

EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF CONVENTIONALISED SIMILES IN ENGLISH LEXICOLOGY AND PHRASEOLOGY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Idioms are a colourful and fascinating aspect of English which are commonly used in all types of language, formal and informal, spoken and written. Despite the emerging theoretical accounts of idioms up to now, little attention has been paid to teaching and learning idiomatic expressions in English as a Foreign Language, English for Specific Purposes or English for Academic Purposes classroom. Developing idiomatic competence among English language learners in Slovakia remains a formidable challenge. Second-year undergraduates of the study programmes 'Teacher Training of English Language and Literature' (single major study) and 'Teacher Training of English Language and Literature (double major study) need to master different types of idioms within one-term course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology'. Their language skills will increase rapidly if they can understand and use them confidently and correctly. The communication role of idiomatic comparisons is often neglected, as well. The aim of the paper is to find out their level of knowledge of standard idiomatic comparisons at the beginning and the end of the course. The paper intends to reveal how students of different nationalities – Slovak, Hungarian, Russian and Ukrainian – are able to explain the meaning of similes used in example sentences in English or their mother tongue. Altogether 51 students are tested twice via tests focused on similes, and their results are compared via a statistical t-Test. The results from the initial test show that their knowledge of idiomatic comparisons was not very wide. However, the results from the final test prove that they were motivated to learn idioms, and thus they extended their knowledge of idiomatic comparisons significantly. In addition, the paper suggests some implications for teaching and learning similes and phraseological units in general.

Keywords: Comparison; Simile; Metaphor; Translation; Topic; Vehicle; Idiomatic Competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

It seems that idioms are a fascinating aspect of English for many students of the Department of English Language and Culture of the Faculty of Education. From pedagogical experience, it can be said that single and double major students of Slovak, Hungarian, Russian, Ukrainian and Serbian nationalities like writing up bachelor's or master's theses focused on searching for idiomatic expressions in pieces of literature for children or adults as well as identifying their translation strategies in books published in their mother tongue, or searching for them in textbooks used in primary, secondary or language schools. They are eager to investigate this aspect of English, but they face many problems. Firstly, it is often impossible for them to guess the meaning of an idiom from the words it contains. Secondly, the Internet offers plenty of online dictionaries and for learners it is more comfortable to use them. When they do not use printed versions of dictionaries, they make mistakes in identifying the correct structures of idioms. Thirdly, they are not aware of nominal, adjectival or verbal variations in British, American or Australian English, let alone the variations in similes (Parizoska & Filipović Petrović, 2017). In addition, since Slovak punctuation is difficult for foreign students, they have problems with correct translations of idioms from English into Slovak. To enhance the quality of the final theses, they should have an excellent eye for detail.

Within the only course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology', learners deal with idiomatic expressions such as traditional idioms (e.g. *turn a blind eye to sth*, *throw the baby out with the bathwater*), idiomatic compounds (e.g. *fall guy*, *turkey shoot*), **similes and comparisons** (e.g. *as dull as ditchwater*, *like a bull in a china shop*), binomials and trinomials (e.g. *wine and dine*; *blood, sweat and tears*), exclamations, proverbs and sayings (e.g. *bully for you!*, *it takes two to tango*, *over my dead body!*), clichés and fixed statements (e.g. *all part of life's rich tapestry*, *there's many a true word spoken in jest*; *so far, so good*), euphemisms (e.g. *breathe my last*, *powder my nose*), quotations (e.g. *the die is cast*, *do not cast your pearls before swine*) and idioms from Latin and French (e.g. *compos mentis*, *au fait with*) (Gajdáčová Veselá, 2019; Kvetko, 2006; O'Dell & McCarthy, 2010). As it can be seen, the range of idioms to master is wide. However, our focus here is put on conventionalised similes only. The learner can use them to make his or her spoken and written English more colourful as well as his or her comparisons more powerful.

Quintilian (Bredin, 1998) writes that in simile one compares some object to the thing which he or she wishes to describe, but Quintilian also writes that simile is drawn from things nearly equal. According to him, comparing and likening are much the same thing. Ortony (1979) claims that comparisons are more or less successful or appropriate to the extent to which the things being compared are, or can be found to be, similar. Miller (1979) states that comparison statements are easily recognisable by their use of one or another copula of similitude: 'like', 'is like', etc. According to Bredin (1998), who explains the difference between comparisons and similes, these views are clearly mistaken. Although one may look for similarities among things, he or she may not always find them.

The literature about simile varies widely on that issue. Ortony (1979) argues that there are two kinds of comparisons – literal and non-literal, which differ only in degree.

