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## Why Teach Idioms? A Challenge to the Profession

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents a rationale for making idioms and their use a mainstay of the second language (L2) curriculum. First, it offers a definition of the elusive term “idiom” as a point of departure for the ensuing discussion. Second, it offers five specific reasons why idiom instruction should be integrated into the L2 curriculum: here, it is argued that students’ knowledge of idioms needs to be anchored in language materials and situations that are both authentic and purposeful. It is further argued that requiring students to produce idioms in ways that native speakers use them enhances students’ mastery of them, facilitating the binding and mapping processes of idiom internalization. Finally, this article challenges the SLA profession to propose a systematic, theoretically informed program for developing idiomatic competence in L2 learners that is based on meaningful, authentic idiom use in the classroom and beyond.

**Keywords:** idioms; figurative language; lexicalized phraseologies; idiom internalization; idiomatization; idiomatic competence; curriculum articulation; authentic integration

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## Introduction

Idioms, part and parcel of human languages, have yet to receive the attention in second language acquisition (SLA) studies accorded to them by learners of second languages. Because of this lack of research, little is known about the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms underlying the understanding and acquisition of idioms in second languages, a field of research in its own right. Even less is known about which interactions and stimuli affect the idiom processing mechanisms that impede or enhance the development of *idiomatic competence*; that is, the ability to understand and use idioms appropriately and accurately in a variety of sociocultural contexts, in a manner similar to that of native speakers, and with the least amount of mental effort (Liantas, 2003, p. 299; see also Liantas, 2015a).

Those of us who teach second languages are thus left to our own devices regarding the place of idioms in the second language (L2) curriculum. Many of us choose not to teach idioms at all, arguing that idioms are such “specialized lexicalized items” that perhaps language learners are best left on their own to acquire them when traveling abroad or when coming into close contact with native speakers. Others, taking a hands-off approach to idioms, feel that idioms are difficult to teach and that they create more problems than they solve—perhaps because, as Kadden (1996) ironically states in her foreword, “Idioms are tricky little devils. They travel incognito. Seeing them in print or hearing them doesn’t necessarily offer any hints to their true personalities. Taking them apart and analyzing their components is akin to examining an alien from outer space. They just don’t volunteer many clues.” Still other L2 teachers maintain that it is best not to focus on idioms since there is so much non-idiomatic material to learn in a second language class, so that teaching idioms would presumably come at the expense of other, more important, aspects of language learning. Thus, our collective belief that teaching idioms is less important than teaching other grammatical or syntactical structures may inadvertently contribute to the dearth of attention given to idioms in SLA research/pedagogy and print materials, including in widely-used textbooks on SLA for graduate study (see, for example, Ellis, 1994 and Cook, 1993), and on language teaching and learning (Ommagio Hadley, 2001).

This article will argue that our failure to make the study of idioms a mainstay of the L2 curriculum may well be founded in our inability to offer firm reasons for teaching idioms, and in the lack of dialogue among language practitioners and researchers regarding the place of idioms in the overall scheme of teaching languages. In an effort to jump-start this dialogue, this article first offers a definition of the elusive term “idiom” in order to establish common ground for the ensuing discussion. This discussion involves five specific reasons for the employment and integration of idioms across the entire L2 curriculum (from beginning to advanced levels of language instruction), and includes illustrative examples and research evidence where appropriate. In its conclusion, this article challenges the SLA profession to propose a systematic, theoretically informed program for developing idiomatic competence in L2 learners within the context of meaningful authentic use, resulting in a knowledge-driven process of theoretical discussion and revision.

## What Are Idioms?

One of the thorniest issues in idiom research has been the question of how to define “idiom,” also known as *slang*, *proverb*, *allusion*, *simile*, *dead metaphor*, *social formula*, and *habitual collocation* in the vast amount of literature on the subject. By whatever name an “idiom” may be called, various researchers have given the term different definitions, based on a variety of criteria. Weinreich (1969), Fraser (1970), Makkai (1972), and Strässler (1982), for example, focus on lexically and grammatically regular idioms; Smith (1925), Roberts (1944), and Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor (1988), on the other hand, focus on the idiosyncrasies of English, many of which are lexically and

grammatically irregular. Cowie and Mackin (1975) and Cowie, Mackin, and McCaig (1983) include both types in their two idiom dictionaries. In contrast, Liontas (1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2015b) focuses only on vivid phrasal (VP) idioms: polysemous phrasal units that combine powerful literal visual imagery (literal, referential meaning) with a memorable, striking expression (institutionalized, figurative meaning) occurring above word level and often, but not always, in the length of a sentence. Examples of the latter idiom type are: *to look for a needle in a haystack* (something hard or impossible to find), *to burn the midnight oil* (to stay up very late at night studying or working), *to count your chickens before they are hatched* (don't count on profits before you earn them or have them in hand), *to put all the eggs in one basket* (to risk everything you have at once on a single idea or plan; to commit all your resources at one time), *to take the bull by the horns* (to act bravely in a troublesome situation; to face up to a difficult challenge by taking decisive action).

