

# Using Ready-Made Materials for Teaching Idioms

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## Abstract

Because idioms are omnipresent in the authentic language students are exposed to, to successfully comprehend and produce natural language, learners of a second or foreign language need to possess a good knowledge of idioms and competence in idiom use. This paper examines the approaches to teaching and learning idioms. A discussion of the importance of idioms in language proficiency will first be carried out. Several different definitions of idioms will be presented, and typical characteristics of idioms will be provided. How idioms differ from idiomaticity and proverbs will too be pointed out. In addition, various types of idioms will be identified. Approaches to idiom instruction and strategies for idiom acquisition will be surveyed, respectively. Finally, materials for idioms learning and teaching will be reviewed in order to assist classroom teachers to effectively design idiom lessons as well as to teach idioms in a fun and interesting manner. This paper is of special relevance to foreign and second language classroom practitioners who are interested in developing learners' idiomatic language comprehension and production.

Idioms have long been regarded as one of the important aspects of language proficiency. Due to their significant role in language competency, idioms have been a subject of investigation in the study of language. Cornell (1999), in effect, postulated that whether in linguistics or language acquisition, idioms have always been a necessary part of the study of language. In 1984, Bromley stated that idioms enjoy widespread utilization among speakers of every language all over the world. Familiarity with the idioms commonly used in everyday language “can be a great asset to learners in acquiring a new language” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 39). Yorio (1989) noted that it appears that whereas fluency is possible without grammatical accuracy, idiomaticity is not. Therefore, as this author argued, idiomaticity is an excellent indicator of bilingual system proficiency. Fernando (1996) even claimed that translators and language teachers cannot afford to ignore idioms or idiomaticity if a natural use of the target language is an aim. Similarly, Wray (2000) pointed out that one crucial component of successful language acquisition is the mastery of idiomatic forms of expression, including idioms, collocations, and sentence frames. In the same vein, citing Fernando (1996), Schmitt (2000), and Wray (2000), Simpson and Mendis (2003) stated that a mastery of idioms is usually equated with native speaker fluency. Simpson and Mendis went on to point out the difficulty teachers and materials writers face regarding making principled decisions about which idioms should be taught, given the fact that the inventory of idioms in a native speaker’s repertoire is vast. According to Johnson-Laird (1993), one of the reasons for the importance of idioms is that they are pervasive, because even in explaining the meaning of an idiom, one can find to his or her expense that he or she is using another idiom. Johnson-Laird also indicated that whereas idioms are transparent for native speakers, they are of perplexity to those who learn a second language. Despite the challenges that idioms present, the issue of second language idiom learning and

teaching has not received adequate attention (Liu, 2008). Along the same line, Irujo (1986) observed that idioms are usually left out of speech addressed to second language learners. Since idioms have been widely accepted as a crucial element in language proficiency, learners of a second language do need to be exposed to idioms so as to acquire them better for their second language comprehension and production. Moreover, the issue of idiom instruction and acquisition also needs to be examined to assist both learners and teachers in their learning and instructional activities.

Prior to further discussion of teaching idioms, it is noteworthy to look into some definitions of idioms. The study of idioms requires different viewpoints and methodological approaches, because idioms are multifaceted objects (Tabossi & Zardon, 1993). What constitutes an idiom is often a decision at the discretion of the researcher (Liu, 2003). Simpson and Mendis (2003) posited that mentioning the word idioms conjures up language that is perceived to be entertaining, engaging, casual, charming, colorful, and memorable. As Simpson and Mendis put it, an idiom is a group of words occurring in a more or less fixed phrase and whose overall meaning cannot be predicted by analyzing the meaning of its constituent parts. Bromley (1984) defined idioms as figurative expressions that represent one concept in terms of another that may be thought of as analogous. Carter (1987) saw idioms as restricted collocations that cannot be understood from the literal meaning of the words that make them up. In a similar way, Huizenga (2000) considered an idiom as a group of words having a meaning different from the meaning of its individual parts. In the same fashion, Feare (1980) stated that an idiom, in general, is an expression that has a special meaning, and this meaning cannot be understood completely by looking at the individual words in the idiom. Idioms are not only lexemes which capture everyday situations semantically, but they are linguistic units that deduce the complexity of

