

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**The Cognitive Linguistic Approach to Teaching Idioms:  
A Case Study with Estonian Secondary School EFL Students  
MA thesis**

**Sigrit Jermoškin  
SUPERVISOR: Lect. Jane Klavan**

**TARTU  
2017**

## ABSTRACT

Since idioms appear difficult for the EFL students to understand and comprehend and the traditional teaching methods are stated to be inefficient, it is necessary to look for alternative ways of teaching. One of the ways praised by several scholars is the cognitive linguistic approach. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the applicability of the cognitive linguistic approach of teaching idioms to secondary school EFL students and to assess its efficiency. Furthermore, comparisons with the traditional teaching method are provided as well. The thesis is divided into two main chapters – literature review of teaching idioms in EFL classroom and the empirical study.

The first chapter is divided into two sections. The first section includes the definition of idioms and gives an overview of the concept of metaphoric idioms. The second section focuses on teaching idioms in EFL classroom via using the traditional teaching method and the cognitive linguistic approach. The necessity of teaching idioms is highlighted and the challenges of teaching such complex vocabulary elements are addressed. Furthermore, the opportunities of the cognitive linguistic approach are introduced by examining previous studies done in that field.

The second chapter provides an overview of the empirical study, which consisted of an experiment conducted with 24 Estonian secondary school students. Furthermore, the results of the study are discussed in accordance with the used literature. Additionally, the main findings of the experiment are discussed and concluded. The shortcomings of the study are addressed as well.

The conclusion emphasises the importance of the topic and summarises the main findings. It gives an overview of how the results can be beneficial for the EFL teacher. Finally, possible options for further study are provided as well.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CL – Cognitive Linguistics

EFL – English as a Foreign Language

EFLT – English as a Foreign Language Training

L2 – Second language

## INTRODUCTION

Language teaching strategies are constantly changed and being renewed in order to follow the continuous modifications taking place in our educational system. This holds true also for idioms. Idiom has been considered as a “form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase used in a distinctive way in a particular language, dialect, or language variety; *spec.* a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from the meanings of the individual words.” (Oxford English Dictionary). In other words, scholars have taken idioms as fixed phrases, which should be memorised and simply learnt by heart in order to use them in oral speech and in writing (Lakoff 1987; Kövecses and Szabo 1996; Cieslicka 2006). Therefore, the teaching methods and strategies for idioms have been traditionally the same – students are to memorize the idioms given and described by the teacher (Chen and Lai 2013). This method assumes that the students will remember the memorized idioms and should be able to use them in context as well.

However, according to several researchers, this method is archaic and they have suggested new and alternative ways of teaching idioms. For instance, idioms can be approached in a cognitive linguistic way, which suggests that some idioms have analysable characteristics and the meanings can in fact be derived from the components (Kövecses 2000; Cieslicka 2006; Boers, Frank and Lindstromberg 2008). Moreover, the cognitive linguistic approach is often thought of as one of the most useful methods in teaching idioms to EFL students since the aim is to teach the students how to use the idioms and not only to learn them by heart (Langlotz 2006; Chen and Lai 2013; Dacygier and Sweetser 2014).

Furthermore, idioms have been considered as one of the core areas to be taught in a foreign language classroom, especially when teaching English as a foreign language (Boers, Frank and Lindstromberg 2008). Researchers have acknowledged the importance of placing special emphasis on teaching idioms due to their significance in native speakers' language use and non-native speakers having difficulties with acquiring metaphoric language (Schmitt 2000; Cieslicka 2006; Tran 2013). In other words, usage of idioms makes the language more colourful and adds a dimension to it, as well as knowing idioms is crucial while communicating with native speakers because they use idiomatic expressions quite frequently. However, idioms are also stated to be one of the most difficult phrases for EFL students to comprehend because traditional teaching methods suggest simply memorising the idioms, but during that process students do not gain knowledge of how to use the phrases in context. The students are not given any connections or options for making links with previous knowledge, but rather introduced to the main meaning of the idioms. Therefore, to improve the process, alternative solutions should be consulted and tested. Consequently, the cognitive linguistic approach was chosen as an alternative to the traditional approach in this study.

The cognitive linguistic (CL) approach presents a promising alternative to the more traditional ways of teaching idioms to foreign language learners. Several studies worldwide have focused on experimenting with the cognitive linguistic approach to teaching idioms. Skoufaki (2008: 101-120) conducted an experiment to test two CL inspired idiom presentation method in the classroom. She conducted the study on Greek university students, who were studying various disciplines and she presented the students with two methods. She used conceptual metaphors with both methods, firstly, she presented the students with the idioms, their meanings and their conceptual metaphors and secondly, she presented the students with

idioms and only conceptual metaphors, the students were instructed to guess the meanings behind the idioms. Skoufaki's (2008) results showed that both methods appeared successful, although she stresses that addition of the guessing method most probably enhances the effectiveness. Still a great amount of guidance is necessary in the classroom for this method to work. Similarly, Piquez-Piriz (2008: 219-236) conducted studies with young Spanish learners to assess how they can cope with figurative meanings. Her results showed that young EFL learners benefitted from the pedagogical application of the CL approach and were capable of comprehending figurative language. Furthermore, Chen and Lai (2013) and Kövecses (2000) have conducted studies on teaching idioms using CL approach - these studies will be discussed in detail in Chapter II: Teaching Idioms in EFL Classroom.

Although previous studies and experiments on the use of CL approach to teaching idioms have been conducted in different parts of the world, there have been no previous experiments with Estonian school students to test the cognitive linguistic method in teaching idioms – at least not to the author's knowledge. Kährik (2001) has conducted a study with 38 undergraduate students at the University of Tartu, where she aimed to investigate Estonian learners' strategies of coping with idiomatic phrasal verbs. Her results showed that the learners were able to perceive the phrasal verbs as metaphorical and not arbitrary. Kährik (2001) adds that the conceptual metaphor approach could be useful in making relations between the literal and non-literal. Therefore, the aim of this study is to test the applicability of the cognitive linguistic approach in teaching idioms to Estonian secondary school EFL students and to assess its efficiency. Additionally, comparisons with the traditional method shall be made as well. The experimental method was chosen for collecting and eliciting data because it allows to combine theoretical and practical aspects, where students are firstly familiarized with the theory and

followed by practical activities. For the purposes of the study, the research questions are the following:

1. Is the cognitive linguistic approach suitable for secondary school EFL students?
2. Is the cognitive linguistic approach more effective than the traditional teaching method?

This thesis is divided into two main core chapters followed with a section dedicated to major findings and conclusions. The first chapter focuses on giving an overview of the literature on teaching idioms, including a summary of the previously conducted studies on the same topic. This section will show the importance of teaching metaphoric language (more specifically idioms) in an EFL classroom and contrasts the two teaching methods – the traditional method and the cognitive linguistic method. The following chapter, Chapter II, gives information about the empirical study and describes the details of the experiment. Additionally, the second chapter presents the results of the empirical study and the discussion of the findings. Finally, the third and final section of the paper distinguishes the major findings of the experiment and offers suggestions for further research. The thesis also has three appendices, which include the handout of the experiment, the categories for assessing the second task of the experiment and all the idioms used in the experiment alongside with their descriptions and corpus data.



## CHAPTER I: TEACHING IDIOMS IN EFL CLASSROOM

This chapter tackles the issues of teaching idioms in an EFL classroom. The chapter provides an overview of the complexity of defining idioms, the concept of metaphoric idioms, the importance of teaching them and how idioms have been taught using traditional methods of teaching. Furthermore, the Cognitive Linguistic approach is introduced and analysed as an alternative method of teaching idioms in EFL classroom. Conclusively, this chapter aims to raise awareness of the different ways of teaching idioms through literature and studies conducted in this field.

