

# **Wrapping your Head around Idioms: It's not Rocket Science!**

English Expressions in English as a Lingua Franca

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### **Abstract**

Idiomatic language is often one aspect of English that is taken into consideration when evaluating a speaker's English competence. In order to acquire a native-like proficiency in English, non-native speakers should be able to comprehend and use idioms. Although there has been research conducted on the role of idiomatic expressions in non-natives perceived English language proficiency by native speakers, there is still research needed in order to investigate how non-native speakers perceive other non-native speakers' competence and comprehensibility of discourse when idioms are used. Therefore, the present study investigates if there is a possible effect of idiomaticity on non-natives speaker's perception. An online questionnaire consisting of a total of 16 different emails were read by 85 Dutch speakers and evaluated regarding comprehensibility of the text and perceived competence of the speaker with respect to idiomaticity and nativeness, Although the obtained results were not significant, it can be suggested that advanced non-native speakers of English are familiar with idiomatic language. Further research is necessary in order to find a significant effect.

Keywords: ELF, idiomaticity, nativeness, language proficiency

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>English as Lingua Franca.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Idiomatic language.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Difficulties of idiomatic language.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Processing.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Proficiency.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Advantages of idiomatic language.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>The present study.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<b>Method.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Materials.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Subjects.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Design.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Instruments.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Procedure.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Statistical treatment.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<b>Results.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Explanations.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Limitations and future research.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>26</b>

## Introduction

English is very essential nowadays. About 20% of the world's population speaks that language (Lyons, 2017). Especially in business contexts, the use of the language is inevitable as it continues to grow. The language is not only spoken across native English speakers (L1), but also in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) setting. This means that even in conversations that take place between non-native speakers from different linguistic backgrounds, who learn English as their second Language (L2), English is often used (Mauranen, Hynninen & Ranta, 2010). As the number of English learners is continuously increasing, so is the importance of being able to speak the language properly.

One of the more specific factors highlighting the importance of the English language are idioms which are often considered in evaluating non-native speaker's language proficiency (Thyab, 2016). Idioms differ from standard language and can be described as informal language expressions, whose meaning often cannot be derived from the individual words. As a result of this, non-native speakers face challenges when encountering idiomatic language. They tend to have difficulties comprehending and using idioms (Laufer, 2002). For non-native speakers, being confronted with idioms often leads to confusion, as not every L2 speaker is able to understand every idiom right away. Research has shown that a speaker's proficiency in this particular language plays an important role in the ability to process and comprehend idioms. The more advanced one's proficiency is, the more likely one is able to understand idioms (Vanlacker-Sidtis, 2003). Therefore, the challenge for non-native speakers to use and comprehend idioms results in a fewer use of idioms.

However, research has shown that the use of idiomatic language is very advantageous, and the integration of idiomatic language in one's vocabulary seems to contribute to the assumption of being a more advanced and fluent English speaker (Boers, Eyckmans, Kappel, Stengers & Demecheleer, 2006; Thyab 2016). In order, as a non-native speaker, to acquire a native-like proficiency in English, making use of idioms and being able to understand them seems therefore to be of great importance.

Yet, very little is known about the effects of the use of idiomatic language within the context of an ELF setting. There has not been conducted research about the effect idiomatic language has on non-native speakers perceived language competence when evaluated by other non-native speakers. As research has shown that non-native speakers themselves have difficulties when exposed to idiomatic language, it is important to investigate how English proficiency is perceived by non-native speakers when idioms are used and whether idioms are

perceived to be a significant contributor to the speaker's competence, as it is so often stated (Boers et al. 2006; Thyab, 2017).

This study aimed to investigate in which way the use of idioms is relevant in an ELF setting when it comes to the evaluation of language competence. This question becomes relevant, as there are more and more ELF settings. The study further aimed to investigate whether non-native speakers are influenced by the L1 background of the speaker, as native speakers generally have a better proficiency in English than non-native speakers (Fleckenstein, Leucht, Pant & Köller, 2016). More specifically, the study examined the effects of idiomatic language in an ELF setting across Dutch speakers on comprehension of idiomatic expressions in discourse, as well as on the perceived language competence of the speaker.

In the following, idiomatic language first is defined and the importance of idiomaticity in the English language is explained. Further, previous research on the use and comprehension of idioms will be addressed as well as studies that have shown a positive effect of idioms on language proficiency.

### **English as Lingua Franca**

There is no doubt that the ability to speak English is of great importance. Due to the continuing process of globalization, the use of English has increased significantly and is spoken worldwide. It is not without reason that English often is referred to as the global language (Nordquist, 2019). Especially in business contexts, the ability to communicate in English is inevitable (Charles, 2007). It gives new opportunities and opens doors in the business world. English is increasingly introduced as the language of instruction in universities and as the common corporate language in international companies (Frederiksson, Barner-Rasmussen & Piekkari, 2006). Nowadays, the language is spoken even more by non-native speakers of English than by native speakers of English themselves (Mauranen et al., 2010). It is estimated that approximately 1.5 billion of the 7.5 billion inhabitants of the world speak English, but only 360 million of these are native speakers of English (Lyson, 2017). Seidlhofer (2009) defines such conversations that take place between speakers of different linguistic backgrounds as ELF situations, which are expected to grow even more.

Due to this growth, it could be assumed that speaking the language on a professional level might be advantageous. However, communication among non-native speakers with different language backgrounds may not always be very clear and complexities are more likely to arise. Miscommunication and misunderstandings are common in ELF settings, as speakers with different L1 backgrounds may use and interpret language differently (Kaur, 2011). Kaur

(2011) conducted a corpus analysis of 15 hours of transcribed audio recordings of spontaneous spoken discourse of non-native speakers in order to investigate how non-native speakers express themselves in English, their L2. Results showed that non-native speakers pay attention to how they express themselves, by using self-repair practices, such as correcting themselves. This shows that non-native speakers are aware of the importance to be able to speak English properly, as they express themselves more carefully and clearly in order to avoid potential misunderstandings and to make sure their message is transmitted correctly.

