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Alexandra Gyimesi – Marjolijn H. Verspoor – Hana Gustafsson: How to judge idiomaticity in the German and English language use of Hungarian learners?

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How to judge idiomaticity in the German and English language use of Hungarian learners?¹

This paper reports on a pilot study that aims to test and assess a background questionnaire, a guided writing task and a comparative judgment tool to rank the writing tasks on idiomaticity in Hungarian, German and English.

The background questionnaire is meant to elicit information on schooling and informal exposure to German and English. The guided writing tasks in Hungarian, German, and English are designed to elicit a high degree of everyday language with idiomatic expressions. The comparative judgment tool is meant to holistically rank the texts of the learners in terms of idiomatic language in each language.

It was found that the background questionnaire gave adequate insight into the schooling, informal exposure and attitude towards German and English. The guided writing tasks assured that the texts were similar enough to compare, and the comparative judgment tool was effective in ranking the texts. Even though the sample was small, an unconfirmed link was evident in the interrelation between the degree of exposure and attitude and the degree of idiomaticity.

Based on the results, the guided writing task and the comparative judgment tool worked well together, and, with slight modifications, they can help explore idiomaticity and the use of formulaic multi-word units among Hungarian secondary-school learners of L3 German.

Keywords: idiomaticity, multi-word sequences, comparative judgement, writing assessment, third language acquisition

1. Introduction

Whereas the assessment of foreign language learners' written productions has traditionally focused on factors such as grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, spelling, cohesion and coherence, there has been an increasing emphasis on idiomaticity since Pawley and Syder (1983) pointed out that *native-like selection* makes a second language (L2) learner sound more proficient.

Even though idiomaticity has gained ground in research, there is still a need for reliable and efficient assessment methods that can deal with its complexity in

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foreign language writing. While traditional rubric-based assessment methods are widely accepted, recent research suggests that comparative judgment (CJ) also offers a promising alternative, demonstrating validity and reliability comparable to traditional absolute assessment methods (Thwaites et al., 2024; Thwaites & Paquot, 2024).

This study aims to pilot three items of a larger-scale study investigating idiomaticity among Hungarian learners of German and English in secondary education. The larger study will explore how factors such as schooling, experience abroad, extramural activities and the learners' L1 (Hungarian) and L2 (English) influence their idiomaticity in L3 German.

This pilot will focus on a background questionnaire, a guided writing task and a comparative judgment tool to find out how reliable, valid and practical their uses are, and whether they can be applied in the larger study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Idiomaticity

Idiomaticity is a fundamental element of acquiring and knowing a language. Pawley and Syder (1983) highlight the role of idiomaticity in native-like selection where speakers routinely employ expressions that are not only grammatically correct but also natural-sounding and conventionalized. Furthermore, they emphasise native-like fluency which entails the ability to produce fluent stretches of spontaneous discourse, often facilitated by prefabricated, lexicalized sentence stems. Such form-meaning pairings are largely fixed and can be retrieved from memory as a whole. Blending lexis and grammar these expressions contribute to fluency and idiomatic expression.

A substantial amount of language is formulaic, meaning it consists of recurrent, prefabricated, conventionalized elements which are often not predictable nor translatable. As a vast proportion of language is formulaic, there are several subcategories to be mentioned, such as collocations, formulae, phrasal verbs, situationally bound utterances or adjective and noun combinations. As it is such a considerable group, there are several ways to define and classify its elements.

The major reference works on formulaic sequences have been written by Wray (2002, 2008) on the basis of which her broadly accepted definition can be found below.

[a formulaic sequence is] a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar. (Wray, 2002: 9)

However, in addition to formulaic sequences defined above, speakers also make frequent use of conventionalized ways of saying things (CWOSTs), which

are longer multi-word sequences that are usually not considered formulaic sequences but are still *preferred formulations among a range of possible ways of expressing the same beyond-word-level notion* (Smiskova et al., 2012:1). Thus, an expert language speaker would be more likely to say “when I grow up” rather than “when I am a grown-up adult”.