### 1.1 Idioms: definition and meaning

Figurative language has been thought of as an aspect which gives a text aesthetic value (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 1). Nevertheless, Dancygier and Sweetser (2014: 1-2) argue that figurative language is far from being only decorative, but rather as part of language, which applies for all human languages. Metaphors are one area of figurative language (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014), which is considered to be a type of comparison developed from the literal meaning (Macmillan Dictionary). Idioms, for instance, are listed as containing metaphorical ideas in the Macmillan Dictionary. Idioms are defined as a group of words which appear in a fixed order and have a certain meaning that is different from the meanings of each component on its own (Oxford English Dictionary). Therefore, it can be said that idioms are fixed phrases with arbitrary meaning. For example, the idiom *apple of my eye* cannot be interpreted by the meaning of each word, which means that the meaning of the idioms should be memorized. Gibbs (1991: 93) has stated that according to the traditional view idioms are expressions whose

meanings cannot be derived from their individual words. He adds that “idioms have been characterized as lexicalized “dead metaphors” that are stored in a special part of the mental lexicon” (Gibbs 1991:93). Furthermore, the Macmillan Dictionary has defined idioms as expressions whose meaning differs from the meaning of its individual words. Moreover, McCarthy and O’Dell (2002: 6) have defined idioms in a similar manner – idioms are expressions with a meaning that is not apparent from the individual words. They add that the best way to understand idioms is to see them in context, therefore they state that the meaning of idioms can in fact be derived from the context they appear. Kövecses and Szabo (1996: 326) have defined idioms as linguistic expressions whose meanings cannot be completely predicted from the constituent parts, but they add that there is systematic conceptual motivation for most idioms because most idioms are based on conceptual metaphors and metonymies. Wright (1999: 7) states that idioms are native speakers’ vocabulary items which means that one cannot make up an idiom, but should always use the correct and fixed one. Furthermore, according to Wright (1999: 7) idiom is an expression that uses language in a metaphoric way.

As can be seen from the discussion above, there are many ways how one can go about defining an idiom. Still, the common assumption seems to be that idioms are arbitrary and should be learnt by heart. However, this study hopes to show that it is possible to take an alternative view on idioms and treat them as motivated by an underlying conceptual metaphor. Moreover, such a view can be potentially advantageous from the perspective of language learning and teaching. For the purposes of the study, this thesis follows the definitions of idioms provided by Wright (1999) and McCarthy and O’Dell (2002).

### 1.1.1 Metaphoric Idioms

Metaphors can be classified in different types, but cognitive linguistics divides metaphors into two: conceptual metaphors and image metaphors (Lakoff 1987: 219-222; Sanchez et al 2012: 35). Image metaphors are conceptually simpler and are based on resemblance between two entities, whereas conceptual metaphors involve the mapping of rich knowledge and inferential structure which gives rise to a larger number of linguistic expressions (Lakoff 1987: 219-222; Sanchez et al 2012: 35). Within Cognitive Linguistics metaphors are conceptual and not purely linguistic phenomena, which means that the ways we think and act are fundamentally metaphoric in nature (Evans & Green 2006: 43). Conceptual Metaphor Theory was firstly developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who associated with such scholars as Zoltan Kövecses and Eve Sweetser as well (Evans 2007: 33-34). Conceptual metaphors are considered as more productive than image metaphors (Sanchez et al 2012: 35). According to Kövecses (2000) and Chen & Lai (2013) in cognitive linguistic view majority of idiomatic expressions are based on conceptual metaphors and metonymies, which means that they are “conceptually motivated” by metaphors and metonymies. Cognitive linguistics views both metaphor and metonymy as helping mechanisms to structure the human conceptual system. Additionally, various authors (Lakoff 1986; Kövecses 2000; Dancygier & Sweetser 2014) have emphasised the closeness of the relation between metaphor and metonymy and that the limits between the two are blurred (Sanchez et al 2012: 33-35). This thesis focuses on the metaphor and metaphoric idioms, however the parallels and differences between metaphor and metonymy are not drawn. The concept of conceptual metaphors is taken to refer to both – the metaphoric and metonymic meaning extensions since in some cases it is notoriously difficult to distinguish

between them two. For further information about the topic of metaphor and metonymy see, for example, Dancygier and Sweetser (2014).

Cognitive Linguistics has managed to successfully create a system in idioms. Cognitive linguists (Kövecses 2000, Lakoff 1986) have grouped idioms and created a system based on their common concepts. As an example, expressions such as *spark off* and *fan the flame* have one common concept: fire. The idioms can be considered as motivated conceptually by general knowledge of the world, which entails a systematic structure that characterises a corresponding coherent system of the idiomatic structure (Lakoff & Johnson 1999). Chen and Lai (2013: 15) have brought an example of fire-related idioms used to describe the emotion *anger*, by using FIRE as the source domain and ANGER as a target domain and the connection made between the two ANGER IS FIRE. This means that idioms can in fact be considered as motivated rather than arbitrary. Moreover, the connection between the concepts is called conceptual metaphor (Lakoff 1986: 381-340) and it illustrates the connection between fire and anger. Conceptual metaphors are usually represented in capital letters (Deignan, Gabrys & Solska 1997: 352). According to Chen and Lai (2013: 15) EFL students can develop an understanding of the meaning of idioms through the awareness and knowledge of the conceptual metaphors behind them. However, according to Gibbs (2007: 2-4) conceptual metaphors are not fixed, but rather created by the linguists following their intuition. In other words, cognitive linguists follow their intuition to uncover language-mind links, image schemas and conceptual metaphors. Image schema is considered to be an abstract conceptual representation of the embodied experience of the everyday interaction and the observation of the world around us (Evans 2007:106). Gibbs (2007) questions cognitive linguists' intuition-based approach because it focuses too heavily on introspection about matters of linguistic structure and behaviour, but agrees that intuition is a

necessary source for constructing hypotheses and suggests caution in creating conceptual metaphors, experiments etc. Stöver (2011: 81-82) states that in order to have metaphoric understanding and not experience tension between the literal and non-literal while encountering a metaphor, learners should be made aware of metaphoricity (Moon 2009) and what it contains. In other words, using conceptual metaphors while teaching figurative language is not useful if the learners have not been familiarised with the concept and how it can be used.

## **1.2 Teaching Idioms to EFL Students**

Although many current linguistic textbooks have little mention of figurative language or have omitted it altogether, figurative language is not just only for decorative purpose, but it is important for both special literary language as well as for everyday language (Dancygier & Sweetster 2014: 1). Dancygier and Sweetster (2014: 1) have made the following claim on figurative structures: “they are important and pervasive in language and, furthermore, this is because the relevant cognitive structures are important and pervasive in thought”. It can be concluded that the need to learn (and therefore teach) figurative language is necessary to maximize students’ understanding due to the fact of figurative language appearing frequently in specialised, and in general language. Furthermore, figurative language elements, more specifically metaphors, have not received the same amount of attention in specialised language as it has been given in general language, although it appears in both (Faber 2012: 1-9). In this thesis, the aspect of teaching idioms shall be generalised and it will include both – specialised language and general or everyday language.

Several researchers have acknowledged the importance of teaching metaphoric language, more specifically idioms, in EFL classroom. These expressions are suggested to be

taught at very early stages of foreign language learning because before getting acquainted with the lexical and syntactic systems of a language, students are more acceptable to acquiring any chunks of language for better abilities in communication (Bolinger 1976: 1-14; Bilkova 2000: 92-93). Nevertheless, according to Bilkova (2002) idioms are often considered as the most difficult aspect in foreign language vocabulary for the student to master due to the difficulties in comprehension, therefore teachers often decide not to teach them. Abel (2003: 348) adds that non-native speakers do not encounter idioms as frequently as native speakers do, which means that non-native speakers are faced with bigger difficulties in idiom comprehension. Estonian National Curriculum (2011) suggests teaching idioms for students who are acquiring language level B1 and note that students should start understanding idioms when they have reached level B2. This conflicts with the notion that idioms should be taught at an early stage and perhaps could be the reason why teaching idioms to secondary school students appears to be more complicated and time consuming. Tran (2013) has conducted a study where she tests EFL students' knowledge of idioms and her results showed that the students' idiomatic competence was considerably poor due to their lack of exposure to idioms in their learning process. Additionally, her analysis showed that the learners desire to study idiomatic language and she urges the educators, the teachers and policy makers to consider it when designing English courses or learning materials (Tran 2013).

Teaching idioms has been stated as important and even necessary, but some scholars have focused on which idioms should be taught in the first place. According to Liu (2008: 109) it is a general rule that high-frequency idioms should be taught before low-frequency idioms because they can most likely be encountered in texts. In addition, he argues in his 2003 study that most study materials on English idioms are often intuition-based, which means that the

idioms are randomly chosen and include seldom-used idioms, which he deems useless to EFL students. Liu (2003: 671-673) states that it is necessary to determine the idioms that have the most value to a student, therefore he has looked at corpus data and compiled a small database of the most frequently appearing idioms. Liu (2003) concludes that since learning low-frequency idioms is unhelpful due to the fact that the students do not encounter and use them, teaching high-frequency idioms is essential. Nevertheless, Panou (2013:17-18) argues that the usefulness of learning idioms depends on the learners. She adds that an idiom which is useful for one group of students may not be useful for another group (Panou 2013).