Since space prevents a comprehensive review of the subject, it suffices to say that most researchers today (in addition to the ones cited above) have reached the consensus that idioms are, by nature, semantically noncompositional entities (Cacciari, 1993; Chomsky, 1965; Colombo, 1993; Cronk & Schweigert, 1992; Cutler, 1982; Flores d'Arcais, 1993; Gibbs, 1980; McGlone, Glucksberg, & Cacciari, 1994; Titone, 1994; Titone & Connine, 1999). In other words, the sum of an idiom's individual parts as in *to let + the cat + out + of + the bag* does not lead one to the figurative meaning of that idiom, *to reveal a secret*. This is perhaps best expressed by the classic and most often cited *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) sense 3a definition of "idiom," the working definition employed for this article:

A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of the language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one. (OED 1989 s.v. *idiom*)

Despite the frequent use of this definition, however, the debate concerning how to define "idiom" rages on (for comprehensive accounts on the subject, see Barkema, 1996; Fernando, 1996; Liu, 2008). But regardless of how broadly or narrowly one defines "idiom," it is through the lexicalized phraseologies (that idioms are generally considered to be) that language expresses its resilience and color (Correli, 2006). This ultimately means that *not* teaching idioms to L2 learners does them a great disservice. Furthermore, as Weinreich (1969) puts it, "idiomaticity is important for this reason, if for no other, that there is so much of it in every language" (p. 23). For these reasons, then, it is important to examine critically the justification for teaching idioms in the L2 classroom.

### ***Making the Case for Idioms***

Among the compelling reasons to teach idioms to learners of second languages are that doing so increases learners' lexical and etymological knowledge, their knowledge of grammar and syntax and, even more importantly, their knowledge of usage (i.e., of the formal properties of idiomatic phonological, lexical, and grammatical systems) and of the use of idioms in communicative situations (i.e., of how to convey meaning through constructing idiomatic discourse) (Liontas, 1999, p. 445). Perhaps the best reason of all, however, is the unique opportunity to teach both language and culture from a multitude of sociocultural perspectives, leading to learners' development and attainment of idiomatic competence.

Because idioms are not based linguistically, but rather socioculturally, their study makes "culture" more than merely a word, whether written with a small "c" or a big "C" (as "culture" is often

written in the literature of pedagogy). The systematic study of idioms moves the discussion of culture away from the traditional focus of who, what, when, and where (referred to by Kramsch [1988] and Lafayette [1988] as the “piece-meal” approaches to culture still present in many foreign language textbooks), and toward a discussion of, for example, what meaning is intended when speakers of a language say expression X in a given communicative situation Y and, even more importantly, what social function expression X fulfills in daily discourse. The latter focus not only enhances students’ knowledge of how culture permeates and dictates linguistic behavior, but also encourages learners to see the world through the eyes of the people whose language and culture they seek to learn. This process of *idiomatization*, generally defined as the process of learning idiom-language norms over time through continuous exposure and planned practice (Liontas, 1999, p. 452; see also Liontas, 2015a, pp. 626-629), can potentially have a profound impact on students’ study of the target language and culture. Through idiomatization, students develop and attain high levels of communicative competence.

While communicative competence is characterized by one’s ability to use language effectively in unrehearsed, unstructured transactions with native speakers (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972; Savignon, 1972; Widdowson, 1978), idiomatic competence empowers learners to use language in socially responsible ways. The study of idioms enhances the attainment of both by supplying the range of expressions that native speakers of a language have at their disposal every time they speak. While knowledge and correct usage of idioms are not absolutely necessary for one to communicate effectively, they are the marks of a competent speaker. As Cowie et al. (1983) have stated, “the accurate and appropriate use of English expressions which are in the broadest sense idiomatic is one distinguishing mark of a native command of the language and a reliable measure of the proficiency of foreign learners” (p. x). A similar position has also been advocated by Strutz (1996), who suggests, “no one can be said to be really proficient in a language until he or she possesses an ‘idiomatic’ control of it” (p. vii).

Many more such views can be cited here, but the point is clear: the study of idioms from the earliest days of language instruction can foster this control more efficiently<sup>1</sup>. Clearly, there are many benefits that language learners can derive from learning idioms in the L2 classroom. The most important of these benefits are discussed next.

### *Rationalizing Idioms Across the Second Language Curriculum*

In what follows, some answers to the main question this article asks—Why teach idioms?—are offered. These answers below make no claim to being sole and final. They are, however, sufficient to jump-start the dialogue envisaged at the outset of this article. Each answer is organized thematically around a central issue believed by this author to be crucial to advancing the rationale for integrating idioms across the entire second language (L2) curriculum. **Reason One** addresses the benefits derived from etymological explorations. In **Reason Two**, the issues associated with idiom understanding are then developed with a discussion of authentic aural and print media materials. The move from idiom comprehension (listening and reading) to idiom production (speaking and writing) is discussed in Reasons Three and Four. **Reason Three** takes a close look at the types of language-production activities that research has shown to promote idiomaticity in speaking and writing. An interactive exercise between author and reader underscores the arguments made in this section. **Reason Four** explores the mental images and (meta)cognitive processing involved in idiom production. Finally, **Reason Five** advocates three specific proposals for the development of a systematic idiom-learning methodology in the four basic language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), leading to the creation of a new model of the processes and skills required for fluent L2 idiom use. Here, a look at some of the answers.

