloud (See Figure 3).

*Figure 3. PowerPoint slide depicting the idiom “down to the wire”.*

*wire* to the experimental group, the instructor projected the following image and read the description aloud (See Figure 3).

**Multiple-choice posttest.** The multiple-choice format was used for an immediate posttest to check for comprehension of the meaning of the idioms (see Appendix D). A well-constructed multiple-choice question can test levels of cognitive processing high above simple recognition (Clegg & Cashin, 1986). Since I
was testing for comprehension, which is considered a higher level of cognition, this technique was a good fit.

Each test question listed an idiom in isolation and the participants chose the definition from four multiple-choice answers. The correct answer was taken from either Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary (2006) or The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms (1997). The three incorrect answers were either the definition of another idiom or were constructed by the researcher. Answers constructed by the researcher included definitions that could be connected to a specific word in the idiom. For example:

Idiom: *to drop one’s guard*

Possible answers:

a. *to relax when you should be careful or alert* (correct answer)
b. *to the very end* (definition of another idiom)
c. *to protect something* (reference to the word *guard*)
d. *to lose something important* (reference to the word *drop*)

When designing the four possible answers, I attempted to use short definitions with simple wording. For example, the definition of *strike out* is “to fail at an endeavor” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*, 1997, p. 404). On the test, I shortened the answer to *fail*, thereby eliminating the potentially unfamiliar word *endeavor*. I also used the pilot study to help me revise the multiple-choice definitions identified by the pilot group as containing unfamiliar vocabulary or confusing sentence structure.
**Gap-fill test.** This was used for the delayed recall posttest (see Appendix E). The ten idioms were listed at the top of the test with a corresponding letter. Each participant needed to match the idiom to the corresponding question. Here is a sample question:

___ 1. *I need to* __________________________ *with my friend. I have not contacted him in a very long time.*

The correct idiom is *touch base.* The participant needed to write the letter corresponding to the idiom in the blank in front of the sentence.

I chose to administer a gap-fill test rather than repeat the same multiple-choice posttest. Since both groups received the correct answers to the immediate posttest, there was the possibility that participants may just remember the exact questions and answers without truly comprehending the idiom. In the gap-fill test, the participants had to show both retention and comprehension to choose the correct answer.

**Procedure**

The procedure consisted of a 30-minute teaching session followed by an immediate multiple-choice posttest for both the control and experimental groups. One week later, a delayed recall gap-fill test was administered to both groups.

**Teaching Session**

Each group received a 30-minute teaching session using a lecture format with a PowerPoint presentation. I taught both sessions without any questions from the students or class discussion. Both groups received the brief explanation that an
idiom is a phrase whose meaning cannot always be understood by understanding
the meaning of the individual words. The example *it’s raining cats and dogs* was
used. Participants did not receive any materials to take away from the class, but
they were allowed to take notes.

**Experimental group.** The experimental group’s session started with a brief
explanation of the metaphorical nature of idioms in regards to how understanding
the literal meaning can help them decipher the figurative meaning. I told the
experimental group that many American idioms originate from sports. *Pass the
baton* was used as an example. I showed images of passing the baton in a relay race
and read the literal definition. I then read the figurative definition and gave a
sample sentence using the figurative meaning. This brief explanation of the
metaphorical nature of idioms related to source domains was done for two reasons
that were discussed in the literature review. First, using the dual-coding aspect of
etymological elaboration is not possible without metaphorical awareness. Second, it
cannot be assumed that all participants have the same level of metaphorical
awareness related to source domains. The instruction either introduced them to the
concept or re-activated their knowledge of the concept.

Next, the experimental group received explicit instruction on the origin of
each of the ten idioms. For each idiom they were provided a verbal and written
description of the literal meaning of the idiom. In addition, imagery was provided in
the form of photos, videos, or instructor demonstration. As an example, for *jump the
gun*, they were told that traditionally a gun is fired to signal the start of a horse race.
If a horse starts running before the gun is fired, the horse is said to have *jumped the gun*. The participants were shown a photo of someone firing a gun at the start of a race and a horse starting before the gun has been fired (Refer to Appendix C for all teaching materials).

**Control group.** The control group received explicit instruction on the figurative meaning of the idioms. This was presented in verbal and written form. The participants were not provided the exact language that would be on the posttest. For example, for the idiom *jump the gun*, the correct definition on the posttest was *to start something too soon*. During the teaching session the language used was *do something before the correct or expected time*.

**Immediate Posttest.** Following the teaching session, each group took the immediate multiple-choice posttest. There was a 20-minute time limit. After the tests were collected, both groups were shown the correct answers via PowerPoint. The instructor read each idiom and the correct answer.

**Delayed Recall Posttest.** Approximately one week after the teaching session, both groups took a gap-fill posttest. There was a 25-minute time allotment and the tests were collected.

**Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed to test the hypothesis that providing cultural background information will result in higher comprehension and retention scores. The immediate and delayed recall posttests were scored and the results of the
experimental and control groups were compared using descriptive statistics and simple graphic analysis.