Smiskova et al. (2012), emphasise that idiomaticity may also include aspects of a text beyond the word and phrase level such as textual coherence, morphosyntactic choices such as tense and voice choice, and pragmatic appropriateness. Köylü et al. (2024) point out that in addition to formulaic multi-word sequences, natural sounding language may also include the use of intensifiers, fillers, pragmatic markers, and discourse markers. Because not all such aspects of natural sounding language can be quantified entirely, they argue that the construct can be scored holistically by human raters.

Finally, the umbrella term “idiomaticity” is suggested by Verspoor and Rosmawati (2024) to include not only quantifiable items such as formulaic sequences, lexical constructions, and verb-argument constructions, but also the use of intensifiers, fillers, pragmatic and discourse features, and so on.

2.2. Idiomaticity, proficiency and exposure

Within the area of idiomaticity and L2 development research, the development of formulaic multi-word sequences has received a great deal of attention over the last two decades.

Formulaic multi-word sequences play a vital role in language acquisition and in reaching native-like proficiency (Granger & Paquot, 2012). According to Wray (2002) an effective repertoire of native-like formulaic multi-word sequences is a significant marker of advanced proficiency in the target language. With the help of formulaic multi-word sequences, language learners can produce naturally sounding utterances and reach their communicative goals easier.

However, mastering formulaic multi-word sequences is a crucial yet challenging part of language learning. Learners in early stages rely heavily on formulaic language (Wray, 2002) and tend to overuse highly frequent collocations, but later on second language (L2) chunks are notoriously difficult to acquire (Granger & Paquot, 2012). Several recent studies have shown that the degree of authentic exposure plays a significant role in mastering such formulaic multi-word sequences.

Smiskova-Gustafsson (2013) showed that in comparison of low-and high exposure learners, high-input learners will have a great advantage and will use not only more chunks, but also a wider variety of chunk types and CWOSts.

Köylü et al. (2024) showed that an immersion situation, even short-term stays abroad, can contribute to a more advanced level of idiomaticity. As learners need to interact in a wide variety of settings and situations, they develop significantly in their idiomaticity and proficiency.

To conclude, idiomaticity is an aspect of language that expert speakers in a speech community will naturally have, and it is assumed that L2 speakers can achieve greater degrees of idiomaticity through frequent exposure of authentic language, either in high input instructional situations or in stays abroad.

2.3. Comparative judgment

To be able to determine the degree to which a text as a whole is more or less idiomatic, Köylü et al. (2024) argue that it may not be possible to quantify all linguistic elements such as intensifiers, fillers, multiword sequences, verb-argument constructions, and discourse-level structures and how they are used. Therefore, the degree of idiomaticity can be best judged by humans, who may give texts a relative holistic formulaicity score by comparing texts to each other.

However, such holistic scoring often takes a considerable amount of time in terms of training the raters and conducting the actual scoring. Holistic scoring by means of comparative judgement (CJ) may provide a cost-and time-effective alternative.

CJ is a form of holistic assessment with roots in psychophysical analysis and was first mentioned by Thurstone (1927). It was first used to scale sense impressions such as weight, loudness and brightness; however, soon it was also applied to measure attitudes, beliefs and preferences. In the educational context, it was first used by Pollitt and Murray (1996) to evaluate speaking performance (Han, 2021).

In applied linguistics, CJ is primarily applied to L1 and L2 writing, translation and competence assessment. Thwaites et al. (2024) and Thwaites and Paquot (2024) have already shown that its validity and reliability are comparable to or even exceed those of traditional absolute assessment methods, such as rubric-based assessment. As a result, CJ can be considered a viable alternative for assessing complex applied linguistic constructs, for instance idiomaticity.

The advantage of CJ is that it is not necessary to undergo a time-consuming process of developing complex marking schemes and it does not require extensive training for the raters. A brief introduction and providing some simple directions in terms of one statement are enough. Thus, the power of CJ lies in brief instructions, simplicity and holistic judgment.