**Reason One.** *Why teach idioms? Because idioms help learners to encounter and understand the workings of natural human language; that is, they help them to gain a deeper knowledge of the creative expression of human thought and language development over time.*

Idioms have their origins in the fabric of human communication; some of them can be traced back as far as 3,000 years. Without exception, all idioms—from the ancient to the most recent—owe their creation to the workings of human thought and language evolution. They draw on practical experience, which makes even the oldest of them relevant to contemporary life. It is not surprising, then, that idioms are omnipresent in natural human language. In fact, all languages use idioms to express the realities of daily life. Idioms are so common in everyday speech that Hoffman (1984), referring to native speakers of English, estimated their usage at 7,000 per week, although this admittedly has yet to be corroborated by empirical evidence. Nevertheless, the very use of idioms by members of a linguistic community—regardless of the actual frequency with which they may be used—demonstrates the cultural spirit of the people that use them. Rooted in the peoples' history, politics, sports, and culture, idioms become the mirror of their world, their hopes and fears, their lives and deaths. In short, idioms become part of the spiritual soul of their language.

Idiom instruction across the entire L2 curriculum—from elementary levels to advanced levels of language instruction—therefore provides second and foreign language learners with an unprecedented opportunity to examine target-language development over time. While certainly not all expressions created ultimately become idioms, those that do can provide valuable insights into the sociocultural conditions and the creative nature of human thought. Idioms evolve with language across time and space. Offering students systematic opportunities to encounter idioms during their language training therefore enables them to acquire new perspectives on life, viewing different cultural realities through the eyes of the people who create and use these turns of phrase. Oftentimes, the etymological origins of fixed, institutionalized idiomatic expressions reveal important information about their metaphorical register and imagery. Such information can be especially helpful and memorable to students if they are also familiar with idiom sources such as the Bible (*cast pearls before swine*; Matthew 7:6), fables (*wolf in sheep's clothing*; used in one of Aesop's fables and in the New Testament, Matthew 7:15), famous authors (*wear your heart on your sleeve*; William Shakespeare in *Othello*), sports (*put your money where your mouth is*; c. 1930, from gambling/betting), and technology (*read between the lines*; used by cryptographers to decode the real meaning of a secret message). Consider, for example, the etymological origin of the idiom *to hang by a thread* (to be in a dangerous, desperate or unsafe position; to depend on something very small in order to be saved; to be in doubt; especially, to be near death or ruin):

There's a myth that tells of a king in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC who grew tired of being told how wonderful he was by a flatterer named Damocles. The king threw a magnificent banquet for Damocles, who was having a grand time until he looked at the ceiling. He was shocked to see a large, sharp sword hanging by a single, thin hair, and pointing straight down at his head! He quickly learned his lesson: Power and happiness are not secure, and usually depend on the will or favor of someone else. Today, when people are in risky situation, we say they're "hanging by a thread" (Terban, 1996, p. 86).

Regardless of an idiom's linguistic journey through time, etymological information of this sort appeals to most language learners and provides a welcome and powerful incentive for them to continue to learn these resilient, colorful expressions. An etymological analysis of an idiom can reveal an expression's origins which, more often than not, are the direct result of some type of technological, industrial, economic, historical, or sociopolitical development in a particular time and place. Background information of this sort becomes even more memorable if it is couched within the key images surrounding a given expression's origins. In the "hanging by a thread" example given above, key images such as "king," "flatterer," "banquet," "ceiling," "sword," and "single hair" can

easily become useful mnemonic devices (i.e., memory hooks) that learners can use to recall that particular idiom and the larger event associated with it. Such mnemonic devices, including the use of emblematic gestures (Allen, 1995; Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers, 2007; Ibáñez, Manes, Escobar, Trujillo, Andreucci, & Hurtado, 2010) have the potential to promote greater idiom retention and recall over time (Boers, Piquer Píriz, Stengers, & Eyckmans, 2009; Nippold & Duthie, 2003). At the very least, such information has the potential to minimize considerably the likelihood that students will later complain that an idiom is “all Greek to me.”

Language practitioners are therefore strongly encouraged to make etymological information available to students at all levels, and to use this as a catalyst for further discussion about an idiom’s figurative meaning and its purpose in communication. The use of a good etymological dictionary has been proven very helpful for spearheading such discussion (Liontas, 1997; Szczepaniak & Lew, 2011). One discussion in particular that has found wide appeal among high school and college students studying second languages has been idiom calquing, the literal borrowing of idioms across languages. Idiom calquing is nothing new in the annals of human language history. Just as other lexical items from one culture find their way into another, idioms travel the globe and find refuge in cultures that share similar conceptualizations of reality. It is, therefore, not surprising to find the English idiom to look for a needle in a haystack in languages such as Russian (искать иголку в стоге сена), French (chercher une aiguille dans une botte de foin), Spanish (buscar una aguja en un pajar), Italian (cercare un ago in un pagliaio), and German (eine Stecknadel im Heuhaufen suchen). The same English idiom, however, is expressed differently in Greek (ζητώ ψύλλους στ’ άχουρα; lit. I look for lice in the hay) and Chinese (Dà hai lǎo zhēn; lit. to look for a needle in a vast ocean).

Teachers should by no means feel compelled to “research” origins and idiom calquing themselves. On the contrary, students should be asked to do this research work, which can be accomplished easily at all levels of language instruction. Past experience at both the high school and college level suggests that, in particular, intermediate- and advanced-level students beginning to study texts of literature benefit the most from etymological explorations because the information unearthed helps them to acquire a deeper understanding of the events that gave birth to idiomatic expressions and the creative metaphorical thinking of the people that created them. Since language is always used with a purpose and for a purpose, the study of idioms from an etymological epistemic perspective allows students to bear witness to the deliberate and creative use of the target language to express the needs and wants of the time.

