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## **Croatian EFL learners' comprehension of idiom use: Context, decomposability and age factors**

There are many factors influencing the comprehension of idiomatic expressions in EFL context. These factors include, among others, age, context, familiarity and decomposability rate (the degree to which an idiom is susceptible to interpretation through simple analysis of the meanings of its individual components). For the purpose of determining how Croatian EFL learners of all levels (Elementary, Secondary, Undergraduate level, Graduate level) process idioms, a study was conducted by using multiple-choice questions and a Likert scale task in order to try and determine which of the abovementioned factors play greater role in idiom comprehension, i.e. if they influence processing to the same extent or if there exists a noticeable difference among them. The purpose of this paper is to set a direction for figurative language teaching in EFL situations by contributing to the existing body of knowledge on what facilitates the comprehension of idiomatic expressions.

**Key words:** idiom comprehension; compositionality; English; Croatian; sentential context.

### **1. On categorization and idiom decomposability**

Insights into idiom processing revealed that idioms, like other lexical items, might be subject to the principle of compositionality after all (see Gibbs, 1991; Glucksberg, 2001; Libben and Titone, 2008; Cain, Towse and Knight, 2009). However, there are idioms that are more compositional than others - for example, it might be easier for an EFL learner to reveal the meaning of an idiom such as *pop the question* than it would be in the case of an idiom such as *<to be> a lemon*. Nunberg (1978, as quoted in Glucksberg, 2001: 73) divides idioms into three categories according to their degree of compositionality: noncompositional, partially composi-



tional and fully compositional idioms. However, the principle of compositionality will have to undergo a revision in order to accommodate for the new findings in the field of figurative language research. Cruse (2004: 68) proposes the following reformulation of the principle: "The meaning of a complex expression is a compositional function of the meanings of its semantic constituents, that is, those constituents which exhaustively partition the complex, and whose meanings, when appropriately compounded, yield the (full) global meaning." How is this relevant to the issue of idiom compositionality? When simplified, the reformulation of the principle indicates that not all grammatical constituents are semantic constituents as well. In other words, *white* and *elephant* are grammatical constituents in the phrase *white elephant*, however, we cannot decipher the meaning of the phrase by simply adding together the meanings of semantic constituents *white* and *elephant* as the original principle of compositionality would have us do. Hence, *white elephant* would fall under the category of noncompositional idioms because the meanings of its respective parts (*white* and *elephant*) do not contribute to the figurative meaning of the phrase ('a burdensome possession'). A definition of decomposability can be derived from this conclusion, or at least an elaboration of it that will be in accordance with the context in which the term will be used throughout the paper. As proposed by Libben and Titone (2008: 1103), decomposability of an idiom is the extent to which the words comprising the idiomatic expression independently contribute to the figurative interpretation of the expression. Idioms will, therefore, vary in terms of their decomposability. However, while Nunberg's categorization (as cited in Glucksberg, 2001: 73) includes noncompositional idioms that cannot be "decomposed", Geeraerts' (1995, as cited in Libben and Titone, 2008: 1116) attempt at idiom categorization suggests idioms can be compositional even if their parts have nothing to do with the figurative meaning of the idiomatic phrase. In this way, the idiom *saw logs* can be seen as compositional (although the meanings of *to saw* and *logs* are in no way related to the meaning of the idiom, which is to 'sleep' or 'snore'). A connection can be drawn between 'sawing logs' and 'snoring', both being the production of loud, usually irritating noises.

Another attempt at categorizing idioms shall now be addressed and it is worth mentioning due to the effect it had on the direction current research has taken. Gibbs (1991: 613–614) has categorized idioms into three groups: normally decomposable (e.g. *lay down the law*), abnormally decomposable (e.g. *carry a torch*) and nondecomposable idioms (e.g. *beat around the bush*). This idiom typology might resemble the Nunberg's (1978, as cited in Glucksberg, 2001: 73) categorization discussed above, however, a closer look would reveal substantial discrepancies. Gibbs (1991: 613) based his division on the concept of *conceptual metaphors*. Let



us take an example of *carry a torch* which is an abnormally decomposable idiom according to Gibbs' categorization. This idiom is classified as abnormally decomposable (and not as nondecomposable) because of its relation to an underlying conventional metaphor AFFECTION IS HEAT (Gibbs, 1997: 151). Idiom *take the bull by the horns* thus stems from the metaphor A PROBLEM IS AN ANIMATE OPPONENT and idioms like *blow off steam* or *blow your stack* are related to an underlying metaphor ANGER IS A HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER. Abnormally decomposable idioms are, therefore, subject to decomposition as long as language users are able to access these conventional metaphors in their mind. According to Gibbs (1991: 614), the ability to tap into the metaphoric knowledge of the world increases with age. To return to the previous point of discussion, although idiom categories put forth by Gibbs and Nunberg might seem identical in nature, a practical example proves otherwise – while Nunberg's categorization (1978, as cited in Glucksberg, 2001: 73) recognizes *kick the bucket* as being a partially compositional idiom, Gibbs (1991: 614) classifies it as nondecomposable.