CJ works as follows: raters are shown two items side-by-side (randomly selected from a set of texts by the tool through an algorithm) and asked to choose which one is better in terms of the general question. The results of many such intuitive decisions are compiled and a scale ranking items from “the strongest” to “the weakest” is developed.

3. Methodology

The objective of this paper is to test three elements in assessing idiomaticity in the German and English written products of Hungarian learners. The elements consist of a background questionnaire, a free writing task, and a comparative judgment tool.

3.1. Background questionnaire

The aim of the background questionnaire is to gather general information on the students' age and amount of L2/L3 instruction, but the focus is on the degree of authentic exposure they have had to German and English and their attitudes towards these languages.

The background questionnaire (see Appendix) was developed using items of the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q). It was carried out in the participants' mother tongue, Hungarian, and consists of four sections. The first section includes demographic data such as age and gender. The second section asks for information on schooling and education including the type of school attended, possible participation in Erasmus programmes, and study-abroad experiences. The third section is used to describe participants' language background and language use. It investigates the order of language acquisition, proportion of language use, self-reported proficiency levels, and purposes of language use. In addition, it explores the presence of English and German in participants' extramural activities, such as reading books and articles, watching series and videos, chatting, surfing on the internet, and engaging with social media. The fourth section focuses on students' attitudes towards English and German and their respective cultures.

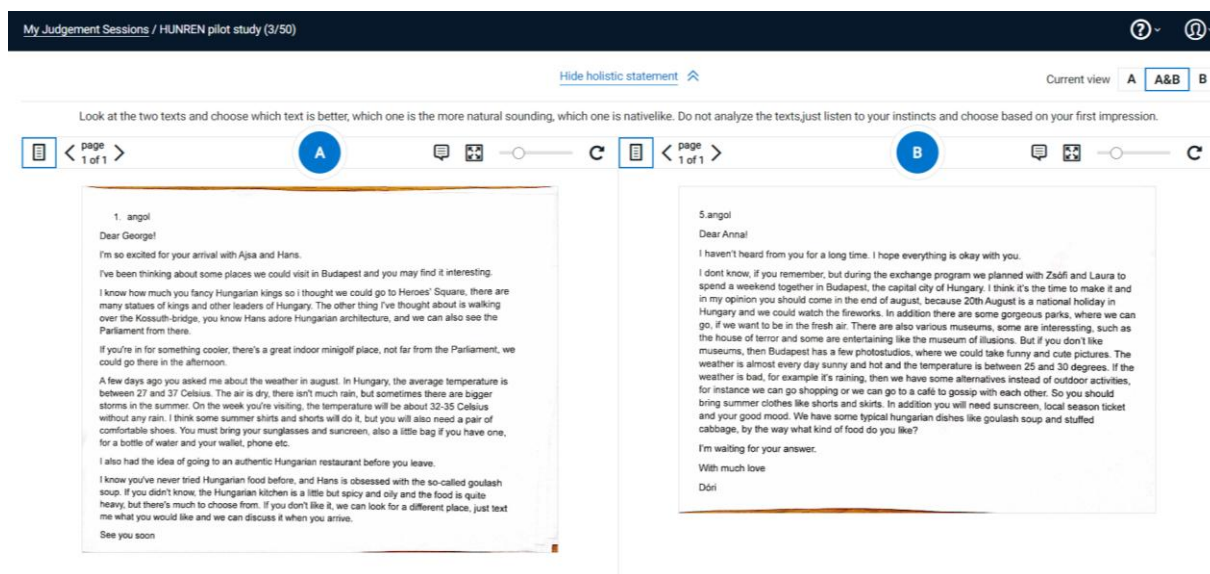
3.2. Guided writing task

The aim of the second element is to elicit as much everyday language that includes as many idiomatic expressions as possible in Hungarian (L1), English (L2) and German (L3). As in Köylü et al. (2024) the task consisted of a guided writing task on an everyday topic to simulate a real-life like communicative situation, which would encourage the use of target-like expressions. Participants were asked to compose three informal emails (each 200-250 words) to their international friends after having participated in a hypothetical Erasmus exchange programme. They were asked not to use a dictionary for writing the informal email. It involved inviting their English-, German-, and Hungarian-speaking friends to Budapest to spend a weekend together in the Hungarian capital. To allow comparability, students received some prompts to include topics such as weather conditions and recommended clothing in summer in Hungary, typical Hungarian dishes and suggestions for possible activities during their time together. Students were allowed to choose the language in which they started their writing.