In addition, idioms should not be ignored simply because in the eyes of some students they are “antiquated” expressions of language. If idioms were merely novel manifestations of eras long gone, students would likely soon lose interest in learning them, and thus miss a valuable opportunity to develop a new filter through which to see figurative expressions in their own native (L1) language. That a great many idioms have stood the test of time, and even more importantly, that many more are being created each decade, is a fitting testament to their power of survival on the one hand, and to the human need to express new conditions of reality through creative language use on the other.

Perhaps the most telling example of the latter observation can be found in NBC’s coverage of the 2000 American Presidential Election, entitled *Decision 2000*. At four o’clock the morning of November 8, following two premature announcements regarding the outcome of Florida’s vote (November 7, 10:16 pm: Vice President Al Gore Wins Florida; November 8, 2:17 am: Texas Governor George W. Bush Wins Florida), news anchor Tom Brokaw conceded his network’s erroneous election calls: “We don’t just have egg on our face, we have an omelet all over our suits.” A week later, another news anchor on the FOX Network said (in the morning of November 14), in reference to Florida’s continued state of confusion, that Tom Brokaw was “running around with an omelet on his suit.” Those proficient in the English language would readily discern the figurative meaning intended by the use of the idiom to have egg on one’s face (to be gravely embarrassed) as well as the subsequent extension of the idiom into new metaphoric territory to include “eggs and

omelets” on “faces and suits.” They would not believe that Tom Brokaw was literally “running around with an omelet on his suit.”<sup>22</sup>

Idioms can bring a unique freshness to language (as in the example above) that makes idioms ripe for evolution, and thus for longevity. Today’s slang, soon outdated, can become tomorrow’s cliché or idiomatic expression. Indeed, the expression to have an omelet on one’s suit may become a well-recognized idiom in the years ahead (its origin dating back to Decision 2000), in a manner similar to the ways in which the expression going postal (to go crazy) became idiomatic following the shootings in various U.S. Post Offices in the early 1990s.

Each culture and sub-culture gives birth to its own expressions; those expressions that survive their emergence quickly begin to circulate among the very people that created them and those who seek to adopt them as their own. Each new use brings new guardians willing to make these expressions their own in their need to express the same ideas figuratively. As the acceptance of such expressions in the language repertoire grows, so too does their staying power in our collective memory. It is through this evolutionary process that all speakers of a language are able to distinguish certain expressions as idiomatic, as having a meaning other than the sum of their parts. Over time, the conditions (technological, industrial, economic, historical, or sociopolitical) that gave rise to an idiom are lost from collective memory and only the idiom’s figurative meaning is accessible. This is why virtually all native speakers of a language can instantaneously access and effortlessly explain the figurative meaning of an idiomatic expression but not necessarily its metaphoric or etymological origin.

The semantic and etymological features of L2 idioms, similar or different as they may be from their English correlates, make for great class discussions and creative group projects. More often than not, this process of discovery has a positive long-lasting effect on L2 learners in that they learn an invaluable lesson: how cultures are alike, not what makes them different. Above all, by carrying out such etymological investigations, students begin to cross conventional boundaries of teaching and learning, all within the spirit of true collaboration and camaraderie, challenging themselves and each other in the process (Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Klein, Erchul, & Pridemore, 1994; Slavin, 1991).

**Reason Two.** *Why teach idioms? Because learners can go beyond the literal meaning of idioms and see the pivotal role that context plays in the understanding of idiomatic expressions.*

As already discussed, idioms have both literal and conventional figurative meanings in the culture of the people who speak a given language. While the former type of meaning may be ascertained through a combined graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic analysis, the latter can only be retrieved from memory, if such meaning has already been established in the mental lexicon, or inferred from a literal analysis of the individual lexemes comprising the idiom in conjunction with an evocation of the learner’s background knowledge and a consideration of the communicative context in which the literal meaning occurs. For an example of the second process noted here, consider the non-literal meaning of the English idiom *to bury the hatchet* (to make peace), which is most readily comprehensible when seen through the lens of Native American history. According to Terban (1996), this saying “probably comes from American Indian tribes who would make peace with their enemies by holding a ceremony. They would actually bury tomahawks, hatchets, and other war weapons to show that the fight was over” (p. 22). In contrast, the Greek idiom *τοῦ βάζω τα δύο πόδια σ’ ἓνα παπούτσι* is not readily discernible from only its literal meaning, *to put someone’s two feet into one shoe*. Indeed, if the figurative meaning is to become both transparent and meaningful, L2 learners must be provided with ample context to make the process of discovering this meaning possible.

Consider the impact that context (or lack thereof) has on your own understanding of the figurative meaning of the Greek idiom above. We will assume for this “interactive” two-part exercise that your linguistic knowledge of the Greek language is advanced enough to understand completely the literal meaning of this idiom. In the absence of context, can you predict this idiom’s intended figurative meaning with any certainty? Which English idioms come to mind as you attempt to make sense of this expression? To what extent does (or does not) the combined graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic analysis of this expression help you infer the idiomatic meaning? Jot down your thoughts and the idioms that come to mind as you complete the first part of this exercise. Are you willing to venture a guess now? On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), how sure are you of the accuracy of your answer(s)?