Additionally, the difficulty of learning idioms lays elsewhere as well. Rodriguez and Moreno (2009: 248) have stated that “the acquisition of idiomatic expressions is one of the most outstanding challenges in TEFL”. The students who learn English as a foreign language need to possess a large vocabulary to function and to orientate in English (Nation 2001: 6-15). According to Nation (2001), while learning a language on a long-term course three aspects help to decide how much of the vocabulary needs to be learnt: the number of words in the language, the number of words needed to use it and the number of words that are only in native speakers’ vocabulary. Furthermore, idioms are known to be characteristic in native speakers’ vocabulary, which means that in order to communicate with native speakers and to fully understand their talk, the EFL students need to possess the knowledge of idiomatic language (Bortfeld 2002: 276-277). Other researchers (Schmitt 2000; Cieslicka 2006) agree with Bortfeld’s notion that the necessity to learn idioms is in relation to their significance in native speakers’ language use.

Moreover, the results of Bortfeld’s (2002: 285-293) research showed that non-native speakers can in fact learn to understand idioms better and to use them properly via effective teaching methods. She concludes that analysing the phrases can help the students: before

conceptually analysing the idioms, the students produced sentences that did not sound natural, but after the process of analysing, the sentences were indeed more natural sounding. Therefore, although idioms are difficult to learn and to teach, with effective teaching methods it is possible for EFL students to acquire the knowledge to sound natural when using idioms.

Kövecses (2000) has provided a starting point for teaching idioms using the CL approach. According to him, the most common idioms should be taught first to EFL students. He predicts that the most common idioms are the ones that are based on the most directly experienced source – the human body. Therefore, the idioms which are connected to the human body should be taught first and predominantly to EFL students. He supports his claim with the fact that body idioms outnumber other idioms and adds that researches have shown evidence of the human body being the highest source of metaphors for hundreds of years. Bilkova (2002: 83-86) has suggested relying on Keysar and Bly (1999: 1572) that the reason behind body idioms being so comprehensible is because people in general are familiar with the shape, size and functions of the body, which can be easily connected with the conceptual metaphors. In conclusion, body idioms should be the first idioms taught to EFL students due to their frequency in appearance and familiarity of features. Consequently, this thesis focuses on how to teach body idioms to EFL students.

### **1.2.1 Traditional Approach for Teaching Idioms**

The importance of teaching idioms cannot be denied: they are constantly appearing in native speakers' talk and they are difficult for EFL students to learn and comprehend. As there are numerous arguments why idioms should be taught in an EFL classroom, there are multiple ways of how they should be taught as well. These methods can be divided broadly into two



broad methods – the traditional method and the cognitive linguistic approach (Rizq 2015: 17-19). Traditionally, idioms have been taught through memorisation and rote learning, which means that the students are given a list of phrases that they are asked to memorize through constant repetition (Chen and Lai 2013: 13). Chen and Lai (2013) assess this method to be time- and effort-consuming because learners must pick up idioms without associations or previous knowledge. Kövecses and Szabo (1996: 327-340) have conducted a study, which compares traditional ways and cognitive linguistics ways of seeing and teaching idioms and they have stated the traditional view of idioms: idioms are considered as a special set from a larger category of words which are independent and a matter of language alone. Therefore, as the traditional view of idioms is arbitrary, the ways of teaching originate from that view. Kövecses and Szabo (1996: 327-340) emphasise that the “traditional method” should not have a negative connotation. Rizq’s (2015) study showed that some teachers prefer the traditional way of teaching because idioms are too vague and ambivalent for implicit learning, therefore these should be taught explicitly. Some teachers participating in Rizq’s (2015) study even believed that the traditional way of teaching could be perfected and made complete by adding some elements of the cognitive linguistic approach to the process. Nevertheless, Nation (2001: 74-76) has stressed the importance of repetition in vocabulary learning. He has stated: “vocabulary items must not only be known, they must be known well so that they can be fluently accessed. Repetition thus adds to the quality of knowledge and also to the quantity or strength of this knowledge” (Nation 2001: 74-76). Therefore, learning idioms through memorisation and repetition is an acceptable method, which benefits the student’s knowledge of the language.

### **1.2.2 Cognitive Linguistic Approach to Teaching Idioms**

The Cognitive Linguistic approach is a modern school of linguistic thought which firstly emerged in 1970s by the earliest pioneers who were dissatisfied with existing approaches to language. Their research in 1970s was dominated by a group of scholars from the United States. Furthermore, in the 1980s CL was rooted in Europe as well. Today, CL is considered as one of the fastest expanding schools of theoretical linguistics in the world (Evans 2007: 6-7). CL approach focuses on the social and physical world, human cognitive processes and language and the connections between them (Tyler 2012: 6). Evans (2007: 22) has said that “CL places central importance on the role of meaning, conceptual processes and embodied experience in the study of language and the mind and the way they intersect”. Evans (2007: 22) adds that CL cannot be considered as a theory, but rather an approach or an enterprise. Furthermore, cognitive linguists strive to find systematicity in language and patterns of thought, which means that studying language according to CL approach means to study patterns of conceptualisation and the features of the human mind (Evans & Green 2006: 5). Moreover, CL agrees with the necessity to memorize some amount of vocabulary, but offers an approach which allows lexical items and multiple meanings to be seen as motivated, which means reflecting a pattern that can provide a set of principles acting as a schema for acquiring new vocabulary (Tyler 2012: 6-7). Tyler (2012: 7) stresses the importance of systematic, motivated explanation in language teaching because it will make interpreting and remembering of the encountered lexical items easier for the language learners.

Evans and Green (2006: 48-49) divide cognitive linguistics into two areas: cognitive approaches to grammar and cognitive semantics. They add that grammar in CL is viewed as a meaningful system in and of itself and shares important features with the system of linguistic

meaning. Whereas cognitive semantics investigates the connections between the conceptual system, experience and the semantic structure in language, which means that scholars in cognitive semantics investigate conceptual structures and conceptualisation. Evans and Green (2006: 48-49) state that: “cognitive semanticists have employed language as the lens through which these cognitive phenomena can be investigated”. Boers (2011: 257-258) believes that using cognitive semantic ways in teaching figurative phrases appears as a useful channel for comprehending and remembering those phrases. He adds that his study of the existing evidence shows that the approach is beneficial for students’ retention of the meanings of the phrases, but not as much for remembering the form of the phrases (Boers 2011). However, Evans and Green (2006: 48-49) argue that cognitive approaches to grammar and cognitive semantics should not be taken as separate fields of study, but rather think of these two areas complementing each other (2006: 48-50).

Several researchers (Kövecses 2000; Charteris-Black 2002; Kömür and Cimen 2009; Chen and Lai 2013) have explored the ways how to use the CL approach as a teaching method, more specifically how to teach figurative language. It is believed that the CL approach can help with learning figurative expressions and offer systematic pedagogical methods to the second language classroom (Charteris-Black 2002: 104-105). Kömür and Cimen (2009: 214-215) who experimented with the CL approach in idiom teaching found out that using conceptual metaphors developed students’ critical thinking and problem-solving. In addition, their results showed that using the CL approach in the EFL classroom appeared as useful, joyful and entertaining. Kömür and Cimen (2009: 214-215) have concluded that according to their research language learners might find the CL approach as extremely useful and at the same time provide the classroom with an enjoyable atmosphere. Furthermore, Berendi, Csabi and Kövecses (2008:

71-73) agree that the CL approach in the foreign language classroom can enhance students' understanding of figurative language and they state that learners' awareness of the motivations behind meanings help with remembering figurative phrases better than the traditional method of memorising the words through translations. Rodriguez and Moreno (2009: 246-248) have experimented with using conceptual metaphors in teaching idiomatic expressions using Disney movies, which could be of great interest to young learners. They strived to draw students' attention to the emotional states of the characters and therefore decided upon using Disney movies. They concluded that using conceptual metaphors is a great method, but stressed that the downside would be the amount of time and effort a teacher should invest in it because processing the material and creating the links between conceptual metaphors can be effort- and time-consuming (Rodriguez and Moreno 2009).

