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## An Achilles' Heel? Helping Interpreting Students Gain Greater Awareness of Literal and Idiomatic English

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# An Achilles' Heel? Helping Interpreting Students Gain Greater Awareness of Literal and Idiomatic English

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## Abstract

This research paper reports on a study involving the use of literal and non-literal or idiomatic language in a multilingual interpreter classroom. Previous research has shown that interpreters are not always able to identify and correctly interpret idiomatic language. This study first examined student interpreters' perceptions of the importance of idiomatic language, then followed by assessing their ability to identify phrases that were literal, idiomatic or both. Lastly it looked at student interpreters' ability to correctly identify and explain idioms in short phrases and dialogues. Findings showed that, after this exercise, students' awareness of the difference between literal and non-literal language increased, however their ability to correctly identify it did not. Furthermore, their previous focus on 'specialized terminology' led them to believe that language other than this was hardly worth learning. The article concludes with recommendations for incorporating the findings of this research into interpreter education.

Keywords: Idiomatic language, non-literal language, multilingual interpreting classroom, cultural equivalents, pragmatic equivalents

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**Literal and idiomatic English**

# An Achilles' Heel? Helping Interpreting Students Gain Greater Awareness of Literal and Idiomatic English

## 1. Introduction and background

Interpreters are required to be proficient in both their native language and at least one other language. At the Auckland University of Technology interpreting students must have achieved an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score of 7.5 academic to be accepted into the undergraduate interpreting courses. Interpreting course applicants who do not have a recent IELTS result, have their spoken and written proficiency skills as well as their listening comprehension in English assessed by lecturers. Interpreters need to reach this high level of proficiency in both languages to prepare them for interpreting for clients in a range of situations. One especially challenging aspect of interpreting is that of dealing with non-literal or idiomatic English. Obviously, this issue is not exclusive to interpreters, as translators face similar challenges.

This article reports on a study of student understanding of written idioms in a multilingual interpreter classroom. In a previous study (Crezee & Grant, 2013), students had been asked to paraphrase authentic idiomatic language from brief television dialogues. The term 'idiomatic' in this article refers to language that is non-compositional and cannot be accurately understood by adding together the meanings of the individual words involved (Chomsky, 1980; Fernando & Flavell, 1981; Fernando, 1996; Fraser, 1970). One thing that emerged from the previous study was the difficulty these advanced interpreting students had at actually identifying the idiomatic language. In other words, if they were presented with idiomatic language that was highlighted and used in a written or spoken text, they were generally able to use context to guess the meaning. However, if they were asked to themselves identify the idiomatic language in a written text by circling or underlining it, they were often unable to do so. This implies that were they interpreting this language, they would quite possibly give a literal rendition of the idiomatic language, thereby potentially misinterpreting the meaning. This assumption was born out by a subsequent study (Crezee & Grant, 2016) where student interpreters incorrectly interpreted idiomatic language used by paramedics featured in authentic audiovisual interpreting practice material. Hence, student interpreters' inability to correctly distinguish literal from idiomatic language may not only affect the accuracy of their input monitoring (cf. Liu, 2008), but also prevent them from considering pragmatic and culturally-appropriate equivalences. This is of concern, as interpreting such language verbatim may result in inaccurate or culturally and pragmatically inappropriate outputs (cf. Darwish, 2006; Hale, 2014; Issa, 2018; Crezee, Teng & Burn, 2017), as demonstrated in these examples cited by Mikkelsen (2017, p. 69):

“When a Colombian says ‘¿que más?’ is it ‘what else?’ or ‘how you doin’?’ When a Dominican says ‘*dímelo, tigraso,*’ is he actually talking to someone called ‘*tigraso*’ [big tiger], or is he saying something more akin to ‘talk to me, big guy’?”

(Palma, 2004, as cited in Valero-Garces, 2014, p. 163)

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Interpreters must be able to correctly identify that the speech they are hearing contains idiomatic language, as that is the first step in ascertaining the meaning in the context or to asking for clarification.

At the time of this writing, the three main District Health Board interpreting and translation services in the Greater Auckland area in New Zealand cater to the communicative needs of migrants and refugees representing 190 or more different languages, including some languages of limited diffusion. At the Auckland University of Technology, interpreter education is non-language specific, with English as the medium of instruction. Among other goals, this program aims to improve students' awareness of different facets of English language use in a range of settings. Such awareness is essential in order for students to develop appropriate interpreting strategies aimed at accurate conversion of meaning.

This study reports on a quasi-experimental study (cf. Hale & Napier, 2013) carried out in the training of a small cohort of multilingual undergraduate interpreting students attending courses over two 12-week semesters. As noted, earlier research (Crezee & Grant, 2013) showed that interpreting students are not always able to recognize idiomatic language themselves. Not recognizing idioms means students will be unable to convey the illocutionary intent of the original text (Morris, 1999, p.6), thereby running the risk of 'betraying the meaning' of the original message. In a sense, this study relates to both input monitoring (cf. Liu, 2008) and students' ability to consider culturally and pragmatically appropriate renditions when interpreting (Hale, 2014). The study, therefore, had two aims. The part of the study conducted during the first semester tested the interpreter students' awareness of and attitudes towards idiomatic language. Obviously, the ability to recognize idiomatic language constitutes a precondition for being able to either ask for clarification or find a culturally and pragmatically appropriate manner to convey the underlying meaning.

The part of the research conducted during the second semester assessed interpreting students' aptitude for identifying where a phrase had a literal meaning, an idiomatic/non-literal meaning, or both. This included their ability to identify and explain idiomatic language when it was used in brief written dialogues. Television and soap opera dialogues were chosen because earlier research (McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Grant, 1996) has shown that these tend to employ a high density of colloquial and idiomatic language. In short, we wanted to know how familiar the interpreting students were with the idiomatic phrases used in this study and to test how accurately they could categorize and explain them.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Idiomatic language, literal and non-literal language, and interpreting

Let us first define the term "figurative and idiomatic language". There are many ways to describe idiomatic language, but traditionally these have been defined as expressions whose meanings are 'non-compositional' and therefore cannot be understood by adding together the meanings of the individual words that make up the idiom. However there are other definitions; indeed, as Columbus (2013) noted, idioms appear to be the most thoroughly described but least clearly defined type of multiword unit. According to McPherron and Randolph (2014, p.2), "idioms stubbornly resist easy classification and are some of the most difficult vocabulary terms to teach", which compounds the problem. Previous research has shown that learners struggle with both the comprehension and production of idioms (Irujo, 1986; Fernando, 1996; Kövecses & Szabo, 1996; Cooper, 1999; Liontas, 2003). As Zyzik (2011) found, despite different ways of promoting awareness and retention of idioms, we are only beginning to understand how non-native speakers actually acquire idioms. While not testing the acquisition of idioms by interpreting students here, we wanted students to understand the challenge and necessity of learning them and encourage self-study in this area.