One of the important factors that seems to contribute to language proficiency in English is idiomatic language, since idioms are very widespread in the English language. The English language is estimated to comprise at least 25,000 idioms (The Idioms, n.d.). The use of idiomatic language is often taken into account when evaluating a speaker's language proficiency (Gibbs, 2010). Therefore, the ability as a non-native speaker to speak English professionally suggests making use of idiomatic language.

### **Idiomatic language**

There are several definitions for idiomatic language, that go back to the 1970s. An idiom is defined by Swinney and Cutler (1979) as 'a string of two or more words for which meaning is not derived from the meanings of the individual words comprising that string' (p. 523). In their study they used the example of the expression *kick the bucket* and explained that the meaning of this expression should not be interpreted literally. Instead of kicking a bucket, it really means 'to die'. The meaning of an idiom as a whole is therefore a different one than the meaning of each separate word within the idiom, or as defined by Beck & Weber (2016) 'the meaning of an idiom typically differs from the literal meanings of the individual constituent words' (p.1). Another example that illustrates this is the following:

Idiom	–	Such a job offer you get <u>once in a blue moon</u> . I would take it!
Meaning	–	Such a job offer you get <u>rarely</u> . I would take it!

What makes the interpretation of idioms, especially for non-native speakers challenging, however, is that while some idiomatic expressions do not have a logical literal interpretation, other idioms can also be understood literally and still make sense (Beck & Weber, 2016; Vanlacker-Sidtis, 2003). The idiom *bathing in hot water* should intend to mean being in trouble. Another example would be *she missed the boat*, meaning to miss an opportunity or a chance for something. However, the intended meanings of these sentences, when used as idioms, are

different compared to the literal meaning, wherefore, idioms intended to be interpreted figuratively can be also interpreted literally and would still be logical (Vanlacker-Sidtis, 2003).

There are also English idioms that do share the same figurative meaning in a different language and can be translated literally (Cieślicka, 2006). Cieślicka (2006) states that idioms which have a literal meaning in speakers L1 even tend to have a processing advantage for L2 speakers over idioms with a figurative meaning that can not be translated literally. An example of such an idiom is the following:

English	-	To be on the same wavelength
German	-	Auf der gleichen Wellenlänge sein

This expression exists both, in English as well as in German and means ‘to think in a similar way and to understand each other well’ (Cambridge Dictionary).

In general, however, idioms can be defined as a type of informal language that have the purpose of expressing something figuratively. Therefore, idioms can be described as a fixed format, that often have an arbitrary meaning that cannot be derived from the literal meaning of the individual words (Swinney & Cutler, 1979; Beck & Weber, 2016).

### **Difficulties of idiomatic language**

Research has shown that although idiomatic language seems to be of great importance, it often represents a challenge for non-native speakers of English regarding comprehension and usage. The difficulty of idiomatic language for non-native speakers has been addressed in many studies, and several variables seem to play an important role here.

#### *Processing*

One of the main challenges for non-native speakers of English to use idiomatic language seems to be associated with the way non-native speakers and native speakers process idioms. The fact that idioms are phrases that can not be interpreted literally but need to be interpreted correctly or (figuratively saying) need to be *learned by heart*, makes the processing of such expressions often a challenge for non-native speakers. Differences between non-native and native speakers have been found in several studies. However, there are several theories that aim to explain the processing of idioms and a variety of studies have moreover shown conflicting results between native and non-native speakers.

Swinney and Cutler (1979) investigated how idiomatic language is processed by native speakers by testing two theories: The Idiom List Hypothesis and the Lexical Representation Hypothesis. According to the Idiom List Hypothesis, idioms are stored in a special list, other than the normal lexicon and have to be translated literally first. The Lexical Representation Hypothesis states that idioms are stored as words in the same mental lexicon as all other words. The researchers found evidence for the second hypothesis and came to the conclusion that idiomatic expressions seem to be processed by native speakers just as normal language.

On the other hand, language processing seems to be different for non-native speakers. Cooper (1999) found evidence that non-native speakers are processing and using idiomatic language differently than native speakers do. He conducted an experiment in which four different processing strategies were investigated. He asked non-native speakers to take an idiom recognition test in which they were asked to describe the meaning of these idioms. Results showed that participants mainly tried to retrieve the meaning from the context. Cooper (1999) concluded that non-native speakers comprehend idioms not based on a certain theory but based on a heuristic method. Instead of revealing the meaning immediately like native speakers do, non-native speakers have to find out the meaning through ‘discovery and experimentation’ (Cooper, 1999, p.254). He concluded that non-native speakers, therefore, need more time compared to native speakers when processing idioms.

Evidence for these difficulties was found in a study done by Siyanova-Chanturia, Conklin and Schmitt (2011), who investigated processing of idiomatic language by conducting an eye tracking experiment. In this experiment, non-native and native speakers of English were asked to read written discourse that contained idioms. One of their findings showed that there is indeed a difference in processing between non-native and native speakers of English. Non-native speakers were shown to have more difficulties and it took them on average longer to process idiomatic language, as they had to re-read idiomatic language in order to fully understand the meaning.

The aforementioned studies may show conflicting evidence regarding possible processing theories of idioms. However, they all found that processing of idioms is indeed different for non-native speakers and associated with more effort and difficulties.

### *Proficiency*

Researchers moreover state that the difficulties for non-native speakers to comprehend idioms correctly, might result from a lack of understanding such expressions (Thyab, 2016). According to Thyab (2016) a possible explanation could be that non-native speakers do not have such an



extended vocabulary as native speakers do and are missing the right background knowledge, in order to understand the real meaning. Non-native speakers are assumed to receive less input, which suggests that they only learn a certain amount of terms and know fewer words than native speakers do. She also states that a higher level of English proficiency, results in greater language input the speaker is exposed to and therefore seems to increase the likelihood of better understanding and applying idioms (Thyab, 2016).

Vanlacker-Sidtis (2003) also found evidence that non-native speakers have more difficulties to recognize idioms than native speakers. In her study, she recorded native speakers of American-English, who recorded the same sentences one time with an intended idiomatic meaning, and the other time with a literal meaning, by using prosodic cues such as stress and intonation. She discovered that native speakers performed better in distinguishing language with an idiomatic meaning from language with a literal meaning than non-native speakers. She further investigated different levels of proficiency of non-native speakers and found evidence that the more proficient someone is, the better someone is able to discriminate between idiomatic and literal meanings.