Idiom categorization is, therefore, a very “tricky business” and it might very well be the reason why no scholar has yet formed an applicable schema for categorizing expressions according to their degree of decomposability.

## 2. The role of context

The role of context in idiom comprehension is irrefutable and ongoing research is no longer focused on whether context plays a role or not, but rather to what extent and whether other factors also play a role (for example, a viable research question would be if preschool children are better at comprehending transparent idioms in context or context-free environments). Age, as one of these factors, certainly determines the influence of context on the comprehension of idiomatic word strings, i.e. children of different educational levels will probably make use of contextual information in different ways. While context might prove to be a facilitating factor for some age groups, it might also turn out to be a stepping stone for others. Studies conducted by Levorato and Cacciari (1999, as cited in Cain, Towse and Knight, 2009: 284) were indicative of children's greater reliance on context than was the case with older subjects, who relied more on the semantic analysis of a given idiom than on inference from context. Gibbs (1980: 150) also came to a conclusion that the role of context might be lesser than previous studies would have us believe: since idioms have strong conventional meanings associated with them they might be understood with ease even in the absence of context. Bulut (2004) conducted a study involving 18 Turkish teachers of English who were all exposed to stimuli in



the form of idioms embedded in context (the participants were then required to verbalize their understandings of the idioms written on the cards). The results have shown that the participants first made use of contextual cues; if inference from context failed to acquire a satisfactory explanation of an idiomatic string, the participants would turn to other strategies such as background knowledge, literal meaning, or L1 (ibid.: 109). It seems that English speakers in EFL contexts, regardless of their proficiency level, would make context a primary strategy when it comes to understanding an unfamiliar idiom, just as young L1 speakers do. Bulut, however, did not control for the compositionality of the phrases so we can only make an educated guess as to what the results would reveal if compositionality was taken into account. It would seem, though, that noncompositional idioms, if indeed processed as lexical chunks, would profit more from contextual information than compositional idioms due to the fact that lexical items are usually learned through contextual abstraction (Nippold and Rudzinski, 1989: 59).

Whatever the case, the discussion on idiom processing is by no means resolved and none of the theories proposed so far make claim to completeness. However, for the purposes of current research a belief will be retained that context is an influencing factor when it comes to figurative language learning in EFL contexts and that “both minimal and extended idiomatic units are closely tied to the here-and-now: they are profoundly context-embedded” (Prodromou, 2005: 325).

Table 1.

Grammatical properties of idioms used in the study							
	elements are separately modifiable	elements coordinate with genuine semantic constituents	elements take contrastive stress	elements can be referred to back anaphorically	elements can be substituted by a synonym or a near-synonym	voice can be changed to passive	
<i>drive someone up the wall (NC)</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	
<i>foam at the mouth (NC)</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	
<i>have your hands full (C)</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	
<i>chew someone out (NC)</i>	-	-	-	-	-	+	
<i>a lemon (NC)</i>	+	-	+	+	-	+	



<i>between the devil and the deep blue sea (NC)</i>	-	-	+	-	-	+
<i>take the bull by the horns (C)</i>	-	-	-	-	+	+
<i>skate on thin ice (C)</i>	+	+	-	-	+	-
<i>pop the question (C)</i>	+	+	+	+	-	+
<i>get out of hand (C)</i>	+	-	-	+	-	-
<i>bite the dust (NC)</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>carry the can (C)</i>	-	-	-	-	+	+

A plus sign (+) indicates an idiom can be subjected to a given transformation while a minus sign (-) indicates an idiom is not likely to undergo transformation with respect to a given grammatical property. A compositionality status of an expression is given in brackets (C=Compositional/ NC=Noncompositional).

### 3. Outline of the study

The study that was conducted encompassed all three levels of the Croatian educational system – Elementary (42 eighth-grade students), Secondary (20 second- and third-grade high school students) and higher education (31 undergraduate students of English Language and Literature (first year of study) and 42 graduate students of English Language and Literature (23 fourth-year students and 19 fifth-year students)). Overall, 135 participants were subjected to testing in the form of questionnaires which were distributed without time restrictions (none of the participants were revealed the purpose of the study apart from the fact it pertained to the domain of figurative language, more specifically, idioms). All levels received an equal copy of the questionnaire which included three different tasks: two multiple-choice tasks (12 items each) and a Likert scale task (36 items). A total of 12 idioms were included in the study, which varied in terms of their decomposability (6 were decomposable in nature, while the other 6 were nondecomposable) (Table 1). The two multiple-choice tasks served as tools for assessing the influence of context and compositionality on the students' comprehension of target idiomatic expressions (the idioms appeared without context in one task and embedded in sentential context in the other). The Likert scale task was designed to monitor for guessing and three plausible definitions of each of the 12 idioms were given to the students for assessment (a five-point scale was used to reflect the participants' opinions of the proposed definitions, in which 1 meant *I disagree* and 5 *I agree*). The aim of the



study was to indicate which of the relevant factors (age, context, decomposability) played a greater role in idiom comprehension among Croatian learners of English and whether these factors remain unaffected as the students' level of proficiency changes; in other words, would an elementary student, for example, make use of the same factors as a high school student would, or would there be statistically relevant differences between the three levels with respect to context, decomposability and age.