Verification of Data

To help ensure internal validity for the quasi-experimental paradigm, the researcher should attempt to minimize the variables between the control and experimental group (Johnson, 1991). Suggestions include using the same instructor for both groups, as well as providing the same environment, same materials, etc. For this study, the researcher was the instructor for both the control and experimental group. Both teaching sessions consisted of a lecture by the instructor without group discussion or questions from the participants. This controlled for the possibility of more information being provided to one group versus the other. The pilot study, with a demographically similar group of students, also served as a way to verify the cultural opaqueness of the proposed idioms rather than administering a pretest to the control and experimental groups. Exposing the control and experimental groups to a pretest could possibly affect the posttest results, resulting in decreased internal validity (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

Reliability is the measure of whether a research project can be replicated and achieves the same results (Merriam, 1998). Having a well-defined teaching plan with well-constructed data collection tools (multiple-choice and gap-fill posttests), as shown in this chapter, provides a level of standardization that can easily be replicated by a different researcher.
Ethics

Ethical standards are an important part of research. To ensure the ethics of this study I: (a) obtained informed, signed consent from participants, (b) provided privacy of the research site and anonymity of the participants, and (c) received approval from both my academic institution and the research site.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have detailed the methodology of this study. I have discussed the quasi-experimental paradigm and the rationale for using it. I have described my plan for data collection and analysis using multiple-choice and gap-fill posttests. I have described my procedure in detail and have provided strategies to ensure internal validity, reliability, and ethical appropriateness. In the next chapter I will present the results of this study.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the first section of this chapter, I will provide the results of the two posttests. In the second section, I will discuss the results as they relate to the research question: Can providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and supplied visual images, improve adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms?

As stated in Chapter Three, during a 30-minute teaching session, the control group (17 participants) was taught the figurative meaning of 10 culture-specific idioms. The experimental group (19 participants) was taught the literal meaning of the same idioms with the addition of supplied visual images that helped explain the idioms within the context of the sport from which they originated. This approach is largely consistent with that used in the Boers et al. (2004a) study in that the experimental group was not provided the figurative meaning prior to the immediate posttest.

A 10-point multiple-choice posttest was administered to both groups immediately after the teaching sessions. After collection of the tests, the participants were verbally provided the correct answers. One week later each group was given a 10-point delayed recall gap-fill posttest. For the remainder of
Chapter 4, as well as Chapter 5, the immediate posttest will be referred to as Test #1 and the delayed recall posttest will be referred to as Test #2.

Results are divided into four subsections: overall performance of both groups, each group’s results in relation to the individual idioms, individual participant’s results, and demographics. This will be followed by a discussion of the results.

Results

Overall performance

Figure 4 illustrates the overall performance of the control and experimental groups. On Test #1, which tested for comprehension, the control group scored a

![Bar chart showing percentage of collective correct responses for the experimental and control groups on Test #1 and Test #2.](chart)

*Figure 4.* Percentage of collective correct responses for the experimental and control groups on Test #1 and Test #2.
substantially higher percentage of correct responses (80%) than did the experimental group (55%). This was not altogether unexpected as the experimental group’s task required a higher level of cognitive processing. The control group’s task was to memorize the figurative meaning of the 10 idioms, whereas the experimental group’s task was to learn the literal meaning of the 10 idioms and independently make the connection between the literal and figurative meaning of each.

Before proceeding, it is important to address what appears to be an anomaly in the data. For the idiom *drop one’s guard*, all participants in the control group chose the incorrect response on Test #1 despite scoring between 70% and 100% on the other nine idioms. This might be attributed to confusing wording of the provided figurative definition and the wording on the multiple-choice question. However, on Test #2, 70% of the control group selected the correct response for this idiom. This may be due to the fact that I emphasized the correct meaning of this idiom when I provided the control group the correct answers for Test #1. Unless stated, results are presented and discussed excluding this idiom. However, where this anomaly has a material impact on the results of this study, I will discuss the results with and without reference to this idiom.

Unlike the wide disparity between the control and experimental groups’ scores on Test #1, Test #2 scores were very close: 41% (excluding *drop one’s guard*: 37%) for the control group and 40% (42%) for the experimental group (See Figure
5). I had anticipated that the experimental group would have scored higher than the control group due to the dual coding theory’s beneficial effect on long-term retention.

![Figure 5](image)

*Figure 5. Percentage of collective correct responses for the experimental and control groups on Test #1 and Test #2 excluding and including drop one’s guard.*

Despite similar results for both groups on Test #2, the drop in overall scores between Test #1 and Test #2 were much more extreme for the control group. Excluding *drop one’s guard*, the control group’s scores dropped an average of 52 percentage points, from 89% on Test #1 to 37% on Test #2. In contrast, the experimental group’s scores only dropped an average of 17 percentage points, from 59% to 42%. There appears to be several factors that might bear upon these outcomes. These factors will be addressed in greater detail in the Discussion section of this chapter. However, one possible cause is worth mentioning at this point. As
indicated, both groups’ scores dropped below 50% on Test #2. Although it is difficult to know the exact cause or causes of this drop, one possible factor is that Test #2 had a higher degree of difficulty than Test #1. Not only did it require all participants to remember the meanings of the idioms, it also required them to comprehend the context of the gap-fill sentences and place the correct idiom in the appropriate sentence. Regardless of the cause or causes of the overall drop for each group’s scores, what the data indicates is that the control group’s ability to retain the meaning of the idioms, and therefore appropriately use them in the proper context, dropped substantially more than did the experimental group’s ability to do so over a period of one week.