Miller (1979) describes three kinds of comparisons – literal comparisons, similes and analogies. Fishelov (1993) discusses literal comparisons, non-poetic similes and poetic similes. Addison (1993) identifies simile with comparison, but then distinguishes between literal and figurative similes. Bredin (1998) argues that there are six logically different kinds of comparison judgement – open comparisons, simple closed comparisons and variable closed comparisons, each of which has both an affirmative and a negative form. Correspondingly, there are six logically different kinds of simile.

Many scholars define similes as conventionalised expressions which assert a similarity relation between two entities – the topic and the vehicle (Glucksberg, 2001; Chiappe & Kennedy, 2001; Chiappe, Kennedy & Smykowski, 2003; Norrick, 1986; Ortony, 1993) – and the comparison is signalled by the markers 'as' or 'like' in English. The typical pattern is '(as) + adjective + as + noun', for instance *(as) clear as crystal* in English, 'olyan tiszta mint a kristály' in Hungarian, 'чистый как хрусталь' in Russian or 'чистий як кришталь' in Ukrainian, etc. in which the noun identifies the vehicle whose salient property is attributed to the topic, and the adjective expresses the property – the tertium that provides the basis for comparison.

According to Bredin (1998), similes are a variety of semantic figure. They are a mode of comparison, and this is why they are quite different from metaphors (Adamcová, 2017; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which are not comparisons in any shape or form. In one respect similes and metaphor (and irony) are alike, namely, that they share a common mortality. There are dead similes just as there are dead ironies and dead metaphors, e.g. *white as sheet*, *green as grass*, *as stale as yesterday's news*, *like two turtle-doves*, *as clean as a new pin*, and so forth. To say that these are 'dead' similes is to say that they have lost their figurativeness and have become literal, i.e. they have become conventional and univocal. One consequence of literalness of similes is that they cease to be comparisons, even though they retain the syntactical and logical form of comparisons.

Tartakovsky and Shen (2019) distinguish between two types of closed similes – the standard (e.g. *meek as a lamb*) and the non-standard (e.g. *meek as milk*). While the standard simile presents a ground that is a salient feature of the source term, the non-standard simile somewhat enigmatically supplies a non-salient ground. In their study, they focus more on the non-standard similes and investigate how these two simile types are distributed across poetic and non-poetic corpora.

Cuenca (2015) states that a simile is a complex conceptual and linguistic process of analogy, whose identification and analysis go back to classical Rhetoric. Although the interest in this process has increased, similes have been generally studied in relation and contrast to metaphor (Burcl, 2013, 2014) and from a rhetorical or psycholinguistic point of view. Bernárdez (2009) points out that it is often the case that research on similes neglects their discourse dimension by analysing them in absence of context (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990; Bredin, 1998; Gentner & Bowdle, 2001; Glucksberg & Haught, 2006). Thus, their role in communication is generally overlooked. To contribute to filling in the gap, Cuenca (2015) focuses on the description of 'A és com B' similes found in Catalan texts. She pays special attention to their context of use, generally the whole text, and the functions and other relevant features that characterise them discursively. The very process of constructing her corpus highlights that certain topics and genres are prone to

include similes. Especially, similes are very frequent and significant in newspapers and web pages related to information and opinion in interviews, news, commentary sections, blogs, and news commentaries by readers).

Moon's (2008) research is aimed at a corpus-based investigation of conventionalised English similes which follow the pattern '(as) + adjective + as + noun group'. She describes their formal and semantic characteristics, discusses the variation, approaches to handling variation, and procedures for establishing the simile lexicon. She deals with the frequencies of 'as -similes' in the Bank of English corpus, including their distribution in British English, and compares these to frequencies observed in other corpora (fiction vs. newspaper). In addition, she speculates on how conventionalised 'as -similes' survive in the lexicon despite their apparent infrequency in (corpus) text.

Norrick (1986) is interested especially in 'stock similes' and gathered these from the *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*. Stock similes are those which regularly recur in the texts of a linguistic community. Typical English examples have 'as' after the adjective heads as in *old as the hills* and 'like' after verbal heads as in *sleep like a log*. The noun phrase following 'as' or 'like' identifies the vehicle of the simile; the vehicle exemplifies the property the predicate head names. This property is called the tertium of the comparison. So, the example *the killer was as hungry as a wolf* describes a relation of equivalence between the object 'killer' and the vehicle 'wolf' with respect to the tertium 'hungry'.