In this study, we used the 'non-compositional' aspect to define an idiom, as well as another aspect often used to describe idioms: their fixed form. However, Moon (1998) showed that almost 40% of what she termed FEIs (fixed expressions and idioms) allowed lexical variation or transformation. In other words, an idiom such as \*adding fuel to the fire\* might have multiple variations, such as these British National Corpus (BNC) examples: \*adding more/considerable/further/ substantial fuel to the fire\*, \*add fuel to these fires/her suspicions\*, \*added

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fuel to the flames\*, \*fan the flames and add fuel to them\*, \*add/adds/adding fuel to the theory /processes /conviction / debate /drive /controversy / Republican debate /alarmist law and order fire\*. Even interpreting students who have already gained a high level of English may be challenged by language such as this, and increasing their awareness of it is very useful to their future careers.

Non-literal language is pervasive in everyday speech (Deignan, Littlemore & Semino, 2013, p.xi), a fact not often recognized by interpreting students. It has been argued that collocations, idioms, and lexical patterns make up as much or more of vocabulary competence than individual words (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002; Lewis, 1993). For example, Martinez & Murphy found that that students overestimated how much they understood these multiword expressions, although they did not even notice many of them. Martinez and Murphy concluded that “not only are multiword expressions much more common than popularly assumed, but they are also difficult for readers to both identify and decode – even when they contain very common words” (2011, p.268). The same could be said to the interpreting students in this study. Most often, understanding depends on the ‘familiarity’ of the expression, in other words the frequency with which the idiom has been previously encountered in its spoken or written form over a person’s lifetime (Columbus, 2013, p.26). We wanted to know how familiar the interpreting students were with common idiomatic phrases and to assess how accurately they could categorize and explain them.

With regard to a possible literal or figurative meaning of idioms, previous studies (Cieślicka, 2006; Zyzik, 2011) have found that non-native English speakers usually give priority to the literal meaning over the figurative one during idiom comprehension. One explanation (Kecskes, 2000; Samani & Hashemian, 2012) for this phenomenon may be the lack of understanding of conceptual metaphors and the lack of metaphorical competence in the learners’ L2 (second language). The argument is that L2 learners encounter an idiom, they are already familiar with the words that make up the idiom. Since the literal meaning of these words is more firmly established in their mental lexicon, they are more likely to access that literal meaning than try to retrieve the figurative meaning of the phrase (Kecskes, 2000). Another explanation suggests that it is only when the literal meaning of the phrase is processed and does not make sense that the figurative or idiomatic meaning is considered (Tabossi, Fanari & Wolf, 2008). But in order to consider the idiomatic meaning of any phrase, learners such as the interpreting students in this study have to be ‘familiar’ with the expression and aware that it can have both literal and non-literal meanings.

There has been a dearth of studies exploring interpreting students’ awareness of and ability to correctly interpret idiomatic language, although there are a few studies that approximate this issue. Crezee & Grant (2013) showed that interpreting students were able to deduce the meaning of idiomatic expressions occurring in dialogues taken from reality television programs. They also found (2016), however, that their group of student interpreters often misinterpret the idiomatic language used by professionals in Australia and New Zealand as a means of reassuring patients. The study reported on here reports on student interpreters’ awareness of the importance of this type of language and presents recommendations for interpreter educators. In the next section, we will outline the methods used for both phases of the study, before describing the findings.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research questions

Phase One of this study first examined student interpreter perceptions of the importance of idiomatic language. Next it assessed students’ ability to identify phrases that were literal, idiomatic or both. Phase Two examined participants’ ability to correctly identify and explain idioms in short phrases and dialogues. The study ran over the course of two semesters.

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### 3.2. Participants

Because of the language-neutral nature of the interpreting classes at our university, these classes contained both native English speakers (L1) and English language learners (L2) from a variety of backgrounds and language groups who were interested in health interpreting, court interpreting and general interpreting. However, as the study load for the program was very high and as participation in this research was voluntary and done while students were having a 15-20 minute break from their interpreting class, only a small number of the L2 students participated. The first semester class involved 12 students in their first year of study. In the second semester class only 10 of the 12 students, still in their first year of study, consistently volunteered to participate. Table 1 provides information about the participants in both phases of the study.

Table 1: Interpreting student participants

Participants	Languages	Language level	Gender	Age range
Phase One 1 <sup>st</sup> semester (N=12)	Russian, Farsi, Samoan, Tongan,	IELTS 6.5	Female: 9 Male: 3	20s-50s
Phase Two 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester (N=10)	Spanish, Thai, Korean, Chinese	IELTS 6.5	Female: 10	

As can be seen, participants in both studies worked with a range of language-pairs, were mostly female and aged from their early twenties to their mid- to late-fifties.

In each phase, the research was conducted during a 15-20 minute break in a community interpreting classroom session attended by participating students. Since few students were able to attend every class, in the end, only a small number of students (10) consistently participated during the five weeks in which the research was done. While we did not inquire as to why students chose to participate or not, we can speculate on a number of possible reasons:

- The community interpreting classes they were taking involved a considerable study load already.
- The students valued their 15-20 minute during classes to relax and not participate in the research
- Some students felt comfortable with their knowledge of literal and non-literal language and so did not feel that they would learn anything.
- Students recognized the difficulty of completing the required research tasks accurately each week
- Students chose not to risk the embarrassment of revealing their lack of knowledge in this area.