**Individual idioms**

**Control Group.** The control group scored >75% on all idioms on Test #1,

![Graph showing control group results for individual idioms](image)

**Figure 6.** Control group results: percent of students with correct responses per idiom.
excluding drop one’s guard (See Figure 6). However, on Test #2, all of the scores were <75%. Scores for every idiom dropped from Test #1 to Test #2. Down to the wire posted the largest drop (82 percentage points), and inside track posted the smallest drop (23 percentage points). Further data show that a high comprehension rate does not always translate into a high retention rate. For example, the two idioms for which the control group showed the greatest comprehension, down to the wire and home run (Test #1: 100%) were two of the lowest scoring idioms for long-term retention (Test #2: 18% and 23% respectively). The highest score on Test #2 was 70% for jump the gun. It was the only idiom that exhibited both a high comprehension and retention rate. On the opposite end of the spectrum, inside track and touch base were two of the lowest scores for comprehension but two of the highest for long-term retention. The reason for these inverse relationships between comprehension and retention for these particular idioms is unclear.

Looking at the general trend for the control group on individual idioms, learning the figurative meaning benefited comprehension more than long-term retention.

Experimental Group. This group scored >75% on only two of the idioms (jump the gun and throw a curveball) on Test #1 and on only one (jump the gun) on Test #2 (See Figure 7). But whereas jump the gun was clearly the most transparent idiom for this group, scoring 100% and 89% respectively on the two posttests, throw a curveball registered the largest drop between Test #1 and #2 (42 percentage points). One might speculate that dual coding worked much better for jump the gun, but it is unclear whether the supplied images for this idiom were
easier to understand and retain or whether the participants had some prior experience with this concept.

Figure 7. Experimental group results: percent of students with correct responses per idiom.

*Inside track* and *touch base* were among the lowest scores for both comprehension and retention, making them the most opaque idioms for the experimental group. It is possible the connection between the literal and figurative meanings were more abstract for these two idioms than for the others. Interestingly, *inside track* was the only idiom that actually posted an improved score between Test #1 and Test #2. Because the improvement was small (5 percentage points), it is difficult to make a declarative statement as to why.
**Group comparisons**

When comparing the data on each group’s collective performance with regard to individual idioms, a few notable patterns emerge. On Test #1, the experimental group scored higher than the control group on only 1 of the 10 idioms, *jump the gun* (See Figure 8). However, on Test #2, the experimental group scored

**Figure 8.** Percentage of correct responses by group for each idiom on Test #1.

**Figure 9.** Percentage of correct responses by group for each idiom on Test #2.
higher than the control group on 6 idioms (See Figure 9). There does not appear to be a discernable pattern among the idioms as to why the experimental group performed better than the control group on these particular idioms. Two of the idioms are from horse racing (jump the gun, down to the wire), one from boxing (on the ropes), and three from baseball (throw a curveball, home run, strike out). As will be discussed at greater length in the Discussion section, this increase might reflect the beneficial use of the dual-coding aspect of etymological elaboration relating to long-term retention by the experimental group.

When summarizing and comparing the high and low scores for both groups on both tests, some notable patterns also emerge. Home run, jump the gun, and throw a curveball had three of the highest scores for comprehension for both groups (See Figure 10). But whereas jump the gun also generated high scores for both groups relating to retention, home run dropped to one of the lowest scores for retention for both groups (See Figure 11). Since jump the gun was clearly the most transparent idiom for both groups on comprehension and retention, one might speculate that some participants may have had some familiarity with this idiom.

On the other extreme, inside track, touch base and on the ropes generated the lowest scores for both groups for comprehension. However, while inside track and touch base posted two of the highest scores for retention for the control group, they remained two of the lowest for retention for the experimental group.

While these patterns are interesting to look at, drawing any conclusions from them is hazardous because of the small number of participants.
**Figure 10.** Comprehension: Test #1 correct responses by idiom and group.

**Figure 11.** Retention: Test #2 correct responses by idiom and group.
**Individual participant’s results**

In comparing the scores from Test #1 to Test #2, individual test scores varied widely, as is seen in Table 1. For example, control group participants C7, C8, C10, and C11.

**Table 1**

*Individual participant’s scores on Test #1 and Test #2*

<table>
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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Test #1</th>
<th>Test #2</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Test #1</th>
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<td>C12</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E13</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>C13</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E14</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>C14</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E15</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>C15</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E16</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>C16</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>67</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>C17</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E18</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E19</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and C10 experienced the greatest drop in scores from Test #1 to Test #2, from 100% correct to 0-11%. The experimental group participants E3, E17, and E18 dropped from 67% correct to 11%. Only four participants (E2, E11, E12, E13) equaled or improved their scores from Test #1 to Test #2. It is possible that these four participants were more equipped, for whatever reason, to utilize etymological elaboration than the others.

Several outcomes contained in the data in Table 1 are notable and highlighted in Table 2. For instance, whereas a high percentage of participants from both groups scored greater than 50% on Test #1 (experimental=71%; control=100%) only five participants from each group accomplished the same feat on Test #2. In comparing the difference in scores between Test #1 and Test #2, the control group had a substantially higher percentage of participants (71%) whose scores dropped more than 50% than did the experimental group (21%). One of the most notable findings is that none of the 17 control group participants (0%) equaled or improved their scores whereas 4 of the 19 of the experimental group participants (21%) did equal or improve their scores. One reason for this improvement for some participants of the experimental group may be that the experimental group may have benefited more from receiving the correct answers to Test #1 than did the control group. This review provided the experimental group the correct link between the literal and figurative meaning and may have contributed to improved retention for some percentage of the experimental participants.
Table 2

Summary of highlights from Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experimental</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total # participants</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td># of part.</td>
<td>% of part.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50% correct on Test #1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50% correct on Test #2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50% drop from #1 to</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same or higher # correct</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>answers on #2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographics

Demographic information collected included age, country of origin, primary language, education level, years lived in the United States, years studying English, current employment status, time spent speaking English, and time spent viewing English-speaking television. In analyzing the scores of individual participants (See Table 1) in relation to their demographics (See Appendix A), there initially appeared to be no discernable common characteristic among the participants with the highest or lowest scores. However, when focusing on years having lived in the United States, a curious pattern emerged in both the experimental and the control groups (Refer to Figures 12 and 13). The average percent of correct responses on Test #1 for both the experimental and the control group was quite similar among the four catagories relating to years having lived in the United States. However, on Test #2,
Figure 12. Experimental group: Average percentage of correct responses in relation to years living in the United States.