### **3.1. *Expected results***

Based on what has already been said and done about the issue of idiom comprehension, several hypotheses will be set forth which the results are expected to support. The expectations concerning the results of the study are summarized within following claims:

- (i) Idioms are compositional in nature; figurative meaning of an idiomatic expression can become available to EFL learner through semantic analysis of the expression's components. Idioms which can undergo decompositional analysis (compositional idioms) will be easier to comprehend for EFL learners than non-compositional idioms.
- (ii) EFL learner's ability to access figurative meaning of unfamiliar idioms is under direct influence of chronological age (proficiency level); the higher the level, the more developed the ability to access the correct target idiomatic meaning of an idiom.
- (iii) Context is a facilitating factor in the comprehension of idioms in an EFL context: learners will be better able to comprehend less familiar idioms in context than in no-context situations.

The number of target idiomatic responses, regardless of provided context, is expected to show gradual increase as we move across levels from those of lower proficiency (Elementary level) towards higher levels (Graduate level). Learners of all levels are expected to score higher on the multiple-choice task with provided sentential context than in the absence of context. Also, they are all expected to score higher on compositional idioms than noncompositional ones, regardless of their level of proficiency.



### 3.2. Methodology

Personal judgement tasks, although favored in idiom comprehension research, were not used in the present study. Time-consuming and impractical upon the researcher in general, personal judgement tasks were discarded due to yet another reason: the untrustworthy nature of the human intuition they rely on. Studies (Keysar and Bly, 1995; Nunberg, Sag and Wasow, 1994, as cited in Katz et al., 1998: 100) indicated how ordinary speakers first learn the meanings of entire idiomatic phrases and only then do they start inferring what the parts might mean. One such example would be *the goose hangs high*, which was used in the experiment by Keysar and Bly (1995, as cited in Katz et al., 1998: 100) and whose original meaning ‘things look good’ was changed so the idiom was presented to the participants as having the meaning of ‘things look bad’. Later, when the participants were asked to rate whether the idiom's meaning made sense, the learned meaning (‘things look bad’) was generally perceived as being more transparent than the nonlearned meaning (‘things look good’), which was also the original meaning of the idiom. The results obtained in the experiment were taken to suggest that people's intuitions about what idioms mean should not be trusted, including the studies which suggest people's intuitions about idioms' meanings might be explained through the concept of conceptual metaphors (see Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Gibbs et al., 1997). Present day speakers would encounter the same amount of difficulty if asked to explain why an idiom, such as *kick the bucket*, means what it means. Although widely used in L1 speech communities and one of the more frequent phrases in L2 textbooks, few or none of the language users would be able to explain the idiom's figurative meaning and recall that it referred to an act of slaughtering hogs where they were strung on a wooden frame and their throat cut. More importantly, the current study takes place in an EFL context and the participants' level of proficiency in the English language is expected to be significantly lower than those of chronologically equivalent L1 speakers – EFL learners might not be as able to use English to verbalize their thoughts and explain intricate concepts which might be called to mind when reading/listening to an idiomatic expression. Therefore, the results of a study which would use personal judgments to determine EFL learners' comprehension of idioms would yield entirely different sets of data from what might be collected if we were to use those tasks which rely less on personal judgment of those involved. That is why the question of methodology is of utter importance due to its direct impact on the findings and why multiple-choice task was ultimately chosen as a method of asserting the participants' knowledge of idioms. All educational levels were exposed to the same set of 12 idioms chosen for the study and four choices have been given for each idiom in context and no-context task respectively. The



choices provided were the same in both situations (Context/ Isolation), but scrambled in order. The participants were given the option to choose an answer between the four provided, where each one presented one of the following categories (an example can be seen in Table 2). The no-context multiple-choice task was placed first in the questionnaire so the data collected would not be affected, which would be the case if the task containing sentential context was to precede the no-context one.

The Likert scale task followed the first set of multiple-choice questions and its purpose was to determine how well the participants knew the target idiomatic meanings of the expressions, thus eliminating the guessing factor which has often been the pitfall of multiple-choice tasks. Attempts were made to employ situations and vocabulary which was likely to be familiar even to low-proficiency levels in order to exclude the influence of factors such as reading complexities or vocabulary deficiencies upon idiom comprehension. The collected data was then subjected to statistical analyses: descriptive statistics was performed for each educational level and the data was analyzed for variance using ANOVA two-factor with replication and a z-test two-sample for means.

Table 2.

