

The Structure and the Distribution of Phraseological Units in Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate EFL Textbooks

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Abstract

The knowledge of native phrases and idiomatic expressions is considered to be an essential aspect of one's fluency in a foreign language and can advance learners toward more excellent proficiency in foreign language acquisition. However, not much research has been dedicated to how they are implemented in the school textbooks. This research work aims to examine the occurrence of phraseological units in the four selected English textbooks for B1 and B2 levels, which are recommended for use at secondary grammar schools and secondary vocational schools in Slovakia by the Ministry of Education. They aim to prepare the secondary school learners for their final school-leaving exams – which are based on and in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages requirements for the specific proficiency levels. To fill the gap in present studies, a detailed analysis was implemented, which included not only the exercises explicitly aimed at phraseological units but also the parts of the textbook, which dealt with the formulaic language implicitly. The main question posed dealt with the categories of phraseological units and their distribution in the analyzed textbooks. Phraseological units were identified, classified, analyzed, and counted by quantitative content analysis. The results showed that although there were phraseological units found in all analyzed textbooks, their distribution and classification differed significantly. Once they were included in the very limited number and variety of exercises, they were never used or mentioned again. Moreover, their explanation was absent or insufficient. The listed findings indicate that learners might encounter significant issues when trying to advance toward higher EFL proficiency levels.

Keywords: distribution, Intermediate EFL textbooks, phraseological units, structure, Upper-Intermediate EFL textbooks

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Introduction

Phraseology is unique to every language as it echoes the reflection of extra-lingual reality in the given society. In fact, up to fifty percent of conversation comprises formulaic language (Schmitt, 2017). Mastering phraseology is thus inevitable for the development of foreign language communicative competence (Cowie, 2005; Fiedler, 2007; Kráľová & Lengyelalussy, 2010; O'Dell & McCarthy, 2010, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d; Schmitt, 2017). Even though they play an important role, when it comes to one's fluency in a foreign language and advance toward more excellent proficiency in foreign language acquisition, not much research has been dedicated in the past to how the phraseological units are implemented in the textbooks aimed for the use at schools nor self-study. This paper aims to analyze the occurrence of phraseological units in the selected English textbooks for B1 and B2 levels – which are recommended for use at secondary grammar schools and secondary vocational schools in Slovakia by the Ministry of Education. They aim to prepare the secondary school learners for their final school-leaving exams – which are based on and in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2023) requirements for the specific proficiency levels. We aim to examine what categories of phraseological units are included in the textbooks, what their distribution is, and how they are incorporated in the textbooks. To fill the gap in research in this field, the analysis included not only the exercises explicitly aimed at phraseological units, but also the parts of the textbook, which dealt with the formulaic language rather implicitly. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated and will be answered:

1. What categories of phraseological units are included in the selected textbooks?
2. What is the frequency and distribution of phraseological units in the selected textbooks?
3. How are the phraseological units incorporated in the textbooks?

Literature Review

Phraseological Units

Despite a clear definition of phraseologisms as stable combinations of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning (Kunin, 1970), the authors use various terms for them – phraseological expression, phraseme, set expression, set phrase, idiomatic phrase, multi-word expression, or simply, idiom (Macis & Schmitt, 2017; Meľčuk, 2012; Quirk et al., 1985).

In the current study, Aisenstadt's (1981) classification of phraseological units was applied – distinguishing the following categories of idiomatic expressions: idioms, phrasal verbs, similes, routine formulae, irreversible binomials, proverbs, slogans, and clichés – as further explained in the following lines.