Figure 13. Control group: Average percentage of correct responses in relation to years living in the United States.
those participants who had lived in the United States for five years or fewer scored significantly higher than participants who had been in the United States for over five years. Particularly surprising, in both the experimental group and the control group, the participants who had lived in the United States for less than two years had an average score on Test #2 that was more than twice as high as participants who had lived in the United States between six and nine years or greater than ten years.

When comparing Test #1 and Test #2 scores, a similar pattern also emerges. Participants in both the experimental and control group who lived in the United States between six and nine years or greater than 10 years experienced a larger drop in average scores between Test #1 and Test #2 than did the participants who have lived in the United States between two and five years or even less that two years. Even more surprising is the fact that the only students to improve their average score from Test #1 to Test #2 were students in the experimental group who had lived in the United States for less than two years (See Figure 12). These findings seem counter intuitive and was not what I predicted would be an expected outcome.

To further highlight some counter intuitive results, Table 3 annecdotally presents a few of the individual participants and their scores in relation to how long they have lived in the United States, as well as how long they have studied English and their education level. Once again, it is interesting to note that, within this sample, the participants with the lowest educational level and least experience with
English fared better than their classmates with significantly higher education and experience with English.

Table 3

*Comparison of demographics and test scores for select participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Yrs in U.S.</th>
<th>Yrs. stud. English</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Test #1 % Correct</th>
<th>Test #2 % Correct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 mo.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>College grad.</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E13</td>
<td>&lt;2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Attended some college</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum, the most notable findings are as follows: (1) the control group initially scored much higher than the experimental group on Test #1, but on Test #2, it was a “dead heat”, (2) although the experimental group scored lower on Test #2 than it did on Test #1, it did not experience the precipitous drop in overall scores that the control group did on Test #2 and actually showed improvement in some areas, and (3) to the extent there is a pattern based upon demographics, it appears that those with the fewest years in the United States, and in some instances, with the lowest levels of formal education and least number of years spent studying English, outperformed those with the longest tenure in the United States, greater number of years spent studying English, and with higher education levels.
In the next section, I will discuss the significance of these findings and how they relate to the research question.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the question: Can providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and supplied visual images, improve adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms? Implicit in the question is whether teaching ELLs about an idiom’s source domain and requiring them to engage in the deeper level of cognitive processing necessary for dual coding in order to link the idiom to its original cultural context would aid in learning opaque idioms.

Regarding comprehension, the answer appears to be no. On Test #1, the control group scored significantly higher (89%) than the experimental group (59%). It appears that, in the short term, memorizing the figurative meaning versus learning the literal meaning and its cultural context and then attempting to make the connection to the figurative meaning results in a higher rate of comprehension. While the control group only needed to comprehend the meanings that they were just taught, the experimental group needed to comprehend the literal meanings and then make a connection between the literal and figurative meanings. The experimental group’s task required a higher level of cognitive processing. The collective score of the experimental group, i.e. 59% correct, implies that this group experienced some difficulty applying this newly acquired information.
On the other hand, the scores also seem to corroborate past findings that etymological elaboration can facilitate the understanding of unfamiliar idioms (Boers et al., 2007; Kovecses & Szabco, 1996). Since the experimental group was only provided the literal meaning, not the figurative meaning, prior to Test #1, it means that those who provided correct responses to Test #1 had to use the metaphorical awareness inherent in etymological elaboration to make some connection between the literal and figurative meanings. In other words, etymological elaboration must have been used to some extent by the experimental group participants because they were not given the explicit meaning of the idioms and, therefore, they had to deduce their meanings via metaphorical awareness. This was clearly more difficult for some participants than for others.

The lower scores posted by the experimental group on Test #1 may be due to several contributing factors. First, the lesson may have simply included too much information to process in 30 minutes. There were both new concepts and new vocabulary involved. The experimental group needed to connect the supplied images to the words and then take those and connect the literal concept to the figurative. The participants may well have understood the connection between the image of someone failing to hit the ball and someone failing a math test, but they could not remember if the idiom was strike out or hitting a home run. This explanation would be supported by the research that shows that when presented with both an image and words, a person’s attention might focus on the image, to the exclusion of the words (Boers, et. al., 2009). Second, some participants may have
lacked adequate metaphorical awareness. Metaphorical awareness is necessary to independently make the connection between the literal and figurative meanings, but it cannot be assumed that everyone possesses it (Cooper, 1998). Third, for some participants, it may be that the explicit cultural background information provided, including the supplied visual images, was not sufficient to make these culturally opaque idioms more transparent. For example, an ELL with little or no exposure to baseball would likely have a difficult time understanding some of the basics of the game when shown a series of images and short videos over just several minutes. This is consistent with the Boers study (2004a) findings that, even with explicit feedback on the source domain, idioms derived from source domains that were less salient in the participants’ culture remained more opaque than idioms that were derived from a source domain familiar to the participants.