3.3 Comparative Judgment

The third aim was to test whether CJ is a useful tool to assess the level of idiomaticity in the participants' texts. There were three separate rating sessions, one for each language: Hungarian, German and English. For each language, different raters (teachers and native speakers of the respective language) were recruited. The texts in each language presented to the raters were the complete emails produced by the participants in the guided writing task. As shown in Figure 1, the texts were presented with the help of an online platform (RM Compare).

Figure 1. Texts presented in the CJ tool (RM Compare)



To ensure validity and reliability, the recommended minimum of fifty judgments per session were carried out. The raters were given a short instruction to the rating procedure before starting their assessment sessions. They were given the following instruction in the respective languages: *Compare the two texts. Which one sounds more like a native speaker of English/German/ Hungarian? Use your intuition and do NOT analyse the texts in detail.*

3.4. Participants

The participants of the pilot study were five Hungarian secondary-school learners between the ages of sixteen and nineteen with different educational backgrounds. As their questionnaire responses showed, all participants had Hungarian as their native language and were learning English and German at school. With one exception, each participant had English as an L2 and German as an L3. At the time of the data collection, four participants attended a bilingual secondary-grammar school. Three of them learned English in the form of an intensive language program (5-6 English and 5-6 German lessons per week) and one of them learned both English and German in an intensive way (4-5 lessons per week). In terms of their study abroad experience, three of them participated in

Erasmus programmes for shorter periods and used English as a contact language. One of the participants lived abroad for two months for work purposes, using German to communicate. They all reported that their writing skills were better in English than in German. The participants used two of their languages, English and Hungarian for extramural activities. For gaming, watching vlogs, videos, series, and social media activities they predominantly used English, while for chatting, texting, and emailing they would prefer Hungarian. Regarding their attitudes, most of the participants thought that English was more important on the job market, and they preferred English music and found English culture more interesting than the German language and culture in general. However, most of them would choose a German-speaking country as their place of residence.

3.5. Data collection and analysis

At the end of October 2024, the participants individually completed the background questionnaire and the guided writing task online using Google forms. Because of the rather small sample, no statistical analysis was possible but information from the questionnaire was analysed using the descriptives of Google forms.

To assess idiomaticity, the informal emails were uploaded in jpg format and compared using the online platform RM Compare. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, their names were omitted. Invitations were sent to the raters and assessment sessions were completed with in-progress data monitoring.

4. Findings

4.1. Background questionnaire

As questions were set as obligatory, participants filled in each section of the questionnaire, and it provides varied information on linguistic and educational background, extramural activities and attitudes without overwhelming the participants.

The responses showed that the questions were understandable and self-explanatory. Participants were encouraged to contact the researcher in case of doubt. Based on their answers and the lack of getting in touch, the researcher concluded that the questionnaire was easy to fill in. When analysing the questionnaire, answers showed that the questions were understandable and self-explanatory.

The four sections of the questionnaire covered all necessary aspects relevant for the study with a special interest in educational background and extramural activities.

4.2. Guided writing task

Participants were encouraged to start with their most comfortable language. Most participants started with their mother tongue, others with English. Regarding the

guided writing task, participants took the task seriously, followed the given prompts and in most cases, the length of the texts was within the 200-250-word limit.

The prompts turned out to be useful for both guiding the participants and giving them creativity at the same time. Even though students used their own experiences and came up with creative ideas, on the whole the emails contained similar semantic units and followed a similar structure, so they were easy to compare.

However, in some cases participants seemed to have semi-translated their first e-mail in the other languages.