- Idioms: groupings of two or more words, which when combined, produce different meaning to that of when separated into individual words, e.g., *domino effect, every Tom, see red, as dead as a doornail, on cloud nine, Bless your cotton socks!*'.
- Phrasal verbs: combinations of words which, in a sentence, act as a single verb. The meaning is different when combined with the individual words, e.g., *get on; take over; get on with.*
- Similes: phrases that compare two things, using the words *like* or *as*, e.g., *a face like a mask; as white as snow.*
- Routine formulae: heterogeneous category of expressions specialized according to the conversation having a phatic function, e.g., *many happy returns; Merry Christmas.*

- Irreversible binomials: pairs of words characterized by their fixed order, usually linked by conjunction, preposition, hyphen, e.g., *bish-bosh*; *hustle and bustle*, *okey dokey*.
 - Proverbs: sayings through which traditional folk wisdom, truths and cultural norms are expressed, e.g., *actions speak louder than words*; *every cloud has a silver lining*; *let sleeping dog lie*.
 - Slogans: memorable words or phrases that catch listener/reader's attention, e.g., '*Just Do It*', '*Finger licking good*', '*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*'.
 - Clichés: expressions or a phrases that, due to an extensive overuse, have become meaningless and lack interest and originality, e.g., *think outside the box*, *loose cannon*.
- Furthermore, in our analysis, three more categories will be included – as follows:
- Collocations: combinations of words, which occur very frequently in a language, e.g., *resounding success*, *crying shame* (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2023).
 - Metaphors: phrases or a words that describe somebody/something with the purpose of showing that two things have very similar qualities, e.g., *she has a heart of stone*, *a game of football* (i.e., the competitive struggle of life) (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2023).
 - Dependent prepositions: prepositions, which are naturally and very frequently used with specific nouns, adjectives, and verbs, e.g., *sick and tired of* (i.e., I get *sick and tired of* the same old routine.), *have a word with* (i.e., I could *have a word with* the guy who's responsible for the course.) (British Council, n.d.).

Foreign Language Textbooks

Richards (n.d.) claims that in the majority of schools, textbooks are a vital part of the teaching procedure – as they, amongst other things, set the classroom language. Cunningsworth (1995) emphasizes that although market offers many different EFL textbooks, not all of them will be suitable for all students.

Cunningsworth (1995) and Richards (n.d.) both recommend that the objectives of the EFL course must be identified prior to selecting textbooks. Cunningsworth (1995) proposes that an initial glance through a textbook is enough to gain the overall gist of it. Like this, one shall consider the book's layout, grammar, vocabulary and topics included, illustrations provided and how visually pleasing the textbook is (Cunningsworth, 1995). Richards (n.d.) claims that when evaluating the appropriateness of a textbook, one must firstly establish who the teacher is, who the students are, and what role the book has and/or will have in the learning process.

One of the tasks of this work is to examine the appropriateness of the phraseological units found in selected textbooks. We shall, therefore, investigate CEFR (Council of Europe, 2023) and National Curriculum (Národný inštitút vzdelávania a mládeže, 2022) to gain more profound knowledge of proficiency levels and language competence. For the age group suitability, we shall search the publishers' websites. CEFR includes idiomatic expressions in its band descriptions (Council of Europe, n.d.) – which, one might argue, validates the inclusion of idioms in school textbooks.

Across Europe, it offers a common starting point for language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, and textbooks. It defines what language learners should learn to be able to communicate and what knowledge and skills they must have for good self-conduct. CEFR specifies levels of proficiency – which makes it easier to monitor the stages of the learner's improvement (A1 – Breakthrough, A2 – Waystage, B1 – Threshold, B2 – Vantage, C1 - Effective

Operational Proficiency, C2 – Mastery). The knowledge of idioms and collocations is specified at the highest three levels:

- C2: “Has a good command of an extensive lexical repertoire, including idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms; shows awareness of connotative levels of meaning.” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 131)
- C1: “Has a good command of common idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms; can play with words/signs reasonably well.” (Council of Europe, 2020, *ibid.*)
- B2: “Can produce appropriate collocations of many words/signs in most contexts reasonably systematically.” (Council of Europe, 2020, *ibid.*)

Suitability of a textbook for the specific age groups of learners is usually decided by the author and the publisher (Myrick, 2016). However, looking at the age group assignment of the textbook itself is probably the safest route in establishing the appropriateness of the textbook for certain levels of learners. Right from the beginning of writing the textbook, the authors and publishers always bear in mind the age of the learner and the aptness of the said book. This age level allocation is nearly always found on the front cover of the textbook and the publisher's website.