When looking at the results of Test #2 for an answer to this study’s question, the answer, at first blush, appears again to be no. The results of Test #2 (experimental: 42%, control: 37%) seem to indicate that neither method of teaching was particularly successful regarding long-term retention of culturally opaque idioms. Regarding the control group, the data indicates that learning only the figurative meaning likely does little to aid long-term retention compared to comprehension in the short-term. This is supported by the fact that the control group’s collective scores dropped from 89% to 37% from the first to second posttest. For the experimental group, although their scores did not drop as much as the control group’s, from 59% to 42%, they did drop. The factors that may have
contributed to their low scores on Test #1, which were outlined above, are also pertinent with regard to Test #2. However, as will be discussed below, a closer review of the data appears to show that to some extent comprehension and retention of culturally opaque idioms may be aided by using words and supplied visual images to teach the underlying cultural context (i.e. source domain) of such idioms.

First, although the collective scores on Test #2 for the control (37%) and experimental (42%) groups were close, the control group’s scores dropped 52% from their collective score on Test #1, whereas the experimental group’s score only dropped 17%. Second, the number of idioms on which the experimental group scored higher than the control group increased from one on Test #1 to six on Test #2. Third, 4 of the 19 participants in the experimental group (21%) equaled or improved their scores compared to 0 of the 17 control group participants.

The fact that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the three aforementioned areas suggests that, in some respects, some participants in the experimental group may have benefited from both the supplied imagery and accompanying verbal information. This would be consistent with the dual-coding theory.

The increased level of cognitive processing required to use the cultural background information provided to make the metaphorical connection from the literal to the figurative meaning is beneficial in long-term retention (Ellis, 1994). It is also a more difficult task than simply learning the figurative meaning. To the
extent some participants in the experimental group were able to process the higher level of information provided during their lesson, this may have helped those participants to more accurately deduce the correct answers to Test #2. Indeed, what may have hindered the experimental group on Test #1, i.e., too much information to immediately process, may have been more useful for deducing answers on Test #2, which required greater comprehension of how to correctly use the idioms in context, rather than just the ability to memorize a definition.

An interesting and unexpected result of the data analysis is in relation to the participant population. One of the objectives of this study was to evaluate these teaching methods on a diverse ELL population. Prior studies had focused almost exclusively on a homogeneous group of EFL college students. In this study, there was a much wider variance in the demographics of the participants in comparison to prior studies. However, the results of this study did not identify any particular demographic characteristics that significantly affected the scores, with the exception of the curious and unexpected outcomes regarding an apparent inverse relationship between years lived in the United States and Test #2 results, as well as the comparative drop in scores from Test #1 to Test #2.

Common sense would suggest that students who have been in the United States and studied English the longest and those who have higher levels of formal education would score higher on the tests. This was not the case. I had predicted that students with a higher level of education or had been in the country and studied English the longest would have fared better than students with a lower level of
education or had spent less time living in the United States and studying English. My reasoning was that they may have had more experience studying metaphorical language in literature or writing classes. Also, the longer they lived in the United States, presumably, the greater exposure they would have had to the culture and language. I was not able to find any prior research that supported these hypotheses, nor, as it turns out, did this study provide any support for them. There may well be other unidentified demographic variables influencing outcomes which were not captured in the demographic information collected from the participants.

In this chapter, I presented the results of my study and discussed them in relation to my research question and the literature review. In Chapter 5, I will present my conclusions, discuss the limitations and implications of this research, and suggest areas of future research.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The intent of this study was to look at the question: Can providing cultural background knowledge of culture-specific sports idioms, using both words and supplied visual images, improve adult ELLs’ comprehension and retention of these idioms? To attempt to answer this question a quasi-experimental research paradigm was used. In 30-minute lecture-based teaching sessions the control group was taught the figurative meanings of 10 idioms and the experimental group was taught cultural background information on the literal meanings. Both groups were given a multiple-choice immediate posttest and a gap-fill delayed recall posttest one week later. In the previous chapter, the results of the data collection were presented and discussed. In this chapter, I will share my concluding thoughts on the capstone process, discuss the study’s limitations, implications, and call for future research.

Conclusions

Past research has shown the benefits of etymological elaboration for EFL college students trying to decipher idioms. However, there was also shown a decreased benefit with culturally opaque idioms. Part of the identified problem was that L2 learners could not create mental images of unfamiliar source domains that contributed to dual coding. This study was designed to determine if, by assisting L2 learners, and particularly ESL learners, with creating mental images that they
otherwise would be unable to create on their own, comprehension and retention of opaque idioms would improve.

This study encompassed three elements that had been identified in prior research as needing further study:


2. Using participants from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds who live in the culture from which the idioms originated.

3. Providing more explicit cultural background teaching in the form of supplied images and written/verbal explanations of the literal origins of the idioms.

While the results were inconclusive in the context of the overall performance of the experimental group, there were several indications that dual coding and cultural/metaphorical awareness aspects of etymological elaboration may have provided some benefit to some participants in the experimental group. Specifically, some in the experimental group were better able than those in the control group to select the appropriate idiom in the gap-fill test, a test that requires more than mere memorization of a given idiom, but a deeper understanding of its meaning and appropriate application.