Parizoska and Filipović Petrović's study (2017) describe the variation of Croatian similes which follow the pattern 'adjective + kao ('as') + noun', e.g. 'crven kao rak' (*red as crab*). Previous studies have mostly focused on noun variation and their semantic relations with adjectives, e.g. 'crven kao rak/paprika' (*red as crab/pepper*). They focus on variations of adjectival slots in 98 adjectival similes in the Croatian web corpus hrWaC. The results show that adjectival slots can be filled by adjectives, adverbs and verbs, e.g. 'pocrvenjeti kao rak' (*turn red as a crab*). Red, green, black and white colours can form numerous comparative constructions (Spišiaková & Mocková, 2020). These scholars research traditional academic dictionaries and the web corpus Araneum in order to find pluriverbal constructions with the pattern 'rojo + como + noun', e.g. 'rojo como la guindilla' (*red as hot pepper*), el pimiento (pepper), la gamba (prawn), el fuego (fire), la lava (lava), la sangre (blood). However, they also find new and interesting comparisons, e.g. 'rojo como las banderas sindicalistas' (red as the union flags), 'como un hígado mal cocido' (as a badly cooked liver) or 'ponerse roja come Heidi' (to become red as Heidi). Also, Spišiaková, Mocková and Smoleňová (2021) deal with lexical units and constructions containing the element of black and white colour and investigate their similarities and differences in the structure in Spanish, Italian and Slovak.

Li et al. (2012) state that people often use similes of pattern 'as + adjective + as + noun' to express their feelings on web medias. The adjective in the pattern is generally the salient property and strong impression of the noun entity in the speaker's mind. By querying the simile templates from search engines, they construct a large database on 'noun-adjective' items in English and Chinese, which highlight the same and different basic sentiments on the same entity in both languages.

Despite the fact that many scholars deal with corpuses of conventionalised similes, not many scholars test how students are able to deal with such expressions.

Wisnita's (2019) descriptive quantitative research tries to explore and find out the students' understanding on selected metaphors and similes in English context. Results from the test reveal that understanding on these two topics is fair. However, this data seem to show that students need to improve their knowledge of the differences between metaphor and simile.

In Slovakia, similes with the pattern 'as + adjective + as + noun' are taught in primary and secondary schools within the language area of comparing and the function of expressing the equivalence. English language learners should be familiar with, for instance, *as big as an elephant, as black as coal, as blind as a bat, as blue as the sky, as brave a lion, as cold as ice, as cool as a cucumber, as deep as the ocean, as dry as a bone, as gentle as a lamb, as good as gold, as green as grass, as heavy as lead, as high as a mountain, as light as a feather, as long as a snake, as proud as a peacock, as quiet as a mouse, as red as a beetroot, as white as snow, as wide as the sky, as wise as an owl*, etc. (Hutchinson, 2000, 1998, 1993; McKinlay & Hastings, 2007). They should know expressions for each of these in their own language, too. What is more, textbooks include activities focused on cultural aspects through which students' pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences should be developed. Sándorová (2020) emphasises the need to integrate intercultural aspects in EFL lessons in Slovak secondary schools. She investigates the implicit and explicit occurrence of the means of sociolinguistic competence through codes such as 'folk wisdom' (e.g. *time is money, her voice is as smooth as honey*) through which idiomatic vocabulary can be enriched.

According to Liontas (2015), 'idiomatic competence' – 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 – may be interpreted as belonging to sociolinguistic competence as offered by both Canale and Swain's (1980) and Bachman's (1990) framework of language competence (Hymes, 1972; Widdowson, 1980). As English language learners in Slovakia move through higher levels of education and proficiency, teaching must encourage them to learn idioms in a more explicit and systematic way if they are to correctly develop idiomatic competence in the English language and culture.

2. METHODS

Participants

In the winter semester of 2022/2023, two groups of second-year students of the study programmes 'Teacher Training of English Language and Literature' (single major study) and 'Teacher Training of English Language and Literature (double major study, that is, a combination with subjects like Art of Music, Pedagogy, Psychology, Physical Education, Visual Arts) of the Faculty of Education of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra participated in the research study.

Materials and procedure

In order to build a corpus of similes, the printed versions of *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (1993) and *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* (2006) were used. Since all example sentences in the dictionaries were included in the Oxford and Cambridge

International Corpora, they reflect natural written and spoken English. The main criterion for choosing the type of simile was to include only similes with the pattern 'as + adjective + as + noun phrase' (Moon, 2008). We were able to gather 162 similes by manually scanning for the marker 'as', then excluded the easier ones. The first corpus for testing students consisted of 60 more difficult similes. However, we supposed that the respondents should be able to deal with them as well as they might be useful for them. Every simile is illustrated in an example sentence (see Appendix).