In the case of *New Success* textbooks, the publisher informs on their website that these course books are “specifically designed for students age 14-20 years” (Pearson, 2022). Oxford University Press (2015) asserts that their *New Headway* is a six-part general English course for secondary and language schools.

Here, we must refer to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education governs schools and school facilities in Slovak Republic through generally binding rules and by providing vocational guidance. The study at the Higher Education institutions in the Slovak Republic is governed by the *Act on higher education* (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, n.d.). The mentioned act comprises binding rules issued by the Ministry of Education, that guide every level of learner's scholarly progress. To add, the Ministry of Education also recommends English textbooks on their website. Secondary vocational schools in Slovakia tend to set their Maturita (Final School Leaving Exam) at the B1 (sometimes students can select B2) proficiency level. Grammar schools' proficiency level in Slovakia is usually higher, at the B2 proficiency level.

Phraseological Units in EFL Textbooks

Concerning the EFL learners, to understand books, newspapers, magazines, films, TV shows, songs, and English humor, they must learn many phraseological units. Idiomatic language is so prevalent it cannot be ignored at school and education in general. Wray (2000) argues that to become a successful language learner, it is crucial for the learner to master formulaic sequences that include idioms, collocations, and compounds. Undoubtedly, the knowledge of native phrases and idiomatic expressions is an integral part of one's fluency in a foreign language (Boers et al., 2006; Cain et al., 2009; Lim et al., 2009; Teodorescu, 2015), and thus, advances learners toward more excellent proficiency in foreign language acquisition.

However, not much attention from researchers has been dedicated to the actual occurrence of phraseological units in the EFL textbooks and how they are implemented in the learning texts.

In Finland, Ikonen (2021) studied the idiom frequency in the vocabulary lists, which were included in the two Finnish upper secondary school textbook series. The examined textbook series were published by the biggest educational publishers in Finland and included *On Track* (by

Sanorama Pro) and *Insights* (by Otava). Although the study's author concluded that the *On Track* series included more idioms and the *Insights* series had idioms spread more evenly, the analysis showed a rather low idiom frequency – especially in the *Insight* series. In addition, the analysis examined the idioms included in the vocabulary lists only – excluding other parts of the textbooks. The author of the study herself calls for a more detailed approach, where the whole books would be examined.

In Iran, Alavi and Rajabpoor (2015) examined the frequency of the occurrence of English idioms in three ILI Advanced level textbooks. Based on their analysis, the authors concluded that the idioms chosen for these Advanced level books did not meet the necessary frequency criteria.

According to researchers, concerning issues associated with teaching and learning phraseological units, there are several drawbacks and limitations in the textbooks concerning their presentation and choice. Regarding their presentation, in most cases, the idioms are provided rather incidentally through the textbooks and are not presented by their shared meanings or themes (Boers, 2013). Therefore, the semantic approaches, which are based on the classification of idioms according to metaphors, their source domains, and origins can enhance idiom learning and deeper retention (Boers, 2013). Another drawback is the fact the existing teaching materials and references for idioms are mostly based on the intuition of the teaching materials creators (Rafatbakhsh & Ahmadi, 2019). Only a couple of textbooks developed for TEFL have implemented the more corpus-based approaches to select vocabulary and idioms – which is believed to be more reliable (Minugh, 2002; Liu, 2003; Simpson & Mendis, 2003; Grant, 2005; Gardner & Davis, 2007). A very good example of such textbooks is undoubtedly the *English in Use* series by Cambridge University – where the authors included numerous examples of phrasal verbs, idioms, and collocations. These are frequent in the English language based on the examination of a 250-million-word corpus of English – both spoken and written, which was based on newspapers, magazines, novels, and other public sources (Alavi & Rajabpoor, 2015).

