In A Manner Of Speaking
Assessing Frequent Spoken Figurative Idioms To Assist ESL/EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Recent information on the frequency of idioms in spoken American academic English (Simpson & Mendis, 2003) and in contemporary spoken American English (Liu, 2003) has helped language teachers decide which ones might be useful to teach to ESL/EFL students. However, as Liu (2003, p. 672) has noted, what constitutes an 'idiom' not only varies from scholar to scholar, but is also affected by context. Therefore, to identify more idioms to teach to ESL/EFL students, we must first identify criteria to define an idiom and then search a corpus, or a large collection of texts, to establish their frequency.

This study attempts first to outline criteria to identify a particular type of idiom, what some people have called 'figurative idioms' (Cowie, Mackin, & McCaig, 1983; Alexander, 1987; Howarth, 1998) or transparent/semi-transparent/semi-opaque metaphors (Moon, 1998; Fernando & Flavell, 1981). The next step involves doing a corpus search to establish the frequency of a number of these figurative idioms, or what will hereafter be called 'figuratives'. To establish frequency in British English, a corpus search was done in the spoken part of the British National Corpus (BNC) for the idioms which qualify as figuratives from both Simpson and Mendis's (2003) and Liu's (2003) spoken American English lists. One aim of this comparison is to test their frequency in a balanced corpus – that is, a collection of texts made up of 90 percent written texts (imaginative – poetry, pose and drama – and informative – eight general domains) and 10 percent spoken recordings (conversational and task-oriented) of people of different ages, social class, location and gender. Another aim is to show which figuratives are more frequently used in spoken English on both sides of the Atlantic – and therefore, may merit teaching time – and which may be more common in one culture or the other. Based on these findings, suggestions are made at the end of the article with regard to the teaching of them.

Criteria for Defining Figuratives

When attempting to define figuratives, Grant and Bauer (2004) chose the most commonly used criterion to define an idiom, that of non-compositionality (you cannot work out the meaning of an idiom by adding together the meanings of the individual words that comprise it), plus an additional one of figurativeness, to divide the presently large collection of multiword units (MWUs) known as idioms into three groups:

1. core idioms (non-compositional, non-figurative)

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- *by and large, so and so, red herring*
2. figuratives (non-compositional, figurative)
   - *take the plunge, keep a low profile, go off the rails*
3. ONCEs (<u>o</u>ne <u>n</u>on-<u>c</u>ompositional <u>e</u>lement, may also be figurative)
   - a *long* face, take its *toll,* at *stake*

The category of figuratives was determined by asking the question: "Is it possible to understand the meaning of the multiword unit (MWU) by recognizing the "untruth" [of the statement] and pragmatically reinterpreting it in a way that correctly explains the MWU?" For example, in the statement "Jack has *gone off the rails* since his wife died", it is an "untruth" that he would be likely to be on or go off rails, so this statement is reinterpreted in the context to work out the intended meaning of "not moving forward in a controlled manner, being out of control".

While one frequency count of the first category of "core idioms" has been done based on the BNC (Grant, 2003), no frequency has yet been established for the other two categories of "figuratives" and "ONCEs". For this reason, a corpus search was done in the BNC of figuratives – and/or "ONCEs" which would also be "figurative" – from both Simpson and Mendis's (2003) and Liu's (2003) lists. The aim of the search was to compare the frequency of figuratives in spoken British and American English. A search was then done for the figurative idioms marked as frequent in two idiom dictionaries, and for some found in English language teaching course books, with the aim of making recommendations about teaching them to ESL/EFL learners.