Classification system for answers on multiple-choice tasks	
Example of idiom: <i>caught between the devil and the deep blue sea</i>	
Correct idiomatic:	in a lose-lose situation
Incorrect idiomatic (not plausible within context*):	unwilling to participate
Incorrect idiomatic (plausible within context):	in a very awkward position
Incorrect literal:	trapped by the devil
*sentential context: <i>Every time I visit my parents I am caught between the devil and the deep blue sea – if I stay, I have to listen about their trip to Florida, and if I go, I have to spend the following months talking with them over the phone.</i>	



### 3.3. Results

#### 3.3.1. Elementary level

A total of 42 participants was included in the study, all eight-grade learners who were in their eighth year of studying English as a foreign language. Out of 42 subjects {mean year of birth = 1996.3, range = 1995 to 1997}, 25 were girls {mean year of birth = 1996.4, range = 1996 to 1997} and 17 were boys {mean year of birth = 1996.1, range = 1995 to 1996}. They were all native speakers of Croatian. Data collected for the Elementary level reveals that 5 out of 6 idioms that obtained the lowest scores, i.e. proved most challenging for this age group, turned out to be noncompositional in nature. 5 out of 6 idioms that got the highest accuracy scores were classified as compositional accordingly. An ANOVA two-factor with replication was then used to analyze the data with respect to context and decomposability degree of the 12 idioms using a 95% statistical reliance (level of significance was  $\alpha = .05$ ). A  $2 \times 2$  (idiom type  $\times$  presentation mode) ANOVA for the Elementary level yielded a statistically insignificant effect of the presentation mode (context) { $F(3.90) = 0.23$ ;  $p > .10$ }. The results of the ANOVA test indicate the learners' performance seemed unaffected by presentation mode, i.e. the data in Context and Isolation shows no significant difference. However, idiom type proved to have a strong effect on the data { $F(3.90) = 35.02$ ;  $p < .01$ }, while the interaction between presentation mode and idiom type also turned out to be statistically insignificant { $F(3.90) = 2.33$ ;  $p > .10$ }. The purpose of the The Likert task was to control for comprehension of the target idiomatic meanings and exclude guessing as the influencing factor. By using modes (most frequent responses) instead of means (average responses) for each of the 36 statements comprising the Likert scale, numerical data was ordered and compared with overall accuracy scores obtained in the earlier analysis. The results showed significant overlap and a z-test was performed to check for statistical reliance { $z = -3.38$ ,  $p < .01$ }. The null hypothesis that the means were equal could therefore be accepted, and guessing excluded as a factor influencing the results obtained on the Elementary level of education.

The learners' errors on multiple-choice tasks in Isolation and Context were also subjected to further examination. No response was the least frequent error type among eighth-graders, while Incorrect idiomatic (plausible within context) was by far the most frequent error they made, regardless of the context conditions. The idiomatic expressions were interpreted literally more often in Context (mean 0.93) than in Isolation (mean 1.55). The Incorrect idiomatic responses were chosen more frequently than literal responses in Context, however, when the context was not provided, the participants chose Incorrect literal responses more often than the In-



correct idiomatic (not plausible within context) ones.

### 3.3.2. *Secondary level*

A total of 20 participants was included in the study. 13 participants attended second grade and 7 were third-grade students. They have all been learning English as a third language. Out of 20 subjects {mean year of birth = 1993.9, range = 1993 to 1995}, 13 participants were female {mean year of birth = 1993.8, range = 1993 to 1995} and 7 were male {1994.1, range = 1993 to 1995}. The results seemed concordant with those obtained at the primary level of education. Further analysis with respect to compositionality of the idiomatic expressions revealed the following – 5 out of 6 most challenging idioms were noncompositional in nature, while 5 out of 6 idioms which scored highest in accuracy measures were compositional. A parallel was drawn between the results obtained on Elementary and Secondary level of education respectively. Context appeared as an irrelevant factor in idiom interpretation on the Secondary level just as it did on the Elementary level. Again, idiom compositionality had a significant influence over the results { $F(3,97) = 28.11; p < .01$ }. Interaction of context and compositionality was not significant { $F(3,97) = 0.61; p > .10$ }. The data collected on the Likert scale task was compared to the accuracy scores by means of a two-sample z-test. The results { $z = -3.44, p < .01$ } indicated that the null hypothesis held ground, i.e. there was no statistically relevant difference between the accuracy scores and the Likert task data and guessing was excluded as an influencing factor. It seemed high school learners' most frequent error type was the Incorrect idiomatic which was plausible within context. Literal responses were chosen more often in Isolation (mean 0.80) than in Context (mean 0.40), suggesting the facilitating effect of contextual information when it comes to discerning the differences between the literal and figurative responses. As expected, the number of overall error types decreased in comparison to Elementary level, with the exception of No response, which was more frequent with Secondary level (mean 0.55) than with Elementary level (mean 0.39).