In the context of Slovak secondary grammar and vocational schools, as recommended by the Ministry of Education, the intermediate and upper-intermediate *New Success* (by Pearson) and *New Headway* (by Oxford University Press) textbooks are used daily – as they cover various aspects of EFL. However, there is rarely space for the use of additional teaching materials, which would be primarily aimed at phraseological units. To the best of our knowledge, there has not been done research examining the intermediate and upper-intermediate *New Success* and *New Headway* textbooks for the frequency and distribution of phraseological units in their complexity as such, nor in the context of Slovak B1 and B2 EFL learners.

Method

Quantitative content analysis was used to establish the occurrence of phraseological units in the selected textbooks as the analysis focused on measuring and interpreting the data (Krippendorff, 2004). The units and the categories of analysis were established, and the data were categorized and analyzed (Cohen et al., 2018). The data was collected from exercises specifically designed to introduce phraseological units to students but also from other texts and articles within each textbook. Therefore, headlines and articles as well as different types of exercises (not designed to practice phraseological units) were scrutinized, too.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to examine selected textbooks for phraseological units, which could then be sorted according to their classification. Thus, we could find out which

class of phraseological units is the most frequently recurring in the textbooks. Other questions posed were whether phraseological units were present in all chosen textbooks and what their distribution per book's chapter was. The phraseological units were located, classified, and manually counted in four textbooks and then written into a pre-prepared MS Word table. The textbooks were also examined for any exercises aiming to practice the use of phraseological units and other texts which were not primarily aimed at the practice of phraseological units, and then compared for any significant differences.

Participants

The four most frequently used student books in Slovakia for B1 and B2 levels (CEFR, 2020) by two different publishers were selected and analyzed:

- *New Success Intermediate – Student's Book* (B1), Pearson (McKinlay & Hastings, 2012);
- *New Headway Intermediate – Student's Book* (B1), Oxford University Press (Soars & Soars, 2019a);
- *New Success Upper-Intermediate – Student's Book* (B2), Pearson (Moran, 2012);
- *New Headway Upper-Intermediate – Student's Book* (B2), Oxford University Press (Soars & Soars, 2019b);

The textbooks are approved by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (Edičný portál, 2021) for teaching at secondary grammar schools and secondary vocational schools in Slovakia.

Results

The final count of the phraseological units in the four chosen textbooks is shown in Table One. Naturally, the number of phraseological units is higher in Upper Intermediate levels of both book series – since the use of idiomatic language as a part of language competences is not expected until the B2 level (Council of Europe, 2020). A wide range of categories can be found in the textbooks, and their number differs from book to book, collocations and routine formulae being the most frequent ones in all books.

Table 1. *The occurrence of phraseological units in the analyzed textbooks*

	<i>New Success Intermediate</i>	<i>New Headway Intermediate</i>	<i>New Success Upper-Intermediate</i>	<i>New Headway Upper-Intermediate</i>
Phrasal verbs	83	67	73	51
Idioms	45	42	126	95
Collocations	121	109	171	190
Metaphors	0	0	8	8
Routine formulae	159	145	142	175
Proverbs/Maxims	6	0	4	1
Irreversible binomials	10	7	9	34
Similes	0	0	0	1
Slogans	1	0	0	0
Clichés	0	27	1	0
Dependent prepositions	39	18	39	4
TOTAL	464	415	573	559

As presented above, the most frequent phraseological units in both upper-intermediate textbooks were *collocations*, followed by *routine formulae* and *idioms*. In intermediate textbooks, *routine formulae* occurred most frequently, followed by *collocations*. There were no *metaphors* or *similes* identified within the intermediate books.

The following graphs (Figure One – Four) display the frequency and distribution of the most frequent categories in the analyzed textbook per unit. There is no chapter in the analyzed textbook without a phraseological unit. However, only *routine formulae* are consistently present in all units in each textbook. *Collocations* and *phrasal verbs* occur in almost every unit of the books with one or two instances in units containing focused exercises. *Idioms* and *dependent prepositions* were more or less symmetrically distributed throughout the individual units of all four books. However, there are only a few dependent prepositions in the *New Headway Upper-Intermediate* textbook.