Identifying Figuratives in Academic and Contemporary Spoken American English

Looking first at figuratives in academic spoken English, Simpson and Mendis (2003) started with their spoken academic corpus and identified idioms in it, using criteria also noted by Fernando (1996), McCarthy (1998) and Moon (1998). They identified 20 idioms deemed particularly useful for an academic purposes curricula, and 32 which occurred frequently – four or more times in MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, a 1.7 million plus word corpus), nine of which occur on both lists. Excluded from this comparison were three which were not considered figuratives. The remaining 40 are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1   Figuratives from Simpson and Mendis (2003) lists

bottom line	*the big picture*	*carrot and stick*
come into play	*draw a line between*	*chicken and egg question*
get a grasp of	*get a handle on*	*get to the bottom of things*
hand-waving	*hand in hand*	*go off on a tangent*
in a nutshell	*ivory tower*	*litmus test*
on the same page	*shift gears*	*play devil's advocate*
split hairs	*down the line*	*thinking on my feet*
on (the right) track	*knee-jerk*	*flip a coin/flip side of the same*

		coin
right off the bat	*on target*	*thumbs up*
fall in love	*out the door*	*take sth at face value*
beat to death	*put the heat on*	*a ballpark idea/guess*
full-fledged	*goes to show*	*come out of the closet*
ring a bell	*take/make a stab at*	*take my/sb's word for it*
rule(s) of thumb		

To add to this number, Liu's (2003) list of 302 frequent 'idioms' in contemporary spoken American English was consulted. Liu used Fernando's (1996) criteria – different from the criteria used by Simpson and Mendis – to divide idioms into three categories (pure, semiliteral, and literal), searched in three American spoken corpora to establish frequency, and then divided the most frequent 302, out of the total of 9,683 idioms, into three groups:
- Band 1 (47 items that occurred 50 or more times per million words)
- Band 2 (107 items that occurred 11 – 49 times per million words)
- Band 3 (148 items that occurred 2 – 19 times per million words)

From Liu's Appendix B (idioms from the combined three corpora of spoken American English) list, a total of 70 figuratives were found, and were included in the corpus search of the BNC, including four from Band 1, five from Band 2, and 61 from Band 3 as Table 2 below shows:

Table 2   Figuratives from Liu's (2003) lists

make sure (Band 1)	*in other words* (1)	*make sense* (1)
have/keep in mind (1)	*on the other hand* (Band 2)	*back and forth* (2)
make a difference (2)	*all of a sudden* (2)	*have/play a part/role (in)* (2)
be open to ideas (Band 3)	*take steps* (3)	*more or less* (3)
be/keep in touch with (3)	*down the road* (3)	*do one's best* (3)
take into account (3)	*in light of* (3)	*go wrong* (3)
in the long/short run/term (3)	*hold s.o./sb accountable* (3)	*at stake* (3)
by hand (3)	*have/get a clue* (3)	*chances are/were* (3)
in the wake of (3)	*have sth on one's mind* (3)	*keep/be on track* (3)
make good on sth (3)	*get to the point* (3)	*on and off/off and on* (3)
give someone a break (3)	*shed/cast light on sth* (3)	*be/put on hold* (3)
a fair game (3)	*up in the air* (3)	*come to mind* (3)
in the eyes of/in sb's eyes (3)	*the big picture* (3)	*ballpark (figure/estimate)* (3)
keep an eye on (3)	*draw the line* (3)	*be over one's head* (3)
get/have a handle on sth (3)	*in (good/bad) shape* (3)	*make fun of* (3)
in line with (3)	*a level playing field* (3)	*call sth into question* (3)
get/have hands on sth (3)	*off the top of one's head* (3)	*put sth to rest* (3)
take its toll (3)	*make up one's mind*	*the ball is in your/their court* (3)
get sth across (3)	*have/get a say/voice in* (3)	*on the horizon* (3)
right off the bat (3)	*sth/things are up for grabs* (3)	*a rule of thumb* (3)
bits and pieces (3)	*err on the side of* (3)	*fall short* (3)

in the works (3)	*beg the question* (3)	*from scratch* (3)
hit home (3)	*in the pipeline* (3)	*make/catch/hit the headlines* (3)
push the envelope (3)		

Idioms from the Spoken American English Lists Excluded from the Figuratives List

Excluded from Simpson and Mendis's (2003) list are those MWUs considered to be truncated from a full expression (what the hell / what the heck), and therefore the meaning would be clear when the full expression was used, and compound words (nitty-gritty).

