

Do you feel iffy about teaching idioms?

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Well, don't feel that way! Get with it and make up your mind to really get idioms down pat--for your own good and that of your students.

Introduction

Idioms are so much used in everyday life yet so ignored in teaching. Many teachers think they are insurmountable obstacles preventing fluent control of a language. On the contrary, they are essential for achieving fluency in conversation and for improving understanding of the spoken language. Idioms play an important role in all aspects of communication: listening, speaking, and formal and informal reading and writing. When we refer to reading, it seems that there is always a mixture of formal and informal writing styles which include many idiomatic expressions. The following are some examples in current magazines:

The day after formally *kicking off* his campaign in January, Colosio elaborated only slightly...
 ...details of the heralded event are not only *fuzzy*... (Spencer 1994:2)
 ...that mathematics is little more than *a bunch of* unrelated rules... (Harper 1993: 52)
 Broadcasting *big mouths*. If the spotted owl can't adjust...then *screw* it.(Anderson 1993: 42)

It is also true that the non-native speaker's use of idioms with a native speaker promotes a communicative relationship of solidarity and friendliness. On the other hand, speakers who never use idioms give the impression of being serious, unimaginative and very official. (Makkai 1987: viii) Therefore, idioms should be presented early in the English course and continued in intermediate and advanced courses. Idioms are the lifeblood of change in language indicating that they come from a dynamic society. American English is heavily idiomatic because as new concepts develop, we need new ways to express them; we put together already existing words and add a new sense to them. This is true of all known languages.

Definition

An idioms is a word or phrase which has an unexpected or unpredictable meaning as contrasted with its literal meaning. Hence, to speak of a car or machine as a *lemon* does not refer to the fruit, but to the fact that it is no good. The *burn up the road* does not mean to set fire to a street or highway, but to drive

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very fast. In other words the meaning of an idiom cannot be understood by looking at its individual words.

Classification

Grammatically speaking, idioms can be:

phrasal verbs: check out, chip in, show up, butt in, bring up the rear

verbal phrases: to get one's goat, to get the ax, to hang out one's shingle

noun phrases: a snake in the grass, a hot number, an idiot box, the last straw

adjectival phrases: dead to the world, flat broke., fly-by-night business

adverbial phrases: talk off the top of one's head, go at it hammer and tongs

prepositional phrases: (used adverbially or adjectivally) to be on the go, to be in a tight spot, to sit on high cotton (in the South).

As we can see, these grammatical categories reflect how the idioms are used in a sentence as verbs, nouns, adjectives or adverbs.

Many idioms are metaphorical: A is B--*My car is a lemon. That exam was a dog.* Many are derived from slang which is vocabulary associated with very informal or colloquial styles (Trudgill 1992: 66) It is more playful, vivid, colorful and ephemeral than ordinary language; it is sometimes socially taboo and sometimes becomes part of standard vocabulary: *hot dog.* Now we come to the vulgar aspects of idiomatic usage which teachers must come to grips with and must realize that it is commonly used in the USA. To many people it is offensive and, therefore, avoided on the grounds that it is in bad taste. Students will often ask about such idioms and teachers should know their meanings in a linguistic, objective manner. Among some of the common vulgar idioms are:

son of a bitch or *S.O.B.*: terrible, miserable, horrible person; in a positive sense:

He's a lucky son of a bitch. He won a lot of money.

fuck around: be promiscuous or do something without a purpose.

fuck off: go away, don't bother me.

fuck up: make a mess of something: to fuck up an exam.

fuck you: directed at a person in disgust, anger, annoyance or contempt.

asshole is used in the same sense as *fuck you* and can also mean stupid..

Oh, shit, and *Oh, fuck*: exclamations expressing momentary surprise, anger, annoyance caused by unexpected accidents or displeasures. (Carrubba, 347)

Another group of idioms is proverbs and sayings. These express some commonplace truth or useful thought. Their idiomaticity as well as that of the taboo words is shown by their special meaning and their literal one. Some examples are:

- Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.* (Don't celebrate the outcome of an action prematurely because you might fail and then look ridiculous).
- A burnt child dreads the fire.* or *Once bitten, twice shy.* (Once you suffer, you avoid the cause of that suffering the next time).
- Handsome is as handsome does.* (Besides his good looks a person must act well in order to gain respect).
- Fine feathers do not make fine birds.* (Don't judge someone or something by their outward appearance.)
- It is an ill wind that blows nobody good.* (Someone can gain from somebody else's misfortunes).
- Don't kill the goose that laid the golden egg.* (Don't spoil something or a good thing by being greedy.)
- Lightening never strikes twice in the same place.* (The same accident doesn't occur twice.)
- Out of the frying pan into the fire.* (From something bad to something worse.)
- Penny wise and pound foolish.* (Wise or careful in small things, but not in important things.)
- People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.* (Don't complain about others if you are just as bad.)
- A rolling stone gathers no moss.* (Changing jobs or moving doesn't often help you to save money or buy property.)
- A stitch in time saves nine.* (Being careful at the right time in the beginning, helps you avoid more trouble in the end.)