Laufer (2002) addressed this problem as well and states that L2 speakers sometimes even tend to avoid idioms. She found that avoidance of idioms is in some cases associated with the similarity of idioms in their L1 and with the speaker's English proficiency. She conducted an experiment with Hebrew students, in which she investigated idioms with different degrees of similarity in Hebrew and English (from total similar, over partial similar or not similar, to non-idiomatic at all). The students were asked to fill in sentence gaps. A Hebrew idiom was given, and participants were asked to translate this idiom. The goal was to investigate whether they would translate the expression idiomatically or avoid idioms and find a non-idiomatic translation. Moreover, the participants proficiency in English varied, to see whether there is an effect of proficiency on avoidance. Results showed that the use of idioms seemed to be related to language similarity. Idioms were not avoided when there was an identical similarity between the two languages, or when there was no similarity at all between the idioms of the languages, but the meaning of the idioms was still the same. They were, however, avoided when there was a partial degree of similarity between the two language, or when the idioms did not exist in Hebrew at all. Results also showed that language proficiency of the non-native speakers seemed to be associated with avoidance of idioms. She concluded that advanced L2 speakers usually do not have difficulties using and understanding idiomatic expressions. If the L2 speaker has a poorer level of proficiency however, they are more likely to avoid such expressions due to a lack of understanding. Laufer (2002) explained that non-native speakers may avoid such

difficult phrases, in order to avoid possible misunderstandings, and therefore rather make use of standard English language they feel confident with.

The difficulties to comprehend idioms for non-native speakers results in a fewer use of such expressions. Research showed that there is a difference in the use of idioms between native speakers and non-native speakers. Studies found that idioms are in general used more often by native speakers and more advanced English learners than less proficient learners of English. There are several studies that emphasize the extensive use of idiomatic language by native speakers. Thyab (2016), for instance, states that native speakers indeed make use of idioms ‘daily, naturally and spontaneously’ (p.108). Non-native speakers, on the other hand, do not use idioms as much and as flexible as native speakers do.

### **Advantages of idiomatic language**

Even though the use of idioms seems to be limited for non-native speakers, research suggests idiomatic language to be of great importance and very advantageous for non-native speakers (Thyab, 2016).

Franceschi (2013) for instance investigated the use of idioms in discourse between non-native speakers with different linguistic backgrounds and found that even though idiomatic expressions may in some cases be more challenging for non-native speakers, they are still used and of interest to them and do not necessarily lead to disruption of communication in ELF situations, wherefore the use may pose significant advantages.

Advantages were found by Ambrose (2008), who described that non-native speaker’s language proficiency will increase when they learn idioms. She states that ‘the more comprehensible input there is, the more learners’ listening, speaking, writing and reading skills will improve’ (p.181-182). Agreement has been found in the work done by Yule (2006), who states that idiomatic expressions help non-native speakers to expand their vocabulary and understand the language better.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (2001), one of the characteristics used to determine the level of proficiency in English for non-native speakers is the ability to comprehend and make use of idiomatic language. Research has revealed a significant effect of idiomatic language on perception of proficiency. The effects known to date suggest that idioms have a positive effect on the perception of the proficiency of non-native speakers when evaluated by native speakers (Boers et al., 2006). Previous research suggests that making use of idiomatic language as a non-native speaker might be very

advantageous, as they might be perceived as more fluent and more nativelike (Boers et al., 2006; Thyab, 2016).

For example, Boers et al. (2006) found a positive effect of using idiomatic language on non-native speakers perceived proficiency when evaluated by native speakers. In their study, they conducted an experiment with blind judges, who were asked to judge the English oral level of the proficiency of Belgian students. The students were all given language teaching hours in English over a period of eight months. However, they were separated in two groups that received different teaching hours. The first group was made aware of the importance to integrate formulaic sequences, such as idioms, into their vocabulary, whereas the other group was not made aware of the importance and was used as a control group. After students completed the language teaching hours, their language proficiency was evaluated with an oral test. In this test, the experimental group, that were made aware of the importance of idiomatic language, used more idioms as a consequence. The judges were not aware of this experiment. They perceived the experimental group as more proficient compared to the control group. The researchers concluded that the perception of non-native speakers ‘fluency and range of expression’ (Boers et al., 2006, p.257) benefitted from the use of formulaic sequences. Therefore, learning formulaic sequences over a certain period of time might contribute to an enhancement of the speaker’s language repertoire, which may have a positive effect on their perceived English proficiency as they sound more nativelike.

### **The present study**

Being able to express oneself professionally in English is extremely relevant, especially in the business world. Previous research has defined idioms as an important part of the English language. Several studies appeal to the use of idioms as they seem to play an important role in speaker’s perceived language proficiency. Learning and using idioms helps language learners to achieve a higher language proficiency and is believed to contribute to the assumption of being a more fluent speaker when evaluated by native speakers (Thyab, 2016; Boers et al., 2006).

However, non-native speakers often face difficulties when they are exposed to idiomatic language. Idioms are often seen as a language barrier for non-native speakers, that sometimes even leads to comprehension problems. Studies have shown that non-native speakers even tend to avoid such figurative language, and that generally, non-native speakers make significantly less use of idioms than native speakers (Laufer, 2002). Even though research suggests the use of idioms to be a very important contributor to language proficiency, the question raises to what

degree this is even relevant in an ELF setting, as studies have shown that non-native speakers have themselves problems with idioms and as a consequence make significantly less use of idioms. The aim of this study is therefore to fill this gap and further investigate if non-native speakers also perceive a positive effect when using idioms. This study aimed to shed more light on this particular case and used the following research question to do so:

To what extent do idiomatic expressions influence the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting?

More specifically, the main research question was divided into the following sub questions.

1. To what extent do L2 speakers of English evaluate the use of idiomatic expressions as making a text more comprehensible and the writer more competent than the absence of idiomatic expressions?