At the beginning of the winter semester 2022/2023, in the first seminar, both groups of students were tested on idiomatic comparisons with the pattern 'as/so + adjective + as + noun phrase'. Naturally, they were not told about testing in order to find out their general knowledge of similes. In the first exercise, they were asked to translate idiomatic similes from English into Slovak. Since many students were of different nationalities and do not understand Slovak very well, they were allowed to translate them into their mother tongue, namely Hungarian, Russian and Ukrainian. In the second exercise, they were asked to write similes they were aware of, and which were not included in the test (only a tiny number of students was able to write some, however, they mentioned easier ones, e.g. *as blue as the sky, as white as snow, as green as grass, as red as pepper, as black as coal*).

At the end of the semester, the students were tested again to find out if their knowledge of idiomatic comparisons improved. During the semester, they were engaged in purposeful, real-life activities and tasks, not fill-in-the-blank exercises, or tedious collections of idioms devoid of communicative interest or personal investment. Interaction provided them with the opportunity to talk in the target language requiring them to interact with the input that was interesting, relevant and comprehensible. They acquired similes as a result of learning how to participate in idiomatic conversations.

Data analysis

In the only course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology', the students did two tests, before the course starts and after the course finishes, on idiomatic comparisons via the initial and final tests (see Appendix). To compare the level of students' knowledge, the method of Hypothesis Testing, namely t-Test (see Tables 4-8), has been chosen (Kučerová & Fidlerová, 2012).

Research questions

Q1: What is the level of students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons starting the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology'?

Q2: To what extent are the single and double major students able to understand the meaning of idiomatic comparisons used in context?

Q3: What knowledge of idiomatic comparisons do the single and double major students have at the end of the semester?

Research hypotheses

H₁: There is a significant difference in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology').

H₀: There is not a significant difference in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology').

H₂: There is a significant difference in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons.

H₀: There is not a significant difference in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the demographic breakdown of the participants (referred to as learners) in the study on 'Teacher Training of English Language and Literature'. The respondents were categorised based on their single major or double major status, and further differentiated by gender. The proportions of male and female learners in each category are as follows:

Single major: males – 26%; females – 74%.

Double major (including subjects like Art of Music, Pedagogy, Psychology, Physical Education, Visual Arts): males – 21%; females – 79%.

It is evident from the data that the two groups, single major and double major, were approximately equal in size. Additionally, considering all students of English Language and Literature, 24% of males and 76% of females participated in the research study.

Table 1. Demographic breakdown of the participants (English language learners)

Learners	Females	Males	Total
Single Major	17	6	23
Double Major	22	6	28
Total	39	12	51

The results achieved in the initial and final tests by single major students and double major students are shown in Tables 2-3 and graphically represented in Figures 1-4.

Table 2. Results achieved in the initial and final tests (single major students)

Single major	Results (%) Initial test	Results (%) Final test	Single major	Results (%) Initial test	Results (%) Final test
Student 1	13%	80%	Student 13	5%	80%
Student 2	5%	40%	Student 14	18%	20%
Student 3	27%	80%	Student 15	27%	100%
Student 4	40%	80%	Student 16	47%	80%
Student 5	38%	60%	Student 17	3%	40%
Student 6	23%	100%	Student 18	7%	40%
Student 7	20%	60%	Student 19	20%	20%
Student 8	27%	60%	Student 20	8%	20%
Student 9	18%	80%	Student 21	15%	80%
Student 10	30%	80%	Student 22	30%	60%
Student 11	7%	80%	Student 23	30%	20%
Student 12	7%	80%	---	---	---

Table 3. Results achieved in the initial and final tests (double major students)

Double major	Results (%) Initial test	Results (%) Final test	Double major	Results (%) Initial test	Results (%) Final test
Student 1	23%	40%	Student 15	23%	80%
Student 2	28%	100%	Student 16	42%	80%
Student 3	17%	20%	Student 17	43%	40%
Student 4	13%	40%	Student 18	58%	100%
Student 5	17%	20%	Student 19	12%	40%
Student 6	12%	20%	Student 20	33%	40%
Student 7	18%	80%	Student 21	10%	20%
Student 8	30%	40%	Student 22	10%	0%
Student 9	27%	60%	Student 23	33%	60%
Student 10	23%	100%	Student 24	25%	40%
Student 11	17%	20%	Student 25	35%	40%
Student 12	45%	20%	Student 26	13%	40%
Student 13	23%	20%	Student 27	43%	80%
Student 14	60%	20%	Student 28	32%	20%

As it can be seen, Tables 2-3 compare the results of the initial and final tests focused on similes achieved by single major and double major students. It is obvious that there is a tendency to achieve better results in final tests when students are engaged in doing regular and meaningful exercises.