This thesis focuses mainly on two studies in detail – Zoltan Kövecses' "A cognitive linguistic view of learning idioms in an FLT context" conducted in 2000 and Yi-chen Chen and Huei-ling Lai's "Teaching English Idioms as Metaphors Through Cognitive-Oriented Method: A Case in an EFL Writing Class" conducted in 2013. These studies can be considered as prototypes for this thesis. Kövecses (2000) and Chen and Lai (2013) have successfully conducted studies which aim to test the CL approach in teaching idioms. Kövecses (2000) conducted his study on 30 adult Hungarian learners of English, who were all at the intermediate level. He divided the group into two – group A and group B who all had to complete the task of filling in the gaps. Furthermore, group A was given 10 phrases with their definitions and were instructed to memorize, whereas group B was given the phrases with conceptual metaphors, which were explained. After familiarising themselves with the phrases, both groups filled in the handouts with the gap-filling task. Additionally, some sentences were left out for the students

to be figured out on their own, which means that the phrases for the sentences were not explained. The results showed that group B, who was presented with conceptual metaphors, performed better in both cases. Kövecses (2000) concluded that making students aware of the conceptual metaphors can enhance the effectiveness of learning idiomatic phrases.

Chen and Lai (2013) conducted their study on 19 university students in Taiwan, who were attending a writing course in English. The students were at the intermediate to high-intermediate level. Chen and Lai's (2013) study involved writing a three- to four-paragraph essay describing an experience of being extremely angry. Furthermore, after submitting the essays the students were introduced to metaphoric language and conceptual metaphors. After that the students were given an article where they were instructed to circle all the idiomatic expressions they can find. Then, the students were directed to create metaphoric mappings for the idiomatic expressions of *anger*. Finally, the students were encouraged to revise their essays and integrate idiomatic expressions. The results showed that the final essays showed the use of idioms with such conceptual metaphors as ANGER IS FIRE and ANGER IS A HEAT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. Chen and Lai (2013) conclude that the CL approach of teaching idioms has high pedagogical value, therefore it should be used by EFL teachers to teach idiomatic expression in the classroom.

Finally, cognitive linguists agree that the CL approach is not perfected and although several studies have shown that it can in fact be used in EFL classroom, it still needs some modifications in order to become a teaching method (Tyler 2012: 17). CL approach focuses on explanations stemming from learners' everyday world and experience, but since each language highlights slightly different aspects of human experience, therefore students might face difficulties in mapping the differences between their first and second language (Tyler 2012: 18).

Tyler (2012: 18) has said that: “A CL approach cannot offer a guaranteed, effortless path to L2 learning. Recognising this inevitable limitation, CL can offer an approach to L2 learning with far fewer garden paths and needless dead ends”.

Conclusively, the aim of this research is to draw parallels between the two methods of teaching idioms – the traditional method and the CL approach. Furthermore, both methods are considered effective by several linguists and researchers, but the two methods have not been tested in the same conditions on Estonian secondary school students while teaching idioms. Therefore, this study’s purpose is to determine which, if either, of the two methods is particularly useful for teaching idioms and additionally to test if the CL approach is suitable for the EFL students on secondary school level as well. The present study hopes to demonstrate that the CL approach can be considered as viable and enjoyable alternative to the traditional method of teaching idioms, and hence the thesis advocates for the use of conceptual metaphors (including metonymies) when teaching figurative language to secondary school students.

## CHAPTER II: EMPIRICAL STUDY

Teaching idioms in an EFL classroom has been acknowledged as important by several researchers due to their significance in native speakers' language use and non-native speakers' difficulties with acquiring metaphoric language (Schmitt 2000; Cieslicka 2006; Tran 2013). Traditionally, idioms have been taught using memorization and rote learning, which means that the students are not given any context, but only the descriptions of the idioms (Chen and Lai 2013, Rizq 2015). Nevertheless, idioms can be approached in a cognitive linguistic way, which suggests that their meanings can be derived from the component parts of the idioms. This can be considered as a useful method for teaching idioms in an EFL classroom since the aim is for the students to gain knowledge of how to use the idioms and not only learn them by heart (Langlotz 2006; Chen and Lai 2013). Therefore, the aim of this study was to conduct an experiment to test the applicability of the cognitive linguistic method. An experiment was chosen for collecting and eliciting data because of its usefulness of combining theoretical and practical aspects.

In order to test the validity of the cognitive linguistic method two research questions were put forward:

1. Is the cognitive linguistic approach suitable for secondary school EFL students?
2. Is the cognitive linguistic approach more effective than the traditional teaching method?

This chapter gives an overview of the empirical research – a case study with Estonian secondary school students. It provides information of the methodology and the details of the experiment, as well as the idioms and their conceptual metaphors used. Furthermore, the results of the experiment are put forward and analysed.

## 2.1 Methodology

To gather data on the effectiveness of the cognitive linguistic method, an experiment was designed and conducted. The aim was to replicate and adapt the studies made by Kövecses (2000) and Chen and Lai (2013). Both studies were considered as prototypes due to their similar nature and ideas. However, adjustments had to be made in order to make the research suitable for secondary school level since the original studies were conducted on adults and university students. To make the experiment more suitable several changes were made. Firstly, the experiment itself was made shorter – the gap-filling task consisted of 12 idioms opposed to Kövecses' (2000) 20 idioms and the second task involved writing a short passage using 5 idioms, whereas Chen and Lai's (2013) research consisted of writing a full essay. Secondly, the instructions were explained in English and in Estonian as well, to assure full understanding of the tasks. Thirdly, a Powerpoint presentation was compiled, which contained explanations of all the idioms. The aim of the presentation was to make the information more visual and memorable. Finally, the theme of the chosen idioms in this thesis differed from the idioms used in the previous studies – this thesis focuses on body idioms.

The experiment consisted of two tasks (see Appendix 1). The first task included choosing the correct idiom from the box and fitting it into the gap to complete the sentence. The aim of this task was to let the students try to memorise the idioms, to work with them and show whether they have understood the meaning of the idioms. The second task was more creative and its aim was to check whether the students can use the idioms in context. Moreover, the task assessed the students' ability to create a coherent passage using five idioms from the list in the correct context. The ideas of the tasks were taken and combined from Kövecses (2000) and Chen &



Lai's (2013) studies. Both studies focused on one task and one aspect, but the author of this research wanted to create an experiment that combined the two, where the students can show whether they have understood the meaning behind each idiom (language comprehension) and additionally, if they are able to use the idioms in context (language production).

## **2.2 Procedure**

The experiment was conducted during the author's teaching practice in January 2017, where the author was already familiar with the students and their language level. As a first step, a pre-test was carried out, where the students were shown all the idioms from the experiment and given some time to look them through. Then, the students were asked to brainstorm the meanings behind those idioms to gain information whether they are familiar with those idioms or not. Incidentally, only one student from the experimental group knew the idiom "cost an arm and a leg", therefore it can be said that the idioms were unknown to students.

After the pre-test, as a second step, the teaching phase began. Firstly, the students were asked to define the word "idiom" in their own words, but neither of the groups managed to do so although according to their program they were supposed to be familiar with the term and the concept. Furthermore, both groups were shown a Powerpoint presentation, which contained the definition of idioms and the descriptions of all the idioms in the experiment. The control group was asked to memorize the 12 idioms, whereas the experimental group was familiarized with the concept of cognitive linguistics method and was also given conceptual metaphors (or markers) to help form links between the idioms, their descriptions and the markers. The

importance of the markers was emphasized and they were left on the whiteboard until the end of the experiment to help the students form connections during the filling of the handouts.

As a third step, the students were given an entirely different activity (a Kahoot game about the recent grammar topic which was not connected with idioms at all) to distract them and to avoid the students' usage of their short-term memory. After the activity, the students were given handouts of the experiment, which included both tasks and the descriptions of the tasks were given orally, in writing and even translated into Estonian to guarantee maximum understanding. Moreover, the students were advised not to leave any of the gaps empty or passages unwritten. The overall experiment lasted for 30-35 minutes. As a final step, the students were shown the correct answers and the course of the experiment was discussed as well.