social interactions; idioms contain information, and they also provide a method of handling special situations (Strässler, 1982). Fernando (1996) deemed idioms as “indivisible units whose components cannot be varied and varied only within definable units” (p. 30). As Wood (1986) saw it, an idiom is “a complex expression which is wholly non-compositional in meaning and wholly non-productive in form” (p. 2). Nattinger and Decarrico (1992, p. 33) defined idioms as “complex bits of frozen syntax whose meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of their constituents, that is, whose meanings are more than simply the sum of their individual parts”. According to Moon (1998), “Idiom is an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways” (p. 3). An idiom is also “any defined unit whose definition does not predict all of its properties” (Williams, 1994, p.8). In addition, Seidl and McMordie (1988) stated that an idiom is “a number of words which, when taken together, have a different meaning from the individual meanings of each word” (p. 13). Schmitt and Carter (2004) observed that meaning of idioms cannot be derived from the sum of the meanings of the component words, and that idioms do not always follow grammatical rules. Chafe (1968, as cited in Lennon, 1998) presented the characteristics of idioms as follows.

1. The meaning of an idiom is comparable to the meaning of a single lexical item.
2. Most, if not all, idioms exhibit certain transformational deficiencies.
3. A minority of idioms may be grammatically deviant.
4. The idiom may admit of a literal meaning, but the idiomatic meaning will be primary and occur more frequently.

Lennon (1998) suggested that there is a distinction of degree between idiomatic language and idioms. As Lennon further noted, at the top end of the scale of idiomaticity there are conventionalized combinations of lexical items in a language whose meaning cannot necessarily

be adduced from the sum of their parts. In addition to idiomatic language and idioms, formulaic language or sequence is another commonly used term used in discussion of idiomaticity. Wray (2000) asserted that in recent years there has been a growing interest in targeting formulaic language in second language instruction. Wray (2002) defined the formulaic sequence as follows:

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. (p. 9)

Wray (2002) identified a plethora of terms (nearly 60 terms) utilized to describe aspects of formulaicity. Some examples are formulaic speech, collocation, fixed expressions, idioms, multiword units, and chunks. Schmitt and Carter (2004) noted that “formulaic sequences lie on a continuum of transparency/opaqueness with idioms at the obscure end, but with many sequences being quite transparent at the other end (e.g.: my point is that \_\_\_\_\_)” (p.6). Idioms are one kind of formulaic language which has probably attracted the greatest amount of research (Schmitt, 2010).

A distinction may also be made between idioms and proverbs. For instance, Schmitt and Carter (2004) suggested that whereas idioms are often employed to express a concept (e.g.: put someone out to pasture, meaning retiring someone because he or she is getting old), proverbs typically convey some commonly believed truth or advice (e.g.: the longest journey begins with the first step, meaning that one should not procrastinate but should begin a long process by taking the initial necessary steps).

In terms of typology, Seidl and McMordie (1988) pointed out that there are three kinds of idioms, and that most idioms belong to the second group:

1. Form irregular, meaning clear (e.g., give someone to understand, do someone proud, do the dirty on someone)
2. Form regular, meaning unclear (e.g., have a bee in one's bonnet, cut no ice, bring the house down)
3. Form irregular, meaning unclear (e.g., be at large, go great guns, be at daggers drawn)

Given that idioms are of crucial importance for language learners to fully comprehend and naturally produce the target language, it is necessary to review strategies that have been employed to learn as well as teach idioms. Liu (2008) presented four main strategies learners utilize to understand idioms in another language: (a) use of contextual knowledge, (b) use of the first language, (c) use of pragmatic knowledge or knowledge of the world, and (d) use of cultural knowledge in the first language. The learner's mother tongue may to some extent have a role in learning idioms. In effect, Irujo (1993) postulated that idioms in the second language that have identical equivalents in the native language will be easier to learn. Due to the opaque nature of most idioms, learners often have to make use of the contextual information, first language, knowledge of the world or cultural knowledge in their native language to make sense of the idioms encountered. Unfortunately, nonetheless, such strategies may not appear to be useful all the time. It is usually impossible to guess the meanings of some idioms because idioms may be understood literally or figuratively. Hence, teaching idioms directly to language learners may be of necessity.