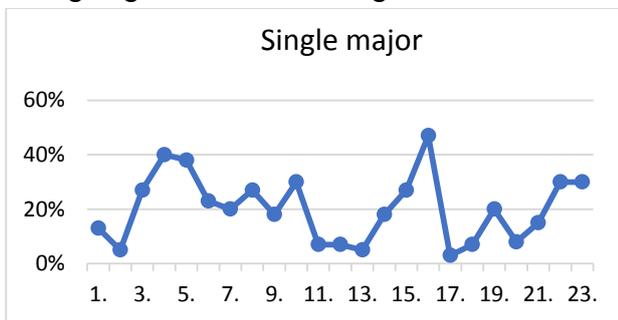


Figure 1. Results achieved in the initial test.

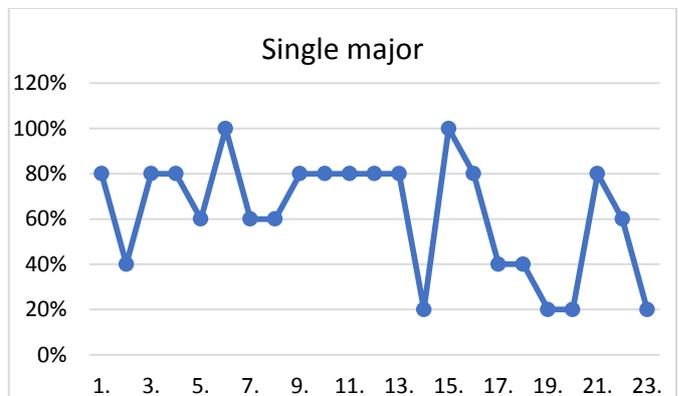


Figure 2. Results achieved in the final test.

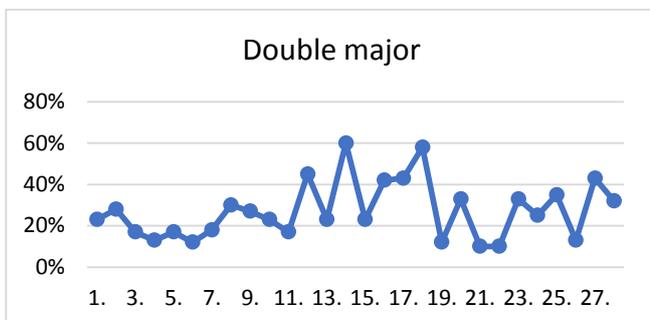


Figure 3. Results achieved in the initial test.

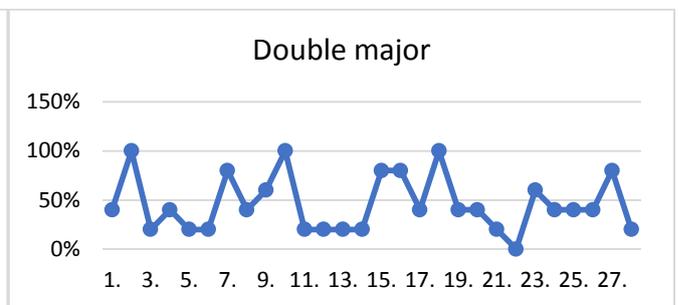


Figure 4. Results achieved in the final test.

Table 4 shows ascertained statistics, that is, the results of the initial tests and final tests achieved by single major and double major students. The average expresses the percentage of success per student. The standard deviation expresses the variability of the results achieved in initial and final tests.

Table 4. Ascertained statistics

Results	Single major		Double major	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Initial test	20.22	12.122	27.3	1.560
Final test	63.48	26.145	45.7	28.212

To test the hypotheses, the t-Tests applied via the Excel software were used.

Testing H₁:

H₀: There is not a significant difference in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology').

H₁: There is a significant difference in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology').

Tables 5-6 show the difference, that is, an increase in the results of the initial and final tests achieved by single major and double major students.

Table 5. Results achieved by single major students

Results	Average	Standard deviation
Initial test	20.22	12.122
Final test	63.48	26.145

The finding: The calculated significance is $p = 1.087 \cdot 10^{-7}$ is smaller than the set level of significance $\alpha = 5\%$ ($\alpha = 0.05$), the null hypothesis H₀ is refuted.

Conclusion: H₁: There **is a significant difference** in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology') is confirmed.

Table 6. Results achieved by double major students

Results	Average	Standard deviation
Initial test	27.3	13.560
Final test	45.7	28.212

The finding: The calculated significance is $p = 0.0016$. It is smaller than the set level of significance $\alpha = 5\%$ ($\alpha = 0.05$), the null hypothesis H₀ is refuted.