Limitations

There are several factors that limit how the results of this study can be utilized. First, the small number of participants prevents using the data to draw any
definitive conclusions or to use this study to extrapolate the results to a larger population. Second, using another instructor’s classroom instead of my own limited the amount of time for the teaching sessions. When I first chose this topic for my capstone, I was teaching an ELL 5 class such as the one I used for this experiment. However, by the time I was ready to perform the actual research, I was teaching a nursing assistant occupational class for ELLs. Using class time for this research would have been inappropriate. Teaching 10 idioms in a 30-minute lecture, an average of three minutes per idiom, is clearly insufficient, especially for the experimental group whose task involved much higher levels of cognitive processing. Third, the students at this ABE center are accustomed to a more interactive teaching model rather than the instructor lecturing without allowing questions or discussion, as was the method used in this experiment. The lecture-based teaching model helped limit the number of variables between the experimental and control group teaching sessions, but also limited interaction between the instructor and the participants, as well as among participants. Fourth, by following the research model of the Boers study I excluded teaching the figurative meaning to the experimental group. While this served a purpose for research, I believe that teaching both the figurative and literal meanings is essential for comprehending culturally opaque idioms among this participant population. Last, follow-up interviews could help determine whether the scores were pure guesswork or a true reflection of the participant’s level of comprehension and retention. Asking the experimental group
which strategies they used to choose their responses would provide insight as to whether they were actually using etymological elaboration.

Implications

Idioms are prevalent in both academic and everyday discourse (Cooper, 1998; Hansen, 2010; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). I believe helping ELLs to develop effective strategies for deciphering idioms is an important part of teaching ESL to adults. Based on the enthusiasm the participants in this study showed in wanting to learn idioms, it is clear that they realize their value. The participants reinforced the fact that idioms are difficult to master by telling me that idioms are one of the hardest parts of English for them.

Using etymological elaboration to decipher idioms is cited as a frequent strategy for L2 learners (Cooper, 1999). However, it has been shown to be less successful when applied to culturally opaque idioms (Boers, 2001; Boers et al., 2004a). This study appears to reinforce that fact, although some of the findings suggest that this strategy shows some usefulness in comprehension and long-term retention. I believe that the teaching strategy of providing cultural background knowledge, using both words and supplied visual images could be more successful with the following modifications:

1) Allowing for longer teaching session using a more interactive teaching style rather than lecture-style teaching to increase exposure to the idioms would probably have benefited both groups. For example, having the experimental group do small group activities such as matching the correct image to the idiom may have
helped them associate the words with the image. Likewise, discussing the metaphorical connection together as a class may improve comprehension and retention more than having students attempt to make the connection independently.

2) Teaching both the figurative and literal meanings together. As a practical matter, not teaching the figurative meaning along with the literal meaning to the experimental group “stacked the deck” against them. *Touching base* would be a good example of requiring too much of a metaphorical stretch to make the connection between physical contact (i.e. the player’s foot touching the base) and communicative contact (touching base with someone) without providing and discussing both the figurative and literal meanings.

However, with any of these modifications, it is apparent that teaching in this way is rather time intensive and may not be practical for some instructors.

**Future Research**

This study reinforces the need for more research in the area of best teaching practices for culturally opaque idioms, especially with a culturally and educationally diverse adult ELL population. This population has been grossly underrepresented in similar studies in the past but understanding idiomatic language is probably more pertinent for their daily lives than for EFL college students. Recommendations for future research that would expand on this study could include teaching the experimental group the figurative and literal meanings in combination, including follow-up interviews, and longer and more interactive teaching sessions. Also, given
some of the counter intuitive results that tend to show an inverse relationship to years spent living in the U. S. and test scores, and the apparent randomness of test scores in relation to various other demographics, it would be interesting to further study the relationship between factors such as educational level, years living in United States, etc. and metaphorical awareness.

Summary

In this chapter, I summarized the conclusions that can be drawn from the study, their implications, as well as the limitations of this study. I also have suggested some directions for future study in this area of language acquisition.

As an ESL teacher, I recognize the prevalence of idioms in the English language and the importance of developing effective techniques for teaching them to non-native speakers. Although this research did not produce a magic bullet, I hope it will encourage others to continue research in this area of language acquisition, and will encourage practitioners to experiment with etymological elaboration in their classrooms.
APPENDIX A

Demographic information on individual participants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part. #</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Yrs in U.S.</th>
<th>Yrs Stud. English</th>
<th>Grade Completed</th>
<th>Works</th>
<th>Hrs/day English spoken</th>
<th>Hrs/wk English Viewing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>2.0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>no</td>
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<td>&gt;2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
</tr>
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<td>-</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<td>&gt;2</td>
</tr>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>Somalia</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>no</td>
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<td>&gt;2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Congo</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12+</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>60</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>5.0</td>
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<td>&lt;1</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
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<td>&lt;1</td>
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<td>&gt;2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<td>no</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Eritrea</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
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<td>1-2</td>
<td>&gt;2</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