### 3.3. Methods

#### 3.3.1 Phase One: The importance and awareness of idiomatic language (first semester)

Phase One of the research focused on gauging students' awareness of idiomatic language as well as their ability to correctly identify whether expressions were literal, idiomatic or both. In the first phase of the research similarly worded brief pre- and post-tests were given to students to gauge their perspectives before and after a quasi-experimental intervention. In the first week, students were given a list of 25 phrases for which students were asked to indicate whether the language was 'literal', 'idiomatic' or 'both' (see Appendix 1). However, after the first week, it was clear that we had misjudged the length of time needed, as the students were not able to make decisions about the 25 phrases in the fifteen to twenty minutes available. For this reason, in the following weeks the students were given only 10 phrases to evaluate. Secondly, the students were given a brief written dialogue, either from a television interview with a celebrity guest, a dialogue from a local soap opera, or a BNC spoken corpus conversation. Here students were asked to circle any examples of language they identified as idiomatic and then give a written explanation of the idiom's meaning. A sample dialogue was provided, with the idiomatic language highlighted and explained, to show students what was expected of them (see Appendix 2).

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### 3.3.2 Literal, Idiomatic or Both (second semester)

Phase One of the research was conducted during the following semester with some of the same and some different interpreting students, again during a 15-20 minute break. Part one of this phase took place during six Monday classes of the 12-week second semester, while part two took place over the final five weeks of that semester. In part one of the second phase, students who volunteered were given a table of idioms taken from the Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms (1998) during a short break in the middle of their class session. Idioms were randomly taken from the sections of the dictionary in which idioms started with an A or a B. The authors chose to select idioms in this way in order to introduce a degree of randomization. In the second part of the second phase, students were asked to identify and explain idioms that were taken from dialogues.

Ethics permission was granted for the study, so students were given the Participant Information Sheet to read and those who wished to participate signed the Consent Form from the university's Ethics committee. In order to guarantee no inadvertent harm would accrue to students who chose to participate in this research, the researcher interacting with the students in both Phase One and Phase Two was not in any way involved with the teaching. The lecturer was therefore unaware of which students were participating in the various phases of the research.

## 4. Results

### 4.1.1 Phase One: Pre- and post-test regarding awareness of idiomatic language

Phase One of the study involved examining student interpreters' awareness of idiomatic language, as this was not something they had explicitly focused on in the classroom. Students were given a pre- and post-test. For each question in the pre- and post-tests students were asked a series of questions designed to measure their attitude regarding idiomatic speech. Responses were measured via a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Not at all', 'A little bit', 'Quite', 'Very' to 'Extremely' (see Table 2). Not all of the students answered all of the questions. Examples of these questions, and some of the responses are presented below. It should be noted that only 6 of the 12 students completed the post-test questionnaire, and that all comments are rendered in the students' exact words. While Question 1 can be judged to be 'leading,' we wanted to get some indication of just how important interpreting students judged knowing idiomatic from literal language to be, as some had stated that they only wanted to focus on vocabulary related to their area of interpreting.

#### 1. Importance of idiomatic language

On a scale from 1 to 5, how important do you think it is for interpreters to be aware of the difference between idiomatic language and literal language?

Table 2: Importance of knowing idiomatic from literal language

	<i>Not important at all</i>	<i>A little bit important</i>	<i>Quite important</i>	<i>Very important</i>	<i>Extremely important</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Pretest</i>	0	0	1	3	8	<i>n=12</i>
<i>Post-test</i>	0	0	0	0	6	<i>n=6</i>

The pre-test results showed that all students felt it was important to know idiomatic from literal language. Pre- and post-test comments included:

Extremely important (S1), Very important (S5), (S10) because:

- It can change the meaning of the message or the whole message itself (S1, S9, S10),
- To interpret accurately (S3, S4, S7, S11),
- To be familiar with the difference between literal and idiomatic and develop their expertise, every bit of the meaning is important (S4, S10).

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### 2. Awareness of idiomatic language

On a scale from 1 to 5, how aware do you think you are now of the difference between language that could be literal, idiomatic, or both?

Table 3: Awareness of the difference between idiomatic and literal language.

	<i>Not aware at all</i>	<i>A little bit aware</i>	<i>Quite aware</i>	<i>Very aware</i>	<i>Extremely aware</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Pretest</i>	0	1	3	4	4	<i>n=12</i>
<i>Post-test</i>	0	0	3	1	2	<i>n=6</i>

Pre- and Post-test comments included:

Extremely aware (S12), very much aware (S2), quite aware now (S9) because:

- Easy to spot when is a literal or idiomatic language (S7)
- Over the years I understood more idioms, when I have time I will look for a book with idioms to fast track learning more idioms (S11)
- The more practice I have and the more experience the greater improvement and awareness I will be given (S1)
- It's been established in my long learning process of which to build up this awareness, in order to improve the language barrier (S10)
- Most of the time can only make educational (sic) guess (S4),
- If not familiar with idiomatic (sic) used, tend to fall into literal interpretation (S2)
- I am only aware of idiomatic language restrictively and desired to improve it (S5)
- Sometimes, it is a little bit difficult for me recognize whether is the literal or idiomatic (S9),
- actually, it depends on many factors: level of confidence, mood, physical state, the chosen answer applies to listening only as I may miss some elements and have to make up to guess about the meaning (S12)

Feedback from the interpreting students shows their increased awareness of the difference between literal and non-literal language, but perhaps not their increased awareness of language that could be both. This prompted the second phase of the research which is described next.

### 4.2. Phase Two: Literal, idiomatic or both

Phase Two of the research first examined students' ability to identify phrases that were literal, idiomatic, or both. This was tested in weeks one and two of the second semester. Over weeks three, five, seven, nine and eleven, students were asked to correctly identify and explain idioms in short phrases and dialogues.