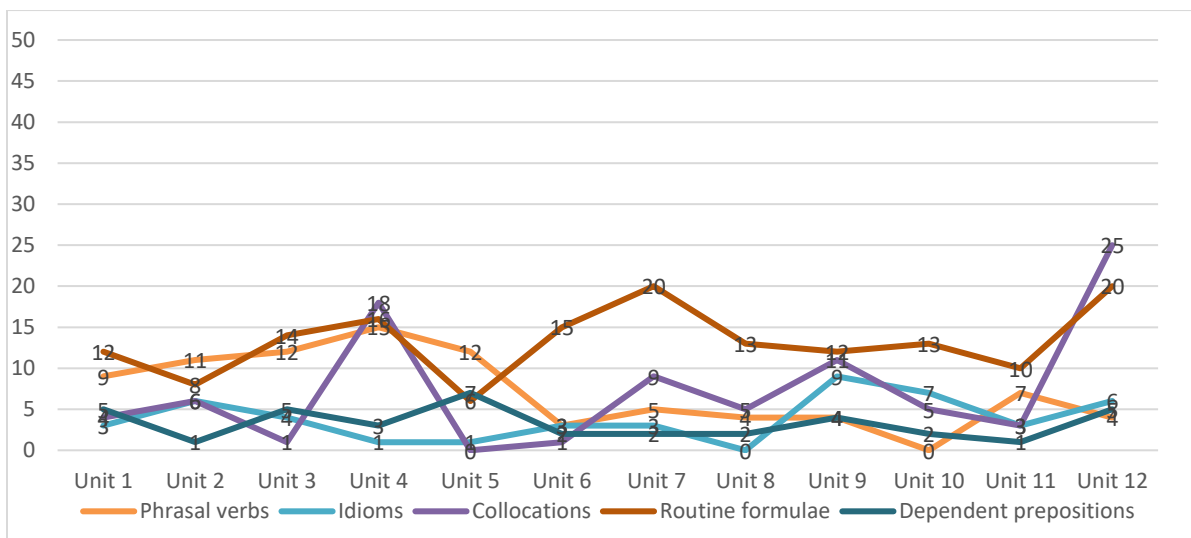


Figure 1. The occurrence of phraseological units in New Success Intermediate

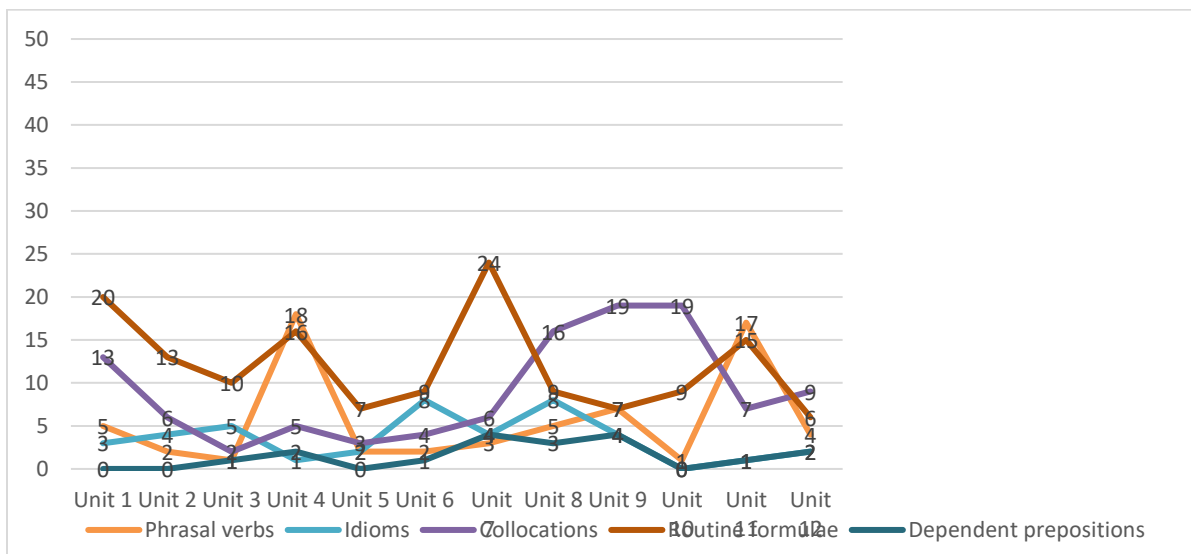