### 3.3.3. *Higher education levels*

First year undergraduate students, all of whom studied English Language and Literature as part of their double-major studies, participated in the study. Out of 31 students {mean age = 19.3, range = 18 to 24}, all native speakers of Croatian, 25 were female {mean age = 19.1, range = 18 to 20} and 6 were male {mean age = 20.3, range = 19 to 24}. 4 out of 6 idioms that scored lowest in accuracy were non-compositional in nature and the ratio was the same in favor of compositional idi-



oms if we look at the 6 idioms that scored highest in accuracy. A  $2 \times 2$  (idiom type  $\times$  presentation mode) ANOVA using a confidence level of mean of 95% yielded the following results: the effect of context upon the results was statistically insignificant  $\{F(3.92) = 0.29; p > .10\}$ , while compositionality had a strong effect  $\{F(3.92) = 26.60; p < .01\}$ . The interaction was statistically not significant  $\{F(3.92) = 2.65; p > .10\}$ . A two-sample z-test excluded guessing as a relevant factor  $\{z = -3.31, p < .01\}$ . Incorrect idiomatic (plausible within context) was once again the most frequent error type among the first year undergraduates regardless of the presentation mode. While the Undergraduate level scored the lowest number of No response answers, the number of Incorrect literal responses was higher with undergraduates (mean 1.02) than it was with Secondary level students (mean 0.60), although the latter remained consistent with respect to the ratio of Incorrect literal responses in Context and Isolation – literal responses were more frequent in the absence of contextual information than in the presence of the same.

A total of 23 subjects in their first year of graduate studies participated in the study  $\{\text{mean age} = 23.0, \text{range} = 22 \text{ to } 26\}$ . They have all been studying English as part of their double-major studies for three years (all participants had completed their BA studies) and at the time of the study were enrolled in their first year of graduate studies (teaching module). 20 were female  $\{\text{mean age} = 23.1, \text{range} = 22 \text{ to } 26\}$  and 3 were male  $\{\text{mean age} = 22.7, \text{range} = 22 \text{ to } 23\}$ . 5 out of 6 idioms which had the lowest combined score in accuracy were noncompositional. The ratio was again in favor of compositional idioms – 5 out of 6 idioms with highest accuracy scores were recognized as compositional. To test the results of the initial analysis, ANOVA was performed using the number of correct responses and context and decomposability as independent variables. A  $2 \times 2$  (idiom type  $\times$  presentation mode) ANOVA yielded the following results: context was again proven to have a statistically insignificant effect upon the results  $\{F(3.95) = 1.46; p > .10\}$ , while idiom compositionality exerted great influence upon the results  $\{F(3.95) = 28.10; p < .01\}$ . Interestingly, the interaction between context and idiom type also proved significant  $\{F(3.95) = 6.30; p \leq .01\}$  and the null hypothesis that the influence of context was the same for compositional and noncompositional idioms respectively could have been rejected – it seems the number of correct responses varied across the two presentation modes (Context/Isolation) with respect to idiom type.

A z-test comparing the data obtained in the Likert scale with the accuracy scores excluded guessing as a factor  $\{z = -5.88, p < .01\}$ . An error analysis was performed for the first year of graduate studies as well. The most frequent error type for the Graduate level-first year was the Incorrect idiomatic (plausible within context),



while the least frequent was No response. The results were thus concordant with those obtained for other levels of education. A more detailed observation revealed that the number of errors decreased in Context for each error type apart from the Incorrect idiomatic (plausible within context) where the number of errors increased in the context situation (mean 1.70 in Isolation; mean 1.78 in Context). The number of Incorrect literal responses was notably lower in Context (mean 0.26) than in Isolation (mean 0.39) which was also in accordance with the results obtained for the other educational levels.

A total of 19 subjects {mean age = 23.8, range = 23 to 28}, all of whom were enrolled in their second year of graduate studies, participated in the study. The subjects were all native speakers of Croatian and have been studying English as part of their double-major studies. Out of 19 participants, 15 were female {mean age = 23.7, range = 23 to 28} and 4 were male {mean age = 24.0, range = 23 to 25}. An initial analysis of the results did not reveal a correlation between idiom type and its accuracy score as was observed with other age groups, however, 4 out of 5 idioms which obtained the perfect score in Context (100%) were compositional. In order to get more conclusive results and see whether the initial observation held ground, an ANOVA (idiom type  $\times$  presentation mode) was performed using the number of correct responses on the multiple-choice tasks. The effect of presentation mode was statistically not significant { $F(3.97) = 1.29; p > .10$ }. Idiom type, however, proved to have a significant effect upon the results { $F(3.97) = 13.37; p < .01$ }. The interaction was significant in 90% of the cases { $F(3.97) = 3.58; p < .10$ }. A z-test excluded guessing as a relevant factor { $z = -6.23, p < .01$ }. The results for Graduate level-second year showed that their most frequent error was Incorrect idiomatic (plausible within context), while they made no errors of the No response type. The number of Incorrect idiomatic (plausible within context) error types was higher in Context (mean 1.47) than in Isolation (mean 1.26), while they made more Incorrect literal responses in Isolation (mean 0.53) than when context was provided (mean 0.05).

