

Idioms Are Always Easier in Somebody Else’s Class

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Teachers have always found teaching idioms both challenging and demanding. The world of idioms demands the study of the language from a level that goes beyond the literal meaning of words or chunks. This study maximizes the use of thinking strategies that help students guess the hidden meaning of idioms.

From the least creative activity of rote memorization to the most creative one, these activities help students develop higher-order thinking activities to help them learn in an active and motivating way the many idioms that shape the English language.

Idioms are fixed phrases with meanings that are not generally easy to guess or infer from their individual components. Because of this, it is not advisable to change an idiomatic expression syntactically; a literal translation is hard to comprehend. In an idiom, if a word is substituted for its synonym, it does not make another idiom—to arrive at another idiom, we need to explore the language in depth. However, we can “play with the language to gain a bigger linguistic repertoire. Teachers need to find and create activities which in one way or another help them “kill two birds with one stone.”

Here are some activities which have proven successful in many groups and levels. Some of them focus on the meaning of idioms and proverbs, fixed collocations, and expressions. It is important to bear in mind that the real usage of idioms becomes clear in the best corpora, which give authentic and relevant data to provide both informed feedback to students and help the teacher make decisions to develop idiomatic competence.

All the activities suggested can be used for presentation, recycling and revision.

A definite taxonomy of idioms is impossible. We find criteria based on the form, the meaning and usage, all of which are pertinent and mingle to help teachers create a battery of activities to help students learn idioms successfully. The activities shown here are a small sample, and act as a basis or starting point for you to create your own, more extensive activities. The concept of “chunking” that students get and need from studying Pairs of Nouns, Collective Noun Phrases, and possibly Pairs of Adjectives and Compound Adjectives is a “warming-up” toward understanding idioms.

Idioms: Pairs of Adjectives

Solve these anagrams.

CATINNIE and **NMDROE**

ROF TEBTER or **ROF ESWRO**

Idioms: Pairs of Nouns

Circle the correct option.

Bed and Breakfast / Breakfast and Bed

Friend or Foe / Foe or Friend

Soul and Heart / Heart and Soul

Earth and Heaven / Heaven and Earth

Idioms: Collective Noun Phrases

Fill in the sentences with the words in the box.

**School Colony Herd Swarm Drove
Litter Pack Flock Flight**

1. A _____ of ants
2. A _____ of cattle
3. A _____ of birds
4. A _____ of sheep
5. A _____ of pigs
6. A _____ of puppies
7. A _____ of wolves
8. A _____ of bees
9. A _____ of dolphins

Idioms: Compound Adjectives

These adjectives are always made up of hyphenated words. Here are two typical examples in current use.

_____ driver.

_____ job.

Idioms: Adjectives and Noun phrases

Match the two halves.

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1. An iron | A. Blanket |
| 2. Second | B. Tale |
| 3. An ivory | C. Tower |
| 4. A tall | D. Thoughts |
| 5. A wet | E. Will |

Noun Phrases

Finish these noun phrases.

1. A bolt from _____
2. A bull in a _____
3. A cuckoo _____
4. A feather _____

Idioms From Special Categories

Colours

Find expressions that contain colours.

<u>Red</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Blue</u>	<u>Black</u>

[You can also focus on categories such as parts of the body, animals, and food items]

Origins of Idioms

A very important element is to provide students with roots so they can understand the origin of idioms. This semantic approach has opened students' minds to this topic. The data below have been adapted from the bibliography suggested. This activity is preceded by other activities; as with matching idiom meanings, here you can provide origins for famous idioms and check comprehension and retention afterward.

In the next pair-work activity, students are asked to use their prior knowledge to fill in the table below. In a second step, after sharing their attempt with the rest of the pairs, they can be asked to check their work against information that can be obtained online or in selected reference books. (See references below for books and link.) All text provided below, in the Origin and Meaning columns, is from Terban (1998).

IDIOM	ORIGIN	MEANING
Every cloud has a silver lining.		There is something good in every bad situation.
Gild the lily.	William Shakespeare used a similar expression in his play "King John." "To gild refined gold, to paint the lily...is wasteful and ridiculous excess." Over the years, the saying got shortened to just "gild the lily." <i>Gild</i> means to cover with a thick layer of gold.	

	Why did Shakespeare use a lily? Because it is already a beautiful flower and covering it with gold to make it more beautiful would be unnecessary.	
Go fly a kite.		Go away, leave, stop bothering me!
It's Greek to me.	William Shakespeare used this phrase in his play, "Julius Caesar." In the play, which takes place in 44 BC, a Roman who spoke only Latin said that he had heard another man speaking Greek, but he could not understand what he was saying.	
Head and shoulders above someone.		Far superior, much better than.
Head over heels in love.	This expression goes back to the ancient Romans and means that being in love with someone makes one's emotions topsy-turvy, upside-down.	
Hit the jackpot.		To be very lucky, to achieve amazing success.
It takes two to tango.	In the 1920s, tango, a dance style, became popular in the United States, and so did this expression. Just as it takes two dancers to do the tango, there are certain activities that need the cooperation of two people in order to work.	
Keep up with the Joneses.	In 1913, a popular comic strip called "Keeping Up With the Joneses" appeared in many American newspapers, starting with <i>The New York Globe</i> . The cartoon was about the	

	<p>experiences of a newly-married young man, and the cartoonist based it on his own life. He chose the name Jones because it was a popular name in America. The name of the comic strip became a popular expression that meant to try hard to follow the latest fashion and live in the style of those around you.</p>	
Kick the bucket.		To die.
Kill two birds with one stone.		To do two things by one action, to get two results by just one effort.
Let the cat out of the bag.	<p>Centuries ago in England, you might have bought a costly pig at a farmer's market. But, if the merchant was dishonest and put a worthless cat into the bag instead of a piglet, you might not find out until you got home and let the cat out of the bag. (Related expressions : buy a pig in a poke, spill the beans.)</p>	
Mad as a hatter.		Completely crazy, strange, eccentric.
Pull your leg.	<p>In the late 1800s, people sometimes tripped other people by catching their legs with a cane or running a string across the sidewalk. Sometimes it was just for fun, at other times robbers did it to steal from the victim after he or she had fallen.</p>	
Raining cats and dogs.		To rain heavily.

Using Online Videos to Teach Idioms

There are hundreds of excellent video clips on YouTube and Vimeo either by teachers or as students' projects which provide an impeccable source of informative input to study useful idioms.

Here are some links to a few of them:

[Confessions of an Idiom](#)

[Idioms to express happiness in English — Free Advance English lesson](#)

[Animal Idioms Song](#)

[That's What Makes an Idiom!](#)

[Learn English - Most Common Idioms in English \[English Conversation\]](#)

We invite you to try these activities as they foster a process of exploration through certainties and seminal doubts. And since we started this article by paraphrasing the proverb “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence,” meaning things seem to be better everywhere else but where you are, we have decided to wrap it up hoping that, when you try some of these activities, idioms will become “greener” on your side of the fence, too!

References

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