Examples 1, 2 and 3 show the e-mails written in the three languages by participant 4, who was judged most idiomatic in English and the second least idiomatic in German and Hungarian.

Example 1:

Hi!

I can't wait to see you in August. I miss you so much!

I hope you don't mind if I take you to my favourite places here, in Budapest. I would definitely suggest visiting the Fisherman's Bastion and the St. Stephen's Basilica. Seeing these buildings is a must if someone is visiting Budapest.

I hope you remember that I told you to bring only tank tops, skirts and dresses, because August is the warmest weather here, and also bring your deodorant if you don't want to be stinky and sweaty. And don't forget the most important things: sunscreen and sunglasses! You'll die without those!

I really want to show you the best Hungarian dishes, I'm sure you'll love the gulyás soup and pörkölt with noodles. I don't know if you prefer salty over sweet food, so let me know! If you want to know anything else, feel free to ask me! See you soon!

Example 2:

Hallo!

Wie gehts?

Ich will meine Lieblingsplätze mit dir besuchen. Zum Beispiel, Halászbástya und Szent István Basilika.

Du musst nicht vergessen diese. Du musst T-Shirts, Röcke und Kleiderer bringen. August ist sehr heiß und sonnig. Bring Deine Sonnenbrille und deinen Sonnenschutz.

*Ich möchte gulyás Suppe und pörkölt mit nokedli mit dich probieren.
Möchtest du etwas fragen? Ich antworte!
Bis bald!*

Example 3:

*Szia!
Alig várom, hogy találkozzunk, már nagyon hiányzol!
Remélem nem bánod, ha megmutatom a kedvenc helyimet itt,
Budapesten. Mindenképpen szeretném meglátogatni a Halászbástyát
és a Szent István Bazilikát, ezeket nem lehet kihagyni, ha Budapestre
érkezel.
Remélem emlékszel, hogy mondtam, hogy csak és kizárólag
ujjatlanokat, szoknyákat és ruhákat hozz, mivel nálunk az augusztus
a legmelegebb hónap, olyan hőség van, hogy alig lehet kibírni! A
dezodorodat se felejtsd el, hacsak nem akarsz bűzleni az izzadságtól!
Legfontosabb pedig, hogy legyen nálad naptej és napszemüveg, ezek
nélkül nem fogsz túlélni egy napot se.
Már nagyon meg szeretném veled kóstoltatni a gulyás levest és a
pörköltöt nokedlivel. Azt nem tudom, hogy édes vagy sós szájú vagy-
e inkább, úgyhogy ezt majd áruld el! Ha van még bármi ami érdekel,
nyugodtan kérdezz meg!
Hamarosan találkozunk!*

4.3. Comparative Judgment

The goal of the comparative judgment tool was to assess idiomaticity based on the working definition of Köylü et al. (2024). Based on the final rankings by the raters, we conclude that raters assessed idiomaticity indeed. However, there were differences in reliability in the groups of raters.

The group of raters assessing English texts, who were rather familiar with the idea of comparative judgment, produced the highest Cronbach Alfa (0.82). Other groups less familiar with comparative judgment, relying more on traditional methods produced a lower Cronbach Alfa. It was 0.5 in the German group and 0.48 in the Hungarian group.

The CJ tool clearly shows a rank order in level of idiomaticity. The scales below (Figures 2-4) were prepared by the platform RM Compare. They show the idiomaticity scores of the participants in their three languages: Hungarian (L1), English (L2) and German (L3) going from the “strongest” (most idiomatic) to the “weakest” (least idiomatic).