#### 3.3.4. *General comparison*

A cross-comparison of the five educational levels was performed and then compared to the anticipated results. A comparative analysis of the mean target idiomatic responses for each level confirmed claim (ii) that was established earlier in the study: proficiency level indeed influences the number of correct responses for each group which increases as we move towards more advanced learners (mean 6.76 for Elementary, mean 7.68 for Secondary, mean 8.15 for Undergraduate, mean



9.28 for Graduate-first year, and mean 10.13 for Graduate level-second year). A closer look at the two modes of presentation reveals a somewhat different picture: a steady increase in numbers across levels is noted, with the exception of Secondary level, which obtained a lower mean of correct responses in Isolation (mean 7.25) than Elementary level (mean 7.81). Inconsistency is present in the numbers obtained in Context as well: Secondary level managed to score a higher number of correct responses in Context (mean 8.10) than Undergraduate level (mean 7.90) did. Following the methodology set out by Nippold & Martin (1989) in their developmental study with adolescents, a  $5 \times 2$  (educational level  $\times$  presentation mode) ANOVA without replication was run with error type serving as the dependent variable. The results obtained for each of the four error types are listed below:

(1) *Incorrect idiomatic (plausible within context)*: Significant effects were obtained for educational level  $\{F(6,39) = 50.77; p < .01\}$ , but presentation mode was insignificant  $\{F(7,71) = 4.08; p > .10\}$ . Learners of all levels made more Incorrect idiomatic (plausible within context) errors in Context than in Isolation.

(2) *Incorrect idiomatic (not plausible within context)*: Significant effects were obtained for educational level  $\{F(6,39) = 25.20; p < .01\}$ , but presentation mode was insignificant  $\{F(7,71) = 4.29; p > .10\}$ . The number of Incorrect idiomatic (not plausible within context) errors was lower in Context for all levels, except for Elementary where the number was lower in Isolation than in Context.

(3) *Incorrect literal*: Significant effects were obtained for educational level  $\{F(6,39) = 20.72; p < .05\}$  as well as for presentation mode  $\{F(7,71) = 21.44; p < .05\}$ . All levels made more Incorrect literal errors in Isolation than in Context. Undergraduates gave more Incorrect literal responses than high-school learners in both presentation modes. Second year of Graduate level made more Incorrect literal responses in Isolation than first year of Graduate level did.

(4) *No response*: Both educational level  $\{F(6,39) = 2.36; p > .10\}$  and presentation mode  $\{F(7,71) = 0.17; p > .10\}$  were statistically insignificant.

None of the five sets of data reported significant effect of presentation mode (Context/Isolation). This was not the case with idiom type (Compositional/Noncompositional), which was found to have a statistically significant effect upon the data collected on all five levels, i.e. the number of correct idiomatic responses varied with respect to idiom type. The interaction of presentation mode and idiom type was insignificant for lower proficiency levels (Elementary, Secondary, Undergraduate). However, ANOVA showed a significant interaction of the variables for Graduate level-first year ( $p \leq .01$ ), while for Graduate level – second year



a significant interaction was obtained at a .10 level ( $p < .10$ ). It might be concluded that compositionality is an influencing factor on idiom comprehension regardless of age/proficiency level and it seems that claim (i) we set out at the beginning of the study holds ground – idioms differ in their degree of compositionality and compositional idioms are easier to comprehend for EFL learners precisely since they can undergo semantic analysis. Table 3 presents the data obtained in the study – the mean number of correct idiomatic responses was calculated for each group with respect to idiom type.

Table 3.

Correct responses on the multiple-choice tasks for compositional and noncompositional idioms.							
		Compositional			Noncompositional		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Elementary level	Isolation	3.90	1.62	0-6	2.05	1.15	0-4
	Context	3.40	1.85	0-6	2.31	1.76	0-6
	Combined	3.65	1.73		2.18	1.45	
Secondary level	Isolation	4.50	1.36	1-6	2.75	1.33	0-5
	Context	4.70	1.13	3-6	3.40	1.31	1-5
	Combined	4.60	1.24		3.08	1.32	
Undergraduate level	Isolation	4.84	1.32	1-6	3.23	1.06	1-5
	Context	4.32	1.49	0-6	3.48	1.39	1-6
	Combined	4.58	1.41		3.35	1.22	
Graduate level – 1st year	Isolation	5.39	0.99	2-6	3.57	1.31	1-6
	Context	5.09	0.79	3-6	4.43	1.31	2-6
	Combined	5.24	0.89		4.00	1.31	
Graduate level – 2nd year	Isolation	5.53	0.84	3-6	4.37	1.07	2-6
	Context	5.37	0.76	4-6	5.00	0.94	4-6
	Combined	5.45	0.80		4.68	1.00	

Mean number of correct responses is higher for compositional idioms than for noncompositional ones for each of the five respective groups. For both idiom types there was a record of gradual increase in the number of correct responses as we moved towards higher levels of proficiency, with one apparent exception: Secondary level had a higher number of correct responses (mean 4.60) for compositional idioms than Undergraduate level did (mean 4.58). Compositional idioms showed better overall comprehension in Isolation than in Context for all groups except high school learners, who understood them better in Context (mean 4.70) than in Isolation (mean 4.50). Noncompositional idioms showed no such exception – all five lev-



els understood them better in Context than they did in the absence of contextual information.