In Phase Two, student participants were given a table of idioms randomly taken from pages of the Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms (CIDI) (1998), that included idioms starting with the letters 'A' or 'B'. In addition to the Cambridge Dictionary idioms, students were given phrases containing idioms. These phrases were taken from television interviews and dialogs. The authors felt it was important that interpreting students did the exercises in class, rather than take them home, to determine what they knew at that point in time, rather than what they could look up or get help with answering, as in their jobs as future interpreters they must be able to access and use their knowledge of this as the need arises. Results from the 22 participants of the first exercise of 25 dictionary idioms and 6 idioms in the interview are given in Table 4. Some of these idioms were less familiar than others, but those which were consistently avoided or incorrectly explained by the majority of students are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Identifying and explaining phrases as Literal, Idiomatic or Both, Week 1

<i>Percentage correct</i>	<i>Cambridge idioms /25 correctly identified</i>	<i>TV Interview idioms /6 correctly identified</i>	<i>TV Interview idioms /6 correctly explained</i>
100%	0 students	3 students	1 student

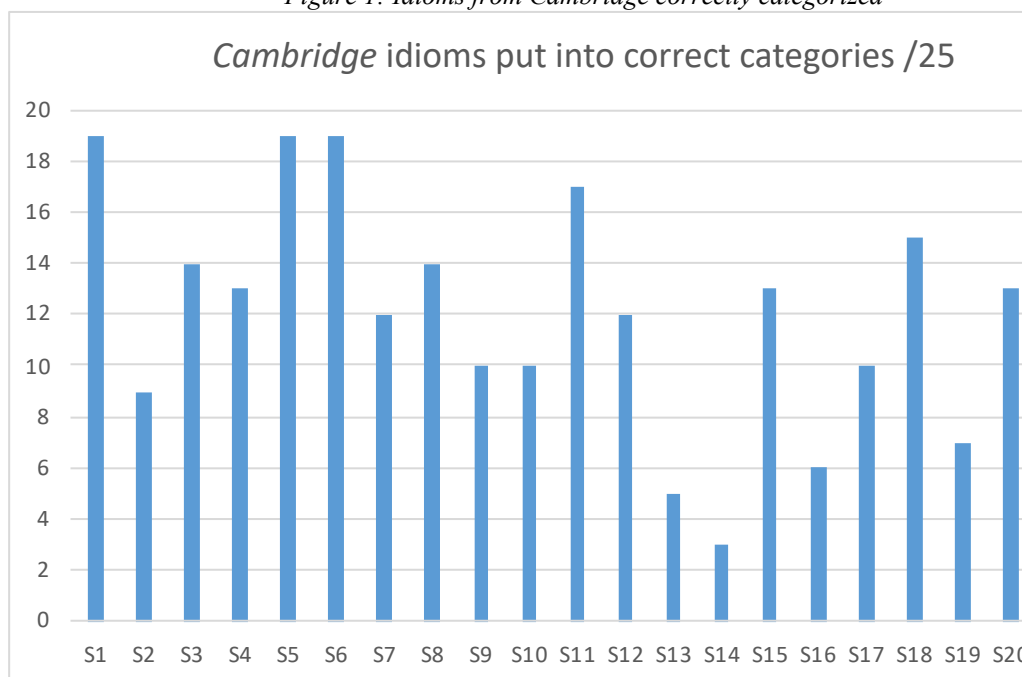


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75-99%	3 students	6 students	2 students
50-74%	8 students	8 students	5 students
30-49%	7 students	2 students	2 students
0-29%	4 students	3 students	12 students

These results show how challenging the 22 students found this exercise. Sometimes they would indicate that all the phrases were idiomatic, or either idiomatic or literal, or they would avoid marking any box for particular idioms showing that they had no idea and did not wish to hazard a guess. And while they were more successful at recognizing and identifying idioms in the television interviews, they were less successful at correctly explaining them. The graph in Figure 1 gives visual results of the Week 1 phrases that were correctly identified by the 22 interpreting students (S1, S2, etc.) as being idiomatic, literal, or both.

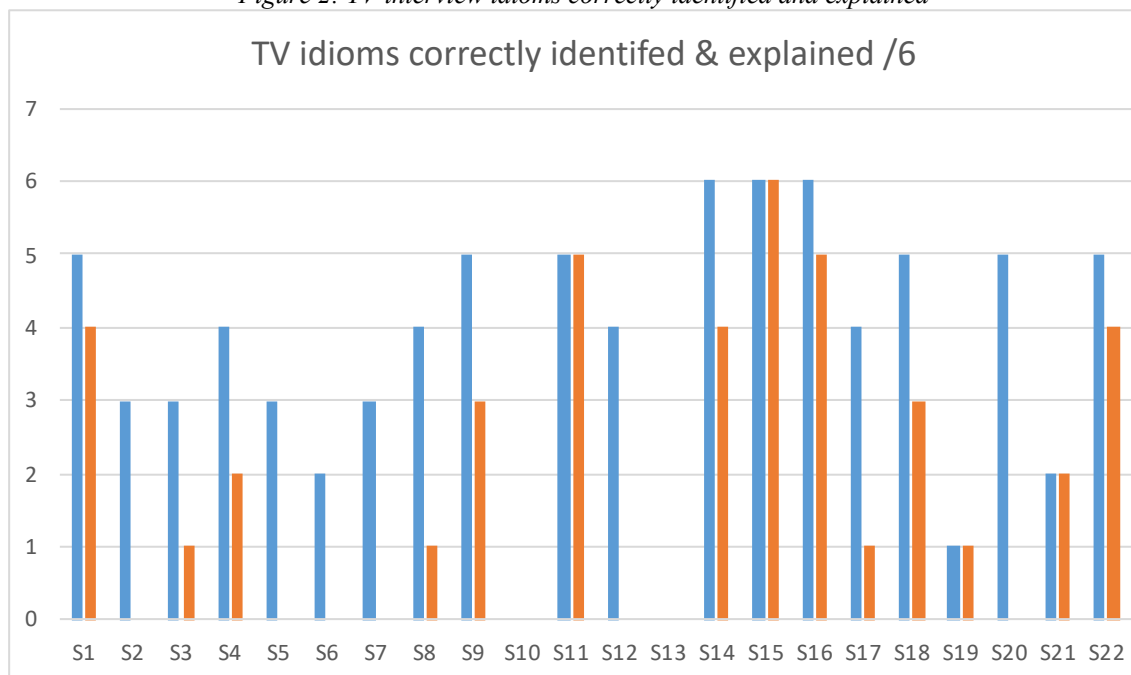
Figure 1: Idioms from Cambridge correctly categorized



As noted, some students (S1, S5, S6, S11, S22) were better at correctly distinguishing the literal from the idiomatic/non-literal language than others (S13, S14, S16). However, as many as nine of the 22 students correctly categorized only 50% or less, showing that more work is needed in this area. Figure 2 shows how successful the 22 students were at correctly identifying the idioms they found in the interviews and then explaining the six idioms used in the TV interview.

