

DIFFICULTIES INVOLVED IN TEACHING IDIOMS TO EFL STUDENTS

*Olga PASCARI,
Senior lecturer, MA,
ULIM, Moldova*

It is evident that idioms play a very important role in English vocabulary. As an essential part of the general vocabulary, idioms reflect the environment, life, history, and culture of the native speakers, and are closely associated with their innermost spirits and feelings. Furthermore, familiarity with idioms and ability to use them appropriately in context are one of the distinguishing markers of a native-like command of English. As we know an English idiom is a group of words with a special meaning different from the total meanings of its constituent words. But let us have a deeper glance of the definitions of idioms viewed by different linguists. One can point out that “idiom” according to the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary of English Idioms, is “a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words” [13]. V.V. Vinogradov gives idioms another name - fusion. “A fusion is a unit which is completely non-motivated” [12]. A.I. Smirnitsky considers that idioms proper are such “combinations of words which occur in metaphorical use and possess a special stylistic colouring or expressiveness” [11]. English and American authors give so many definitions to idioms and idiomatic English that it is by no means easy to disentangle their essential features. Here are just a few illustrations:

For William Freeman an idiom is “an established word or phrase with a special meaning that is independent of the dictionary's definition and frequently of the rules of grammar as well. Idioms have become a fundamental part of our language; they are frequently nothing more than vigorous abbreviations of common phrases. They are a terror to any student with a logical and orderly mind. Many of them, indeed, are beyond any common-sensible explanation whatever. Others are based on passages from the Bible, Shakespeare, on proverbs, and, in fact, on anything which can be employed to convey one's thoughts briefly and effectively,” etc. [6].

Idioms are found in every language and learning them is an important aspect of the mastery of a language. The English language is no exception as it contains a large number of idioms, which are extensively used. However, because of their rather rigid structure and quite unpredictable meaning, idioms are often considered difficult to learn. Although little research has been done to date on the nature of idioms as well as how they are used, a better understanding of variations in idioms can nevertheless be acquired by looking at some theories and thoughts about their use and their structure.

Idioms enrich the language like a necklace of pearls embellishes a woman's neck. Generally, language follows rules. If it did not, then its users would not be able to make sense of the random utterances they read or heard and they would not be able to communicate meaningfully themselves.

Learning idioms has always been very difficult for second-language learners. Idioms are difficult to learn, including the fact that most materials for teaching idioms are inadequate.

To help teachers prepare materials and activities for teaching them, criteria are suggested for deciding which idioms to teach, and ten activities are described which will help students understand and produce idiomatic English.'Familiarity with a wide range of idiomatic expressions and the ability to use them appropriately in context are among the distinguishing marks of a native-like command of English' ([3]. While many second-language learners may be satisfied with something less than 'nativelike' command, idiomatic usage is so common in English that it can be difficult to speak or write without using idioms [10]. The learning of idioms must therefore be considered an integral part of vocabulary learning.

There are several explanations for the fact that idioms are very difficult to learn in a second language. Some of these will be explored below. Idioms are not literal; they do not mean what they say. For example, the idiomatic meaning of 'he spilled the beans' has nothing to do with beans or with spilling in its literal sense. Most idioms also have literal counterparts, which makes them even harder to learn. A native speaker will quickly realize which meaning is intended, while the second-language learner is left trying to figure out where the beans came from and how they were spilled.

Exposure to idioms is frequently omitted in the speech addressed to second-language learners. Native speakers tend to use simple, concrete, everyday vocabulary when they address second-language learners; the use of idioms is avoided. On the other hand, idioms are commonly used in movies and on television. However, television and movies do not provide the kind of interaction which is necessary for learning language; input

without interaction is not sufficient for language acquisition [8]. Thus learners' exposure to idioms appears to occur mainly in noninteractive situations, where there is no opportunity for negotiation of meaning, rather than in interactive situations which allow learners to clarify meaning and receive feedback on use.

Even when learners do master the meanings of some English idioms, it is still very difficult to learn to use them correctly. Idioms vary in formality from slang {you got it} and colloquialisms {he kicked the bucket} to those which can be used in formal situations {run the risk}. In addition to situational appropriateness, many idioms have grammatical constraints. You can tell your friends that you 'didn't sleep a wink' last night, but you can't tell them that you 'slept a wink'. You can be 'fed up with' something, but you can't 'feed him up with' the same thing. Most idioms are invariant and must be learned as wholes, but the verbs must still be put into the correct form, and pronouns must agree with their antecedents. If learners try to rely on their first language to help them use idioms in their second, they will be successful in only a very few instances. In most cases, this strategy will produce an incorrect and often comical form. A Spanish man will not make a very good impression on his companion if he tells her she has 'chicken skin', although his literal translation from Spanish is not very different from the English idiom *goose flesh*.