#### 4. Discussion

When the role of context in idiom comprehension was discussed in the introduction, its facilitating role was emphasized. It was also anticipated that the results would support claim (iii) which states that context facilitates understanding and thus better comprehension will be registered in Context than in Isolation. As mentioned earlier, several studies carried out in the past brought the facilitating effect of context into question (Gibbs, 1980: 150; Levorato and Cacciari, 1992, as cited in Cain, Towse and Knight, 2009: 284). Gibbs (1980: 150) claims idiom comprehension is not conditioned by context as much as it was previously thought because idioms have strong conventional meanings associated with them; however, context will play a crucial role in understanding idioms that are used unconventionally. The outlined study seems to support these claims. The data collected goes in favor of yet another claim made earlier in this paper: noncompositional idioms, being processed as lexical chunks, will probably benefit more from contextual information (Nippold and Rudzinski, 1989: 59). This claim was tested against the results obtained for noncompositional idioms used in the study. The results showed that the number of correct idiomatic responses for noncompositional idioms increased in Context for each of the five groups, while context facilitated the comprehension of compositional idioms only in the case of high school learners (the other four groups understood noncompositional idioms more often in isolation). Elementary (mean in Isolation 7.81; mean in Context 5.71) and Undergraduate (mean in Isolation 8.39; mean in Context 7.90) level are the only two groups which seem not to have benefited from contextual information and their overall scores show lower means of correct idiomatic responses in Context than in Isolation (Figure 1).

In the earlier discussion about the role of context it was mentioned that children rely more on inferences from context and prefer this strategy over semantic analysis (Cain, Towse and Knight, 2009: 285). However, the results obtained in this study seem to refute such a conclusion: eighth-graders were not as successful in with-context conditions as they were in no-context conditions. Interestingly, context helped them discern figurative from literal interpretations: Incorrect literal responses were less frequent in Context (mean 0.93) than in Isolation (mean 1.55). The findings corroborate Gibbs' (1991: 616) conclusion that children give more literal explanations in no-context conditions.

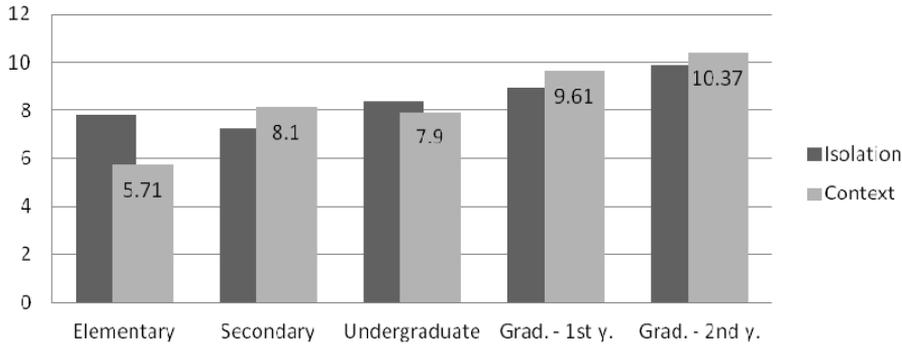


Figure 1. Mean target idiomatic responses across levels.

A belief which is still maintained in the field of idiom comprehension is that the control of figurative language is a late-developing skill in children. Douglas and Peel (1979, as cited in Abkarian, Jones and West, 1992: 581) used short-story contexts and had children explain the meanings of idioms. Their findings indicated literal interpretations were characteristic of younger children (first graders), but by third grade, three fourths of 30 children they tested were able to demonstrate figurative knowledge of given idioms. These findings were considered evidence of the generally accepted developmental pattern for elementary school children – increasing age is accompanied by a decrease in literal interpretations. These studies were carried out in L1 contexts and thus need to be handled with caution when it comes to comparing their findings with those obtained in a study involving EFL participants. If we take into account that increasing chronological age accompanied the increase in figurative language comprehension in our EFL study as well, and that a decrease in literal explanations was noticeable across the observed age groups (with the exception of Undergraduate level, whose Incorrect literal responses (mean 1.02) were more frequent than the ones obtained for Secondary level (mean 0.60)), it might indicate that the findings in L1 contexts are, to some extent, applicable in EFL contexts as well. The developmental patterns noticed in L1 elementary school children hold ground in our study as well, except for the fact that the pattern can be followed across different levels of education. It remains to be seen whether Croatian EFL learners would demonstrate such subtle differences in figurative language comprehension if more adjacent age groups were to be studied (for example, fifth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders). However, none of the explanations provided so far account for the differences observed with Elementary and Undergraduate level – why did eighth-graders and first year undergraduates not benefit from contextual information? The study carried out by Abkarian, Jones and West