### **2.3 Idioms Used in the Experiment**

According to Kövecses (2000) the most common idioms are body idioms, which should be taught first in EFL classroom, therefore body idioms were chosen as a central topic into the experiment. A pilot study was conducted with 33 students from Jaan Poska's Gymnasium from year 10. The pilot study included only the first task where the students were asked to fill in the gaps. The aim of the pilot study was to see whether the students from this age group and roughly the same language level are familiar with the idioms in the experiment. The data from the pilot were analysed and necessary modifications were made to the original task – the following three idioms were replaced: *give you a hand*, *cried my heart out* and *got green fingers*. These idioms were familiar to more than 60% of the participants.

All in all, 12 idioms were used in the experiment, which were: 1. Keep your hair on 2. Pay through the nose 3. Pulling your leg 4. Turn your nose up 5. Came to a head 6. Like I need a hole in the head 7. Keep your head 8. Toffee-nosed 9. Cost an arm and a leg 10. Didn't turn a hair 11. By the skin of my teeth 12. Twisted my arm. For the descriptions of the idioms see Appendix 3.

According to Kövecsec (2000) and Chen & Lai (2013), who advocate for the cognitive linguistic approach to idiom teaching, the most important aspect of teaching idiomatic language to a foreign language learner is to use conceptual metaphors to help the learners to create links between the idioms and their conceptual meanings. This method of teaching is considered as the cognitive linguistic approach. Therefore, six conceptual metaphors or markers were created using McCarthy and O'Dell's "English Idioms in use" (2002: 98-110). The marker used for idioms connected with arms was: ARMS = VALUABLE, which was described as "something is valuable and you have to give it away" e.g. *cost an arm and a leg*. The idioms connected with nose have the main association with feelings and reactions: NOSE = FEELINGS/REACTIONS, e.g. *toffee-nosed* can be connected with the marker as somebody feeling they are better than others. According to McCarthy and O'Dell (2002) idioms connected with the head usually relate with emotions and staying calm, therefore the marker used was: HEAD = EMOTIONS, e.g. *came to a head* can be connected as a situation where emotions have reached their peak and something must be done about it. The marker used for idioms connected with legs was: LEG = SUPPORT, which can be connected as "legs support and if one gets taken away it affects the person" e.g. *cost an arm and a leg* (here it connects with the marker ARMS = VALUABLE as well). The idioms connected with teeth have several associations, which could be hard work, determination or struggles (McCarthy and O'Dell 2002). In this thesis teeth are connected with

the marker: TEETH = STRUGGLE, e.g. *I escaped by the skin of my teeth* shows that somebody was struggling. Finally, the marker for idioms connected with hair was: HAIR = CALM, e.g. *didn't turn a hair* shows that the person is entirely calm and shows no reactions. It should be noted that body idioms lend themselves particularly well for metonymic interpretation as well, even though the etymology of the phrases may have been lost for the present-day naïve language user. However, the present thesis takes an overarching conceptual metaphor view and does not distinguish between metaphor and metonymy (see the discussion in section 1.1.1 on Metaphoric Idioms above).

## 2.4 Participants

24 Secondary school students from Kristjan Jaak Peterson's Gymnasium participated in the empirical study. An experiment was carried out with two classes of pupils studying in year 10. The students were all Estonian native speakers and were studying English as their first foreign language. Furthermore, the classes were divided into group A, which was the control group and group B, which was the experimental group. There were 13 students in group A and 11 students in group B. Group A was taught using the traditional idiom teaching method and group B was taught using the cognitive linguistic approach. The students were informed of the experiment the day before and were assured that participation is voluntary and that the gained information will be used only for academic purposes. The 10<sup>th</sup> grades were chosen due to the fact that their finished programme included idioms, their definition and their usage, which mean that these students were supposedly already familiar with the concept of idioms.

## 2.5 Results of the Experiment

In order to analyse the results, firstly, the answers of the first task were coded in Microsoft Excel: the answers were given values, where the correct answer was 1 and the wrong answer 0. Incidentally, an empty gap was automatically considered as a wrong answer. Furthermore, the written passages of the second task were typed into a Microsoft Word file and four categories were made to assess the results (see Appendix 2). The categories were the following: idioms used, correctly used idioms, vocabulary and grammar and finally coherence. The categories were created in accordance with the description of the second task, which stated: “Write a short passage using 5 of the given idioms. Try to make the text cohesive and logical” (see Appendix 1). Additionally, maximum of five points were given for each category, which means that each student could gain 20 points all in all. See Appendix 2 for the details about the assessment rubric.

### 2.5.1 Results of task 1: The Gap-Filling Task

The first task of the experiment was a gap-filling task, where the students had to choose the correct idioms from the box given. The idioms were already familiar to the students. The effectiveness of the completion task was measured in terms of the number of correct responses to the 12 sentences in both control group and the experimental group.

The control group which consisted of 13 students were most successful with sentence 12 which included the idiom *by the skin of my teeth*. All the students from the control group managed to choose a correct answer. It was followed by idioms *like I need a hole in the head*, *toffee-nosed* and *didn't turn a head*, which were chosen correctly by 12 students. Two of the

least correctly chosen idioms by the control group were *keep your hair on* and *keep your head*, which were chosen correctly by only six students. Finally, the control group chose 114 answers correctly out of 156 possible correct answers, which means that they scored 73 per cent correct responses. From all the students in the control group, only one student left three gaps empty, these were sentences 4, 6, 7 and these were automatically considered as incorrect answers

The experimental group consisted of 11 students. They managed to excel in four sentences – 2, 4, 5 and 12, which included the idioms *keep your hair on*, *like I need a hole in the head*, *toffee-nosed* and *by the skin of my teeth*. All four sentences were answered correctly by all of the students from the experimental group. 10 students from the group managed to choose the idiom *didn't turn a hair* correctly as well. The least correctly chosen idiom by the experimental group was *turn your nose up*, which was chosen correctly by eight students. Conclusively, the experimental group managed to choose 114 answers correctly out of 143 possible correct answers, which means that they scored 86 per cent correct responses. Finally, only one student from the experimental group left two gaps empty and these were sentences 9 and 10. These answers were considered automatically incorrect.

Table 1 below shows the number of correct responses by the control group and the experimental group. The overall percentages of the completed task, which were calculated by adding together the correct answers, then multiplied by 100 and divided with the number of possible correct answers, are presented as well.

<b>Sentence, Idiom</b>	<b>Control group (N=13)</b>	<b>Experimental group (N=11)</b>
1 <i>turn your nose up</i>	8	7
2 <i>keep your hair on</i>	6	11
3 <i>cost an arm and a leg</i>	9	9

4 <i>like I need a hole in the head</i>	12	11
5 <i>toffee-nosed</i>	12	11
6 <i>pay through the nose</i>	8	9
7 <i>came to a head</i>	7	8
8 <i>twisted my arm</i>	10	9
9 <i>pulling your leg</i>	11	9
10 <i>keep your head</i>	6	9
11 <i>didn't turn a hair</i>	12	10
12 <i>by the skin of my teeth</i>	13	11
<b>Total:</b>	<b>114/156</b>	<b>114/143</b>
	<b>(73%)</b>	<b>(86%)</b>

Table 1. Number of correct responses from task 1

The top four correctly chosen idioms were looked examined in detail. The only idioms chosen correctly by all 13 students in the control group was *by the skin of my teeth*. It was followed by idioms: *like I need a hole in the head*, *toffee-nosed* and *didn't turn a hair*, which were answered correctly by 92 per cent of the students. Similarly, the experimental group answered correctly the sentences containing idioms *like I need a hole in the head* and *by the skin of my teeth*, which were answered correctly by all 11 students. Additionally, another two idioms were chosen correctly by all 11 students and these were *keep your hair on* and *pay through the nose*. Conclusively, the experimental group managed to answer four sentences 100 per cent correctly, whereas the control group managed to answer only one.

The tables 2 and 3 below show the correctly chosen idioms by the control group and the experimental group. Four first idioms have been indicated and the total percentage has been calculated.