Conclusion: H₁: There **is a significant difference** in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology') is confirmed.

Testing H₂:

H₀: There is not a significant difference in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons.

H₂: There is a significant difference in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons.

Tables 7-8 comprise the characteristics necessary for testing the significance of the difference between the level of knowledge of single major and double major students.

Table 7. The level of knowledge in the initial test

Results	Single major		Double major	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Initial test	20.22	12.122	27.3	1.560

The finding: The calculated significance is $p = 0.0589$. It is smaller than the set level of significance $\alpha = 5\%$ ($\alpha = 0.05$), the null hypothesis H₀ is not refuted.

Conclusion: H₀: There is **not a significant difference** in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons.

Table 8. The level of knowledge in the final test

Results	Single major		Double major	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Final test	63.48	26.145	45.7	28.212

The finding: The calculated significance is $p = 0.0269$. It is smaller than the set level of significance $\alpha = 5\%$ ($\alpha = 0.05$), the null hypothesis H₀ is refuted.

Conclusion: H₂: There **is a significant difference** in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons is confirmed.

Considering idiomatic competence, a single, invariable one-size-fits-all method for developing it does not exist. Teaching must afford students ample opportunities to encounter idioms in their attempts to approximate, and hopefully master, the target language and culture. The following techniques appear to be effective and can help English language learners in acquiring similes: (a) '1 image – 3 similes' – learners have to decide which one of the three similes best 'fits' the image, as each image combines powerful, literal visual imagery with a memorable striking expression; (b) '1 text – 3 idioms' – learners are presented with an authentic text (paragraph or dialogue) minus the simile, which they have to supply in writing from three possibilities given to them in advance; (c) 'all in the family similes' – learners are asked to find each simile's corresponding variant (conceptually related simile) to expand their knowledge of specific main similes and recall plausible variant similes with identical or similar (or dissimilar) meanings; and (d) 'name that simile' – learners have to name the simile depicted in the image.

4. DISCUSSION

Idioms, as opposed to metaphors, collocations, phrasal verbs, sayings and formulaic sequences, remain underrepresented in the field of second language acquisition theory and research (Liontas, 2015). So far, the research has not examined how idioms are learned over time or how accurately learners of different levels of proficiency perform idioms (Levorato, Nesi & Cacciari, 2004; Stengers et al., 2011).

According to Karrupali and Bhat (2015), the ability to understand similes follows a developmental pattern. The responses obtained by the participants in the research study improved with age by suggesting that the amount and quality of knowledge that a child possesses concerning a figurative expression, plays an important role in the child's comprehension of such higher language aspects. Wisnita's (2019) explores undergraduates' understanding on selected metaphors and similes in English context. Research findings show that they need to improve their knowledge of the differences between metaphor and simile. To find out how English language learners in Slovakia are able to deal with similes, they were asked to translate them into Slovak, their mother tongue, or to explain their meanings. According to Bredin (1998), there is a difference in form, but not in semantic content, between 'white' and *white as a sheet* or between 'old' and *as old as Methuselah* or between 'very quick' and *as quick as lightning*. Now, we will consider research questions, hypotheses, limitations and implications for practice.

Q1: What is the level of students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons starting the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology'? Answer: Regarding single major students, there was only one student who reached 47% in the initial test. He or she was followed by a student who reached 40%, then a student who reached 38% and then by two students who reached 30% in the test. Regarding double major students, the best result was 60% reached by one student. He or she was followed by a student who reached 58%, then by one student who reached 45% and then by two students who reached 43 % in the initial test. Overall, it can be said that the results of both groups were rather disappointing.

Q2: To what extent are the single and double major students able to understand the meaning of idiomatic comparisons used in context? Answer: Considering single major students and the initial test, one student who comes from Russia achieved the best result. He or she was able to translate them from English into Slovak. This result was very surprising for us. Later, it was revealed that this student is interested in literature which is an excellent source for learning idioms. Two students of Hungarian and one of Ukrainian nationality chose their mother tongue to deal with it. However, they faced big problems with translation. Considering double major students and the initial test, three students of Hungarian nationality chose their mother tongue, but faced big problems, too. Since the initial test result was rather poor, it can be stated that the context did not help them much. In addition, they were not aware of the fact that there is no difference between single lexical units and similes (Bredin, 1998) in semantic content.

Q3: What knowledge of idiomatic comparisons do the single and double major students have at the end of the semester? Answer: As far as single major students are concerned, two students reached 100%, ten students 80% and four students 40% in the

final test. As far as double major students are considered, three students reached 100%, four students 80% and two students 60% in the final test. All in all, it can be said that their knowledge of idiomatic comparisons was widened significantly.