Further excluded were those from Liu's (2003) list judged to be phrasal verbs (deal with, go through, come up, look for, find out, etc), as well as some MWUs which others call "vague language" (kind of, sort of), collocations or fixed expressions (in fact, at all, as well, in order to/that, etc.), and discourse markers (first of all, according to, etc.). For this corpus comparison, a decision was made not to include phrasal verbs – although some are figurative – and non-idiom fixed expressions in the search for figuratives, but to add a search of a brief sample of these for frequency comparison purposes. If language teachers are making a decision on which MWUs to teach students, frequency of occurrence might be one criteria they are interested in.

Corpus Search Results

In order to compare "apples with apples" as much as possible, the frequency results from MICASE (1.7 million+ words) were compared to the frequency results of the spoken BNC (just over 10 million words) and divided by five to give a rough equivalence. The search comparison is listed below, in Table 3, with the nine figuratives which occurred on both of the Simpson and Mendis (2003) lists – those considered useful for an academic purposes curricula, and those which occurred frequently – marked with an asterisk (*):

Table 3   Frequency of figuratives in MICASE and the spoken BNC

Idiom / Figurative	Total in MICASE 1.7 mil	Total in BNC 2 mil	Idiom / Figurative	Total in MICASE 1.7 mil	Total in BNC 2 mil
*bottom line**	17	8	*come out of the closet*	4	0
*the big picture**	7	0.6	*full-fledged / fully fledged*	4	0 / 1.2
*come into play**	14	4	*get a handle on**	4	0.6
down the line	11	7.16	*goes to show*	4	2.32
flip a coin, flip side of a/the same coin / toss a coin	10	0.4 / 0.6	*on the same page**	4	0
on (the right) track	9	0.8	*ring a bell*	4	5

knee-jerk	8	0	split hairs*	4	0.2
hand in hand*	8	1.8	take (make/have) a stab at it	4	0.6
right (straight) off the bat	7	0	take my/someone's word for it	4	2.12
carrot(s) and stick(s)*	7	0.6	chicken-and-egg (question)	1	2.4
draw a/the line between*	7	2.4	get a grasp of	1	0.6
on target	7	2.4	get to the bottom of things	1	1.8
thumbs up	7	0.4	go off on a tangent	3	0
fall in love	6	5.6	hand-waving	2	0
out the door	6	2.6	in a nutshell	3	2.4
rule(s) of thumb	6	3.2	ivory tower	3	0.6
take (something) at face value	6	2.6	litmus test	1	0
beat to death	5	0	play devil's advocate	3	1.4
put the heat on	5	0.2	shift gears	1	0
a ballpark (idea / guess)	4	1.2	thinking on my feet	1	0.6

MICASE / BNC Comparison

While few reliable conclusions can be drawn when comparing two relatively small and quite different spoken corpora, some generalizations based on the frequency figures can be put forward for future research.

Firstly, all but three (*ring a bell, chicken(-)and(-)egg situation, get to the bottom of*) of these figuratives occurred more commonly in the specialized American academic spoken corpus than in the more general British spoken corpus. Some occurred as many as *ten or more times as often* in the American academic corpus, including the following:

the big picture	*carrot(s) and stick(s)*
flip a coin / flip side of the same coin	*thumbs up*
on (the right) track	*put the heat on*

This may indicate a higher frequency of these in spoken American academic English, or may simply be attributable to the idiolect of individual lecturers and students, something noted by Simpson and Mendis (2003).