We specifically aimed to investigate comprehensibility of the text, as non-native speakers were shown to have problems comprehending idioms. Also, we investigated perceived competence of the writer, as we aimed to find further evidence that the positive effect between perceived competence and the use of idioms is also applicable to non-native speakers.

2. To what extent is there a difference in the effect of idioms on the evaluation of the text and speaker when the writer is assumed to be a non-native speaker compared to a native speaker?

The second sub question aimed to further investigate the effect in an ELF setting. It is often stated that idioms have a positive effect on the evaluation by native speakers. But this study aimed to investigate further and see if there is the same effect in an ELF setting. Not much research has investigated this effect in an ELF setting. This context is, however, extremely relevant, as ELF is very widespread and likely to grow. The answer to this question would be very much relevant for non-native speakers, as this knowledge would encourage them to make informed choices in terms of vocabulary use in an ELF setting.

## Method

An online questionnaire was conducted to examine the effect of idioms on comprehensibility of the text and competence of the writer and to find a possible relationship between the use of idioms and the nativeness of the writer.

### Materials

The experiment consisted of 16 emails written in English. The emails were approximately ten lines long. In these emails we addressed four different topics related to a business context that tend to have the same impact on the reader. The topics addressed in these emails were about a business trip, a monthly meeting, an organizational change and a relocation of a new office in a different location. Moreover, the emails came in two versions: either a version that included idioms, or a version that did not include idioms. An overview of the emails can be found in Appendix A.

The idiomatic versions of the emails included five idioms. The idioms were selected from an existing database created by Beck and Weber (2016). This database includes a wide range of 300 German-English idiomatic expressions and their meanings, organized by familiarity. The idioms were ranked by native speakers of English on levels from 1 to 7 (low corresponds to low familiarity, 7 corresponds to high familiarity) on each three attributes: meaningfulness, familiarity, literality. The criteria on which idioms were selected were based on the familiarity rating of the idioms. In order to make sure the idioms were likely to be known by the reader, we only chose idioms with an L1 familiarity rating higher than 6.0. The idiomatic expressions and their corresponding familiarity ratings included in the experiment are presented in Appendix B. We decided to use each idiom only once per condition, in order to investigate several idioms.

### Subjects

In total, 87 participants took part in this study. They were all Dutch students of the Radboud University in Nijmegen. Of the overall sample, 48 participants were female and 39 were male. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29 years of age with an average of 22.06 ( $SD = 2.06$ ). Additionally, seven participants indicated to be older than 30, who are not calculated in the average score. Of the overall sample, 85 participants were native speakers of the Dutch language. The other two participants mother tongue was Turkish and Indonesian. We decided to exclude the two participants who indicated a different first language than Dutch, as we aimed

to focus this study on Dutch participants. In the final sample, 85 participants were included. Table 1 shows the distribution of the academic year participants are enrolled in.

Table 1 *Participants academic year*

Academic year	N	%
Bachelor 1	7	8.2
Bachelor 2	3	3.5
Bachelor 3	33	38.8
Master 1	11	12.9
Master 2	6	7.1
Other	25	29.4
Total	85	100.0

Participants averaged 7.38 (1 corresponds to low, 10 to high) in their self-assessed English proficiency ratings ( $SD = 1.08$ ). The highest estimation of English level was 10 and the lowest was 5. It was important that all the participants used English as their second language and that their level of proficiency was at least advanced. In order to determine the participants' actual level of English, all of them completed the LexTALE proficiency vocabulary test (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012). In this test, participants were exposed to 60 items (40 words, 20 nonwords) and had to indicate whether the depicted word is an existing English word or not. We tested their general level of proficiency, as we aimed to only include participants that had approximately the same level of English. Participants scored on average 79.25 on the LexTALE proficiency vocabulary test ( $SD = 12.24$ ). The lowest score was 48.75 and the highest score was 100.00.

## Design

In this experiment a 2x2 between-subjects design was used. The independent variables in this experiment were idiomaticity and language background. Each of the two variables had two values. We categorized idiomatic language in idiomatic versus nonidiomatic. The language background was categorized in native versus non-native.

In order to investigate these variables separately, but also to find out whether there is an interaction between them, we created four conditions of the same emails discussed previously. In each of the four conditions, the same emails were used, only the variables were combined differently. As described above, each of the four different emails came in two versions, one

version that included idiomatic language, and the other version that did not include idiomatic language. Furthermore, we constructed subversions of these emails that were told to be written by native speakers of English and nonnative speakers of English. The experiment thus consisted of 16 emails: emails that included idiomatic language and were told to be written by a native speaker; emails that included idiomatic language as well but were also told to be written by a nonnative speaker; emails that did not include idiomatic language and were told to be written by a native speaker; emails that did not include idiomatic language either, but were told to be written by a nonnative speaker. Thus, each condition comprised four emails. Each participant was exposed to four emails of one of the four aforementioned conditions. The order of the emails to which participants were exposed was mixed.

### **Instruments**

In this study, two dependent variables were measured: comprehensibility of the text and perceived competence of the writer. A questionnaire was created for each of these variables in order to measure them. The questionnaire included three questions each for measuring comprehensibility and competence and is inspired by Nejari et al. (2020), who investigated attitude towards the speaker.

Firstly, comprehensibility was measured using three 5-point semantic differential scales that included the three following statements:

The text is not easy to read. / The text easy to read.

It is not clear what the text is about. / It is clear what the text is about. /

The text is not understandable. / The text is understandable. /

The participants had to indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 whether they disagree or agree (1 corresponds to strongly disagree, 5 corresponds to strongly agree).

The reliability of ‘comprehensibility’ comprising three items was good:  $\alpha = .852$ .

Secondly, competence was measured using three 5-point semantic differential scales, in order to analyze the attitude towards the writer. Here the participants had to evaluate the proficiency, professionalism, and education of the writer. In the questionnaire they had to indicate whether they think the writer is:

Unprofessional/professional

Not proficient/proficient

Not educated/educated

The participants had to indicate on a scale from 1 to 5 whether they disagree or agree (1 corresponds to strongly disagree, 5 corresponds to strongly agree).

