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Teaching Idioms – How, Why and to Whom?

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Abstract

Teaching Idioms – Why, How and to Whom? aims at taking a closer look at the problem of understanding what idioms are and how important they can be – if that should be the case – in acquiring a more native-like language competence. The main purpose of this paper is to offer teachers a new perspective on idioms, making suggestions on how to teach them and to whom (especially in as far as the age of the learners is concerned), based on a teaching experience that stretches over more than two decades.

Keywords: *Idiom Teaching, Native-Like Idiom Use, Competence Level*

Teaching Idioms – How, Why and to Whom?

What are idioms? How present are they in a language? Idioms are those expressions which add color to speech. They do not add any new meaning, they do not change the meaning of a sentence and they do not make passing the message in a more difficult way... *unless that expression is unknown to us*. Hence, the main goal of teaching idioms to learners of English is to make them understand any message written or spoken in a native-like English.

But, are idioms so wide-spread that whoever learns English and hopes to have the chance to talk to native speakers, has to learn them? Many researches gave an affirmative answer to this question. Dixon (2004), for example, states that “(...) *the use of idioms is so widespread that understanding these expressions is essential to successful communication (...)*” (Dixon, 2004: IX). Other arguments can be found in Huston and Francis (2000): “*most language is composed of prefabricated strings*” (Huston and Francis, 2000: 271, in Dumitraşcu 2009: 388), and in

Dumitraşcu (2009) – “*storing lexical patterns is accepted to have a long-term result for the learners, i.e. it ensures their fluency and accuracy in the foreign language.*” (id. *ibid.*)

Idioms are definitely *prefabricated strings*, and not knowing them may not prevent someone from passing a message in English, using just simple words, not grouped as expressions, but it will definitely prevent anyone from understanding real-life English.

Are learners aware of the fact that idioms will help them speak a foreign language better? If so, are they willing to go the extra mile and learn those complex expressions? Kramersch (1998) made a very interesting observation in this respect:

Language learners, keen on slipping into someone else's shoes by learning their language, attach great importance to the cultural authenticity of French bread or German train schedule, and the cultural appropriateness of Japanese salutations and Chinese greeting ceremonies. Their desire to learn the language of others is often coupled with a desire to behave and think like them, in order to ultimately be recognized and validated by them. (Kramersch, 1998: 80)

All the researchers in this field agree that idioms bear the mark of the socio-cultural space in which were created by the people living there. For instance, proverbs are considered to be samples of the wisdom of the people who created them. They represent the way people think, their mentality, their history and their level of understanding the world. A successful learner of any foreign language is the one who learns the culture behind that foreign language. When a learner of English, for example, starts using, in a natural way, expressions specific only to the English language, that learner may be said to have found the Holy Grail: in this case the ability to think in English.

Defining idioms

Before starting to teach idioms, teachers must decide which of those *prefabricated strings* are idioms, and which are not. This must be done because teaching and practicing, for example, phrasal verbs, is different from teaching collocations or similes. Is this an easy task? Not really, but once teachers makes up his mind, everything gets easier.

There is no perfect harmony among the linguists who have tried to give a very clear definition to the fixed phrases known as “idioms”. Hence, many dictionaries and books on idioms, whose authors were afraid to miss something, include phrasal verbs, similes, clichés, collocations, idioms and proverbs under in the class of “idioms.” But are all phrasal verbs, all clichés, all similes, all collocations and all proverbs idioms? If they are, then we are facing something similar to ”mission: impossible.” This is the moment when one must listen to the important voices of the specialists in the field. According to some specialists, an idiom is “*a group of words which has a different meaning from the sum of its parts.*” (Cullen, Hands, McGovern& Wright, 2000: iii), idioms “*should be made of at least two words and the meaning of an idiom is not predictable from its component parts, which are empty of their usual senses.*” (Makkai, 1972: 122, 118, in Fernando, 1996: 4) and an idiom is defined as “*a group of words which has a special meaning that is different*

from the ordinary meaning of each separate word. e.g. under the weather - ill." (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2003)

Based on the definitions above and on my personal observations, the working definition selected for the present paper is: an idiom is a group of words, never only one word, whose meaning is different from the literal meaning of the sum of the words making it and also from each word taken separately.

How and to whom can English idioms be taught?