Irujo (1993) reasoned that teaching students strategies to cope with figurative language will enable them to take advantage of the semantic transparency of some idioms. According to Irujo, it makes sense to teach the idioms that students want to learn, and teachers may encourage students to learn idioms by asking them to keep notebooks containing idioms encountered outside of class, or the teacher may use idioms students want to learn in teaching activities. In addition, Irujo suggested that an idiom bulletin board could be used for the teacher and students to post examples of idioms they came across in newspapers or any other possible sources.

Richards (1996, as cited in Liu, 2008) set forth two approaches to idiom instruction: a proactive approach and a retroactive approach. Whereas in the former approach the teacher actively looks for idioms to teach to students and make students use them as much as possible, the teacher in the latter approach does not actively teach any idioms but only gives students instruction regarding the idioms they have met and need assistance in comprehension and production. As Liu (2008) indicated, Richards (1996) advocated that in teaching idioms a retroactive approach is preferable to a proactive one, as proactive instruction of idioms often leads students to develop an overzealous drive to use as many idioms as possible, which may lead to idiomatosis or excessive and inappropriate use of idioms. The use of idioms for speakers of any native language is in truth a very personal matter of preference and habit. It is commonplace that some people like to spice up their language very frequently probably because they know a large number of idioms and may want to show them off, while others may rarely use idioms in their speech. The reasons for employing idioms in natural communication may vary, but it seems to be a fact of life. Simpson and Mendis (2003) found that the use of idioms appears to be a feature more of individual speakers' idiolects than of any linguistic or content-related



categories, because whereas some speakers in their corpus employed idioms quite frequently others rarely did.

In contrast to the position held by Richards (1996), Liu (2008) argued that a proactive approach to idiom instruction is justifiable on the following grounds. Firstly, although the overuse and inappropriate use of idioms could be a price students need to pay in learning idioms, making errors and overusing some language structures and expressions has been part of the language learning process. Thus, as Liu continued, the excessive and inappropriate use of idioms is not a good excuse for stopping active idiom instruction. Secondly Liu further stated that if proactive teaching of idioms is conducted cautiously and appropriately, it should not make students overuse idioms inappropriately. Additionally, Liu suggested that during instruction if the teacher ensures that students can clearly understand register and function of the idioms taught, the overuse and inappropriate use of idioms could be significantly reduced. Moreover, he admonished teachers to constantly remind students not to use idioms simply for the sake of using them. In order to raise learner's awareness of idiomatosis, as Liu recommended, the teacher can provide students with speech or writing containing the excessive and inappropriate use of idioms so as to help them avoid such a problem.

In an attempt to identify strategies used to explain idioms, Liu (2000, 2008) found that teachers make use of three strategies to assist students in noticing and understanding idioms: definition, elaboration, and paraphrasing. As Liu further explicated, the teacher using the definition strategy simply provides the meaning of the idiom. An example he provided is as follows: "There are several organizational designs. One is the simple structure. What a simple structure is is like a store, *a Mom and Pop store*. That's an American term. *What we mean is a family-owned business* (italic original)" (Liu, 2008, p. 162). "What we mean is," as Liu noted, is

called a definition marker. Nevertheless, he added that a definition is sometimes given without a definition marker. One example he used is: “It needs someone to, as we say, *grease the wheels*.... *Grease the wheels. Make it operate much smoother* [definition]” (Liu, 2008, p. 163).

In using the elaboration strategy, as Liu (2008) mentioned, the teacher explains the meaning of the idiom by providing information or examples that enable students to better understand it. He illustrated his point by using the following example.