This concludes the experimental procedures for Part One. Let us now continue with the second part of this exercise. In Part Two the Greek idiom *τον βάζω τα δυο πόδια σ’ ένα παπούτσι* (lit. to put someone’s two feet into one shoe) is provided along with the authentic text from which it was previously extracted. For this part we will assume again that your linguistic knowledge of the Greek language is proficient enough to produce an accurate literal translation in your native English, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Excerpt from an Authentic Text*

MODERN GREEK TEXT	ENGLISH TEXT (TRANSLATION)
<b>A:</b> Άκουσες τα νέα; Ο Μίλτος παντρεύτηκε.	<b>A:</b> Have you heard the news? Melto’s got married.
<b>B:</b> Αλήθεια; Βρέθηκε γυναίκα να τον παντρευτεί;	<b>B:</b> Really? A woman was finally found who wanted to marry him?
<b>A:</b> Βέβαια.	<b>A:</b> Sure.
<b>B:</b> Την καημένη! Πολύ τη λυπάμαι!	<b>B:</b> Poor soul! I feel sorry for her!
<b>A:</b> Τον καημένο να λες, γιατί τον κάνει ότι θέλει.	<b>A:</b> You should feel sorry for him, because she does whatever she wants with him.
<b>B:</b> Σοβαρά; Το Μίλτο, το σκληρό άντρα;	<b>B:</b> Are you serious? Melto, the tough guy?
<b>A:</b> Μάλιστα. Το Μίλτο, το σκληρό άντρα του έχει βάλει τα δυο πόδια σ’ ένα παπούτσι.	<b>A:</b> Yeah. Melto, the tough guy. She has <b>put his two feet into one shoe.</b>

First, read the text carefully. As you read, try to make logical connections based on what is being said between Speakers A and B. Now concentrate on the literal meaning of the idiom given in bold type. Does the expression itself provide you with any new clues? What images do these clues evoke in your mind from only a literal understanding of the expression? Can you match the merging conceptual image with another one from your native language? Do you now believe you have discovered the intended figurative meaning? If yes, congratulations on your newfound success. If not, ask yourself the following two hypothetical questions: “What would I say given the conversational constraints of the text? Which equivalent English idiom makes sense in the overall framework of this context?”

If you have answered *to have someone wrapped around one’s little finger* (or *to lead someone by the nose*; *to have someone eat out of your hand*; *to be under someone’s thumb*; *to push someone into the corner*), *I take my hat off to you*. On the other hand, if your answer was off the mark, then I hope that this exercise was enough to drive home the point that the computation of a given idiomatic meaning (including the one discussed above: to dominate or control someone completely) is not always a smooth one,



nor is it necessarily linear in nature. At times, even a supporting context which points to the figurative meaning of an idiom may not be enough to allow students (or you) to decipher that idiom correctly. This is particularly true for those L2 idioms that do not have word-for-word counterparts in the learners' native (L1) language (Irujo, 1986; Laufer, 2000; Liontas, 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2015b). In such cases, students should be strongly advised to make use of their pragmatic knowledge (i.e., personal background and world knowledge) by asking themselves the hypothetical questions given above.

To facilitate the discovery process further, students should also be given questions to guide and focus their attention on the thematic elements of the texts they read, hear, or watch. Consider, for example, the following series of questions referencing the authentic text in Table 1: What is the topic of conversation? How does Speaker B react to Speaker A's announcement of news? What conclusion does Speaker B arrive at upon hearing the news? Does Speaker A concur with Speaker B's conclusion? If not, what additional new information does Speaker A provide about the subject of their conversation? What is Speaker B's reaction to all this? How does Speaker A bring their conversation to a close? Which particular function does the use of the given idiom fulfill in this context? How else could Speaker A have answered? Can you think of other idiomatic expressions that would make sense here, given the overall direction of the conversation?

While such instructional intervention does not guarantee that students will always be able to arrive at the correct idiomatic meaning, it is nevertheless likely that at the very least they will apprehend the figurative domain of which an idiom is part. In the case of vivid phrasal (VP) idioms, for example, statistical evidence obtained from 60 adult third-year learners of French, German, and Spanish strongly suggests that increased context and an individual's pragmatic knowledge exert a significant impact on idiomatic comprehension and interpretation (Liontas, 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2015b).

Students should also be encouraged to work in groups or as a class in order to discover idiomatic meanings. In a survey of the same learners cited above, it was found that over ninety percent of them preferred collaborative to individual work. Regardless of what format is chosen for reaching an understanding of idiomatic expressions, however, students will come away knowing that context is indispensable in comprehending and interpreting idioms that do not have a word-for-word counterpart in the L1 (Cieslicka, 2006a, 2006b; Ezell & Goldstein, 1992; Kecskes, 2006; Levorato & Cacciari, 1992; McGlone et al., 1994). As already noted, idioms are a frequently occurring element of everyday communication. Speakers use them because they possess extraordinary communicative effectiveness and rhetorical power. Both of them apply to the functions idioms fulfill, including the evaluation of people and situations, the signaling of congeniality and conflict, and the expression of affective states (Liontas, 2008, 2015a). Nowhere are these functions better expressed than in the realia of the target culture.