List of Idioms
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idiom</th>
<th>Source Domain</th>
<th>Figurative Definition</th>
<th>Literal Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jump the gun</td>
<td>Horse racing</td>
<td>Start doing something too soon, too hastily.</td>
<td>To begin running before the gun is fired to start the race.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside track</td>
<td>Horse racing</td>
<td>You have an advantage that other people don’t have.</td>
<td>On the racing track, the inside track is the shortest, so the competitors want to use it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down to the wire</td>
<td>Horse racing</td>
<td>Finish something at the last possible moment.</td>
<td>It was long the practice to stretch a wire across and above the track at the finish line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch base</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>Contact someone.</td>
<td>Batters have to touch first, second and third bases to score a run.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strike out</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>To fail in an endeavor.</td>
<td>A batter’s failure to put the ball in play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit a home run</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>To be very successful.</td>
<td>When a batter hits a homerun, they hit the ball a very long way, so they are able to run around all of the bases and score a run before the other team gets the ball back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throw someone a curveball</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>Surprise someone by doing something unexpected.</td>
<td>Pitcher tries to fool a batter by throwing a curveball, which is thrown with sufficient spin to make it veer from its expected path.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinch-hit</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>Substitute for someone, especially in an emergency.</td>
<td>A player substitutes for another at bat at a critical point or tight situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop one’s guard</td>
<td>Boxing</td>
<td>You relax when you should be careful or alert.</td>
<td>To put up one’s fist to protect against the opponent’s blows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the ropes</td>
<td>Boxing</td>
<td>Someone is very close to failing or being defeated.</td>
<td>Boxer forced back to the ropes of the ring and leaning against them for support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

Teaching Materials
### Idiom
- A phrase (group of words) whose meaning can not always be understood by knowing the meaning of each word.
- The meaning of an idiom is different than you would expect it to mean.

**Example:** It is raining cats and dogs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Jump the gun
- To do something before the correct or expected time.
- *It is polite to wait to start eating until everyone has received their food. Jane jumped the gun and started eating too soon.*

### Touch base
- To talk to or communicate with someone.
- *Jane needs to touch base with her boss before she leaves work today.*

### On the ropes
- Someone is helpless, about to lose or be defeated.
- *Bob and John are candidates for president. John is on the ropes and will probably lose the election.*

### Down to the wire
- To be very close to the end of something.
- *Jane and her brother are having a contest to see who can finish their math homework first. The contest is down to the wire because they both have only one math problem left.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drop one’s guard</th>
<th>Strike out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To be unprotected. You are not being careful to protect yourself.</td>
<td>• To <strong>not</strong> be successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Jane <strong>struck out</strong> at her job interview today. She did not get the job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Jane had a lot of money in her purse.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfortunately, she <strong>dropped her guard</strong> and put her purse on the seat next to her on the bus. Someone stole it when she wasn’t looking.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inside track</th>
<th>Hit a home run</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To be in a position of special advantage</td>
<td>• A big accomplishment/achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>There is a very nice apartment available. The rent is cheap. Many people want the apartment but Jane has an inside track because she knows the landlord.</strong></td>
<td>• Jane <strong>hit a home run</strong> today by scoring 100% on her test.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Throw (someone) a curveball</th>
<th>Pinch-hit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To surprise someone.</td>
<td>• To take someone’s place at doing a task or job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To surprise someone by doing something different than the person thought you were going to do.</td>
<td>• To substitute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I thought my husband had forgotten that today was my birthday, but he <strong>threw me a curveball</strong> and sent me flowers.</td>
<td>• Jane is our regular teacher but she is not here today. Laura will <strong>pinch-hit</strong> for Jane and teach the class today.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Idiom

- A phrase (group of words) whose meaning can not always be understood by knowing the meaning of each word.
- The meaning of an idiom is different than you would expect it to mean.

### Example: It is raining cats and dogs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Many American idioms come from sports, such as track.

### Example: **pass the baton** comes from track

- ![Image](image3.png)

## Pass the baton

- In track, one member of a team runs with the baton for a distance, then hands the baton to the next runner. The next runner is now responsible for running for the team.

### The idiomatic meaning of **pass the baton** means that one person passes responsibility for something to another person.

- When President Obama was elected, President Bush **passed the baton** to Obama. President Obama is now responsible for the job of president of the United States.
### Idioms from horse racing

1. Jump the gun
2. Inside track
3. Down to the wire

### The horses run on a “track”

To start the race, a gun is fired.

### At the end of the race there is a wire above the finish line.

**Idiom: Jump the gun**

To begin running before the gun is fired to start the race.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jump the gun</th>
<th>Idiom: Inside track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Swimmer" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Racetrack" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This swimmer “jumped the gun”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• She started the race before the gun was fired.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The inside track is the shortest distance so the racers want to use it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inside track</th>
<th>Idiom: Down to the wire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Horses" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Horses at Racetrack" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This horse has the inside track.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It has the shortest distance to run.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The finish of a race between two horses is very close.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Down to the wire</th>
<th>Idioms from baseball</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Horses" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Baseball Field" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This race is “down to the wire”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Touch base</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Throw (someone) a curveball</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Strike out</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Pinch-hit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hit a home run</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseball is played on a “field”.</td>
<td>There are two teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One team is in the field. They try to catch the ball.</th>
<th>The other team “bats” (hits the ball).</th>
<th>A “run” is scored when a batter (hitter) runs around all of the bases.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Diagram" /></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The team with the most “runs” (points) at the end of the game wins.</th>
<th>Idiom: Touch base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image7.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “home” team has 12 runs. They win.
**Touch base**

- The runner (#27) is **touching base**. His foot is in contact with the base.

**Throw (someone) a curveball**

The pitcher tries to surprise the batter by throwing a curveball, which is thrown to make it turn from its expected path.

**Idiom: Strike out**

A **strike** is when the batter tries to hit the ball and misses it. If the batter misses 3 balls it is called a **strikeout**. The batter **struck out** (past tense).

**Strike out**

The batter has **struck out**. He failed to hit the ball after three tries.