Figure 2. The occurrence of phraseological units in New Headway Intermediate

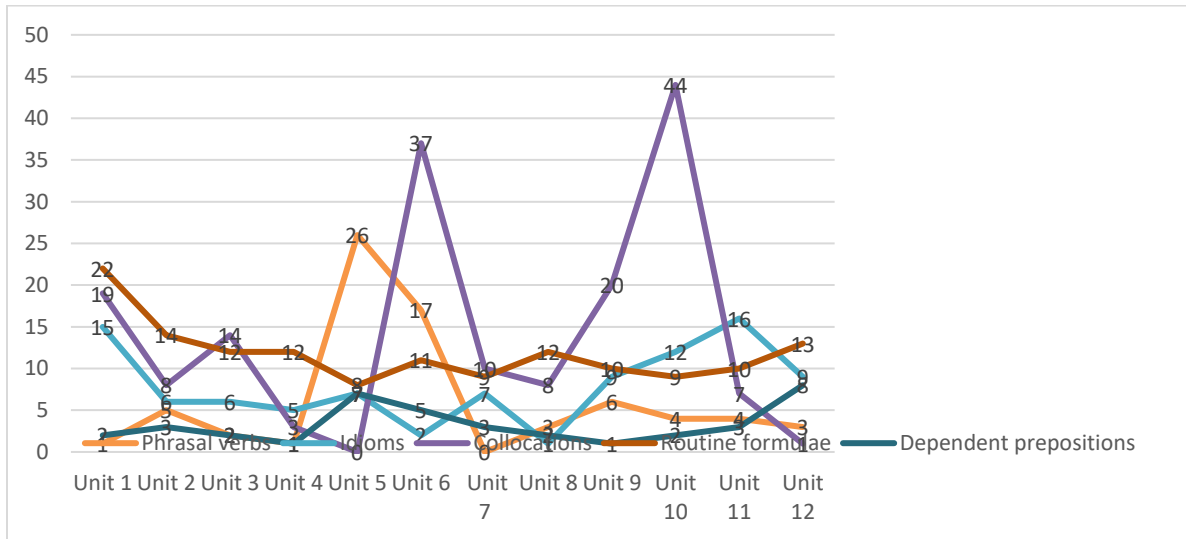


Figure 3. The occurrence of phraseological units in New Success Upper-Intermediate