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Figure 2: TV interview idioms correctly identified and explained



In the figure above, the first bar indicates how many idioms each student could correctly identify (by circling it), while the second bar indicates how many idioms each student could correctly explain. As shown, most students were better at identifying idioms than explaining what they meant. Any missing columns for particular students (S2, S5, S6, S7, S12, S20) indicate a 0/6 score for either identifying or explaining the language or sometimes for both (S10, S13).

Table 5 lists the idioms that students found most challenging over the course of Phase Two:

Table 5: Language consistently incorrectly identified as literal, idiomatic or both

<i>Phrases most often incorrectly identified</i>		
<i>do an about face</i>	<i>hold all the aces</i>	<i>a piece of the action</i>
<i>on somebody's account</i>	<i>caught somebody in the act</i>	<i>be out of action</i>

Tables 6 and 7 show the results during the second part of Phase Two, which took place over weeks three, five, seven, nine, and eleven of the second semester. In Table 6, the ten participating students were asked to first identify whether the phrase had a literal meaning, an idiomatic meaning or could have both meanings. The number of those who could do this each week with percentages of accuracy are given below.

Table 6: Correctly categorising idioms, Weeks 3 to 11

Percentage correct	Week 3 Idioms	Week 5 Idioms	Week 7 Idioms	Week 9 Idioms	Week 11 Idioms
80-100%	2 students	1 student	1 student	0 students	1 student
60-79%	5 students	3 students	3 students	6 students	1 student
40-59%	3 students	3 students	6 students	3 students	4 students
0-39%	0 students	3 students	0 students	1 student	4 students

The idiomatic phrases from the interviews and dialogues, familiar to native speakers in New Zealand but not to some of the interpreting students, are given in Table 7.

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Table 7: Correctly identifying and explaining idioms, Weeks 3-11

Week 3 (7)	Week 4 (5)	Week 7 (8)	Week 9 (3)	Week 11 (6)
<i>the face of ___</i>	<i>it's a doosey</i>	<i>squeaky clean</i>	<i>...like that (very quickly)</i>	<i>get back on your feet</i>
<i>looked like a stick insect</i>	<i>bend the rules</i>	<i>goes both ways</i>	<i>get...sorted</i>	<i>...in the book</i>
<i>gone mad</i>	<i>Bring it on!</i>	<i>for my own good</i>	<i>haven't the foggiest</i>	<i>ditch the self-pity</i>
<i>a fairy godmother</i>	<i>I'll kick your butt!</i>	<i>are a train wreck</i>	/	<i>easy for you to say</i>
<i>baby boomers</i>	<i>In your dreams!</i>	<i>got 's ear</i>	/	<i>sort yourself out</i>
<i>I thought I'd died and gone to heaven</i>	/	<i>always there for me</i>	/	<i>have your work cut out for you</i>
<i>quite grounded</i>	/	<i>giving you an out</i>	/	/
/	/	<i>kept in the dark</i>	/	/

Figure 3 below gives a visual indication of the students' strengths and weaknesses in these exercises in weeks 3,5,7,9 and 11 of the semester. It was challenging for them to indicate whether the language was literal, non-literal (idiomatic) or could be both. As we can see, some students (S1, S2, S4) were more successful than others (S9, S10).

Figure 3: Identifying phrases that were literal, idiomatic or both

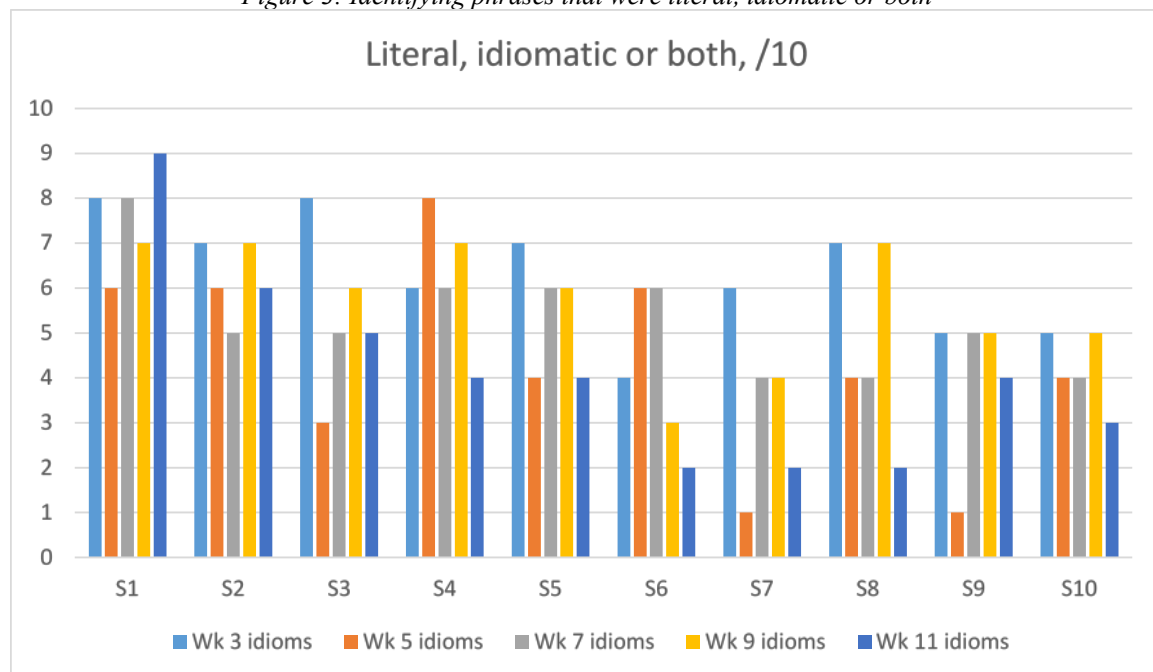


Figure 4 illustrates visually how challenging students found this part of the exercise over the remaining 5 weeks. Some (S2, S5, S7, S8, S9, S10) were able to identify the idiomatic language in some weeks but not explain it, others (S2, S3, S4, S5, S7, S8, S9, S10) were able to identify or explain fewer than half of the phrases and one (S6) was unable to identify or explain any of the idiomatic language found in these interviews or dialogues. Only one (S1) of the 10 students was able to identify and attempt to explain the idiomatic language every week.