(1992: 585), who tested idiom comprehension in native American preschool and school-age children (3 to 6 years of age), came up with findings that did not support the view that sees idiom learning as a straight-line function toward greater and greater nonliteral interpretation with increasing age. It might be that idiom comprehension with EFL learners proceeds in a similar fashion. In the case of Elementary level, context should have been proven a facilitatory factor as other studies have recorded so far (Nippold and Martin, 1989; Cain, Towse and Knight, 2009), however, Croatian eighth-graders did not find sentential context helpful in interpreting idiomatic expressions. Inference from context is a strategy well developed by this age in L1 contexts, however, it seems EFL learners have not grasped the full extent of the skill: not only did they fail to make use of contextual clues, but they also found it distracting. Although combined mean for undergraduates (mean 8.15) was higher than for high school learners (mean 7.68), undergraduates were outperformed by high schoolers in with-context conditions. Elementary level outperformed Secondary level in Isolation (mean 7.81 and 7.25 respectively). These findings suggest EFL learners of lower proficiency in English (mainly Elementary and Secondary level) rely on different sets of strategies when it comes to discerning figurative meanings.

It seems context facilitates idiom comprehension with some age groups and not with others. Although it is to be expected that children acquire inference from context prior to semantic analysis (Cain, Towse and Knight, 2009: 285), it seems EFL learners do not follow such a developmental pattern as rigorously as L1 speakers. One of the possible explanations might be that EFL learners develop the skills of semantic analysis along with their skills of inference from context during their formal education. Claim (iii) about the facilitative nature of context was, therefore, not confirmed by the findings of this study – it appears context is a facilitating factor only for highly advanced learners and the discrepancies between different levels observed in this study indicate that language proficiency is not as determined by educational levels as previously thought. In other words, school curricula, the length of exposure to language as well as sociolinguistic skills and other factors might have influenced the learners' performance in this study.

## 5. Concluding remarks

By teaching learners to speak figuratively, we are shaping them into more capable language users. The next logical step would be determining which forms of figurative language to teach and which to avoid in order not to burden the learner with too much input. Idioms are, fair to say, not at the beginning of the list due to their



strong relation to L1 contexts they derive from, but studying how they are acquired in EFL contexts might facilitate our understanding of the general process of learning words and phrases in a foreign language. In choosing which idioms to include in EFL curricula, an ongoing research into the nature of conceptual metaphors might prove essential, since it appears that some idiomatic expressions are governed by *primary* metaphors, which are universal in nature and shared across different languages, such as *time*, *emotions* and *self* (Kövecses, 2003: 319). Andreou & Galantomos (2008: 71) find metaphoric competence to be an indication of overall communicative competence in a foreign language, and as such it should form an indispensable part of EFL curricula. They also find conceptual metaphors as a means of discerning which idioms to include in language instruction, however, they make claim that idioms which are not motivated by such metaphors should also be included “in order to enrich the content of conceptual syllabus” (ibid.: 74). Adding to this, the study outlined in this paper aimed to show how idiom compositionality is yet another factor which should be taken into account when choosing which idioms to include. This is not to imply that only compositional idioms should be included, but rather that EFL learners should be instructed how to employ different strategies; their metacognitive skills should be subjected to constant attempts at improvement, because knowing how idioms are eventually acquired will help the learners discern the most efficient way to learn them.

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**RAZUMIJEVANJE FRAZEMA KOD HRVATSKIH UČENIKA ENGLESKOGA JEZIKA:  
KONTEKST, KOMPOZICIONALNOST I DOB KAO ČINITELJI**

Brojni činitelji utječu na razumijevanje frazema u kontekstu učenja stranoga jezika. Oni su, između ostalog, dob, kontekst, poznavanje frazema te njegova kompozicionalnost (stupanj podložnosti frazema semantičkoj analizi pojedinih sastavnica). Istraživanje u kojem su korištena pitanja višestrukog izbora i Likertova skala provedeno je kako bi se utvrdio način na koji hrvatski učenici engleskoga jezika sa različitih obrazovnih razina (osnovna, sekundarna, preddiplomska, diplomatska) razumijevaju frazeme te koji činitelji više utječu na njihovo razumijevanje, odnosno postoje li među činiteljima zamjetne razlike u utjecaju. Svrha ovoga rada je utvrditi smjer poučavanja figurativnog jezika u kontekstu poučavanja stranoga jezika nadograđujući postojeće znanje o činiteljima koji doprinose razumijevanju frazema.

**Ključne riječi:** razumijevanje frazema; kompozicionalnost; engleski; hrvatski; rečenični kontekst.