H₁: There is a significant difference in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology').

H₀: There is not a significant difference in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology').

Considering single major students, H₁: There is a significant difference in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology') was confirmed.

Considering double major students, H₁: There is a significant difference in the students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons in the initial and final tests (having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology') was confirmed.

H₂: There is a significant difference in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons.

H₀: There is not a significant difference in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons.

Regarding the level of knowledge in the initial test, H₀: There is not a significant difference in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons was not refuted.

The level of knowledge in the final test, H₂: There is a significant difference in the level of single major and double major students' knowledge of idiomatic comparisons was confirmed.

Naturally, while testing students there were some limitations. Not all students were enthusiastic about translating similes into Slovak. Therefore, they were allowed to translate them into their mother tongue which meant more work for us to process the data. Even though it might have been frustrating and difficult for them to deal with this challenge when they were not ready for the test in the first seminar, they had fun and learned a lot when correcting the mistakes of their peers as the lecturer's feedback was provided immediately after the test.

We fully agree with Kamenická (2019) that improving one's English means not only enhancing one's grammar but also enlarging one's vocabulary. In her paper, she proposes several strategies and techniques which can help students learn foreign language vocabulary – single-word items, collocations and multiword expressions – effectively. Thornbury (2022) and Scrivener (2005) also offer useful advice on teaching and learning foreign language grammar and vocabulary. Adamcová (2020) states that fixed word combinations such as idioms, collocations and familiar quotations are omnipresent in the vocabulary of contemporary German. Therefore, she emphasises the importance of dealing with this issue, which is an inseparable part of phraseology.

5. CONCLUSIONS

By acquiring multiword expressions learners' lexicon can be enriched a good deal. Second-year undergraduates of the study programmes 'Teacher Training of English Language and Literature (single major study) and 'Teacher Training of English Language and Literature (double major study) need to master a wide range of idioms. University is the most convenient place where they can acquire as many idioms as possible. As future teachers of English, they need to be familiar with them, since they will use textbooks containing spoken language. They need to distinguish between idioms and non-idiomatic phrases, e.g. *look daggers at sb* versus *look angrily at sb* as idioms often have a stronger meaning than non-idiomatic phrases, but they mean the same thing. Idioms may also suggest a particular attitude of the person using them, e.g. disapproval, humour, exasperation or admiration.

Similes are figurative comparisons between a source and a target. They are powerful mechanisms to catch the addressee's attention and put one's opinions in a nutshell. The paper stresses the importance of using conventionalised similes in conversation. Research findings show that students' prior knowledge of idiomatic comparisons was not very wide. However, having finished the course in 'English Lexicology and Phraseology', learners demonstrated considerable knowledge of similes.

The vocabulary of any language is fascinating. We recommend learning similes as whole phrases, because it is usually not possible to change the individual words. Where it is possible to change the individual words, the meaning of the simile often changes, e.g. *as dry as a bone* (extremely dry/thirst), *as dry as dust* (extremely boring). Furthermore, similes are often used in everyday e-mail conversation and informal writing, e.g. *as red as a beetroot*, *be all over sb like a rash*, *as thick as thieves*, *as quick as a flash*, *as keen as mustard*, *fighting like cat and dog*, *work like a dog*, *a face like a thunder*. They have strong meanings and are often used in humorous or sarcastic way, e.g. *my teacher's explanations are as clear as mud* (not clear at all).

To sum up, English language learners in Slovakia need to be affectively disposed to idiomatic input, including paralinguistic input, prior to cultivating a keen appreciation for the cultural values hidden within the idiomatic expressions themselves. Creative teachers should be able to apply any technique or strategy which will help them acquire interesting vocabulary and retain it in their memories for a long time. Needless to say, if learners of English acquire these expressions, they must use them carefully.

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Appendix – Initial test

A Translate the following similes (idiomatic comparisons) in bold into Slovak.