Secondly, some figuratives occurred approximately twice as often in the specialized American academic spoken corpus than in the more general British spoken corpus, once again for possibly the same reasons or because these are "more American":

rule(s) of thumb   *goes to show*
take (something) at face value   *take my/someone's word for it*

Thirdly, some figuratives which occurred in the specialized American academic spoken corpus had zero occurrences in the spoken part of the more general BNC corpus. One example is *full-fledged* which had zero occurrences in the spoken part of the BNC but six occurrences when spelled *fully fledged* and not hyphenated. As variations in spelling were checked, the zero occurrences of the others might indicate that either they are more American than British, or that they might occur in written but not spoken English:

knee(-)jerk   *come out of the closet*
right off the bat   *on the same page*
beat to death   *hand-waving*
go off on a tangent   *shift gears*
litmus test

Fourthly, some figuratives might be more American than British because of their association with an American sport (baseball) not played in Britain:

a ballpark idea/guess   *right off the bat*

Comparing Frequency in Three Corpora of Spoken American English and the BNC

Looking now at contemporary American spoken English, a total of 70 'idioms' judged to be figuratives or figurative ONCEs were selected from Liu's (2003) Appendix B (most frequent across all three spoken corpora) list and compared with occurrences in the BNC spoken corpus as shown in Table 4 below. Those in bold also occur in the MICASE corpus. Numbers include all verb inflections (eg, make/makes/made/making sure) and are based on occurrences per million in both spoken corpora:

Table 4 Figuratives in spoken American and British English

Most frequently used figuratives	Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million	Total in spoken BNC / million	Most frequently used figuratives	Total in 3 corpora of spoken AmerEng / million	Total in spoken BNC / million
make sure	50 +	109.27	*come to mind*	2 – 19	1.93
in other words	50 +	48.54	*in the eyes of / in sb's eyes*	2 – 19	1.84
make sense	50 +	24.95	*the big picture*	2 – 19	0.29
have / keep in mind keep, *bear in mind*	50 +	8.80/1.55/ 38.68	*ballpark (figure, estimate, etc)*	2 – 19	0.1
on the other hand	11 – 49	23.88	*keep an/one's eye on*	2 – 19	7.35

back and forth	11 – 49	1.74	*draw the line*	2 – 19	1.16
make a difference	11 – 49	33.75	*be over one's head*	2 – 19	0.77
have / play a part / role in	11 – 49	2.71	***get / have a handle on sth**, / put / keep*	2 – 19	0.1 / 0, 0.1 / 0.1
all of a sudden	11 – 49	15.66	*in good / bad shape*	2 – 19	0.19 / 0.19
be open to ideas	2 – 19	0.1	*make fun of*	2 – 19	0.58
take steps	2 – 19	3.96	*in line with*	2 – 19	6
more or less	2 – 19	44.29	*(a) level playing field*	2 – 19	0.87
be / keep in touch with / get in touch	2 – 19	4.06 / 3.77 / 12.96	*call sth into question*	2 – 19	0.48
down the road	2 – 19	2.51	*get / have hands on sth*	2 – 19	2.03 / 0
do one's best	2 – 19	12.38	*off the top of my (one's) head*	2 – 19	2.51
take into account / take account of	2 – 19	28.33	*put sth to rest*	2 – 19	0
in (the) light of	2 – 19	10.54	*take its toll*	2 – 19	0.1 (taken)
go wrong	2 – 19	27.85	*make up one's mind*	2 – 19	8.12
in the long / short run / term	2 – 19	11.60	*the ball is in your/their court*	2 – 19	0.29
hold someone / sb accountable	2 – 19	0.1	*get sth across*	2 – 19	3
at stake	2 – 19	0.87	*have a say / voice in sth*	2 – 19	2.32 / 0.39
by hand	2 – 19	6.19	*on the horizon*	2 – 19	0.87
[not] have / get a clue	2 – 19	12.58	*right off the bat*	2 – 19	0
chances are / were	2 – 19	4.06 / 0	*sth / things are up for grabs*	2 – 19	0.39
in the wake of	2 – 19	0.58	***a rule** (s) of **thumb***	2 – 19	1.55
have (something) on one's mind	2 – 19	1.55	*bits and pieces*	2 – 19	12.67
keep / be (on track)	2 – 19	0.29/0.29 (0.29)	*err on the side of*	2 – 19	0.19
make good on sth	2 – 19	0.29	*fall short*	2 – 19	1.74
get to the point	2 – 19	0.48	*in the works*	2 – 19	0.48
on and off / off and on	2 – 19	2.42 / 0.97	*beg the question*	2 – 19	0.48
give sb a break	2 – 19	0.29	*from scratch*	2 – 19	2.32
shed / cast/ throw light on sth	2 – 19	0.1 / 0.1 0.58	*hit home*	2 – 19	0.39