Idiom	Correct answers	Total Percentage
By the skin of my teeth	13	100%

Like I need a hole in the head	12	92%
Toffee-nosed	12	92%
Didn't turn a hair	12	92%

Table 2. Top four correctly chosen idioms by the control group

Idiom	Correct answers	Total Percentage
Keep your hair on	11	100%
Like I need a hole in the head	11	100%
Pay through the nose	11	100%
By the skin of my teeth	11	100%

Table 3. Top four correctly chosen idioms by the experimental group

### 2.5.2 Results of Task 2: Creative Writing Task

The second task of the experiment was a creative writing task where the students had to choose five idioms from the box given and write a short passage. The students were instructed to make the passage cohesive and logical. The author of the thesis emphasized the usage of proper language and grammar orally. The effectiveness of the task was measured using four categories which were: *idioms used*, *correctly used idioms*, *vocabulary and grammar* and *coherence* (see Appendix 2). Each category gave a maximum of five points and in order to analyse the results the group averages were calculated and added together. Table 4 shows the four categories of the second task and the average number of points for the control group and the experimental group as well.

Categories	Control Group average	Experimental Group average
Idioms used	4	4
Correctly used idioms	3.4	3.5
Vocabulary and grammar	3.8	4.2



Coherence	3	3.7
<b>Total:</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>15.4</b>

Table 4: Group averages of the four categories

The first category *idioms used* showed how many idioms the students used out of five requested idioms. The results showed that both, the control group and the experimental group used on average four idioms. The second category assessed how many idioms were placed in the correct context out of the idioms used in the passage. The control group's average was 3.4 points, whereas the experimental group's average was slightly higher – 3.5 points. The third category assessed the student's usage of vocabulary and correct grammar. It is interesting that the control group's average was only 3.8, whereas the experimental group managed to gain 4.2 points, which is the closest score to maximum. Finally, the fourth category was *coherence* and it reflects how cohesive the produced text was. The differences between the control group and the experimental group is notable within this category – the control group scored 3 points and the experimental group scored 3.7 points, which shows that the group using the memorization method scored lower than the group using the cognitive linguistic method. Conclusively, the total averages were 14.2 for the control group and 15.4 for the experimental group, which are both excellent scores (maximum was 20 points), but the results show that the experimental group managed to follow the instructions better and the students were able to use the new idioms in context by formulating a cohesive passage.

Several passages from the experimental group were written on the same topic – having an expensive car and something happening to it. This means that the students managed to understand the idioms enough to group them and to find some logic between them. One of the passages from the experimental group was, for example, the following:

*I was driving on a slippery road with my car. After finishing a right turn I lost control over my car. I saw a car coming to my traction. I tried to **keep my hair on** and act right. So I turned off from road. I escaped the car accident **by the skin of my teeth**, but accidentally, I found myself between the trees. My car was in a bad condition and I thought “I needed that **like I need a hole in the head**”. I was already thinking of those **toffee-nosed** insurance guys. So I just tried to **keep my head** and find some help.*

Conclusively, the creative writing task can be considered successful for the experimental group because they managed to use given idioms correctly to formulate cohesive sentences by grouping the idioms and giving the passage a logical meaning. In contrast, the control group managed to score quite high as well, but the lowest scores appeared from the coherence category, which was meant to show how well the students can use the idioms in context. Out of the two groups, three students from the control group formulated five separate sentences different in meaning and topic, which resulted in an extremely low score in the category of *coherence*.

All idioms in the experiment and their usage was analysed by calculating how many of the given idioms were used by both groups. Additionally, their frequency of usage was presented as well. The results showed that both groups managed to use all the idioms at least once, which implies that none of the idioms appeared too difficult or incomprehensible. The idioms used only once were *like I need a hole in the head* and *by the skin of my teeth* by the control group and *toffee-nosed*, *pulling your leg* and *turn your nose up* by the experimental group. In addition, the most frequently used idiom for the control group and the experimental group was *cost an arm and a leg*, which was used seven times by both groups. Other most popular idioms were: *pay through the nose* and *didn't turn a hair*.

The table below shows the frequency of the idioms used in the second task by the control group and the experimental group; the last column in Table 5 shows the total number of occurrences across the two groups (the idioms are listed according to the total number of occurrences):

<b>Idioms</b>	<b>Control group</b>	<b>Experimental group</b>	<b>Total</b>
Cost an arm and a leg	7	7	14
Pay through the nose	6	5	11
Didn't turn a hair	7	3	10
Toffee-nosed	9	1	10
Keep your hair on	3	5	8
Keep your head	4	4	8
Like I need a hole in the head	1	6	7
By the skin of my teeth	1	6	7
Pulling your leg	4	1	5
Twisted my arm	3	2	5
Turn your nose up	3	1	4
Came to a head	2	2	4
<b>Total:</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>93</b>

Table 5: Most frequently used idioms in the experiment

It was also checked whether the idioms that were chosen the most correctly in task 1 were used more in task 2 as well. The analysis showed that there was no significant correlation. Therefore, it can be said that the students tried to experiment with different idioms in the creative task or it can be speculated that the students used the idioms according to the context they had in mind for the writing of the passage. Moreover, it shows that there was no single idiom, which was somehow previously known or appeared the easiest for the students.

### 2.5.3 Corpus Frequencies of the Idioms Used in the Experiment

In addition, the corpus frequency of the idioms was looked at for the purpose of finding out whether there is any connection between higher frequency idioms and how they were used by the students. For that, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which consists of 520 million words and the British National Corpus (BNC), which consists of 100 million words were consulted and the results showed that according to COCA the most frequently appeared idioms were *come to a head* (99 tokens), *pulling your leg* (42 tokens, where the search included *pulling his leg* and *pulling her leg*) and *cost an arm and a leg* (28 tokens). Similarly, the most frequent idioms in BNC were *come to a head* (136 tokens), *pulling your leg* (22 tokens, where the search included *pulling his leg* and *pulling her leg*) and *keep your hair on* (18 tokens). Therefore, it can be said that out of 12 idioms *come to a head* and *pulling your leg* have the highest frequency in both corpora. The results of this thesis showed that in the first task, 7 students from the control group and 8 students from the experimental group chose the idiom *come to a head* correctly, which is slightly above average for the control group (13 students), but a better result for the experimental group, which consisted of 11 students. Furthermore, this idiom was one of the lowest scoring idioms in the second task, where only two students from both groups used it in their passages. In contrast, the idiom *pulling your leg* managed to be answered correctly by 11 students from the control group and 9 students from the experimental group in task one. Both results are near maximum. Nevertheless, this idiom was one of the lowest scoring idioms in the second task, where it was used by four students from the control group and only one student from the experimental group. In conclusion, there is no difference between teaching idioms with higher frequency or lower frequency when they are unknown to the students.

## 2.6 Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to test the applicability of the cognitive linguistic approach of teaching idioms to secondary school EFL students and to assess its efficiency compared to the traditional teaching method. The conducted experiment was carried out in order to find answers to two research questions:

- 1) Is the cognitive linguistic approach suitable for secondary school EFL students?
- 2) Is the cognitive linguistic approach more effective than the traditional teaching method?

Firstly, since majority of similar studies have been conducted among adult learners or university students – Skoufaki (2008) did her research on Greek university students, Kövecses (2000) conducted the study among adult learners in Hungary and Chen and Lai (2013) did their experiment on university students in Taiwan – it was necessary to find out whether the CL approach is suitable for using in secondary school EFL classroom. The conclusion drawn by the present study is similar to the previous studies – the CL approach is a promising alternative for the traditional methods of teaching idioms.

It has been stated by many researchers (Schmitt 2000; Cieslicka 2006; Tran 2013) that learning idioms is in fact difficult for the EFL students mainly because idioms are considered to be in native speakers' language use, which means that idiomatic language is not in everyday use for the EFL student. Therefore, scholars have searched for alternative, more efficient, ways to teaching and learning idioms besides the traditional methods, which suggest memorisation and rote learning. Estonian students should start studying idiomatic language on language level

B1 (Estonian National Curriculum 2011), which means that they start getting familiar with such phrases in secondary school. According to Keysar and Bly (1999:1572) and Bilkova (2000: 92-93) the easiest is to teach figurative language to young learners because they are more acceptable to any chunks of language and have not been compromised with rules and regulations, but rather adapt with new information quickly. Therefore, it can be said that it is extremely difficult for Estonian students to learn and comprehend idiomatic language since they start studying it when they have already been familiarised with the beforementioned rules. Nevertheless, the results of this study showed that using the cognitive linguistic approach had some positive effects on the students. Firstly, after the students of the experimental group were explained the CL ways and given the idioms, their meanings and the conceptual metaphors, the students managed to achieve 86 per cent of the correct answers in the first task, which is well above average and not far from maximum. Therefore, it can be concluded that the students were able to understand nearly all the given idioms with the use of the conceptual metaphors and the links between the idioms and the metaphors. The results in Kövecses (2000) research showed similar data where the learners were able to answer most of the sentences correctly as well.