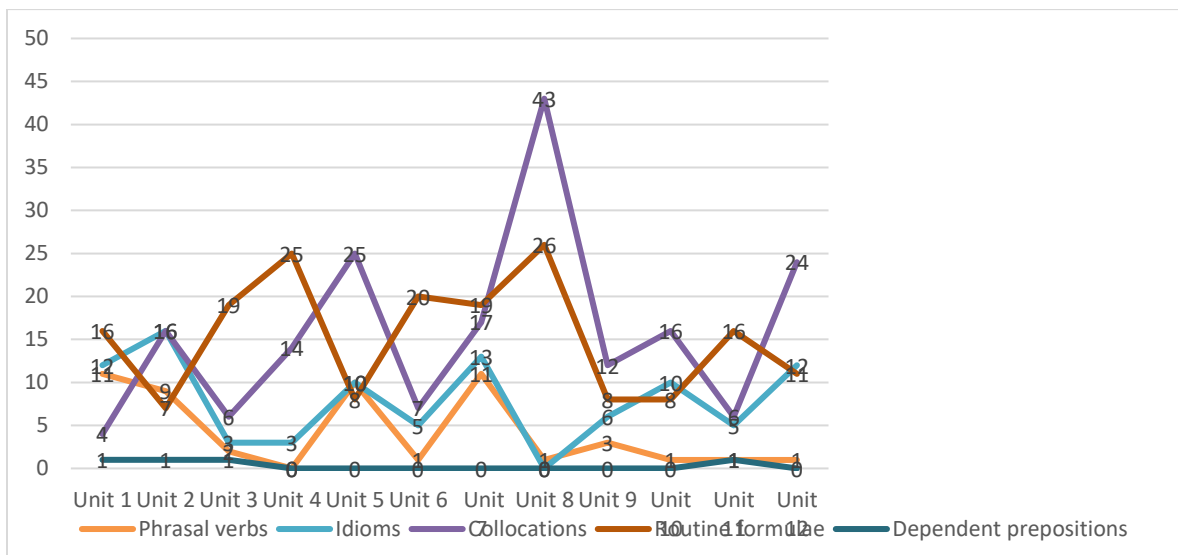


Figure 4. The occurrence of phraseological units in New Headway Upper-Intermediate

The analysis of the textbooks indicated that exercises specifically designed to practice phraseological units are present in all textbooks examined. These mainly were cloze exercises, such as gap filling and matching, introducing phraseological units, and then asking the student to practice them. However, these practices were not regularly spaced within the books and more significant number of the phraseological units was extracted from articles and texts, which were not directly aimed at the phraseological units practice. For example, routine formulae were collected from pages specifically designed for conversation. In the *New Headway*, this section is called ‘Everyday English’; in *New Success* textbook, this section is named ‘Speak Out’. In the following table, we offer an overview of the total number of phraseological units detected in the following types of activities:

- Reading,

- Conversation (speaking + listening) – *New Success Intermediate: Speak out, New Headway series: Everyday English,*
- Exercises (reading + writing + listening) – including gap filling, matching, finding, completing, and sorting.

Table 2. *The occurrence of phraseological units in the analyzed textbooks in specific types of activities*

Activity	<i>New Success Intermediate</i>	<i>New Headway Intermediate</i>	<i>New Success Upper-Intermediate</i>	<i>New Headway Upper-Intermediate</i>	TOTAL
Reading	176	126	161	170	633
Conversation	147	191	142	173	653
Exercises	121	91	233	206	651

As presented above, the number of texts, which are not exercises aimed at phraseological units – yet include them, is almost double. To add, once the phraseological units were practiced in the exercises, they were never used or mentioned in the textbooks again. This leads us to the speculation presented in the following lines.

Discussion

To answer our first research question, the most frequent categories of phraseological units that were found in both upper-intermediate textbooks include *collocations*, followed by *routine formulae* and *idioms*. There were few *metaphors, proverbs and maxims, similes, clichés, slogans, and quotes*. In intermediate textbooks, *routine formulae* occurred most frequently, followed by *collocations*. There were no *metaphors* or *similes* identified within the intermediate books. Interestingly, *New Headway Intermediate* contained 27 clichés and the other books (except for one cliché in *New Success Upper-Intermediate*) contained none. We emphasize this as there was an exercise in *New Headway Intermediate* devised for practicing these.

To answer our second research question, which was concerned with the frequency and distribution of phraseological units, it can be summarized that there is no chapter in the analyzed textbook without a phraseological unit. However, only *routine formulae* were found to be consistently present in all units in each textbook. *Collocations* and *phrasal verbs* occur in almost every unit of the books with one or two cases in units containing focused exercises. *Idioms* and *dependent prepositions* were more or less symmetrically distributed throughout the individual units of all four books. However, there are only a few dependent prepositions in the *New Headway Upper-Intermediate* textbook. All in all, when compared to the results of the analysis done by Alavi and Rajabpoor (2015) and by Ikonen (2021), which dealt exclusively with idioms, it can be concluded that the frequency and distribution of phraseological units in the analyzed textbooks is rather satisfactory – especially when it comes to the *idioms*, but also *phrasal verbs, collocations, routine formulae, and dependent prepositions* (except the *New Headway Upper Intermediate*). On the other hand, the frequency and distribution of *metaphors, proverbs/maxims, irreversible*

binomials (except the *New Headway Upper Intermediate*), *similes*, *slogans*, and *clichés*, were very limited.