Explaining an idiom and then finding an equivalent of that idiom in the target language (TL) (if available) is one thing, but making students remember the idioms in the SL for a longer period of time is *another meal of fish*. With this Romanian idiom – *another meal of fish* – translated word for word into English, I caught your attention and I gave you a little shock, didn't I? I am sure that you will remember this idiom for a longer period of time, now. Maybe you have already guessed what it means: *something else, something that is different from the rest*. The method to which you have just been exposed to is one of the three main methods I use in order to make my students retain idioms for a longer period of time:

1. *Finding funny pictures on the Internet to exemplify the idiom.* The Internet offers funny pictures or even funny videos in which the idioms are taken literally. Show them to your students. They will have fun and, at the same time, they will retain them more easily.
2. *"Shocking" the students by leaving them guess the meaning and then showing them how far they were from the actual meaning*
3. *Telling them the stories behind the idioms. Etymology helps, especially if the story behind the idiom is funny or interesting, and many are.* The disadvantage of this method is that not all the idioms have stories known to us behind them.

Quite a few numbers of idioms are close to the literary meaning, such as: "I'll keep my eye on you", where it is fairly easy to understand that you will be watched carefully, or "I bit off more than I can chew", where it is easy to understand that the person who says that exaggerated in some respect, but how can we make students memorize idioms such as "to feel a bit under the weather"? The word "weather" makes us, native or non-native speakers of English, think that maybe the person who feels "under the weather" is influenced by the weather and, maybe, it is a rainy day and that person feels sad or blue. It can also be the opposite: a sunny day, which makes the one who feels "under the weather" happy. Is this the right meaning of the idiom? Not at all. The idiom means "to feel sick" and it comes from the age when the captains of the sail vessels had to write down, among other things, two things in the journal: the sick people and the weather. Sometimes, there were so many sick people (during epidemic times) that some of the names had to be written under "weather." So, how do you make students remember such an idiom for a longer period of time, or forever? Explaining idioms is not the most difficult part in teaching them. Teaching also implies making students memorize idioms and then using them consciously.

Every teacher knows that the easiest thing to do, when teaching new words or expressions, is to be able to recognize and translate them into the students' own language. When it comes to

using them independently, i.e. remembering them in their form and meaning, things can get more difficult. The most successful students will remember half of the idioms after understanding them. Hence, practicing idioms is required.

Over the years I have found out that the best methods for teaching idioms are the entertaining ones. Playing games while practicing idioms is both funny and efficient. Here are some suggestions:

1. Charade

Everybody knows this game. It is usually played with single words, but it works with idioms, too. The only thing that the teacher must do is to carefully select the idioms which are to be used in the game, as there are a number of idioms almost impossible to mime. Not entirely impossible, but the younger the students are, the more difficult it gets for them to think of a way in which they can mime “the lights are on but there is nobody home”, for example. Imagine how difficult it can be for the members of the team who have to guess the idiom!

After selecting a series of relevant idioms, they can be displayed on a projection screen or simply written on the board. It may take some time to write all of them down (for the game to be more exciting, more than 15 idioms are needed), but it will be worth the effort. Then, enjoy being a judge!

Suggested idioms which are easy to mime and can be taken into account for this teaching method are: *keep an eye out*, *keep the eyes on someone*, *shooting fish in the barrel*, *fishing for compliments*, *the elevator does not go all the way to the top*, *beat around the bush*, *bite more than one can chew*, *cost an arm and a leg*, *cry over the spilt milk*, *hit the nail on the head*, *let the cat out of the bag*, *pull the wool over someone’s eyes* etc.

2. Using props to suggest idioms

For this method, the teacher needs objects mentioned in the idioms which need to be practiced, or pictures of the words (cards). The “Guess the idiom” game can be played taking the students one by one (recommended only for small groups) or by teams. If the teacher shows the student whose turn is the picture of a stone and two birds, the student is expected to say “kill two birds with one stone”. By showing the student the picture of a car with no driver (and we suggest that the car be moving), we will get (fortunately) this answer: “the engine is running, but there is nobody behind the wheel.” A picture with a screw loose will be exactly what it shows (“to have a screw loose”), a picture with a can of drink will be “a can shy/short of a six pack” and so on.