Secondly, the students who were taught using the CL method managed to show impressive results with the second task, which involved using the new idioms in context. The results showed that the students could produce a passage using the idioms that they were taught earlier and additionally, make the passage as cohesive and logical as possible. It is notable that the experimental group was able to create a system among the given idioms – the students managed to group some idioms under the same topic and to produce cohesive passages on this topic. The students created a topic which involved having an expensive car and something

happening to it. Therefore, it can be concluded that the second task was successful for the experimental group who were taught using the CL approach.

The research conducted by Chen and Lai (2013) showed similar data, where the university students managed to successfully use the conceptual metaphors to help them produce a cohesive essay. Although the learners in Chen and Lai's research had the advantage of producing a lengthier text thus making it easier to use different idioms, whereas the students in this research were limited by using five idioms in a single passage. Additionally, the author of this research discussed the CL approach with the students who participated in the experiment and the thoughts of the students were that the approach was different and interesting. They liked the usage of the conceptual metaphors and the fact that they were left on the whiteboard because they were able to make connections and memorise the idioms and make some sense in them. Conclusively, it can be said that the CL approach can be considered appropriate for secondary school EFL students because it helps the students to make connections between the idioms and the conceptual metaphors.

Furthermore, traditional methods of teaching idioms, which involve the technique of memorizing and repetition have been considered as archaic and ineffective. It has been suggested that the CL approach could be more useful in the EFL classroom than the traditional method. Several studies have shown that the CL approach indeed produces better results than the traditional method. This research aimed to compare the two methods and to find out whether CL approach is indeed more effective. The results showed that in task one the students who were taught using the CL approach managed to perform better than the students who were taught using the traditional method. However, the differences between the results were not grand – the control group scored 73 per cent of correct answers in contrast to the experimental group's 86

per cent. Therefore, it can be said that the students who were taught using the CL approach managed to gain better results, but the differences between the results were not as big as to say that the traditional method is not effective at all. Similar results occurred in Kövecses (2000) study, where he concludes that both the memorisation method and the conceptual metaphor method played positive roles, although the results from the conceptual metaphor method appeared slightly better. Moreover, the results from the second task imply that the students who used the CL approach again managed to score higher than the students using the traditional method. For instance, the students using the traditional method were not able to create cohesive passages and create links and connections between the idioms, whereas the experimental group excelled in this category. Therefore, it can be concluded that the CL approach helps the students to use the new idioms in context, whereas the traditional teaching method fails to do so. Furthermore, the score of the students, who were taught using the traditional method was not substantially lower than the experimental group's score. Although the experimental group scored higher in three categories out of four, the traditional group's total average was still relatively high. Additionally, since the experimental group scored higher in categories such as vocabulary and grammar and correctly used idioms, there remains a chance that the students of the experimental group might have been more advanced, although their teacher listed both groups on the same language level. Nevertheless, since both groups scored relatively high with the second task, it can be concluded that although the CL approach appeared more effective than the traditional method, the results were not high enough to state that the traditional method is not useful at all. Conclusively, as the results from Rizq's (2015) study showed, the best way to teach idioms with the maximum efficiency would be to combine elements from the two methods.



Liu (2008) has stated that learning high-frequency idioms is essential, whereas learning low-frequency idioms can be considered useless. He explains that high-frequency idioms are the ones most likely to be encountered in different texts. Liu (2008) believes that high-frequency idioms are most valuable to teach because students can use them in context and most likely recognise them more. The results of this study showed that those idioms which were of higher frequency – *come to a head* and *pulling your leg* – were some of the lowest scoring idioms in the second task, which means that the students used other idioms, which were of lower frequency. Therefore, it can be argued whether it is necessary to teach students only higher frequency idioms. Panou (2013) believes that the usefulness of the idiom depends on the learners and what is useful for one group, might not be useful for the other group. The results of this research showed that both groups used different idioms to fit them into a context suitable for them. Therefore, students should be taught idioms which could be useful for them, which are related to the necessary context and those idioms do not need to be of high-frequency. In conclusion, the CL approach had a positive effect on teaching low-frequency idioms, which means that this approach can be considered as a useful and efficient way of teaching figurative language to secondary school EFL students.

The present study is not exhaustive. There are some limitations which should be noted. Firstly, the sample of this study does not allow to make any generalisations but rather applies to these students who participated in the experiment. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the CL approach can be potentially useful for teaching and understanding the idioms in EFL context. Furthermore, the results of this study can be useful for teachers of English who struggle with teaching figurative language and are looking for alternative ways to make this process more effective. Secondly, no post-test was conducted, which means that there is no data whether

the students were able to remember the idioms or if they can use the conceptual metaphors again to form links between the metaphors and the idioms. According to Nation (2001: 75-76), repetition in learning new vocabulary is essential because only repetition allows the words to be known so well that they could be fluently used. Therefore, a post-test can be potentially useful, where the students could once again repeat the idioms and show whether they remember how to use the conceptual metaphors. Another possible limitation could be that the author of this research solely assessed the passages written by the students. Although the author used assessment categories and the rubric given in Appendix 2, there may be a certain amount of subjectivity involved when interpreting the results.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is considered to be difficult for EFL teachers to teach figurative language, more specifically idioms, in the classroom. One of the reasons behind it is the debate between the suitable teaching methods to use in order to achieve the maximum level of effectiveness. Some of the scholars prefer the traditional teaching methods, which include memorisation and rote learning, and some of the scholars prefer the Cognitive Linguistic approach, which includes using conceptual metaphors in teaching idioms. Another reason for the difficulties is the nature of idioms and idiomatic expressions, which traditionally have been considered as arbitrary language chunks, but nowadays rather as expressions, whose meanings cannot be derived from its components, but can be derived from the context. Therefore, as idioms have multiple definitions, there are several scholars who have opinions whether idioms should be focused on in EFL classroom and how they should be taught.

The main reason behind the necessity of teaching idioms is the fact that idioms are considered characteristic in native speakers' language use. Which means that the students will encounter idioms while speaking with native English speakers and reading texts. Therefore, it is important to place emphasis on teaching idiomatic expressions to EFL students. Teaching methods, however, differ from one another. The traditional method treats idioms as fixed chunks of language which should be memorised, but this method has been considered archaic and ineffective because it does not involve providing the students with the knowledge of how to use idioms in context. Therefore, linguists have been looking for alternative methods and cognitive linguists have proposed a Cognitive Linguistic approach, which suggests that idioms can be seen as motivated. In other words, the CL approach believes that because it is possible to create links between the idioms and their meanings through using conceptual metaphors the meaning

of the idioms can be explained by using the components it is made up from. However, this applies only to metaphoric idioms. Furthermore, several studies have been conducted on teaching idioms using the CL approach as a teaching method and the results have shown that the CL approach imposes positive effects. Although as majority of the studies have been conducted with university students or adult learners, in Estonian context it is important to test whether the method is suitable for secondary school students, since the Estonian National Curriculum suggests teaching idiomatic language on language levels B1 and B2.

In order to see whether the CL approach is suitable for teaching idioms to secondary school students, an experiment was conducted. The students were divided into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. The control group was taught using the traditional memorisation method and the experimental group was taught using the CL approach. The students were instructed to fill in handouts which consisted of two tasks: a gap filling task and writing a passage. The gap filling task aimed to see whether the students are able to recognise the idioms that were previously introduced to them. The second task included writing a passage using five of the introduced idioms and it aimed to gain knowledge whether the students are able to use the idioms in context. The overall results of the study were promising - both tasks were performed better by the group who was taught using the CL approach.

The results of the study show that the CL approach can be considered as a useful method for teaching idioms in EFL classroom because it offers a way of forming links and connections. Nevertheless, probably the most effective way of teaching idioms would be to combine the traditional method and the CL approach. This way the students will be able to use conceptual metaphors for creating links and making connections with the knowledge they already possess, but also make use of the necessity of repetition. Conclusively, EFL teachers should be made

aware of the CL approach and what it entails in order to maximise the effectiveness of teaching idiomatic expressions.