Scrutiny of authentic texts thus allows students first to investigate idiomatic functions and then to make a list of common functions, if desired. Following that, students could be encouraged to search for a variety of authentic texts that make use of such functions. They could, for example, be asked to read or listen to authentic texts (either whole or in part) with the goal of locating idioms and identifying the linguistic functions they fulfill in those particular contexts. This type of (skimming/scanning) reading/listening activity helps students to gain valuable insights into the customs, humor, and cultural beliefs of the target-language users. A wide variety of texts from a range of media (e.g., the internet, newspapers, magazines, movies, records, and the like) make such a task possible. Care must be taken, however, that students do not feel overwhelmed or frustrated by the demands of the task. This point has been made elsewhere, but it bears repetition:

Although realia from the target culture are of great benefit to language learners, it cannot be overemphasized that it is not the content or form of the authentic materials that determine the difficulty of the materials, but the tasks we ask students to perform based on those authentic language samples (Liontas 1991, p. 102).

If used judiciously, target-language realia containing idioms or plays on idiomatic knowledge (a common feature in advertising language and press headlines) can make the rhetorical power of idioms in context powerfully evident to students (for examples of advertisements and press headlines using idioms, see Herrera & White, 2010 and Watkins, 1995). It is important to emphasize here that idiom production does not necessarily follow idiom comprehension. It does not follow only because students were able to decipher correctly the figurative meaning of an idiom within given aural or print realia the same students are also able to use the same idiom appropriately and accurately, in a variety of sociocultural situations, with the least amount of mental effort. Nor, further, does it follow that they will be able to use it in a manner that exemplifies native speakers' linguistic behavior. As Cowie et al. (1983) have argued, "mastery of such usage presupposes a competence which is not merely linguistic but cultural in the broadest sense" (p. xvii). For idiomatic competence to develop over time, "cultural understanding must be promoted in various ways so that students are sensitive to other cultures and are prepared to live more harmoniously in the target-language community," Omaggio Hadley (2001, p. 91) suggests in her fifth hypothesis for orienting instruction toward proficiency. The move from idiom comprehension to idiom production is discussed next.

**Reason Three.** *Why teach idioms? Because requiring learners to produce idioms in ways that native speakers use them enhances learners' mastery of them, facilitating the binding and mapping processes of idiom internalization.*

Being aware of the ways in which a given target-language community uses idioms appears to be a necessary first step toward acquiring idiomatic competence. No less important is the realization that ideas and thoughts can be expressed in a variety of ways. All of us do this expertly in our L1. When it comes to second or foreign languages, however, a great many of us may feel inept when using idiomatic expressions. Our students are no exception to this rule: they too often find themselves unable to articulate exactly what they are trying to say in a few words. It is because of this that the systematic study of idioms can be of great help to them. One of the most important features of idioms explains the very reason why idioms are used widely by so many of us: idioms succinctly express ideas with the help of colorful, yet very powerful, figures of speech that are (to a large extent) "frozen in time." Since the meanings of such figures of speech do not have to be inferred and interpreted anew each time they are used by a member of the linguistic community, due to their meaning being frozen over time (Cutler, 1982; Gibbs, 1980; Gibbs & Gonzales, 1985), idioms can present complex ideas and thoughts with a few memorable words. They often do so in imaginative, expressive, and laconic ways that make us wonder how we might ever be able to convey complex realities and human behavior without them.

A simple test of what is argued here can be done by simply trying to explain an idiom to a member of another linguistic community or culture. The test becomes even more telling when this person comes from a culture that has a totally different religious, political, economic, or sociopolitical history than the tester's own. In this situation, attempts to explain the idiom will often involve the use of other idioms in order to explain the first. This observation reveals that we are generally unaware of our own native idiomatic knowledge. More often than not, we use idioms without even realizing that we are doing so. Only after this is pointed out to us do we recognize it and as a result we may choose to begin monitoring and editing our linguistic output. This observation was clearly

captured on videotape with a sub-set of L2 participants in the Liontas (1999) study of VP idioms (see also Liontas, 2007).

Our L2 learners will first begin to use idioms consciously and awkwardly. But over time and through repeated systematic exposure to idioms in a supporting context, their idiom use will become so automatic that they too will be surprised to find themselves unconsciously using idioms for various expressive purposes (Arnold & Hornette, 1990; Holmes & Moulton, 2005; Lennon, 1998). To foster the development of idiomatic competence, students should be encouraged to emulate the ways idioms are used in target-language realia and everyday communication.

Requiring students to produce idioms in ways that native speakers use them enhances students' mastery of them, facilitating the binding and mapping processes of idiom internalization. Accordingly, after examining idiom use in authentic texts, students could, for example, be asked to create their own dialogues or narratives expressing the previously discovered functions. If desired, they could also be asked to videotape these dialogues for all to see and appreciate, or to perform them in class. Another group project that stands out in particular is the creation of new idioms by students enrolled in conversation or composition courses (usually in the fourth or fifth semester of language study). Groups of learners compete against each other for the distinction of having created the most imaginative figurative expression. The guidelines given to them are straightforward:

Using an etymological dictionary of idioms, your task is to create the most imaginative figurative expression that you can conceive as a group. You are free to use well-known idioms as a point of departure by expanding upon their metaphorical reach or by providing a new play on idiomatic knowledge, including new twists to old and trite clichés. Your only requirement is to embed your expression in a dialogue or narrative that clearly identifies your idiom's intended figurative meaning and use in context (for other members of this class).

The clear benefit of such planned group projects is that students become not only *users* of the target language and culture, but also *creators* of it, expressing in the process ever-new conditions of human interaction. More often than not, many of the figurative expressions created find their way into spontaneous speech, at times even in writing assignments (including e-mails, chat rooms, letters, essays, and tests). Often, these expressions become the "secret code" by which the members of a group (or class) secure their solidarity and identity. The latter claim becomes especially self-evident at the beginning of a new semester, as new unsuspecting members of the class attempt—judging from their puzzled looks on their faces—to figure out the cryptic play of words between two classmates who already share a common ground of figurative understanding.