The reliability of ‘competence’ comprising three items was good:  $\alpha = .885$ .

### **Procedure**

The experiment was conducted online through Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>). Participants were given a brief introduction to inform them about the process of the experiment. The experiment consisted of three parts. First of all, participants were asked to fill out background information (age, gender, which semester they were in, whether they participate in an English program or not, whether their L1 is Dutch). Secondly, the participants were exposed to the main experiment. Each participant was presented with four emails successively. After each email, they were exposed to a questionnaire in which they had to rate the comprehensibility of the text as well as the competence of the writer. Thirdly, a LexTALE test was created in Qualtrics, that participants had to fill out immediately after the main experiment, in order to determine their level of English. The test intended to assess advanced L2 speakers’ level of English (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2011). We wanted to make sure that they are all advanced users of English in order to generalize the results better in the end. None of the participants was excluded due to a low level of proficiency in English. However, from this existing sample another sample was created that only included participants who scored higher than 80 on the LexTALE test. An outline of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix C.

The experiment was intended to take no longer than 15 minutes to be filled out by participants. On average, it took participants 3681.10 seconds (61.35 minutes) to finish the experiment ( $SD = 15699.88$ ). The fastest participant took 183 seconds (3.05 min), and the one who needed the most took 112627 seconds (1877.12 min). In order to show a more representative value, the duration time was calculated one more time, excluding participants who took longer than 3000 seconds. The mean duration time of the 83 participants who took less than 3000 seconds was 758.10 seconds (12.64 minutes) ( $SD = 545.15$ ).

### **Statistical treatment**

In order to answer the research questions, two two-way univariate analysis of variance with between-subject factors were carried out, as we aimed to test the effect of two factors. Firstly, a two-way ANOVA was conducted that examined the effect of idiomaticity, nativeness and their interaction on the judgement of comprehensibility of the text by the non-native reader.



Secondly, a two-way ANOVA was conducted that examined the effect of idiomaticity, nativeness and their interaction on the judgement of competence by the non-native reader.

## Results

We tested Dutch native speakers' evaluation of idiomaticity and nativeness with respect to perceived competence and comprehensibility with two two-way anovas.

Table 2 *Means and standard deviations for perceived comprehensibility and competence of e-mails in function of idiomaticity and nativeness of writer (1 = very low comprehensibility / competence, 5 = very high comprehensibility / competence)*

	Idioms		No idioms	
	Native n = 26 M (SD)	Non-native n = 21 M (SD)	Native n = 18 M (SD)	Non-native n = 20 M (SD)
Comprehensibility	4.38 (.58)	4.25 (.56)	4.39 (.49)	4.45 (.31)
Competence	3.55 (.70)	3.54 (.60)	3.66 (.45)	3.77 (.44)

A two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity and nativeness as factors showed a nonsignificant main effect of idiomaticity on the readers comprehensibility of the text ( $F(1, 81) = 1.044, p = .310$ ). The two-way analysis of variance showed also a nonsignificant main effect of nativeness on the readers comprehensibility of the text ( $F(1, 81) < 1, p = .759$ ). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and nativeness was not statistically significant ( $F(1, 81) < 1$ ). A two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity and nativeness as factors showed a nonsignificant main effect of idiomaticity on the readers perceived competence of the writer ( $F(1, 81) = 1.765, p = .188$ ). The two-way analysis of variance showed also a nonsignificant main effect of nativeness on the readers perceived competence of the writer ( $F(1, 81) < 1, p = .676$ ). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and nativeness was not statistically significant ( $F(1, 81) < 1$ ). Table 2 shows the means of the variables.

In addition, we ran the same analysis with participants that scored higher than 80 on the LexTALE test in order to see whether it made a difference in the results, as previous literature suggested language proficiency to be positively related to the use and understanding of idioms (Vanlacker-Sidtis, 2003).

Table 3 *Means and standard deviations for perceived comprehensibility and competence of e-mails in function of idiomaticity and nativeness of writer (1 = very low comprehensibility / competence, 5 = very high comprehensibility / competence) for participants who scored higher than 80 on LexTale*

	Idioms		No idioms	
	Native n = 13 M (SD)	Non-native n = 6 M (SD)	Native n = 11 M (SD)	Non-native n = 11 M (SD)
Comprehensibility	4.56 (.37)	4.51 (.42)	4.47 (.42)	4.52 (.27)
Competence	3.97 (.61)	3.60 (.65)	3.60 (.45)	3.86 (.33)

A two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity and nativeness as factors showed a nonsignificant main effect of idiomaticity on the readers comprehensibility of the text ( $F(1, 37) < 1, p = .719$ ). The two-way analysis of variance showed also a nonsignificant main effect of nativeness on the readers comprehensibility of the text ( $F(1, 37) < 1, p = .995$ ). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and nativeness was not statistically significant ( $F(1, 37) < 1$ ). A two-way analysis of variance with idiomaticity and nativeness as factors showed a nonsignificant main effect of idiomaticity on the readers perceived competence of the writer ( $F(1, 37) < 1, p = .709$ ). The two-way analysis of variance showed also a nonsignificant main effect of nativeness on the readers perceived competence of the writer ( $F(1, 37) < 1, p = .771$ ). The interaction effect between idiomaticity and nativeness was not statistically significant ( $F(1, 37) = 3.704$ ). Table 3 shows the means of the variables.

## Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate the effect of idiomatic expressions on the judgements of texts and speakers in an ELF setting. The goal was to detect a difference in perception when idioms are used and when they are not used. In addition, it was investigated whether the perception differed when the emails were told to be written by a native speaker of English or a non-native speaker. The results did not show statistically significant effects. In the following, the results for each of the variables and the interactions will be discussed.

## Explanations

A significant effect of idiomaticity on comprehension was not found. Several studies, however, have shown that idiomatic expressions are more difficult to comprehend by non-native than by native speakers and advanced non-native speakers (Vanlacker-Sidtis, 2003; Laufer, 2002). Therefore, our study suggests that non-native speakers are indeed familiar with idioms and therefore, able to comprehend them. Non-native speakers seem to be able to comprehend idioms, as the scores regarding comprehensibility did not differ significantly from the texts that included idioms and the texts that did not include idioms. That seems to confirm the findings by Franceschi (2013) who states that idiomatic expressions do not necessarily disrupt communication in ELF situations.