Figure 2. Idiomaticity scores for Hungarian

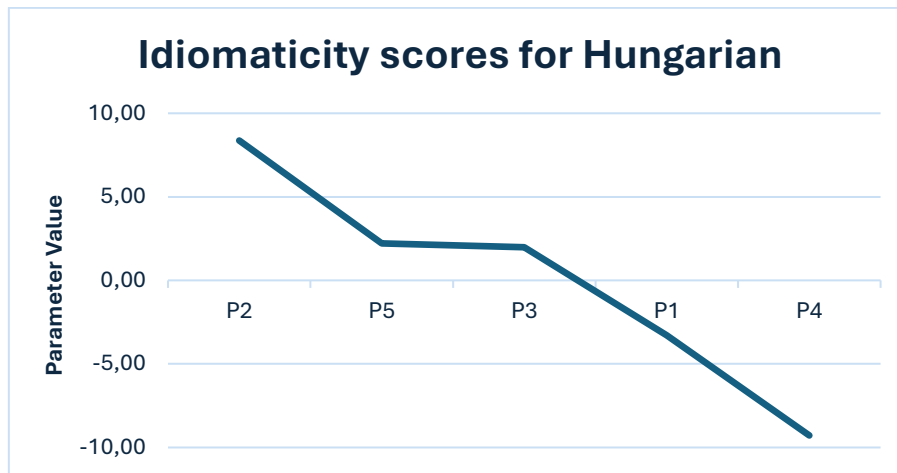


Figure 3. Idiomaticity scores for German

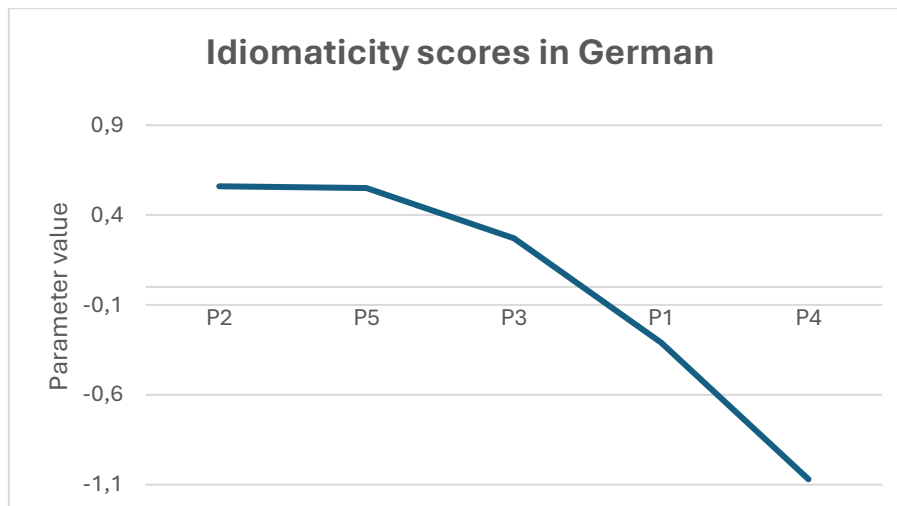
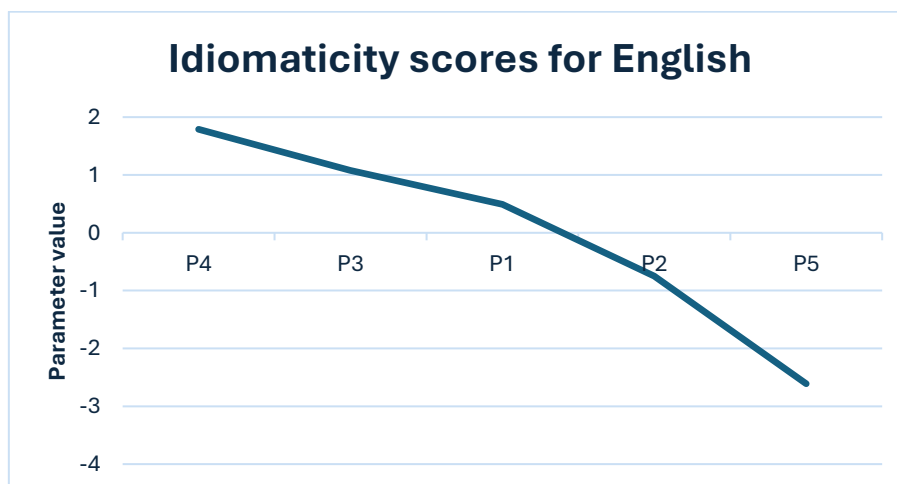