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Figure 4: Correctly identifying and explaining idioms

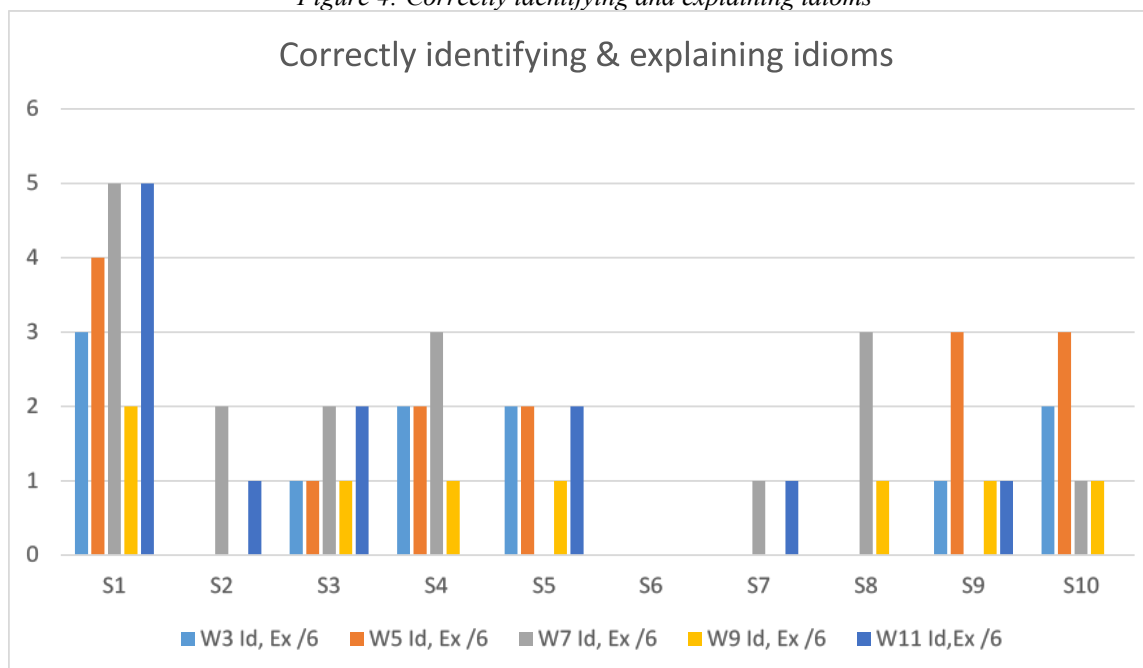


Table 8 shows the results of identifying and explaining the idiomatic language used in the short interviews or conversations. The number of idioms in these varied each week. Sometimes students would circle and correctly identify the idiomatic phrases but not attempt to explain them, other times they would circle or explain only some of the phrases or none at all. Fewer students were able to identify and explain most of the idioms this time, again giving some indication of how challenging the idiomatic language was to them, some weeks in particular.

Table 8: Correctly identifying and explaining idioms from the dialogues, Weeks 3-11

Percentage correct	Week 3 Idioms /5	Week 5 Idioms /5	Week 7 Idioms/8	Week 9 Idioms) /3	Week 11 Idioms /6
80-100%	0 students	1 student	0 students	0 students	1 student
60-79%	1 student	2 students	1 student	1 student	0 students
40-59%	3 students	2 students	2 students	0 students	0 students
0-39%	3 students	2 students	4 students	9 students	7 students
Identified, not explained	3 students	3 students	3 students	0 students	2 students

Finally, Table 9 shows idiomatic expressions which student participants consistently either failed to explain, or for which they provided incorrect explanations.

Table 9: Language consistently avoided or incorrectly explained

<i>It's a doosey.</i>	<i>goes both ways</i>	<i>in the book</i>
<i>I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.</i>	<i>giving you an out</i>	<i>have your work cut out for you</i>
<i>are a train wreck</i>	<i>always there for me</i>	<i>haven't the foggiest</i>

The authors feel that the 'troublesome' idiomatic expressions in Table 9 are actually commonly used in New Zealand. It is true that adding the word *idea* to the phrase 'haven't the foggiest' would have facilitated students guessing its meaning. Students often commented that they 'had never heard' an expression prior to exposure, only to tell us that they 'now heard it all the time'. This seems to suggest that the first step to helping interpreting students become more aware of idiomatic expressions would be to recommend ways of increasing their exposure

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to such expressions. Some recommendations are given in the conclusion section. Secondly, student interpreters need to be taught to always ask for clarification if an expression does not make sense to them.

### 5. Discussion

#### 5.1. *Interpreting students and idiomatic language*

Native speakers have little difficulty recognizing idiomatic language and distinguishing it from the literal, and even if they encounter a new idiom they are usually able to use context to work out its meaning. Native speakers have learned to deduce the meaning of idiomatic expressions through being exposed to them in context. Previous experience has shown us that the non-native English speaking interpreting students may also be able to use context to work out the meaning of idiomatic language if it has already been identified as such for them, but many struggle with recognizing the idiomatic language themselves. This means that as interpreters in the workplace, they would either misunderstand an idiomatic phrase, assuming it had a literal meaning, and might interpret it literally, thereby failing to convey the meaning. In a guest lecture on translating idiomatic language taken from intercepted telephone calls for law enforcement officers, Deng (2018) advised student interpreters in one of our courses to try and find a ‘challenge-proof’ translation of idiomatic language used in intercepted phone calls. This involved first recognizing idiomatic language for what it was, within the context of regional language usage, before deciding on a translation that would be acceptable to both defence and prosecution lawyers (Deng, 2018). While a number of the interpreting students in the study reported on here could correctly identify the language that was idiomatic in the written dialogues, they could not explain it. Interpreter educators should train students to ask for clarification in such cases. Once the original speaker clarifies idiomatic language (e.g. by paraphrasing), interpreters can convey the meaning.