There is, however, a small, insignificant trend recognizable that shows that participants who were exposed to emails that did not include idioms scored on average higher on comprehensibility. This could be explained by the findings of several researchers, who state that non-native speakers may have difficulties understanding such expressions, due to a lower level of proficiency (Laufer, 2002). Non-native speakers possibly miss the right background knowledge and vocabulary in order to understand the meaning of the idioms. Non-native speakers therefore may have more difficulties understanding idioms than native speakers, which resulted in a lower score on comprehensibility. The difference in the means, however, is very small and statistically not significant. Future research is needed in order to make further suggestions.

According to the previous research discussed, the use of idioms is suggested in order to sound more fluent as a non-native speaker. Participants also scored similarly on perceived competence of the writer in all of the conditions. This suggests the use of idioms not to be as relevant for non-native speakers as it is for native speakers when evaluating language competence.

It was moreover aimed to test whether non-native speakers' evaluations of the text as well as the speaker would be different when the same text was told to be written by a native speaker versus a non-native speaker. We did not necessarily expect that language background would have an impact on participants evaluations of comprehension of the text. We did expect however to find a possible effect on perceived competence of the writer, as participants could have been potentially biased by the assumption that native speakers language competence is in general assumed to be better than non-native speaker's language competence (Fleckenstein et al., 2016). The results did not show a significant effect of nativeness on competence, which suggests that participants were not biased by the speaker's language background.

### **Limitations and future research**

This study has taken a step into researching non-native speakers' perception of idiomatic language in written discourse. It did not find evidence that idiomatic expressions influence non-native speakers perceived competence of the writer or comprehensibility of the text.

Insignificant results may be explained by the research design. In this study, a between subjects-design was used. This means, each participant was exposed to only one condition (native, idioms; native, no idioms; non-native, idioms; non-native, no idioms) which enabled only a between, but not a within-participant comparison. This might have led participants to evaluate the writer's proficiency differently compared to when more than one email would have been read. A better approach would have been to expose each participant to at least two of the four conditions. One version should have included idioms, and one not. The direct exposure to two different versions may have given them different attitudes towards the reader as well as different attitudes towards the text. Research has shown that proficient L2 speakers are able to recognize idioms (Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, & Maynard, 2008). With a direct comparison of texts that include idioms, and texts that did not include idioms, the participants may have realized that there is a difference and would have been more likely to score differently depending on the texts.

The criteria on which idioms were selected in this study might also have limitations. The present study took only the L1 familiarity ratings of idioms into consideration for the selection of idioms. However, the L2 familiarity ratings might be important to consider as well, as previous research suggested familiarity between L1 and L2 to be an important contributor to non-native speaker's comprehensibility of idioms (Beck & Weber, 2016). Therefore, future studies should possibly consider the L2 familiarity rating as well. Moreover, future studies should possibly take the literality ratings developed by Beck & Weber (2016) into consideration as well. In their study, Beck & Weber (2016) referred to the Literal Salience Model developed by Cieśicka (2006) and explained "literal meaning seems to have a processing priority over figurative meaning, even in known idioms" (p.3). Moreover, Laufer (2002) found that similarity of the idioms in L1 and L2 plays an important role as well. In her study, she found evidence that the use of idioms seems to be related to language similarity. Therefore, it might be of importance to reconsider the selection of idioms and investigate not only idioms with a high familiarity rating, but also literality or similarity rating.

Also, as English proficiency seems to be associated with the use of idioms, we aimed to investigate only advanced learners of English. Previous research has shown non-native speakers comprehensibility of idiomatic language to be associated with a higher language proficiency in

English (Laufer, 2002; Vanlacker-Sidtis, 2003). Future research may therefore consider differentiating between different levels of language proficiency when investigating the role of idiomaticity in order to find a possible effect. Vanlacker-Sidtis (2003) for instance found an effect of different levels of English proficiency on comprehensibility of idioms in her study. She found evidence, that native speakers outperformed non-native speakers in the ability to discriminate between idiomatic and literal meanings of idioms, but that advanced non-native speakers were also able to discriminate between them. Future studies should therefore also consider including both, more advanced and less advanced English learners, as it seems that idiomatic language might not be such a major language barrier for advanced learners, as it is for less advanced learners.

Furthermore, a possible limitation of measuring nativeness could be that reading only is not sufficient enough to evaluate proficiency levels, but that more senses need to be addressed, for example by listening to audio tapes. Future research should make the distinction between native and non-native authors clearer. Upcoming studies could possibly focus on spoken discourse to pronounce the distinction between native and non-native speakers. A previous study done by Boers et al. (2006) for instance found an effect of idioms on perceived proficiency by investigating spoken discourse.

In addition, performing the questionnaire online might have been influenced by concentration problems and distraction. This is shown by the high range of the duration time. Some participants possibly took a break or got distracted by something else during the questionnaire which may have influenced the results as well. Future research should therefore invite participants to a laboratory, where the study can be conducted under more controlled measures.

Moreover, it must be noted that this study only focused on Dutch participants and was limited when it comes to the number of participants. Therefore, the results might not be generalizable to non-native speakers with any L1 language background. It is important that future research focuses on different L1 backgrounds and expands the sample.

## Conclusion

This study researched whether the use of idioms in written discourse influences non-native speakers perceived competence of the writer as well as the comprehensibility of the text. Yet, it has not been confirmed that idioms influence comprehensibility and perceived competence in an ELF setting. However, the results suggest that non-native speakers understand idiomatic

language and rate texts that include idioms similar as texts that do not include idioms. The results therefore suggest that idioms are present even in the vocabulary of advanced non-native speakers and do not necessarily lead to comprehension problems. This study did not find idiomatic language to be perceived as more competent than standard English in an ELF setting. This may suggest that idioms do not contribute to the perception of being a more competent speaker. Due to the limited generalizability in this study, investigating further these variables in an ELF setting should play an important role in future research.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Emails

##### Version 1 with idioms

Dear all,

As many of you may have already heard our team will be going on a trip to Dublin to visit the company Forte. We will be visiting this company to **get the ball rolling** on an international collaboration between our companies. The market is currently in our favour, so we should definitely **seize the opportunity** to set up this collaboration.