be / put on hold	2 – 19	0.48	*in the pipeline*	2 – 19	1.96
(sth as) a fair game	2 – 19	0.29	*make / catch / hit headlines*	2 – 19	0/0.1/0.19
up in the air	2 – 19	0.68	*push the envelope*	2 – 19	0

Results of Comparison of "Figuratives" in the American and British Corpora

While not possible to do more exact comparisons because of Liu (2003) using a range of frequency, a number of generalisations are nevertheless put forward for consideration and future research.

Firstly, only one figurative occurs frequently enough in British English to qualify for the most frequent (50+/million) found in Band 1:

> *make sure*

Secondly, only three figuratives occur more frequently in spoken British English than spoken American:

> *more or less*
> *take into account / take account of something*
> *go wrong*

Thirdly, several figuratives occur with the same frequency in spoken British English to qualify for the Band 3 frequency range (2 – 19 occurrences per million) in spoken American English:

take steps	*by hand*
be / keep in touch with	*have / get a clue*
do one's best	*chances are/were*
bits and pieces	*in line with*
from scratch	*off the top of my / one's head*
get to the point	*get sth across*
in (the) light of	*come / spring to mind*
in the long/short run/term	*keep an / one's eye on*

Fourthly, while some figuratives have zero occurrences in spoken British English (*make the headlines, put sth to rest, push the envelope*), a number of others do <u>not</u> occur frequently enough to reach the minimum frequency of two per million:

in the wake of	*make fun of*
back and forth	*a level playing field*
be open to ideas	*the ball is in their / sb's court*
err on the side of	*take its toll*
fall short	*on the horizon*

begs the question	*sth / things are up for grabs*	
hit home	*a rule of thumb*	
be / keep on track	*up in the air*	
make good on sth	*in the eyes of / sb's eyes*	
give sb a break	*draw the line*	
shed / cast / throw light on sth	*be over one's head*	
at stake	*in good / bad shape*	
get a handle on sth	*in the works*	

Adding to the List of Spoken Figuratives

To widen the search for figuratives and add to the lists above, first the two British idiom dictionaries that give a frequency indicator (*Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*, 1998 and *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms*, 1995) were examined and the idioms from each which were marked as being frequent, and which qualified as figuratives, were combined. The result was that a total of *only* 79 frequent 'idioms' occurred in <u>both</u> dictionaries, and of these, the following 76 were judged to be figuratives. Table 5 gives these, with the ones in **bold** either on the Simpson and Mendis or Liu lists:

Table 5 Figuratives found in both British idiom dictionaries that indicate frequency