Figure 4. Idiomaticity scores for English



4.4. Results of the pilot study

The main goal of this pilot study was to test whether the information gathered from the background questionnaire, specifically the amount of informal exposure and attitude, and idiomaticity scores obtained from the guided writing task would align. The following short narratives intend to show how the information of the background questionnaire and idiomaticity scores may indeed be related to each other, but a larger sample will be needed for statistical analysis. For each participant the relative rankings in each language as shown in Figures 2-4 are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. The summary of idiomaticity rankings

Participants	English	German	Hungarian
Participant 1	3.	4.	4.
Participant 2	4.	1.	1.
Participant 3	2.	3.	3.
Participant 4	1.	5.	5.
Participant 5	5.	2.	2.

Participant 1

Participant 1 is relatively stronger in English idiomaticity than in Hungarian or German. This may be explained by the fact that she has participated in several Erasmus programmes where she has used English for communication. She is also in a high-input group in English at school and as she studies subjects in English, this is the language she uses most at school. Using English for most of her extramural activities and her preference towards English culture and music probably contribute to this as well. However, she finds German important for better job perspectives in the future and is also working with a private tutor on her German.

Participant 2

Participant 2 is the strongest in idiomaticity in German and Hungarian, which may be explained by the fact that she lived abroad (in Austria) for two months because she had a summer job there and during her stay, she used German as the language of communication. Moreover, she is working on her German skills with a private tutor. In addition, she has a positive attitude towards German, she would prefer to live in a German-speaking country and finds learning German more fun than English; she is also more interested in German culture.

Participant 3

Participant 3 is the second most idiomatic in English in the group, which may be explained by the fact that she participated in Erasmus programmes using English as a language of communication and she uses English (school, free time) and Hungarian (home, social interactions in general) in her everyday life the most. Furthermore, she is more interested in the English culture but can imagine living in a German-speaking country; probably that is why she is learning German with a private tutor.

Participant 4

Participant 4 is the most idiomatic in English in the group, which may be explained by the fact that she took part in an Erasmus programme where she used English for communication and participated in an exchange programme organized by the school. Although she mostly uses her native language at home, school and other social interactions, for her extramural activities she also uses English, and she has a much greater interest in English.

Participant 5

Participant 5 is the least idiomatic in English, which may be explained by the fact that she is neither part of a high-input class in English nor has participated in any exchange programmes or Erasmus programmes. She is relatively idiomatic in German, which can be interpreted as a result of her positive attitude towards German and her interest in German culture and in living in a German-speaking country in the future.

5. Discussion

The aim of the pilot study was to see if the background questionnaire, the guided writing task and the comparative judgment tool were suitable for a larger study on the development of idiomaticity among L1 Hungarian learners of L2/3 English and German.

The background questionnaire was constructed based on the LEAP-Q questionnaire as it is a validated questionnaire and has been used for collecting self-reported proficiency and experience data on bilinguals and multilinguals for a long time. Although it was modified a little to suit this study more, questions were asked in the original order using the official Hungarian translation as it is recommended by Kaushanskaya et al. (2020). There were only a few items left out, as the pilot study deals with written products, so questions concerning accent and pronunciation were not relevant.

Overall, the questionnaire worked well. Participants answered all the questions, and their responses were relatively simple to analyse. There will be no need to make adjustments to the questionnaire.

The aim of the guided writing activity was to create a task in which participants can imitate an informal real-life communicative situation, use idiomatic expressions and were similar enough to make comparisons across participants and languages.

On the whole, the guided writing task worked well as all texts contained the type of every-day language full of idiomatic expressions. However, in some cases, participants seemed to have translated parts of the texts with mirror translations. Thus, in the larger study, participants should be asked not to translate texts directly.