The small number of interpreting students who volunteered for each phase of this study gave positive feedback about the study’s use to them. In the first phase of the research, the students felt their awareness of idiomatic language had greatly increased and that they now accepted the importance of ‘keeping their ear to the ground’ and listening for idiomatic language use as part of their continued professional practice as interpreters. In the second phase of the study, students felt the exercises gave them the opportunity to think about each idiom and decide whether they knew the meaning, and if they did, whether it could have both an idiomatic and a literal meaning, or only one of those. Having some time to think about the written idioms in the tables did not, however, mean that they could correctly identify which category they belonged in. In addition, students still struggled to correctly identify and explain the meaning of idiomatic language found in the interviews or dialogues.

The voluntary exercise revealed that even confident interpreting students who have a high level of proficiency in English if not native speakers, were not fully aware of either the frequency of idiomatic language or the number of expressions that can have both a literal and a non-literal meaning. Again, where student interpreters are aware that particular expressions may have a literal and a non-literal meaning, they should be trained to ask speakers for clarification if the answer is not clear from the context.

It would seem that participants’ knowledge of polysemy, or the “knowledge of all the possible meanings that a word or expression could have” (Rozati & Ketabi, 2013, p.798), is weak, as is their awareness of the ‘creativity’ of language users. Lin (2014, p.173) refers to the Martinez and Murphy (2011) study in her discussion of ‘formulaic sequences.’ Her study showed that some English language learners overestimate their understanding of these sequences simply because they are composed of high-frequency words, noting that learners often overlook the idiomatic meanings of word combinations which appeared familiar. While participants in the current study had advanced levels of English proficiency, we concur with Feng (2014) that their knowledge of non-idiomatic language was still weak.

While completing the exercises in this study, the interpreting students were under time pressure (having to complete all the exercises in their 15-20 minute break from class). This sort of time-pressure is not unusual in real-life interpreting situations. While we cannot state with certainty that unanswered questions were a result of either the students’ limited knowledge of idiomatic language or time-pressure, we can speculate that their lack of

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familiarity with many of the non-literal expressions was a factor. Furthermore, the students were not acting as professional interpreters but simply as participants in our research, so they may have made less effort when the task became too onerous, an option not available to professional interpreters. Our interpreting students appeared to find it difficult to both recognize and accurately interpret the idiomatic language, and as noted, this leaves the potential for possible misunderstanding and miscommunication.

In addition, we feel that as interpreting students do not seem to fully understand the frequency of idiomatic language in English, nor the importance of recognizing phrases that could have either a literal or a non-literal meaning, more research in this area is needed.

### 5.2. *Implications for teaching*

All of the interpreting students who volunteered for this study were non-native speakers of English. As usage of idiomatic language is common, not just in general English (Cieślicka, 2006; Cooper, 1998; Grant & Nation, 2006) but also in specialty areas such as the media and advertising, interpreting students must develop not only their awareness of literal and idiomatic language and which phrases could have both meanings, but also interaction management skills to ask for clarification. Students also need to reflect on different approaches to interpreting idiomatic language, for instance by being aware of the work done by Baker (2011). Paraphrasing may be the most 'risk-averse' approach to recommend to student interpreters in this context, especially as the use of idiomatic language may not always constitute a culturally acceptable use of register in all settings (Crezee & Grant, 2016).

There is no doubt that training interpreters involves a very full program. As Bale (2013) has noted, interpreting students must continually update and improve competencies in their languages, especially at the undergraduate level, but some kind of 'language enhancement' is still necessary even for students at a graduate level. It may be that undergraduate interpreting classes will have to make room for this 'language enhancement' in their training. This could involve exposure to and discussion of a wide range of idiomatic language, not only in written but also in audiovisual form, where students are asked to identify not only the meaning of expressions, but also their illocutionary force and possible renditions in their other language.

Such language enhancement practice would allow interpreting students to increase their lexical and pragmatic knowledge of the use of both literal and non-literal/idiomatic vocabulary.

While this study was done using volunteers from an interpreting class, we feel it has relevance for student translators as well. Baker (2011) rightly focuses on different approaches to the translation of idioms and fixed patterns of language. However, student interpreters and beginning translators must first recognize and correctly identify what is idiomatic and what is not, otherwise they cannot even begin to consider suitable interpreting or translation strategies. Other researchers have noted what factors should be taken into consideration when deciding which multiword units to teach learners, the most common of which is frequency, but as Martinez (2013, p.187) notes, researchers are inconsistent about how such expressions should be prioritized. Frequency (how often the expression occurs) and range (what different text types it occurs in) are often factors used, but even with less frequent items in a corpus such as 'Nice to meet you' (which occurs 26 times in the 100 million word British National Corpus), Martinez argues, few teachers would doubt its usefulness. Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) identify another important factor, that of 'semantic transparency,' arguing that the most frequent expressions are likely to be learned anyway, and that it is the mid-range frequency items (e.g., *show someone the ropes*) that should be the focus. Interpreting educators either need to consider the frequency, range and semantic transparency of such idiomatic multiword expressions or give students strategies for learning this language themselves so they can begin to recognize and accurately interpret it.

Based on the results and feedback, we offer the following recommendations to teachers working with interpreting, translation or other non-native English-speaking students:

- Raise students' awareness from the early stages of language learning:
  - that many English phrases can have a literal meaning, a non-literal meaning, or sometimes both.
  - that these meanings can be deceptively transparent (Martinez & Murphy, 2011).
- Choose a variety of sources of idioms:

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- names of shops, written and spoken advertisements, clips from soap operas (e.g. Grant, 1996) and TV sitcoms, newspaper headlines, radio and television interviews, talkback radio, political texts.
- dictionaries of idioms, especially those with pictures and etymology, (cf, Szczepaniak & Lew, 2011).
- English speakers (e.g. neighbors, shop keepers, friends).
- corpora conversations (e.g. BNC<sup>2</sup>, COCA<sup>3</sup>).
- corpora lectures – (e.g. MICASE<sup>4</sup>, BASE<sup>5</sup>).
- comparison with idioms used in their native languages, to increase their intercultural awareness.
- Show students how translation of some idioms may preserve the meaning only by changing the image, or ‘spirit of the original’ (Horodecka & Osadnik, 1989-90).
- Encourage students to develop strategies:
  - to notice idioms they hear and see around them.
  - to paraphrase the meaning of idiomatic language including socio-pragmatics and register.
  - to practise using idioms in their conversations with classmates, monitored by their teacher or an English speaker who can give feedback on the appropriateness of their use.