This trip will be mostly business-related, but we will also have some free time. There is still no schedule for the spare time we have, any suggestions are welcome so that's **food for thought** for you all. As this team is fairly new, I would like to **break the ice** by going to a casual dinner together before we leave. Dan and Susie from the marketing department will also be joining us for this dinner, as they will be **holding down the fort** in our department while we're gone.

I will be sending you all the itinerary for our trip shortly.

Kind regards,

Anne Miller / Anne van den Boogaard

##### Version 1 without idioms

Dear all,

As many of you may have already heard our team will be going on a trip to Dublin to visit another company. We will be visiting the company to get things started on an international collaboration between our companies. The market is currently in our favour, so we should definitely take advantage of the situation to set up this collaboration.

This trip will be mostly business-related, but we will also have some free time. There is still no schedule for the spare time we have, any suggestions are welcome so that's something to think about for you all. As this team is fairly new, I would like to ease any awkwardness by going to a casual dinner together before we leave. Dan and Susie from the marketing department will also be joining us for this dinner, as they will be looking after business in our department while we're gone.

I will be sending you all the itinerary for our trip shortly.

Kind regards,

Anne Miller / Anne van den Boogaard

Version 2 with idioms

Dear all,

Last week, we started a new project concerning our social media strategy. To discuss how the project is going for each group, we would like to schedule a monthly meeting the first Monday of every month. This will be the perfect opportunity **to speak your mind** and ask questions.

The meeting will always take place in one of the meeting rooms in our headquarters in Nijmegen on the first floor. For further details about which room, we will contact you shortly before the start of the meeting. The duration of the meeting is two hours, so there's plenty of time and no need to **talk a mile a minute**. To avoid that one of you **draws a blank**, we will always send you a reminder two days beforehand. Jeanette will **do the honors** and host the first meeting.

Let's say, we'll just **set the pace** by having this meeting monthly and we can always change the frequency of the meeting if preferred.

Kind regards,

Joyce McGee / Joyce de Jong

Version 2 without idioms

Dear all,

Last week, we started a new project concerning our social media strategy. To discuss how the project is going for each group, we would like to schedule a monthly meeting the first Monday of every month. This will be the perfect opportunity to give your opinion and ask questions.

The meeting will always take place in one of the meeting rooms in our headquarters in Nijmegen on the first floor. For further details about which room, we will contact you shortly before the start of the meeting. The duration of the meeting is two hours, so there's plenty of time and no need to speak fast. To avoid that one of you forgets the meeting, we will always send you a reminder two days beforehand. Jeanette will be the first to host a meeting.

Let's say, we'll just set the tempo by meeting once a month and we can always change the frequency of the meeting if preferred.

Kind regards,

Joyce McGee / Joyce de Jong

Version 3 with idioms

Dear all,

As you all know very well, our headquarters will be moving to a different location this year. In this email we would like to **clear the air** about the upcoming organizational changes.

First of all, we want to assure you that we are not just **throwing money out of the window** with the reorganization. The new headquarters will have a lot more space and resources to let us grow as a company. As you know, our desire has always been to **break the record** in our market. We are convinced that an improved office will **do the trick**.

Secondly, you do not have to worry that your job is going to change very much. You will only be working at a different location. If we will do this together, the upcoming organizational change will be a **piece of cake**.

Do not hesitate to respond with any questions to this email.

Kind regards,

Oscar Groen / Oscar Hughes

Version 3 without idioms

Dear all,

As you all know very well, our headquarters will be moving to a different location this year. In this email we would like to make sure there will be no misunderstandings about the upcoming organizational changes.

First of all, we want to assure you that we are not wasting money with the reorganization. The new headquarters will have a lot more space and resources to let us grow as a company. As you know, our desire has always been to be the best in our market. We are convinced that an improved office will achieve the desired effect.

Secondly, you do not have to worry that your job is going to change very much. You will only be working at a different location. If we will do this together, the upcoming organizational change will be very easy.

Do not hesitate to respond with any questions to this email.

Kind regards,

Oscar Groen / Oscar Hughes

Version 4 with idioms

Dear all,

I am more than happy to finally **let the cat out of the bag** and announce that we are opening our new office in Amsterdam in October.

After **giving it a whirl** and opening a Start-up in Germany in 2010, we have faced plenty of challenges and **learned the ropes**. In 2015 we opened an office in England, in 2017 another one in Germany, and in 2019 in Sweden. Now 10 years later, **we are taking the plunge** and take on the next challenge: we expand to the Netherlands.

We have all worked very hard in the last couple of years and I am proud to see how this company has made it from a Start-up business to a company with over 120 employees.

I would like to thank all of you for your work and your support and I look forward **to seeing more of the world** with you.

Kind regards,

Tim Johnson / Tim Jansen

Version 4 without idioms

Dear all,

We have been waiting for it and I am very proud to announce that we are finally opening a new office in Amsterdam in October.

Starting our business in 2010 here in Germany, we have faced plenty of challenges and experienced an amazing development. In 2015 we opened an office in England, in 2017 another one in Germany, and in 2019 in Sweden. Now 10 years later, we have come to the point to take on the next challenge: we expand to the Netherlands. We have all worked very hard in the last couple of years and I am proud to see how this company has made it from a Start-up business to a company with over 120 employees.

I would like to thank all of you for your work and your support and I look forward to keep growing with you even more.