As noted already, idiomatic competence is best achieved by anchoring idiom learning in real-life situations that make use of authentic materials. The aim of idiom learning should never be to accumulate a predetermined number of idiomatic expressions, as one collects Pokémon cards or Beanie Babies dolls. On the contrary, the aim should be to master a wide range of expressions (including proverbs, similes, binomials/trinomials, and fixed collocations) because such expressions are used for specific functional purposes in daily discourse. This goal must be given increased attention in SLA research and pedagogy if L2 learners are to have the best chance of attaining idiomatic competence, and thus proficiency, in the target language.

Throughout the development of their idiomatic competence, it is important to offer students several variant idioms that express the same or nearly the same idea as that of another idiom. Take, for example, the English idiom *to kick the bucket* (to die). If it were argued that this idiom alone captures the essence of the concept "to die," it could then be argued that all remaining

variant idioms (e.g., *to buy the farm*, *to bite the dust*, *to push up daisies*) are superfluous and therefore need not be memorized by students. But we cannot perfectly predict which idioms will be used in what contexts and under what communicative conditions. Not offering students access to “alternative” idioms is therefore as ineffective as *putting the cart before the horse*. Even worse, it sends the message that every idiom has only one meaning and one context in which it can occur, when in fact an idiom can be interpreted in various ways, depending on context. The notion of “one idiom, one context” denies the fact that idioms serve many different purposes in human communication. While admittedly there do exist certain idioms that are used only with a specific tone (either negative or positive), such as *don't count your chickens before they're hatched* (used only negatively), there exist many other idioms that change their figurative meaning depending on context. A clear understanding of the specific uses idioms have and the functions they perform in extended discourse has been shown to improve students' motivation to learn and use idioms, and may also result in improved language skills (Liontas, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2006). Specifically, idiom instruction may offer learners the more general pedagogical advantages both of developing a conceptual understanding of the linguistic system and of promoting its mastery and retention in memory.

**Reason Four.** *Why teach idioms? Because idioms afford learners the opportunity to examine their own mental images associated with idiomatic phrases and the conceptual metaphors mediating their figurative meanings.*

What images do L2 learners create in their minds as they hear or read an idiom? Do they first access the literal meaning of the idiom, or the conceptual metaphor mediating its figurative meaning, or are both meanings simultaneously available to them? If only the literal meaning is accessed first, do learners ever bridge the gap between it and the figurative meaning? Rarely are such questions explored in the SLA context, much less investigated in a scientific manner. Such exploration is nonetheless possible, as long as students are provided with systematic opportunities to introspect their own mental image(s) of an idiom and the possible underlying metaphor(s) mediating its meaning (see, for example, Cooper, 1998; Cutler, 1982; Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 2001; Dong, 2004; Gibbs, 1980, 1995; Glucksberg, 2001; Hussey & Katz, 2009; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Roberts, 1944).

To that end, students could, for example, be presented with one idiom at a time and asked to describe (orally or in writing) the resulting images in as much detail as possible. They might also be asked to draw their mental images, explain the reasons behind their conceptualizations, and even compare them with those of other members of the class. If an image depicting the correct literal or figurative meaning of a given idiom is available, it could be introduced as a means to stimulate discussion about the idiom's possible meaning(s). Should the figurative meaning still elude students, oral and/or written texts containing the idiom should be made available to them for further consultation. Again, context has been shown to make a significant difference in the way students conceptualize and understand idioms, ultimately allowing them to arrive at both literal and idiomatic interpretations (Colombo, 1993; Katsarou, 2011; Kecskes, 2006; Liontas, 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2015b).

**Reason Five.** *Why teach idioms? Because the study of idioms in the classroom can help the SLA profession to build a systematic program for the development of idiomatic competence in second language learners.*

Unlike metaphors, which have been the subject of many studies (e.g., Blasko, 1999; Glucksberg & McGlone, 1999; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Searle, 1982; Shen, 1999), idioms have not been a topic

of intense research interest. Yet having an adequate L2 theory of idiom acquisition and production is important to advancements in a wide range of applied linguistics issues, including curriculum articulation (i.e., the ways in which idioms are planned for in the language curriculum), materials development (i.e., the ways in which oral and print texts reflect the use of idioms), and performance assessment (i.e., the ways in which language learners are tested on idioms).