- 1 All the men in our family have been **as bald as coots** by the time they reached forty.
.....
- 2 I've met him a few times. He's **not as black as he's painted**.
- 3 I'm **as blind as a bat** without my glasses.
- 4 There she stood, denying everything **as bold as brass**, in spite of all the evidence against her.
.....
- 5 Be careful what you say in front of the boy. He's **as bright as a button** and can ask the most awkward questions.
- 6 Well, on the figures alone, whether we invest in Germany or France is about **as broad as it's long**.
.....
- 7 She's **as brown as a berry** after a month in Greece.
- 8 She's **as busy as a bee**, always going to meetings and organizing parties.
- 9 It's odd how people will pay exorbitant prices for forced rhubarb in February and turn up their noses at it in July when it's **as cheap as dirt**.
- 10 Jim's mum was a big woman, a Tartar, a real six-footer who kept her house **as clean as a new pin**.
.....
- 11 He hasn't got a criminal record - he's **clean as a whistle**.
- 12 She has the voice of a natural singer, effortless and **clear as a bell**.
- 13 'Are the instructions easy to understand?' 'Yes, **clear as crystal**.'
- 14 That he loved her ... was **as clear as day**.
- 15 Yes, he gave me directions how to get there. They were about **as clear as mud** though. I wish I'd asked him to draw a rough sketch-map.
- 16 I like our new doctor; the last one was very efficient, but **as cold as charity**.
- 17 You can tell from the way she talks she's **as common as muck**.
- 18 I thought there would have been protestations and tears when I told her I wanted to move out of the flat, but no, she stayed **as cool as a cucumber**.
- 19 George will be **as cross as a bear with a sore head** if we keep him waiting.
- 20 Her father is **as cross as two sticks** about what she's done.
- 21 Who cares about socialism anymore? Socialism's **as dead as a dodo**.
- 22 I found the fish, **dead as a doornail**, floating on the surface of the water.
- 23 She's eighty-nine and **as deaf as a post**.
- 24 The two brothers resembled each other physically, but were **as different** in their natures **as chalk from cheese**.
- 25 They went off down the road together half an hour ago, singing and swaying, **drunk as lords**.
.....
- 26 I don't think he's been watering these plants – the soil's **as dry as a bone**.
- 27 He loved the book but I thought it was **as dull as ditchwater**.
- 28 The exam was **as easy as ABC**.
- 29 There is one poor little runt in the litter as usual, but the other four puppies are **as fat as a butter**.
.....
- 30 My dad's nearly eighty now but he's **as fit as a fiddle**.
- 31 I have no wish to be the figure of your English Misses, **flat as a board** before and behind.
.....
- 32 I was supposed to have been a gathering of celebrities but as most of them sent notes of regret for their absence, the whole affair fell **flat as a pancake**.
- 33 Here I go again, **fresh as a daisy** after hours of sleep.
- 34 We married nine days after we met, and three years on we're **happy as Larry**.
- 35 It sounded to me as though you were giving them a piece of your mind. It was **as good as a play** to watch you.
- 36 But for years now – well, ever since you went to Italy, I think – we've been **as happy as the day is long**, haven't we?
- 37 She'll be good in business – she's **as hard as nails**.
- 38 You can be as honest **as the day is long** and still get into trouble if you fill in your tax form incorrectly.
.....
- 39 Why don't we ask Tom to captain the cricket team? He's **as keen as mustard**.
- 40 I looked up from my paper and there he was, **as large as life**, Tim Taylor!
- 41 You can tell they're brothers at a glance – they're **like two peas in a pod**.

- 42 He was **as mad as a hornet** when he heard what she said about him.
- 43 'Isn't she slightly strange, your aunt?' 'Oh, she's **as nutty as a fruitcake**.'
- 44 Difficult relationships between parents and children are nothing new: the problem's **as old as the hills**.
.....
- 45 I was a young boy at the time so to me he looked **as old as Methuselah** but he was probably in his sixties.
- 46 He's so impossibly long-winded. You need to be **as patient as Job** to listen to him without making an excuse to leave.
- 47 I'll be **as right as rain** as soon as I take my pills.
- 48 You get in your nice warm bed with your teddy and you'll be **as snug as a bug in a rug!**
.....
- 49 It's awful when everyone around you has been drinking and you're **as sober as a judge**.
.....
- 50 He felt more like laughing at child's escapade than scolding him, but **solemn as an owl**, he got through the necessary reprimand.
- 51 There he stood, **stiff as a poker**, unwilling to give an inch.
- 52 If there's any fiddling of the books going on in this office, it must be one of the new people. Jenkins has been with me eighteen years and I know he's **as straight as a die** in everything.
.....
- 53 He'll be back again next week asking for more money, **sure as eggs is eggs**.
- 54 Country and western music is **as American as apple pie**.
- 55 I'm sure she tells Ruth what's going on – they're **as thick as thieves**, those two.
.....
- 56 Most people who read these papers are **as thick as two short planks**.
- 57 These new shoes of mine are **as tight as hell**. I wonder if I could have them stretched?
.....
- 58 I wish I'd asked for chicken salad. This steak is **as tough as leather**.
- 59 Mathieson is one of my oldest friends and is **as true as steel** whatever happens.
.....
- 60 **Ugly as sin** themselves, the two stepsisters hated Cinderella for her beauty.

B Write any similes in English and their Slovak equivalents you know that are not included in this list.