3. Rewriting a text using idioms

This is for the more advanced students, who also need to work on their writing skill. The texts are not difficult to make. First, write a text with lots of idioms and then replace them with synonyms represented by regular words. For example, “My neighbor blew a fuse when I told him that I did not see eye to eye with him” becomes “My neighbor *got very angry* when I told him that I *did not agree* with him.” The students must replace the words written in italics with idioms. Many of them

will get the original variant, but some of them may say “My neighbor *blew his top*”, which is not a mistake.

Lewis (2000: 19) suggests that collocations may be more easily remembered and more safely translated if teachers guide their learners to preserve something of the context and to keep recorded lexical chunks that are as large as possible. For example, a sentence such as: *I have been searching high and low for a man like you*, when uttered in a certain context, is more likely to be remembered by learners, than the phrase *to search high and low*. (Dumitraşcu, 2009: 389)

Absolutely true! Presenting idioms in context is not only one of the best classic ways to teach idioms and to make students retain them for a longer time, but it is – or, at least, it should be – compulsory to do after translating idioms word for word, explaining them and then finding the equivalent in the TL. An idiom without a context can be explained and understood. It can even be memorized, but it will be lifeless, therefore not appealing.

Woolard (2000) suggests learners may become aware of collocations if teachers intentionally use mis-collocations. Such an approach will help learners understand that “*learning vocabulary is not just learning new words, it is often learning familiar words in new combinations*” (Woolard, 2000: 30 in Dumitraşcu, 2009: 390). Moreover, Hill (2000) thinks that students may become aware of collocation if they are guided to notice collocations, on the one hand, and to find further examples of collocational patterns, on the other. (Hill, 2000 in id. *ibid.*)

This method can be applied while teaching proverbs, since proverbs are more complex collocations. As a matter of fact, teaching is not a good word when it comes to proverbs. Presenting them and making students remember them is what should happen in class. The following method is both funny and efficient: giving half the proverb to the students and let them continue. The results can be hilarious and, after having fun with the entire class, they will certainly remember the proverbs for a longer period of time, including what their classmates said. The most famous examples can be found on several sites. These examples were taken from http://msgboard.snopes.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=9;t=002142;p=0, where six-year olds were asked to finish a series of common proverbs. Here are some of the results: Don't change the horses... *before they stop running.*; Strike while... *the bug is close.*; Don't bite the hand that... *looks dirty.*; You can't teach an old dog new... *math*. Where's there's smoke, there's... *pollution*. You get out of something only what you... *see in the picture on the box*.

Funny as they may be, they show one thing: children do not think in metaphors. This statement leads to a question whose answer is given later in the present paper: can children understand metaphors? If they cannot, should we teach six-year olds idioms?

It is well-known that expressions, proverbs, words in general will not be remembered if presented and used only once. People learn their own language after hearing the same words repeated thousands of times. Learning a foreign language is like being born again, in a different language. It takes time, effort, and constancy. Repeating the same words every day will lead to memorizing them, but the repetition should be put into practice by creating, every time, different contexts in which the words or the structures are used.

In order to do this, teachers should constantly ‘recycle’ collocations by means of specially designed grids and vocabulary exercises, as well as by producing numerous illustrative sentences and collocation games designed for each group of selected collocations. In addition, teachers should guide learners to record fixed lexical patterns in special lexical notebooks. If lexical notebooks are organized according to grammatical criteria, to the key words or to the topic, collocations may be more easily revised and retrieved by learners. (Dumitraşcu, 2009: 392)

One other very good way to make learners retain idioms is by using fragments of speeches given by real people and today’s technology makes it easy as pie. Just write “speeches” in the search bar on *youtube* and you will have a lot of them, but you still have to listen to and select those fragments in which real people use idioms. Or you can type “idioms in movies” and they are already selected for you. This one is very good, if it is still there: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgBDSb7G6cs&list=PLHnecZpGk8xNruwBytumRCCfEM3Oxagey>. If you really want to have fun, type “idioms taken literally” and let the magic begin.

To whom?

How early in the English-learning life of a learner should we introduce idioms? Of course, there are voices who say that the level of the students must be at least intermediate and there are voices who say that they should be introduced early. Who is right and who is wrong? I would say that both groups are right. Yes, indeed, a learner must be experienced enough in his own language to make the distinction between the literal meaning of a lexical structure and the figurative meaning of an idiom. Little children tend to take everything literally, so, from this point of view, the first group of voices is right. The second group is also right, but there is a condition: the learners, although beginners, must grasp idioms in their own language, which means that they have to be experienced enough in their language so that they can understand idioms in another language.