To answer our third research question, the phraseological units were incorporated in the examined textbooks as follows. All of the textbooks included exercises specifically designed to practice phraseological units – which were mostly cloze exercises, such as gap filling and matching, introducing phraseological units, and then asking the student to practice them. However, such exercises were not regularly distributed over the units in the textbook. A more significant number of the phraseological units was present in articles and other texts, which were aimed at practicing other aspects of language, e.g. speaking and reading. The number of such texts is almost double – when compared to the number of exercises explicitly aimed at phraseological units. Another issue that was noticed during the analysis is that the chosen phraseological units were included in the exercises just once, but were never mentioned again in the following pages of the textbook.

Our examination revealed that the distribution of phraseological units was rather uneven and incidental – i.e. not sorted according to their shared themes, which is in line with Boers (2013). This might be the indicator of the fact that the choice of phraseological units was intuition-based, at least to a certain extent. We are well aware of the fact that very often learning becomes a goal in itself – especially when the learners are expected to learn huge amounts of material in short periods of time. Alavi and Rajabpoor (2015) explain that learners might tend to become more selective in learning, preferring to spend their learning time on items, that occur more frequently in the language and are more practical. Therefore, we would like to emphasize that adopting more semantic approaches when designing the EFL textbooks could be more convenient, as proposed by Boers (2013). In addition, the implementation of corpus-based approaches to select vocabulary and phraseological units – as proposed by several authors (Minugh, 2002; Liu, 2003; Simpson & Mendis, 2003; Grant, 2005; Gardner & Davis, 2007), could prove more reliable – especially when it comes to the objectivity of the resulting selection.

Concerning our research findings, we would like to emphasize the importance of the use of additional materials to increase the learners' fluency and proficiency in a foreign language. Especially regarding the phraseological units, we recommend the *English in Use* series by Cambridge University, which covers a great deal of EFL material that is not included in the multispectral textbooks designed for regular EFL classes at schools.

Last but not least, ideally, future studies should collect more data on idioms included in various English corpora – which should be implemented in the new learning materials. That would ensure that the textbooks would be up-to-date and would include the practical language useful in real life.

Conclusion

This research aimed to analyze the occurrence of phraseological units in the selected English textbooks for B1 and B2 levels, which the Ministry of Education recommends for use at secondary grammar schools and secondary vocational schools in Slovakia. For this purpose, phraseological units in the textbooks were identified, classified, analyzed, and counted by quantitative content analysis. In the analysis, the following categories of phraseological units were distinguished: idioms, phrasal verbs, similes, routine formulae, irreversible binomials, proverbs, slogans, and clichés. The results showed that although there are phraseological units found in all analyzed textbooks, their distribution and classification differed significantly. Even though the

knowledge of formulaic language can increase one's fluency in a foreign language, it can be concluded that only a limited number of such exercises were present in the analyzed textbooks. Additionally, once collocations, routine formulae, idioms, phrasal verbs, and dependent prepositions were included in the exercises, they were never used or mentioned in the textbook again. Moreover, the analyzed textbooks contained a minimal variety of exercises – predominately cloze exercises. A more significant number of the phraseological units was extracted from the headlines, articles, and other texts – which were not primarily aimed at phraseological units. In addition, concerning the fact that the textbooks were designed not only for classroom use but also for self-study, an insufficient explanation of the opaque phraseological units was given. While the scholars agree that formulaic language is essential for fluency, our analysis showed that an insufficient number of exercises were present throughout the textbooks. Another issue noted was that once collocations, routine formulae, idioms, phrasal verbs, and dependent prepositions were practiced in the exercises, they were never used or mentioned in the textbooks again.

The present study offered a complex view of phraseological units included in the detailed examination of all the texts incorporated in the analyzed textbooks. We hope that a small step has been taken towards a greater understanding of learning and teaching phraseological units as a part of EFL.

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