This focus on idioms would help both interpreting and translation teachers and students know if it was worth investing more time and training in this area. Future research would also serve to validate our findings or uncover new ones. The feedback already provided by the interpreting students in this research will be useful for planning future research regarding literal and non-literal language. Previous research by the authors and colleagues (Crezee & Grant, 2016; Crezee, Teng & Burn, 2017; Crezee, Burn & Teng, 2019) has shown that students are particularly receptive to idiomatic language used in documentary style reality television programs involving professionals such as law enforcement officers, border patrol personnel or paramedics and medical staff. Interpreter educators could use modalities such as GoReact or VoiceThread to allow student interpreters to interpret such naturally-occurring language and to reflect on their renditions.

### 5.3. *Limitations of the study*

As the number of students participating in this study was small, it is not possible to make generalizations based on the results. Our hope, however, is that when others involved in training interpreters read about this study, it may encourage them to do similar research to see if their interpreting students are able to recognize idiomatic expressions in the target language, distinguish them from literal expressions and accurately explain the meaning in the context in which it is used. This study does give us a good idea of our own advanced undergraduate interpreting students’ abilities in these areas. Further research is needed with both interpreting and translation students, as well as with other language students, to see if increased awareness in this area makes a difference. Moreover, the value of our findings is further weakened by the fact that not all the participants answered all the questions. In terms of identification and explanation of idiomatic expressions in particular, failure to respond can skew the results and their interpretation so we recommend that future studies take place during class when given enough time, teachers and/or researchers can ensure that all questions are answered.

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<sup>2</sup> British National Corpus

<sup>3</sup> Corpus of Contemporary American English

<sup>4</sup> Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English

<sup>5</sup> British Academic Spoken English Corpus

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### 6. Conclusion

It is hoped that raising interpreting and other students' awareness of literal and non-literal language as well as language that can have both meanings will prove to be useful. The authors feel that this increased awareness will become an integral part of students' input monitoring. Recognizing idiomatic language for what it is will be an important first step to considering the cultural and pragmatic implications of rendering this type of language (Hale, 2014; Crezee & Grant, 2016). However, before students can learn to recognize and explain, rather than avoid, the idiomatic language they encounter, they might first need both better lexical knowledge (Zyzik, 2011) and cultural background knowledge (Zheng & Xiang, 2014), both of which can be gained through increased exposure to idiomatic language in the natural context. Interpreter educators need to facilitate this type of exposure in order to help their students improve their ability to both recognize and explain idiomatic language. Feedback from the students who participated in this research indicates that this study increased their awareness of the cultural and pragmatic implications of interpreting idiomatic language, and that they would like more training and practice in this area. An important second step will be to reinforce the concept of interaction management through asking for repetition or clarification. A third step will be strategies for conveying idioms. The authors usually refer to the very useful translation strategies outlined by Baker (2011), while reminding students that they will have less time than translators to weigh up their options. As well as interpreting and translation students, other students such as ones preparing for further study may benefit from this knowledge as well, because idiomatic phrases can also occur in academic lectures (Howarth, 1998; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). We hope that the findings of the small study described here will go some way towards dealing with our interpreting students' 'Achilles heel' in this one aspect of language, and will inspire other researchers to explore learners' knowledge of phrases that can have a literal, idiomatic or both meanings, to benefit future interpreters and translators in particular.

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### Appendix 1

*Literal, idiomatic or both? (1), Answers*

	<b>Literal</b>	<b>Idiomatic</b>	<b>Both</b>
<i>from A to Z</i>			<i>Possible, normally idiom</i>
<i>go from A to B</i>			<i>Possible, normally idiom</i>
<i>do an about face</i>		<i>Only idiom</i>	
<i>be about face</i>	<i>Only literal</i>		
<i>above and beyond</i>			<i>Possible, normally idiom</i>
<i>on somebody's account</i>			<i>Possible, normally idiom</i>
<i>on your own account</i>			<i>Possible, normally idiom</i>
<i>take something into account</i>		<i>Only idiom</i>	
<i>play your ace</i>			<i>Possible, normally idiom</i>
<i>hold all the aces</i>			<i>Possible, normally idiom</i>
<i>an Achille's heel</i>		<i>Only idiom</i>	
<i>a sore heel</i>	<i>Only literal</i>		
<i>caught somebody in the act</i>		<i>Only idiom</i>	
<i>caught somebody's act</i>	<i>Only literal</i>		
<i>cut the act</i>		<i>Only idiom</i>	
<i>a piece of the action</i>		<i>Only idiom</i>	
<i>clean up your office</i>	<i>Only literal</i>		
<i>clean up your act</i>		<i>Only idiom</i>	
<i>be out of action</i>		<i>Only idiom</i>	
<i>not know somebody from Adam</i>		<i>Only idiom</i>	
<i>not know Adam</i>	<i>Only literal</i>		
<i>be afraid of your own solution</i>	<i>Only literal</i>		
<i>be afraid of your own shadow</i>			<i>Possible, normally idiom</i>
<i>be afraid of somebody</i>	<i>Only literal</i>		
<i>keep something afloat</i>			<i>Possible, normally idiom</i>

### Appendix 2

(Example) Read the short TV dialogue below and circle any idiomatic language you see, then paraphrase the idiomatic phrase(s) in the spaces provided:

*Michael Parkinson* interview with actor *Samuel Jackson* (28.1.08)

*MP*: How has acting helped you in life?

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*SJ*: In different ways, but really the only think you have after those **glory days** is your education. You can't **lose your cool** about something someone says to you, you have to ignore it. You would just **die laughing** if I told you some of the things people have said to me.

**Glory days**: happy, wonderful time in your life

**Lose your cool**: get angry

**Die laughing**: laugh a lot

*MP*: Was there a moment when you actually **took stock of** your life?

**Took stock of**: had a good look at your life, carefully thought about what you were doing with your life

*SJ*: Yes, when I realized my drinking was getting **out of hand**. Half the time I was **drunk out of my mind**, so I realized I needed to do something about it.

**Out of hand**: out of control

**Drunk out of my mind**: very drunk