Another reason why second-language learners do not learn idioms is that we do not teach them very well. Many second-language teaching materials either ignore idioms entirely or relegate them to the 'other expressions' section of vocabulary lists, without providing exercises or other aids to learning. Typically, an idiom will appear in the introductory reading or dialogue, a definition, translation or example will be provided in the margin or notes, and the idiom will then appear again in the vocabulary list. These are obviously not sufficient aids to learning, unless the teacher provides additional exercises and practice. Materials designed specifically to teach idioms do, of course, provide exercises to help learners master them. However, a survey of five ESL idiom books (Reeves 1975, Feare 1980, Goldman 1981, Dixson 1983, Adams and Kuder 1984) revealed that many of the exercises are inadequate. In some cases, it was possible to do the exercises without any knowledge of the meaning of the idiom. For example, Reeves provides dashes to indicate the number of letters in each word of the idiom which is to be inserted into a sentence. Dixson has students answer questions containing idioms, but many of the questions can be answered simply by manipulating their structure, without any need to understand them. Exercises which do involve understanding usually require comprehension only and do not ask students to produce the idioms. These

include matching the idiom with its definition or substituting one for the other (Feare, Reeves, Dixson), multiple-choice exercises where the correct definition or paraphrase is chosen (Feare, Adams and Kuder), and completion exercises where the correct idiom is chosen from a list and inserted into a sentence (Goldman, Reeves, Adams and Kuder). In some cases, exercises requiring production of idioms are included only in review lessons which Learning and teaching idioms [9, 6, 7, 4, and 1].

Training students to infer meaning from context and to deal with figurative *comprehension* speech enables them to generalize beyond those idioms which they have learned and to understand idioms which they have never encountered before [2].

Let us have a look at the possible activities that can be used for learning idioms.

1. Write a paragraph containing an idiom in a logical context, but omit the idiom. Ask students to complete the paragraph with a word or short phrase which fits the context. When this has been done correctly (i.e. the word or phrase is a paraphrase of the idiom you omitted), tell them what the idiom is, and show them how they have already inferred its meaning from the context.

2. Draw (or get the students to draw) sets of pictures showing both the literal and the idiomatic meanings of an idiom. Then have students matched the pictures that go together and match them with the idiom (this could be done by playing 'Concentration' or 'Fish').

3. Make up and get the students to make up stories using the literal meanings of idioms. For example: 'I went to a party last night and there was a guy there who was telling such funny stories that I just cracked up. I was in stitches all evening. It was so bad that before I could go home I had to go to the hospital to have the crack fixed and the stitches taken out.' Discuss why the story is strange.

4. Make up and ask students to make up dialogues involving a literal misinterpretation of one or several idioms. For example:

Girl: Why don't you give me a ring some time?

Foreign boy: Oh, no! I don't know you well enough to marry you!

Girl: You must be pulling my leg!

Foreign boy: How can I pull your leg? I'm not even near you!

Discuss why the misinterpretation occurred.

5. Give students an envelope containing a card with an idiom written on it, and the props needed to act out its literal meaning. Have other students guess the literal meaning; then discuss the idiomatic meaning.

6. Play idiom charades. Divide the class into teams. Each member of each team gets a slip of paper with an idiom written on it. (These can be

prepared by the teacher or by the students; in the latter case, each team thinks up the idioms to be acted out by the members of the other team.) Each member of the team acts out first the idiomatic meaning and then the literal meaning of the idiom, while the rest of the team tries to guess it. The teacher times how long it takes to guess the idiom (time limits may be imposed); the team with the shortest total time wins. (Hand signals should be taught in order to designate whether it is the literal or idiomatic meaning, the number of words, which word is being acted out, the number of syllables, etc.)

7. Tell an 'add-on' story. Begin the story by giving a sentence containing one of the idioms on the list. Students add to the story by contributing a sentence containing another idiom from the list.

8. Students write short plays, puppet show, stories, or dialogues, from lists of idioms which the teacher supplies or which they collect themselves.

These can be impromptu, in-class activities, done either individually or in groups, or they can be formal assignments.

9. The teacher tells a story containing several idioms (or students tell them to each other, using stories they wrote in the previous activity). (For example: 'Jack was down in the dumps. His car had a flat tyre, his stereo was broken, and his girl friend was going out with somebody else. He really felt blue, and he looked as though he had lost his best friend. So he bought a lottery ticket. How did he feel when he found out that he had won \$ 100,000? He was in seventh heaven! Now he could buy a new car and a new stereo and get a new girl friend! He was on cloud nine! Jack was walking on air for months after that.') Students then re-tell the story to the teacher or to one another, trying to include as many of the idioms as possible.

10. Students role-play a situation suggested by the teacher, using idioms which they have learned previously. This activity allows them to try out actually using idioms in a non-threatening situation, and to receive feedback on the appropriateness of their use in that situation.

Most students are very interested in learning idiomatic language. They recognize it as an area in which they have difficulties, and appreciate systematic instruction. The activities described here can be adapted for any level, and have been used successfully in high-school ESL and foreign language classes. Learners enjoy them, and ESL students report that the practice provided in class gives them confidence to try to use idioms outside the classroom. Students should be given ample opportunity to practise using idioms in non-threatening natural situations in order to give them confidence that they can use them correctly. Comparing and contrasting

literal and figurative meanings of idioms will enable students to recognize idiomatic usage and to interpret idioms accordingly. It also establishes a link between the form and the meaning. Comparing idioms in the first and second languages will enable students to discover which idioms are identical.

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