“If we are to take a technical approach to language teaching it is clear that some of these sentences, grouped and chosen for archetypicality, must be introduced relatively early in the language programme.” (Lewis, 2002: 100). It is well-known that young children take things literally. Therefore the quote above refers to beginners, and not to little children who have just started learning English because, to them, when a character in a movie dies, the actor dies too. They do not get metaphors. There are a lot of short videos on *youtube* to illustrate this. For instance, when asked to keep an eye on the ball, children of different ages literally put their eyes on the ball. It is amusing, but not for a teacher of English who wants to teach children idioms. *“Traditionally, picturesque idioms have been seen as appropriate for relatively advanced students – a sophistication, marginal to the serious business of mastering the central grammatical system.”* (Dumitraşcu, 2009: 98)

Idioms have different degrees of picturesque and it has been noticed that the more picturesque an idiom is, the more difficult it is to decode it, even for adult native speakers of English. In one of her shows, Ellen Degeneres invited Hugh Laurie (alias Dr. House) and made an exchange of British and American idioms. Many times they were not able to guess the meaning of the idioms the other was bringing into attention. For example, *to chin wag* or *to have a chin wag*. Ellen

Degeneres did not know the meaning of this idioms which means "to have a chit-chat". The image results from the literal meaning of this: to wag the chin. When people talk, they move their chins up and down, therefore wagging them. As a matter of fact, the two interlocutors did not guess the meaning of any of the idioms *chin wag*, *ba-donka-dong*, *chuffed to bits*. There were three more words, but they cannot be considered idioms according to the working definition selected for this article.

'He was running like a headless chicken' is a graphic image and thus comparatively easy to understand (...). What makes it an idiom is that it is non-literal and rigidly fixed – it is not a reference to chickens and a headless duck or goose does not qualify as 'correct' English. (Lewis, 2002b: 37)

Lewis (2002b) states that a teacher cannot make sure that students will retain and, later, use the fixed expressions chosen to be taught in class. What a teacher can do, he follows, is to make sure that the fixed expressions are somehow grouped so they can be more easily retained. Also, he finds that showing the students the equivalent expression in their mother tongue can be useful.

Finding equivalents of English fixed expressions, including idioms, in one's language is useful, but I do not think that it helps students memorize English idioms faster or for a longer period of time. The equivalent may help learners understand the meaning of an English idiom, but what really helps them retain it, maybe for the rest of their lives, is to translate it word for word in their own language. It is what I named here the "shock and rock" method. When the teacher produces a shock, "rocking" the students' life a bit by exposing them to a word-for-word translation, the period of time in which they will remember the idiom becomes a lot longer. Just like this principle of the journalism says – a dog bit a man is not news, but a man bit a dog is – the "news" that *the engine is running but there is nobody behind the wheels* comes as a shock for the students in whose language this idiom does not exist. The image of a car out of control must be at least impressive if not shocking. If there is a word-for-word similar idiom in their mother tongue, then remembering it is not a problem since all they have to do is to replace the word in their language with their English equivalents.

Being a non-native speaker of English myself, I know first-hand that finding the cultural equivalent of English idioms in my language does not help me remember them. On the contrary, I might say.

What age should students be to be taught idioms?

First of all, knowing idioms is not vital for the ones who want to be able to have a normal conversation in English, but if you are to teach idioms, as part of a project or because you want to give your students more chances to sound native-like, then those students must be old or linguistically experienced enough to understand images, metaphors, because this is what idioms are. Young students take everything literally, so teaching them idioms is not only useless, but it can do more harm than well.

Another reason for which young students should not be exposed to idioms is that the majority of the idioms is negative, on the dark side of metaphors, and is used when we want to be ironic, sarcastic or to insult. Children are not able to handle those things.