get your act together	***draw the line** at sth*	*(be) on the spot*
get in on the act	*keep a low profile*	*back to square one*
clear the air	*cross your mind*	*on the spur of the moment*
jump on the bandwagon	*(be) on the cards*	*follow suit*
give sb the benefit of the doubt	*give/lend sb a hand*	***in the short**/medium/**long term***
(be) a bone of contention	*(be) run of the mill*	*ram sth down sb's throat*
(be) out of the blue	*put your finger on sth*	*keep sb on their toes*
*(be**) the bottom line***	*give and take*	*bite your tongue*
(be) in cold blood	*loud and clear*	*keep track*
(be) in the dark	*bend/stretch the rules*	*have/get the upper hand*
(be) down to earth	*play it safe*	*have your work cut out for you*
(be) easier said than done	*(be) on top of sth*	*(be) out of this world*
make ends meet	*set/start the ball rolling*	*(be) **up in the air***
make/pull a face	*(be) over the moon*	*turn a blind eye to sth*
at first glance	*get on sb's nerves*	*(be) over the top*
bear fruit	*(speak) off the cuff*	*(be) out of your depth*
give it a shot/whirl	*in a nutshell*	*(not) see eye to eye*
go against the grain	*(be) plain sailing*	*not (be) the end of the world*
stick to your guns	***(be) in the pipeline***	*get/come to grips with sth*
take the plunge	*lose your head*	*get the hang of sth*
(be) off the record	*break sb's heart*	*hold your own*

set/put the record straight	get your own back	let sb off the hook
red tape	fall into place	break the ice
behind the scenes	**(be) on the right track**	(be) at loggerheads
from scratch	bear**/keep sth in mind**	come to a head
stick/poke your nose in		

Despite being marked as frequent, the corpus search for these 76 in the BNC showed that only 10 occurred in spoken English more frequently than the threshold of two occurrences per million words:

get your act together (2.51)	(be) on the spot (4.16)
make / pull a face (2.22)	in the short (2.22) / long (3.87) term
give / lend sb a hand (6.77)	(be) over the top (5.12)
(be) on top of sth (2.51)	get / come to grips with sth (3.29)
from scratch (2.32)	bear / keep sth in mind (38.68)

Furthermore, of these 10 only one (*bear / keep something in mind*) occurred considerably more frequently than the others, something that language teachers and students may wish to take note of.

A second strategy used to widen the number of figuratives to search for was to see which ones were being taught in idiom books. Two idiom books were chosen for this task, one American and one British, with the first 10 figuratives in each being selected for a corpus search of the BNC. Frequency is given for occurrences in spoken English:

- Watkins, D. (2001). *The idiom adventure, Fluency in speaking and listening*. White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.

a breeze (0.19)	kick the habit (0.19)
a couch potato (0)	out of step (0.29)
have a green thumb/fingers (0/0.29)	see red (0)
make sth from scratch (0.19)	up in arms (1.26)
run-of-the-mill (0.1)	work oneself into a lather (0)

- McCarthy, M. & O'Dell, F. (2002). *English idioms in use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

not all there (0.29)	give sb a taste/dose of their own medicine (0.19)
off her trolley / rocker (0.19/0.29)	a sore point (0.1)
not right in the head (0)	bitten the dust (0.19)
one sandwich short of a picnic (0)	a bitter pill to swallow (0.19)
as nutty as a fruitcake (0)	sugar the pill (0)

These results show that none of the above 20 figuratives occurs frequently enough to meet the threshold of two per million. For teaching purposes, it might be useful to include frequency figures based on a large and balanced corpus so that teachers and students can prioritise which ones, if any, to teach/learn.

Frequency of Other Non-Figurative MWUs

In order to compare the frequency of other MWUs not judged to be figuratives – including phrasal verbs, vague language, discourse markers, and collocations – a corpus search of some from Liu's (2003) list was carried out. Twenty of these were selected from Band 1, 10 phrasal verbs and 10 others. When determining frequency of MWUs such as "kind of" or "sort of", meaning "somewhat" rather than "type of" or "caring/helpful of", a sample was done of the first 50 occurrences in spoken British English, and then based on this number, the approximate total over all the occurrences, was worked out. Similarly, with occurrences of "as far as", those involving measurements of distance were subtracted from the total as were occurrences of "a deal with", which has a different meaning from the phrasal verb "deal with". Once again, the number of occurrences per million includes verb inflections (deal/deals/dealt/dealing). Table 6 below has the results of this comparison:

Table 6 Frequency of phrasal verb and fixed expression MWUs from Liu's (2003) list

MWU	Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million	Total in spoken BNC / million	MWU	Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million	Total in spoken BNC / million
deal with	50+	156.48	kind of	50+	42.99
go through	50+	165.16	sort of	50+	389.68
come up / come up with	50+	199.29 / 35.87	of course	50+	547.39
look for	50+	121.83	in terms of	50+	141.47
find out	50+	119.71	as/so far as	50+	102.01/11.02
get into	50+	71.93	at all	50+	296.37
go ahead	50+	23.49	as well as	50+	59.95
put on	50+	72.43	by the way	50+	40.32
end up	50+	60.73	first of all	50+	74.17
point out	50+	37.61	according to	50+	37.81

The comparison table above shows that while all of the phrasal verbs are also very frequent in the BNC compared with figuratives, three of these (come up with, go ahead, point out) were less common in British spoken English. Similarly, collocations such as "of course", "in terms of", "in fact", and "at all" are also frequent, as is vague language such as "sort of", which occurs more often in spoken British English than "kind of". Furthermore, "by the way" and

"according to" are less common, with the latter proving to be much more common in written British English.

In addition, for frequency comparison purposes, a corpus search of the BNC was done to establish the frequency in British English of a number of collocations beginning with "in". Once again, 20 were chosen, this time from all three bands. While the majority of these should cause no problems in reception and understanding for ESL/EFL students, they may not feature in the students' productive vocabulary. The results of the corpus search can be seen in Table 7 below:

Table 7 Frequency of collocational MWUs with "in" from Liu's (2003) list

MWU	Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million	Total in spoken BNC / million	MWU	Total in 3 corpora of spoken Amer Eng / million	Total in spoken BNC / million
in terms of	50+	141.47	in public	2 – 19	4.06
in fact	50+	290.96	in case	2 – 19	40.42
in a way / in some way	50+	43.03 / 11.41	in common	2 – 19	6.00
in a sense / in some sense	50+	33.46 / 0.77	in essence	2 – 19	2.71
in general	50+	22.63	in detail	2 – 19	6.87
in time	11 – 49	25.43	in control	2 – 19	6.77
in effect	11 – 49	16.73	in private	2 – 19	0.48
in favor / favo[u]r (of)	11 – 49	28.14	in good faith	2 – 19	0.77
in charge (of)	11 – 49	13.34	in no way	2 – 19	1.64
in advance	2 – 19	12.18	in practice	2 – 19	11.02

While "in terms of" and "in fact" also occur frequently in spoken British English, "in a/some way", "in a/some sense" and "in general" are more frequent in spoken American English. Furthermore, while "in private", "in good faith", and "in no way" occur less frequently in spoken British English, "in case" occurs much more frequently.

Pedagogical Implications

With regard to learning figurative idioms – figuratives – and other MWUs, teachers may wish to drawn students' attention to which ones occur more frequently in spoken British or spoken American English, or in a specialised area like spoken American academic English.

In addition, both teachers and students would benefit if a number of steps were followed. Firstly with regard to figuratives, they would benefit from knowing which metaphors the figuratives are based on (Lakoff, & Johnson, 1980). For example, one textbook (Wright, 1999)

that provides practice in this uses a metaphor for each chapter heading (A company is a ship) and then gives exercises using associated figuratives (*knows the ropes, all in the same boat, on course, run a tight ship, on board, it's all hands on deck, wait for the storm to pass, like rats leaving a sinking ship, don't rock the boat, weather the storm,* etc.).