Common idioms for everyday use

- He cut off his nose to spite his face.* (Making things worse for oneself because of anger or frustration.)
- I can't *get a word in edgewise.* (I don't have a chance to speak.)
- That's a *piece of cake.* (something very easy)
- Mary has a big *sweet tooth.* (to have a fondness for sweets)
- His comment was very *tongue in cheek.* (ironic or insincere)
- Jack really *got it in the neck.* (to be scolded)
- I'm *all keyed up* about the exam. (to be excited or nervous)
- He doesn't know whether he's *coming or going.* (not be sure of one's actions)
- Jim is always *in hot water.* (to be in trouble)
- I'll pass the exam *come hell or high water.* (no matter what happens)
- Jim argued with Pat until he was *blue in the face.* (very angry or upset, excited)
- The bottom line* is that he's a spy. (the naked truth)
- How come* you're late? (How is it that, why?)
- Pat won a scholarship. *How about that!* (That's wonderful or very good)

Idioms in context: A dialogue

A very effective way to teach idioms is through dialogues which provide a context for students to understand the meaning of idioms more easily. The storyline of this dialogue is the effort of one speaker to convince the other of a certain line of action. This helps drive home the meaning of the idioms.

Liz: Do you feel iffy about teaching idioms, Phil?
Phil: I sure do. Liz. I just feel so down in the mouth because I can't get some of them through my head.
Liz: Oh, come on! Get with it, Phil. Make up your mind to get them down pat.
Phil: No way, unless you give me a hand.
Liz: O.K. I'll help you out. I've got a dictionary of idioms that's out of this world. I'll be glad to lend it to you.
Phil: That ought to do the trick, Liz.
Liz: When can we get together?
Phil: How about next Monday night?
Liz: Right on, Phil.

If this dialogue can be presented with pictures, all the better. The book *Illustrated American Idioms* (Curry 1989) illustrates each of its idioms with a letter-size, black and white drawing which can either be held up for the class to see or be used on an OHP.

Explanation: Meaning, usage, grammar

We come to the explanation of the idioms underlined in the dialogue. Even though the idioms may have more than one sense, it is pedagogical to teach only one sense, that used in the dialogue. There will be several abbreviations used to facilitate the use of this section: *inf*: informal, *for*: formal, *sl*: slang, *cl*: cliché, *vph*: verbal phrase, *phv*: phrasal verb, *adjph*: adjectival phrase, *sep*: separable, *insep*, inseparable. The order followed in this section will be meaning of idiom, grammatical description, usage label, and intonation marks when necessary.

1. *feel iffy about*: to be doubtful, unsure; vph, inf.
2. *feel down at the mouth*: to feel sad, discouraged, dejected; vph, inf.
3. *get something through your head*: understand, learn; vph, insep, inf
4. *oh, come on*: to show displeasure or disapproval; exclamation, phv, insep, inf.
5. *get with it*: to pay attention, be alive or alert; command form, vph, insep, sl.
6. *make up your mind*: to come to a decision; phr, sep, inf.
7. *get something down pat*: to learn very well; vph, sep, inf.
8. *no way*: absolutely not, impossible; adverb phrase (used after a statement) sl.

9. *give me a hand*: to help; vph, inf.
10. *out of this world*: wonderful, satisfactory; adjph, sl, cl.
11. *do the trick*: to have a desired result; vph, inf.
12. *get together*: to meet, come together; vph, inf.
13. *how about*: what do you think of ____?; IWQ, inf.
14. *right on*: animated approval, that's correct, satisfactory; adjph, sl, inf.

Ten ways to practice idioms

1. *Definition correspondence*. Use one of the idioms in the dialogue to answer the following questions:

- a. Do you feel sad about the grade you got on the math exam?
- b. Can't you understand these idioms?
- c. What do you think of this book I found on idioms?

2. *Sentence completion*. Complete the following sentences with one of the above idioms:

- a. I think that compact discs are _____.
- b. I need some help with my English. Can you _____?
- c. You're going to lend me \$20,000, aren't you? _____?

3. *Choosing situations*. Which of the following situations makes you feel *down in the mouth*?

- a. Going on a trip.
- b. Knowing that your parents are going to get a divorce.
- c. Thinking about your new girl/boyfriend.

4. *What will do the trick?* Consider the following situations and then think of a sentence ending with *will do the trick*. Begin your sentence with a special instrument or action with the -ing form of the verb.

- a. How can I get rid of this splitting headache?
- b. I can't read this small print.
- c. How can I eat this wonderful mango?

5. *Making comments*. The following statements contain idioms. Comment about each statement without using an idiom in your comment.

- a. I'm worried about my daughter. She feels iffy about her job.
- b. Oh, come on. Don't feel so disappointed about losing all that money.
- c. I'll give you a hand with your new computer.

6. *Answering with no way*. In which of the following situations would it be possible to answer with *no way*? Give a reason for your answer.

- a. I'd like to give you a watch for your birthday.
- b. At the end of this class you will have a test on these idioms which will last one hour.
- c. Jack met Liz last week and he wants to marry her next month.

7. *Missing parts.* Choose the appropriate word or words from the above idioms to fill the blank spaces.

- a. Now, come _____. Get _____.
- b. I'd like to _____ you _____, but I can't.
- c. I can't _____ my _____ where to go on my vacation.

8. *Classification.* Find the right idioms for each of the following classifications:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| a. disapproval, disgust, displeasure | d. learning very well. |
| b. complete satisfaction, agreement | e. willingness to help |
| c. inability to learn | f. indecision |
| g. marvelous, fantastic, wonderful | |

9. *Spanish equivalents:* what equivalents are there for the following idioms in Spanish?

- a. *How about* coming to my house next Saturday to practice English?
- b. Let's *get together* for a cup of coffee sometime.
- c. Showing patience and understanding to your students ought to *do the trick*.
- d. I *can't make up my mind* about marrying Sara or Jessica.

10. *Creativity.* Form a team of four classmates and create your own dialogue, skit or paragraph using the above idioms or any others.

Conclusion

The idea for this paper has been to inspire teachers to learn and teach idioms since they are so commonly used in everyday life. Many examples of idioms have been given as well as a definition, ways to classify them, a dialogue illustrating their use, explanations and ten exercises for practicing them.

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