**Idiom: Pinch-hit**

- A player substitutes for another player as the batter (hitter) at an important time during the baseball game.
- It is Player A’s turn to bat (hit). Instead of Player A, Player B bats. Player B is **pinch-hitting** for Player A.

**Idiom: Hit a home run**

When a batter **hits a home run**, they hit the ball a very long way, so they are able to run around all of the bases and score a run (point) for their team.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hit a home run</th>
<th>Idioms from boxing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This batter just hit a home run.</td>
<td>1. On the ropes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Drop one’s guard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boxing</th>
<th>Idiom: On the ropes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Two boxers (fighters) hit each other to try to win the fight.</td>
<td>• The Blue boxer is forced back on the ropes and is leaning against the ropes for support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Boxing occurs in a “ring” which is a square area surrounded by ropes.</td>
<td>• The Blue boxer is “on the ropes” (in a defensive or losing position).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To “guard” himself, a boxer puts his hands up to protect himself from being hit.</th>
<th>Idiom: Drop one’s guard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The boxer in the red shorts lowered his hands or “dropped his guard”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• His face is unprotected.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

Multiple-choice immediate posttest
Multiple-choice immediate posttest

Please circle the meaning of each idiom.

Example: Its raining cats and dogs
   a. The rain sounds like dogs and cats crying
   b. It is a very heavy rain
   c. Cats and dogs are falling from the sky
   d. It has been raining for at least three days

1. Jump the gun
   a. Start doing something too soon
   b. Protect someone from danger
   c. Be surprised or frightened
   d. Take a weapon away from someone

2. Touch base
   a. Feel sad about something
   b. Put your hand on a hard surface
   c. Contact someone
   d. Solve a problem

3. On the ropes
   a. Wrap something around someone’s waist
   b. Close to failing or being defeated
   c. Order someone to climb the ropes on a sailboat
   d. Do very hard work

4. Down to the wire
   a. Finish something at the last possible moment
   b. Something that is almost empty
   c. Start at the beginning
   d. Someone who has lost a lot of weight – is very thin

5. Drop one’s guard
   a. Relax when you should be careful or alert
   b. Escape from a dangerous place
   c. Protect something important
   d. Lose something important
6. **Strike out**
   a. Solve a problem  
   b. Remove an item from a list  
   c. Become angry or threatening  
   d. Fail

7. **Inside track**
   a. Follow someone without them knowing it  
   b. **Have an advantage that other people don’t have**
   c. Be safe during a storm  
   d. Work inside a building

8. **Hit a home run**
   a. Drive to your house quickly  
   b. Arrive at a familiar place  
   c. **To be very successful**
   d. Feel comfortable

9. **Throw (someone) a curveball**
   a. **Surprise someone by doing something unexpected**
   b. Give someone an expensive gift  
   c. Throw an object at someone when you are angry  
   d. Ask someone for help

10. **Pinch-hit**
    a. Accidentally hit someone  
    b. **Substitute for someone**
    c. Reward someone  
    d. Punish someone

Note: Answer in bold face indicates correct response.
APPENDIX E

Gap-fill delayed recall posttest
Gap-fill delayed recall posttest

Instructions: Read the sentences and decide which idiom belongs in each sentence. Place the letter of the idiom in the blank. Each idiom is only used once. See example.

A. Jump the gun   E. Throw (someone) a curveball   I. Hit a home run
B. On the ropes   F. Touch base   J. Pinch-hit
C. Drop one’s guard   G. Down to the wire
D. Inside track   H. Strike out

K. **Raining cats and dogs**

_Example:_ The weather is awful. It is _____________ today. I forgot my umbrella and my clothes are very wet.

_1._ The company hired Bob for the job because he ___________________ at the job interview. After the interview, Bob called his wife to tell her about his success.

_F_ 2. I have not talked to my friend for a long time. I need to ___________________ with him.

_H_ 3. John failed his math test last week. John hopes that he does not ___________ on his math test again today.

_A_ 4. The teacher told the students not to start the test until every student had received a copy of the test. Mary ___________________ and started the test before the appropriate time.

_E_ 5. Jane has always thought of Bob as just a friend. Bob surprised Jane by unexpectedly asking her to marry him. Bob really _________________.

_J_ 6. Jane is scheduled to give an important presentation at a meeting today but her daughter is sick. Jane needs to stay home with her daughter. Jane calls her co-worker, Dan, and asks him to substitute for her at the meeting. Dan says he will be happy to ________ for Jane.

_B_ 7. Karen and Alice are having an argument. Karen is winning the argument. Alice is _______________ and about to lose the argument.
8. If you are walking by yourself at night in a dangerous neighborhood you need to be careful and alert. You do not want to _________________.

D 9. Jason and Mike are both applying for the same job. Jason has an advantage because Jason and the boss are friends. Jason has a/an __________ to getting the job.

G 10. The election between the two candidates is very close. No one will know who the winner will be until the very end of the election. The election is going _________________.

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Hansen, M. (2010). *Barriers that non-native speakers of English face in a community college nursing program*. Unpublished Masters Capstone, Hamline University,


Mantyla, K. (2004). Idioms and language users: The effect of the characteristics of idioms on their recognition and interpretation by native and non-native speakers of English. Jyvaskylan Yliopisto (Finland); 0979; University of Jyvaskyla, Seminarrink. 15, FI-40014 University of Jyvaskyla, Finland). *DAI, 66* (03C), 239-563.