A second point is that students would benefit from developing the skills to "recognise the untruth in the figurative and pragmatically reinterpret it to find the intended truth" whenever and wherever figuratives occur   For example, figuratives which occur in the BNC – either spoken English (SE) or written English (WE) – such as *be given/get the green light* (0.39 SE; 1.04 WE) or *fight like cat and dog* (0 SE, 0.06 WE) are not difficult for students to reinterpret as most have an understanding of the purpose of a green light and of the relationship between cats and dogs. Using authentic language from the BNC – corpus-based pedagogical material (Simpson & Mendis, 2003) – shows how it should be possible for students to use both the known circumstances and contextual clues to work out the intended meaning. The following examples are from the BNC, both the spoken (SE) and the written (WE) part:

- But, and it's but, supporting the document today does not give the C E C the **green light** to rush into any amalgamation with the Transport and General Union and carve up the G M B. [SE]
- For this reason he was given the **green light** to prepare more detailed proposals for further consideration. [WE]
- We'd fight like cat and **dog**. [WE]
- We fought like cat and **dog** the whole time we were together -- or at least most of the time," she added, remembering, "he made my life an absolute misery!" [WE]

Other figuratives may be less obvious for students to interpret or unpick, but with classroom practice, most can be understood such as these further BNC examples (*make sure, change one's mind, lend a* hand) below:

- It is your responsibility to **make sure** that money is paid each and every week. [SE]
- Smoke alarms need very little maintenance, but they do need to be tested regularly to **make sure** they are in good working order. [WE]
- For example a lot of people change their **mind** about wanting goods and decide I don't think I want that new pair of shoes after all. [SE]
- My colleagues seemed genuinely worried by my decision and many of them tried to convince me to change my **mind**. [WE]
- And Karen last weekend, after you were sitting for them suddenly took ill on the Saturday I think, and Sheila wasn't in any great shape, so he went back home er, from the office an-- over his lunch hour to see if he could just go and lend a **hand**, ge-- generally help out over his lunch hour. [SE]
- When, that first night, she went to her own bungalow, I was left mostly on my own, though Alec came in early in the evening to lend a **hand**. [WE]

Thirdly, teachers and students would benefit from developing knowledge of which figuratives might be more useful to learn, based on their frequency of occurrence – in spoken and written English – in both a general and a specialised corpus.

A fourth point is that from knowing the role of figuratives – or how they are used in the discourse – teachers can help students learn to both understand and use them appropriately. Providing an opportunity to practise using figuratives in the safe environment of the classroom should give students more courage if they want to use them outside in the real world.

Fifthly, students would benefit from learning how to access and use both a general, and a specialised, corpus so they begin to recognise figuratives used authentically in context and can apply the tools they have learnt to reinterpret them correctly.

An additional point is that both teachers and students would benefit from teaching resources such as idiom books and dictionaries including frequency figures – in both spoken and written English – of individual figuratives based on occurrences in a general, or specialised, corpus. In other words, the idiom dictionaries that distinguish frequent ones may have to justify this by explaining how this frequency has been determined. Some may be frequent in the media but not in other genres, so it is important for learners to know this.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this comparison, we know that figuratives occur less frequently than many phrasal verbs, collocations and discourse markers so may merit less teaching time. However, as Liu (2003) has noted, even low frequency figuratives could be important to some students. Therefore, teaching students the skills to reinterpret the figurative when trying to understand the intended meaning as it occurs in discourse will help them become independent learners in this area.

As both Simpson and Mendis (2003) and Liu (2003) note a corpus can be consulted for both the frequency of occurrence and the role of figurative idioms, either a large and representative corpus like the BNC or the proposed American National Corpus (ANC), or a small and specialised one like MICASE. For example, the MICASE search revealed that contrary to expectations, some idioms – especially figurative ones – occur in spoken academic English so their inclusion in a teaching syllabus can be justified for that target audience. Finally, idiom teaching materials would be more helpful if as Liu (2003) notes, rather than the idioms included being based on the intuition of the authors', they were based on frequency and range of occurrence in authentic language, either that found in a large and balanced corpus or in a more specialised corpus developed for a specific target group.

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