The aim of the comparative judgment tool was to assess idiomaticity validly and reliably. On the whole, comparative judgment worked, but there were significant differences among the groups of raters. The group more familiar with the method produced the highest Cronbach Alpha. In the future, it would be useful to familiarize judges more with the basic concept of comparative judgment or engage native speakers who are not teachers. Some judges, mainly teachers working in public education, who are used to traditional absolute scoring systems, seemed very sceptical towards the method. Familiarizing them with previous research results (Thwaites et al., 2024; Thwaites and Paquot, 2024) might motivate them to really use their intuition when making their judgments.

The pilot study proved to be useful. All in all, it can be said that the information gained from the questionnaires aligned with the idiomaticity rankings obtained from the guided writing task. In the larger study, minor changes are needed in the writing instructions for the participants and especially for German, the judges need to be trained better.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to test a background questionnaire, a guided writing task, and a comparative judgment tool and see whether they relate to each other and whether they can help explore idiomaticity and the use of multi-word units among Hungarian secondary-school learners of L3 German, as part of a larger-scale study.

While this pilot study provides valuable insights on the instruments, the small sample does not allow us to generalize about the development of idiomaticity in these learners. A larger participant pool in the main study would be necessary to draw more general conclusions. In addition, to be able to analyse the influence of school type, study-abroad experience a more varied group of participants is needed.

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Appendix

Language skills and proficiency questionnaire (created using the LEAP-Q questionnaire)

I. General information (correct answer to be entered or underlined)

1. Gender: woman man

2. Age:

3. Today's Date:

II. Education and schooling

1. Attended school

Secondary-grammar school

Bilingual secondary-grammar school

Vocational school

Secondary-technical school

Other:.....

2. Which year are you in?

0.

9.

10.

11.

12.

3. I went to a national primary school. Yes. No.

If yes, language learned in increased hours:

4. I attended a bilingual high school. Yes. No.

If yes, language learned in increased hours:

5. Have you participated in ERASMUS? Yes. No.

If yes, in which country(ies)?

If yes, which language did you use here?

6. Have you studied abroad? Yes. No
 If yes, for how long?
 What type of education have you been involved in?
 What languages did you use there?
7. Have you ever lived abroad? Yes. No.
 If yes, For how long?.....
 If yes, Where?.....
 If yes, what languages did you use there?
8. Are there any other places where you learnt? Any other factors that influenced your language learning? (international neighbour, friends, penpals...)

III. Language skills

1. List all the languages you know, start with the most dominant (include your native language too).

1	2	3	4	5
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2. List all the languages you have learned, in order of mastery (start with your native language).

1	2	3	4	5
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3. Describe how often and in what proportion you are exposed to the above-mentioned languages in everyday life (to be specified as a percentage). *The sum of the percentages must be exactly 100%.*

Language:					
Percentage:					

4. Describe what level of language you think you are currently using, taking into account different language skills. The levels are specified according to CEFR levels. (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2). Fill in the information about all your language mentioned above.

Language:						
Level:	Speaking					
	Writing					
	Reading					
	Listening					

5. Which languages do you use most often in specific locations and situations?

(Denoted by X)

	Hungarian	English	German	Other:...
home				
school				
work				
Other social interactions (time spent with friends, shopping, restaurants...)				
Leisure activities				

6. Which languages do you use most often in the following activities?

(Denoted by X)

	Hungarian	English	German	Other: ...
Gaming				
Watching videos and vlogs				
Watching movies and series				
Surfing on social media				
Chatting, messaging, and writing emails				
Reading newspapers and magazines				
Reading professional material, material connected to your studies				
Reading novels				

7. Fill in the statements using the words 'English' and 'German' so that they are true for you.

1. Learning is more important to me in general than learning
2. Learning is more useful on the job market than learning
3. Learning is more fun than learning
4. I would rather live in an-speaking country than in a-speaking country.
5. I am more fluent in than in
6. I prefer music to music.
7. I find learning very interesting.
8. I always look forward to classes.
9. I would like to know more about traditions and people in-speaking countries.
10. I prefer films.
11. It is easier to communicate with people than with people.
12. I get more nervous when speaking than
13. I am more insecure when writing in