Despite all the L1 theoretical accounts of idioms that have led to a number of competing hypotheses—the *idiom list (literal first) hypothesis* (Bobrow & Bell, 1973), the *lexical representation (simultaneous processing) hypothesis* (Swinney & Cutler, 1979), the *figurative first hypothesis* (or *direct access model*), and the *holistic hypothesis* (Jiang & Nekrasova, 2007, Wray, 2002)—or models—the *idiom decomposition model* (Gibbs, 1980, 1995; Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989), the *configuration model* (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988), the *hybrid model* (Caillies & Butcher, 2007; Cutting & Bock, 1997; Sprenger, Levelt, & Kempen, 2006) or *constraint-based model* (Libben & Titone, 2008; Titone & Connine, 1999; Titone, Columbus, Whitford, Mercier, & Libben, 2015), and the *dual route model* (Van Lancker Sidtis, 2004, 2012; Van Lancker Sidtis, Cameron, Bridges, & Sidtis, 2015)—for the lexical representation, processing, and comprehension of idioms and of language use, to date only a small number of L2 hypotheses or models—the *graded salience hypothesis* (Giora, 1997), the *idiom diffusion model* (Liontas, 1999, 2002b, 2015b), the *dual idiom representation model* (Abel, 2003), and the *literal salience model* (Cieślicka, 2006a)—have singularly focused on how second or foreign language learners process, retrieve, and understand idioms. Furthermore, empirical studies have yet to fully explore the factors affecting the processing, comprehension, and interpretation of L2 idioms while reading/listening to authentic texts or how second/foreign language learners learn and use idioms productively in natural settings. These factors include idiom recognition, lexical access and retrieval, prior background knowledge, and idiom strategy use. Knowledge about the roles that these and other factors play in the reading/listening process would deepen our understanding of reading/listening and thus move us closer to creating a more complete model of the processes and skills required for fluent L2 idiom use. Moreover, the greater our understanding of the idiom process at work during L2 reading/listening, the more effectively teachers can ultimately help L2 learners to gain greater competence in figurative language use. It is here that the research/pedagogy loop can come full circle: such an outcome in the classroom could lead investigators to develop a systematic idiom-learning methodology for incorporation into L2 curricula.

Any empirical and classroom-based research into the idiom process will be most sound if the SLA profession takes into account the following three proposals. First, the SLA profession should consider that the process of L2 idiom comprehension and interpretation *may not be the same* as that for L1 comprehension; that is, there may be some fundamentally different ways in which L2 learners grasp idiomatic meaning. Second, when looking for commonalities among L2 learners of similar background, age, and language preparation, the SLA profession should investigate whether or not idiom understanding is indeed *universal* with regard to second languages, as Liontas (1999) claims for Spanish, French, German, and Modern Greek. Third, the SLA profession should investigate the extent to which L2 learners want idioms to be an integral part of their language and culture training (Liontas, 2002e, 2015b).

Investigations stemming from these three proposals alone can generate an entirely new model for second languages that does not rely on the propositions advanced in current L1 psycholinguistic models. These proposals can aid investigations of learners' reading/listening strategies and of their use of cultural background knowledge for idiom comprehension and interpretation. In addition, studies of interactions between first and second language idiomatic competence will contribute to the development of a pragmatic methodology of idiomaticity for second and foreign languages that can be carried into the L2 classroom. A methodological framework for idiom instruction specifically

in second or foreign languages, based upon empirical and classroom-based research data, will no doubt enhance students' opportunities to achieve idiomatic competence.

## Conclusion

This article offered a rationale for making idioms and the knowledge resulting from their use a mainstay of the L2 curriculum. To achieve this end, a common ground for defining the term "idiom" was first established. The article then presented a series of reasons for including idioms in the L2 curriculum, offering illustrative examples and research evidence to reinforce these points. Throughout this discussion, it was argued that students' knowledge of idioms must be anchored in language materials and situations that are both authentic and purposeful. It was further argued that asking students to produce idioms for the same purposes that native speakers use them expedites the development, and ultimately the attainment, of idiomatic competence in second languages.

A key point to revisit here is the need not to treat idiomatic expressions as "antiquated" lexical items that are merely to be collected. Furthermore, idioms should not be treated as a novelty for students' amusement on a Friday afternoon or simply as a means for killing class time now and then. Just as we find rationales for all the "communicative" things we try to accomplish with our students, we must similarly find rationales for the place of idioms in L2 curricula. This article has tried to begin that process.

Instructors, curriculum developers, textbook publishers, researchers, and everyone else involved in developing students' language proficiency are invited to participate in a dialogue that determines whether we, as a profession committed to the ideals of producing speakers proficient in languages other than English, are willing to invest time and energy in an area of human communication that has for too long remained the exclusive domain of lexicologists and etymologists. The SLA profession is hereby challenged to begin investigating the parameters of L2 idiom comprehension and interpretation both quantitatively and qualitatively, including the lexical and idiomatic mappings between L2 and L1 idioms. Understanding how idioms are mentally represented and accessed across several second languages can lead to the prescription of specific pedagogical activities for mastering idioms in the four basic language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) within contextualized authentic environments.

It is hoped that, in the years ahead, the SLA profession will build a more cogent framework through which the development of idiomatic competence can be described, analyzed, explained, and predicted completely and systematically. This will be necessary if a comprehensive understanding of the issues surrounding curriculum articulation, materials development, and performance assessment is to be attained. The realization that the study of idioms could and should become a mainstay of the L2 curriculum is seen here as a necessary first step on a long journey full of research promise and untapped pedagogical potential.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One argument that could be made against the early study of idioms is that idiomatic knowledge is a mark of high linguistic and cultural proficiency, like knowledge of jokes and word plays. Therefore, it could be said that beginning and intermediate students may not need to learn idioms immediately but could defer learning about them until later. While the validity of this argument is not in dispute (at least not outright), idiom instruction from the earliest days of second language learning offers too many benefits, both linguistic and cultural, to be ignored.

<sup>2</sup>Equally powerful and full of freshness and twists is Dan Rather's triple metaphor: "His [Al Gore's] back is against the wall, his shirttails are on fire, and the tax collector is banging on the door" (CBS News, Election Night 2000).

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[For an in-depth interview with John I. Liontas, see *IJLTR*, 5(2), July 2017, 145-153:

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