His biography says that he *jaywalked through life*... *jaywalked through life*, you know what the word “jaywalk” means? *It means you wandered around, across the street, not at the corner. You jaywalked through life, wandered around, didn't know what you were doing.* (Liu, 2008, p. 163)

Finally, the teacher who employs the paraphrasing strategy utilizes a different expression that conveys a similar meaning. An example of this strategy is “you gotta *kick them around*, you gotta *tell them what to do*” (Liu, 2008, p. 163).

In addition to strategies for idiom acquisition and instruction, activities designed for teaching and learning idioms are also of importance. Lennon (1998) suggested some kinds of exercises that may be utilized to teach and learn idioms. First, some idioms may be presented to students and students are asked to work in groups to discuss whether there are similar idioms in the students' first language. Second, students may be provided with the idioms coupled with their definitions in which a key word is missing. The key words are also offered so that students can choose the right one to fill in the blank. This kind of exercise, as Lennon noted, is best performed individually. Third, students can be instructed to read a text in which idioms are underlined. Students have to supplant the idioms with language expressing more or less the same meaning.

An example could be “It was raining cats and dogs when I arrived at the airport.” Students are supposed to replace the phrase “raining cats and dogs” with “raining heavily.” Furthermore, students can be given a list of idioms in order to arrange them into pair (near) opposite meaning such as “the more, the merrier” and “too many cooks spoil the broth.” Lennon (1998) recommended that students can be asked to read a text in which many idioms are found and then they are required to utilize the idioms found in the text to fill in another text in which the idioms are used in another context. This type of exercise should be employed with advanced learners, as Lennon suggested.

Materials specifically developed for idioms learning are multifarious. In fact, Liu (2003) observed that “most teaching and reference materials on English idioms are primarily intuition based. As such, they often include seldom-used idioms and incorrect descriptions of the meaning and use of some idioms, hence limiting their usefulness to ESOL students” (Liu, 2003, p. 671). Liu (2003) conducted a corpus study of idioms and he was able to develop four lists of the most frequently used idioms in spoken American English. He argued that idioms to be taught should be selected in a more rigorous and systematic manner and they should be based upon authentic language use rather than upon intuition so as to increase their content representativeness. Further, Liu suggested that when idioms are taught, their use frequency as well as information on idiom variations should be pointed out to the learners so that students’ learning of idioms can be more complete. What Liu indicated is indeed the direction that materials writers and publishers may need to seriously consider when creating textbooks for language learners.

Publications devoted to the teaching of idioms are many. For example, Wu (2008) suggested some practical activities for teaching English idioms. Several books have been created to help learners better acquire idioms. Some typical books currently available for teachers and

learners of idioms are Seidl and McMordie (1988), Broukal (1994), Spears (1994), Francis (2004), Huizenga (2000), and Leaney (2005). Huizenga (2000) focuses on systematically developing learners' knowledge of idioms in English by leading learners through various steps to learning idioms such as reading a text that uses typographical visual enhancement (in bold) to help learners pay attention to the idioms. Learners are also provided with different activities to meet the idioms again by listening to the text, filling the blanks, and talking and writing using the idioms in the text. Broukal (1994), however, organizes idioms according to topics such as colors, food, and numbers. Broukal's book is made up of 20 units and a review section. Each unit is composed of five parts: reading (the idioms are in bold), meanings (the idioms are explained), practice (students answer yes or no to questions containing the idioms and students are given sentences to fill in the blanks or to correct errors with the idioms), conversation (students are supplied with some situations in which the idioms are used and students practice each conversation with another student), and discussion (students are asked to discuss the idioms in the lesson). Leaney (2005) is probably one of the most recent textbooks for idiom learners and teachers, and the audio CD that accompanies the book seems to be especially beneficial to learners' acquisition of second language idioms.