Further studies on the same topic can be conducted with using a larger sample of students and making it a larger scale study with Estonian students. Moreover, further studies could make use of a different set of idioms in addition to the body-part related idioms used in the present study. Furthermore, the experiment could follow a post test, where the students are given a chance to show whether they remember any of the idioms that were taught with or without the conceptual metaphors.

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## Appendix 1 - The Experiment

### Participation information

**Title of the Thesis:** The Cognitive Linguistic Approach to Teaching idioms: A Case Study with Estonian Secondary School EFL Students

The aim of my thesis is to test the applicability of the cognitive linguistic approach in teaching idioms to EFL students and to assess its efficiency. Your participation in this study is voluntary and your anonymity will be granted. The experiment lasts approximately 20-25 minutes and it consists of two tasks, which should be filled in. All the received information will be used for academic purposes only and it will contribute to the compiling of a corpus at the Department of English studies in University of Tartu.

### Task 1:

**Complete the sentences by filling the gaps. Use the idioms given in the box.**

keep your hair on    pay through the nose    pulling your leg    turn your nose up  
 came to a head    like I need a hole in the head    keep your head    toffee-nosed  
 cost an arm and a leg    didn't turn a hair    by the skin of my teeth    twisted my arm.

1. You shouldn't \_\_\_\_\_ at 200 euros a week. It's better than nothing.
2. \_\_\_\_\_, Mike! Your car isn't badly damaged.
3. These cakes are delicious, but they \_\_\_\_\_.
4. My boss asked me to go to London. I need a trip to London \_\_\_\_\_.
5. He's nice and friendly, but his brother is very \_\_\_\_\_.
6. We had to \_\_\_\_\_ to get our car repaired, but at least it's working now.
7. The conflict between the company and the workers \_\_\_\_\_ at the annual general meeting.
8. I didn't really want to do the job, but he \_\_\_\_\_ and I said yes.

9. I haven't really won the lottery, I was only \_\_\_\_\_.
10. You should try to \_\_\_\_\_ when everybody around you are panicking.
11. My boss \_\_\_\_\_ when I handed in my notice.
12. I escaped a disaster \_\_\_\_\_.

**Task 2:**

**Write a short passage using 5 of the given idioms. Try to make the text cohesive and logical.**

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## Appendix 2 – Categories for Assessing Task 2

<b>Categories for assessing task 2.</b>						
<b>Idioms used</b>	No idioms used/task left undone. <i>0 points</i>	One idiom used. <i>1 point</i>	Two idioms used. <i>2 points</i>	Three idioms used. <i>3 points</i>	Four idioms used. <i>4 points</i>	Five idioms used. <i>5 points</i>
<b>Correctly used idioms</b>	No idioms used correctly, task left undone. <i>0 points</i>	One idiom used correctly. <i>1 point</i>	Two idioms used correctly. <i>2 points</i>	Three idioms used correctly. <i>3 points</i>	Four idioms used correctly. <i>4 points</i>	Five idioms used correctly. <i>5 points</i>
<b>Vocabulary and grammar</b>	Task left undone. <i>0 points</i>	Six or more grammar mistakes, uses overly simplistic vocabulary. <i>1 point</i>	Five grammar mistakes, uses overly simplistic vocabulary. <i>2 points</i>	Four grammar mistakes, uses simple vocabulary. <i>3 points</i>	Three grammar mistakes, but uses good vocabulary. <i>4 points</i>	One or two grammar mistakes, but uses good and colourful vocabulary. <i>5 points</i>
<b>Coherence</b>	Task left undone. <i>0 points</i>	No story, separate sentences. <i>1 point</i>	No story, but some sentences connected. <i>2 points</i>	Story, but no central theme, some sentences connected. <i>3 points</i>	Functioning story, some sentences not connected. <i>4 points</i>	Fully functioning story, every sentence connected. <i>5 points</i>

### Appendix 3 – The Idioms Used in the Experiment

<b>Idiom</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>COCA frequency</b>	<b>BNC frequency</b>
Keep your hair on	be calm/calm down	3 tokens	18 tokens
Pay through the nose	to pay a lot of money	26 tokens	12 tokens
Pulling your/his/her leg	joking	42 tokens	22 tokens
Turn your/his/her nose up	to refuse	8 tokens	5 tokens
Come/came to a head	the situation has gotten so bad that it has to be dealt with	99 tokens	136 tokens
Like I need a hole in the head	do not need it at all	3 tokens	0 tokens
Keep your head	to keep calm/to be calm	20 tokens	10 tokens
Toffee-nosed	a person who look down on others	2 tokens	10 tokens
Cost an arm and a leg	to be very expensive	28 tokens	4 tokens
Didn't/don't turn a hair	to show no reaction	6 tokens	6 tokens
By the skin of my teeth	barely manage to do something	19 tokens	1 token
Twisted my/his/her arm	to persuade somebody to do something	6 tokens	3 tokens

## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Sigrit Jermoškin**

**The Cognitive Linguistic Approach to Teaching Idioms: A Case Study with Estonian Secondary School EFL Students.**

**Kognitiiv-lingvistiline lähenemine idioomide õpetamisel: Juhtumiuuring inglise keelt õppivate gümnaasiumiõpilastega Eestis**

Magistritöö

2017

Lehekülgede arv: 55

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva magistritöö eesmärk on uurida kognitiiv-lingvistilist lähenemist idioomide õpetamisel gümnaasiumiastme inglise keele tunnis ning hinnata selle sobivust ja tõhusust. Lisaks võrdleb töö traditsioonilist õppemeetodit kognitiiv-lingvistilise lähenemisega. Töös kasutati 12 kehaga seotud idioomi.

Magistritöö koosneb kahest peatükist, milleks on kirjanduse ülevaade ja empiiriline uurimus. Kirjanduse ülevaade keskendub idioomi defineerimisele ja tutvustab lugejale kontseptuaalse metafoorteooria käsitlust idioomidest. Lisaks sellele antakse ülevaade idioomide õpetamise olulisusest, sellega kaasnevatest raskustest õpetajatele ja õpilastele ning käsitletakse kahte erinevate lähenemist idioomide õpetamisele – traditsiooniline lähenemine ja kognitiiv-lingvistiline lähenemine. Samuti tutvustatakse kognitiivse lingvistika põhimõtteid ja seletatakse kuidas on võimalik seda kasutada idioomide õpetamisel inglise keele tunnis. Tuuakse välja ka võrdlused kahe eelmainitud lähenemise vahel. Kirjanduse ülevaade toetub varasematele uurimustele samas valdkonnas.

Teine peatükk annab ülevaate empiirilisest uurimusest, mille keskmes on katseline mteoodika. Töö valimi moodustasid 24 kümnenda klassi õpilast Tartu Kristjan Jaak Petersoni gümnaasiumist. Õpilased olid jagatud kahte rühma, millest üks oli kontrollrühm ja teine eksperimentaalrühm. Kontrollrühma õpilasi õpetati traditsioonilist õppemeetodit järgides ja eksperimentaalrühma õpilasi õpetati kognitiiv-lingvistilist lähenemist järgides. Peatükk annab ülevaate tulemustest ja nende analüüsist. Töö tulemustest selgus, et kognitiiv-lingvistiline lähenemine on tõhus idioomide õpetamisel inglise keele tunnis, kuna pakub õpilastele vaheldust ja suudab panna neid seoseid looma. Siiski ei tasu traditsioonilisest meetodist loobuda, kuna ka see meetod annab arvestatavaid tulemusi. Parimaks variandiks idioomide õpetamisel oleks kahe meetodi kombineerimine.

Märksõnad: kognitiivne lingvistika, idioomid, metafooriline idioom, idioomide õpetamine

## **Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks**

Mina, Sigrít Jermoškin,

1. annan Tartu Ülikoolile tasuta loa (lihtlitsentsi) enda loodud teose *The Cognitive Linguistic Approach to Teaching Idioms: A Case Study with Estonian Secondary School EFL Students*

mille juhendaja on Jane Klavan

- 1.1. reprodutseerimiseks säilitamise ja üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemise eesmärgil, sealhulgas digitaalarhiivi DSpace-is lisamise eesmärgil kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse tähtaja lõppemiseni;
- 1.2. üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks Tartu Ülikooli veebikeskkonna kaudu, sealhulgas digitaalarhiivi DSpace-i kaudu kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse tähtaja lõppemiseni.
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Tartus, 16.05.2017

Sigrít Jermoškin