In Chapter 4 of his study, Lewis (2002b) "spills the beans" and reveals one of the main reasons for which using translations in classroom has had such a bad name in the last decades: money. Publishers prefer books which can be sold in more than one country (in every country, if possible), and adapting those books for each country would have been impossible, or would have generated supplementary costs on the part of the editor (Lewis, 2002b: 61). But is translating from L2 to L1 a good method to teach? I personally use my own language when I teach young students, especially when I want to explain something, but I encourage them, at the same time, to think in English and to understand that, for example, to ride a bicycle is the right thing to... think of this activity, and not "to walk on the bike" as it is, in a word-for-word translation, in Romanian. I have always militated for equilibrium between the two methods: teaching English as L1 and teaching it as L2, using translations and Romanian equivalent expressions. When it comes to teaching idioms, though, I do not encourage them to find the cultural equivalent in Romanian until they translate the English idiom word-for-word, and perceive it as a new and funny reality (somebody with a screw loose is funny, and so are the images of somebody barking at the wrong tree, beating around the bush or crying over the spilt milk), allow them to be a little shocked (in a good way). Only after these two stages do I explain the meaning of the selected idiom(s) in English. In other words, firstly I make sure that students know what the English idiom means and that they have already had fun with it, hence increasing the chances to be retained for a longer period of time, and only later I ask them to find the Romanian equivalent. If they do not know it, I tell them what the equivalent is, if there is any.

Every teacher should know their students and should have their own signs telling them when the right time to teach idioms is. There are many signs, but one of them works every time. I have named it

The case of "Big deal"! vs. "Big cheese!"

I personally start teaching idioms when my students feel the need to use idioms in their everyday speech. Every year there is one student or even more who, trying to show off with what they have already acquired English-wise, they speak English to their classmates, even during recess, and use Romanian idioms which they translate word-for-word into English. The most common one is "Big cheese!" when they mean "Big deal!" because the Romanian equivalent for "big deal" is "big cheese". That is the moment when I tell them that a native speaker of English would not understand what they mean by "big cheese" because they use different expressions. Then I give them more examples of idioms which have cultural equivalents in Romanian, but are made up of different words. They have fun and they show a great interest in learning new English idioms because – as it happens everywhere in the world – they want to show off even more.

Exposing them to the English idioms and showing them the fact that the two languages choose different images to express the same thing has a double effect: they retain the idioms much longer

and they understand the fact that thinking in English is the right way to do when speaking English. They become aware of the fact that “a piece of cake” represents in English what “a flower behind the ear” represents in Romanian. They even have fun translating the English idioms word-for-word into Romanian, and I encourage this because this is the way they become fully aware of the differences between the two cultures and because, well, I have as much fun as they do when I hear them translated like that.

One of the most important roles played by the idioms, and consequently by teaching idioms, is demonstrating the students how wrong it is, more often than not, to think in their mother tongue and to try, afterwards, to translate their thoughts into English. The most frequent mistake learners can make is exactly this: to think in their mother tongue when they have to speak in a different language. I always tell my students that this process is called “translating” and that the job of a translator is one of the most difficult jobs in this world. Translators must be experts in at least two languages: the SL and the TL.

Conclusions

Idioms are prefabricated chunks of language which make a speaker sound more natural. Knowing them is more important for understanding the language spoken by a native speaker than for creating meaningful speeches. One can communicate efficiently without using idioms, but communicating efficiently is only one side of using a language properly. The other side is communicating in an artistic way, and idioms are perfect for that, being metaphors. We all applauded the apparition of the color movies and, after that, color television, why not applauding adding color to a text by using idioms? I always smile when I hear that someone is “happy as a puppy with two tails”, but I do not smile (although I am happy for that someone) when I hear that someone is very or extremely happy.

Teaching idioms to children should start when the teacher notices that they try to introduce idioms in English by translating idioms in their mother tongue. That tendency shows that they understand metaphors and that they are ready to learn the metaphors specific to other languages.

Translating English idioms word-for-word into their mother tongue, letting them guess their meaning and having fun while doing these two activities and turning the teaching or the practice sequences into games definitely help students memorize idioms for a longer period of time. Finding the equivalent of the already-presented English idioms should come after the fun parts mentioned above.

Last, but not least, children should be taught those idioms from which they can learn something and which come in the form of a very short story: proverbs. Due to their qualities – teaching a life lesson, being very concise and drawing a picture with words – proverbs are, almost paradoxically, the first idioms with which children should start learning – by means of ricochet – about the culture of the people whose language they have to learn. “It is the early bird that catches the worm” is more appropriate to teach to a 9 year-old student than “chew someone out”, even though children are still severely “chewed out” in some cultures, for every little mistake.

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