Kind regards,

Tim Johnson / Tim Jansen

## Appendix B

Idioms with their corresponding familiarity rating based on Beck &amp; Weber (2016)

Idiom	L1 familiarity (mean)	L2 familiarity (mean)
Break the ice	6,61	6,90
Food for thought	6,50	4,96
Get the ball rolling	6,68	5,32
Hold down the fort	6,54	2,55
Seize the opportunity	6,55	5,20

Idiom	L1 familiarity (mean)	L2 familiarity (mean)
Speak your mind	6,63	5,15
Talk a mile a minute	6,15	3,25
Draw a blank	6,73	3,25
Do the honors	6,65	4,65
Set the pace	6,22	5,21

Idiom	L1 familiarity (mean)	L2 familiarity (mean)
A piece of cake	6,77	6,20
Break the record	6,5	6,70
Clear the air	6,05	5,55
Do the trick	6,17	5,10
Throw money out the window	6,04	5,95

Idiom	L1 familiarity (mean)	L2 familiarity (mean)
Let the cat out of the bag	6,35	5,15
Giving it a whirl	6,23	2,69
Learn the ropes	6,34	2,45
Take the plunge	6,50	3,40
See the world	6,45	6,20

Appendix C  
Questionnaire

**Instructions before background questions**

**Version for native speaker texts**

Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in our study. This experiment will consist of three parts. First, we will ask you to fill out some general questions about your background. After these questions the experiment will begin, you will be asked to read 4 e-mails from a business context and you will be asked to evaluate these e-mails and their writers. The e-mails you will be reading are written by native speakers of English. Once you have completed the questionnaire about these e-mails, a vocabulary test will be administered to give us an indication of your English proficiency. In total, this will take about 30 minutes to complete.

The data collected through this experiment will be used for Bachelor thesis purposes only. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact the supervisors Ferdy Hubers ([f.hubers@let.ru.nl](mailto:f.hubers@let.ru.nl)) or Lotte Hogeweg ([l.hogeweg@let.ru.nl](mailto:l.hogeweg@let.ru.nl)).

**Version for non-native speaker texts**

Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in our study. This experiment will consist of three parts. First, we will ask you to fill out some general questions about your background. After these questions the experiment will begin, you will be asked to read 4 e-mails from a business context and you will be asked to evaluate these e-mails and their writers. The e-mails you will be reading are written by non-native speakers of English. Once you have completed the questionnaire about these e-mails, a vocabulary test will be administered to give us an indication of your English proficiency. In total, this will take about 30 minutes to complete.

The data collected through this experiment will be used for Bachelor thesis purposes only. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact the supervisors Ferdy Hubers ([f.hubers@let.ru.nl](mailto:f.hubers@let.ru.nl)) or Lotte Hogeweg ([l.hogeweg@let.ru.nl](mailto:l.hogeweg@let.ru.nl)).

## 1. Background questions

1. What is your age?
  - Drop-down list 16-30
2. What gender do you identify with?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Other
3. What academic year are you in?
  - Bachelor 1 (propaedeutic phase)
  - Bachelor 2
  - Bachelor 3
  - Master 1
  - Master 2
  - Other (type in individually)
4. Are you enrolled in an English-taught programme?
  - Yes
  - No
5. Is your mother tongue Dutch?
  - Yes
  - No (fill in what language)
6. Your estimation of your level in English (1 = almost nothing, 10 = perfect/native) :  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. My English is better than my Dutch : True / False



### Instructions after background questions

#### Version for native speaker texts

The experiment will now begin. You will be shown 4 different e-mails, each followed by 6 questions about the text and the writer. These texts are all written by native speakers of English. Keep in mind that the text will disappear when you proceed to the questions, so read carefully.

#### Version for non-native speaker texts

The experiment will now begin. You will be shown 4 different e-mails, each followed by 6 questions about the text and the writer. These texts are all written by non-native speakers of English. Keep in mind that the text will disappear when you proceed to the questions, so read carefully.

## 2. Actual experiment

Please rate the text on the following traits:

1. The text is easy to read

Strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. It is clear what the text is about.

Strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. I understood the text.

Strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please rate the email of mister ...'s on the following traits:

1. Unprofessional      Professional

2. Uneducated      Educated
3. Not proficient      Proficient

### 3. Vocabulary Test

This test consists of about 60 trials, in each of which you will see a string of letters. Your task is to decide whether this is an existing English word or not. If you think it is an existing English word, you put a « X » in the column « Word ? », and if you think it is not an existing English word, you leave the column blank.

If you are sure that the word exists, even though you don't know its exact meaning, you may still respond "yes"/put an « X » in the « Word ? » column. But if you are not sure if it is an existing word, you should NOT put an « X » in the « Word ? » column.

In this experiment, we use British English rather than American English spelling. For example: "realise" instead of "realize"; "colour" instead of "color", and so on. Please don't let this confuse you. This experiment is not about detecting such subtle spelling differences anyway. You have as much time as you like for each decision. This part of the experiment will take about 5 minutes.

Stimulus	Word?	Stimulus	Word?	Stimulus	Word?
platory		spaunch		magrity	
denial		allied		nourishment	
generic		slain		abergy	
mensible		recipient		proom	
scornful		exprate		turmoil	
stoutly		eloquence		carbohydrate	
ablaze		cleanliness		scholar	
kermshaw		dispatch		turtle	

moonlit		rebondicate		fellick	
lofty		ingenious		description	
hurricane		bewitch		cylinder	
flaw		skave		ensorship	
alberation		plaintively		celestial	
unkempt		kilp		rascal	
breeding		interfate		purrage	
festivity		hasty		pulsh	
screech		lengthy		muddy	
savoury		fray		quirty	
plaudate		crumper		pudour	
shin		upkeep		listless	
fluid		majestic		wrought	

## **End of the experiment. Thanks for your participation!**

### **Debriefing**

Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in our study, we really appreciate your input. This study aims to investigate the effect of the presence of idiomatic language (the use of expressions) in business related e-mails on the evaluation of the comprehensibility of the text and competence of the writer. In addition to this we aim to find whether native or non-native writers are evaluated differently. If you wish to be notified with the results of this study please contact : “email address”

Kind regards,

Lydia, Loes, Jana, Welmer and Guusje

Appendix C


Statement of own work

Student name: Jana Strobl  
Student number: S1013895  
Course code and name: Bachelor Thesis  
Lecturer: Lotte Hogeweg and Ferdy Hubers  
Number course group: 12

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