A useful online resource for both teachers and learners of idioms is <http://www.voanews.com/learningenglish/home/words-stories/>. This website may be considered a gold mine for idiom learning and teaching. The idioms are organized and explained by both contextualization and paraphrasing. More importantly, as claimed in the website, all the words used in VOA Special English are within a core vocabulary of 1500 words; short and simple sentences are used, and texts are read at a slower pace, about two-thirds the speed of Standard English. For a native speaker of English, the pace of reading in Special English may be deemed

as “ridiculously slow,” but for those who learn English as an additional language, especially adult learners, the slow pace of reading is not only helpful in the initial period of language acquisition, but it is helpful for advanced learners who wish to improve their pronunciation. This website may be seen as beneficial for language learners in several language areas such as highly frequent vocabulary development (through frequently encountering the core vocabulary), basic grammar mastery (through reading and listening to the texts), and pronunciation improvement and practice (through listening to and repeating after the newsreaders). Particularly, for the teacher, the ready-made texts can be used for classroom activities or they can be adapted to serve other purposes depending on learners’ needs and preferences. The teacher can read the text if the slow pace of reading is not desired. Finally, the texts in the section labeled Words and Their Stories are fun and relatively easy for learners to understand, thus enhancing learners’ motivation to improve their knowledge of idioms, increase their interest in the American culture, and quicken their automaticity in comprehension and production.

The approach used to explained idioms in Words and Their Stories is similar to what Boers, Demecheleer, and Eyckmans (2004) termed etymological elaboration. According to Boers et al., etymological elaboration is the technique of helping learners to comprehend and remember figurative idioms by raising their awareness of the literal origins or source domains of the expressions. These researchers found that etymological elaboration as a strategy for learning idioms has positive effects on learners’ retention of idioms. In fact, telling stories related to the idioms can greatly arouse learners’ curiosity and interest in learning more about idioms. For example, Mikkai (1993) gave a possible historical explanation for the idiom “white elephant” (an unwanted and unmanageable property) as follows.

The king of Siam is said to have disliked a courtier once, and so, in order to punish him, gave him a white elephant as a gift. One must realize, of course, that in ancient Thailand the white elephant was considered a holy animal somewhat as cows still considered in India today. To kill or neglect a white elephant was considered a capital crime. Yet to care for a white elephant properly meant financial ruin. Because the white elephant was a gift from the king, it could not be refused. (Mikkai, 1993, p. 301)

Learning idioms through stories and historical explanation is decidedly a compelling way to commit idioms to memory. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that it is not easy to trace the origins of idioms. Though this approach is interesting and can be very effective for the teaching and learning of idioms, it may not always be used due to the difficulty in finding historical explanation for idioms. Whenever possible, however, historical origins of idioms may be of great interest and fun to teachers as well as learners.

Irujo (1993) remarked that second language teachers would probably agree that even the most advanced students seem to avoid employing idioms and this avoidance might be due to fear of not using the idioms correctly. Therefore, Irujo suggested that students should be exposed to idioms as much as possible so that they do not have to keep clear of idioms. Arguably, avoiding using idioms in daily conversations due to lack of confidence or knowledge of the appropriate idioms does not appear to in any way inhibit effective communication. As previously discussed, the use of idioms in communication is a matter of personal preferences and habits. As such, judging a person's language competency based solely on the frequency and amount of idiom use may not be a fair and highly reliable measure of evaluating language proficiency. However, if the aim of the learner is to use the target language as naturally and comfortably as possible, developing solid knowledge of and competence in comprehending and utilizing highly

frequently used idioms is indeed of great significance. Learning idioms can be viewed as learning the culture of the people speaking the target language. Just as culture is an interesting subject for language learners to explore, learning idioms can also be as interesting as learning culture. It may be a cliché to say that learning an additional language besides one's first language is a long and arduous process, but in fact it is. Learning a new language does not simply involve dealing with grammatical patterns and individual vocabulary words. It also requires the ability to understand and use groups of words that may be used together in an ungrammatical and semantically irregular manner. Idiom acquisition and instruction merit more attention in the language classroom as well as in teacher training sessions. It should not be taken for granted that teachers can teach idioms without special training. In order for the learning and teaching of idioms to be successful, teachers do need to be assisted in instructional approaches and strategies for idiom instruction, and they also have to be cognizant of the ways learners employ to acquire idioms. Such skills and knowledge demand serious training and practice. It is hoped that when sufficient training in idiom acquisition and instruction is offered, teachers and learners may find learning and teaching idioms both easy and fun.

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