

# Knowledge Enrichment by Teaching Idioms with Students in Center of Learning Process

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the relevant research related to teaching idioms and describes the following problems my students have faced when encountering idiom: a) Recognising the idioms in context b) Understanding the idioms c) Using these expressions usefully. Finally, it suggests a possible solution that has improved my students' comprehension of idiomatic phrases. The solutions involve a practical approach to encourage students' use of this language in their every day class talk. It also has its own goal has to stimulate, to emphasize the freedom of the teachers to support the creativity and independent mental power of both protagonist (student) and the leader (teacher). In fact every people especially a student has its own personality and specifically is "a unique idea of the creator" with both the weak & the strong sides of the character, as well as the adults themselves. It also shows aspects of teaching and learning foreign languages compared to any other subject. All these are in response to fundamental cultural and contemporary methods all over the world. Setting the students in center of the teaching process and knowledge enrichments is the aim, but leading them to do it, requires a great patient effort from the teacher. More than naturally this article doesn't show ready-made recipes, but helps you to avoid reluctantly such teaching obstacles, in order to rich the success and learning joyfully and effectively. Surely if still exists the old saying "The master doesn't come from Heaven!"*

**Keywords:** idiom, acquisition, complexities. assume,

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction and reasons why to teach idioms.

Research offers a long list of reasons to justify teaching idioms to students of different nationalities. By definition, idioms are linguistic expressions "whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of its constituent parts" [1] For example, the idiomatic meaning of "*She gave him the creeps*" cannot be derived from the meanings of 'give' and 'rocket'.

However, the main reason why I teach idioms are:

- a) Native speakers frequently use idioms in their everyday life; consequently these phrases form a very important part of any natural language..
- b) On the contrary, research in the field of teaching has noticed that students try to avoid idiomatic phrases in their free speaking. This avoidance reflects not only their difficulties in recognising and processing idioms, but it is due to even a certain resistance to teaching idioms, as teachers have seen them always as 'cases from which no rules can be derived' [2]
- c) The same limiting idiomatic usefulness to L2 learners is reflected in most of the textbooks available for teaching English as a foreign language nowadays, where little emphasis is given to idiomatic phrases, usually placed at the end of a didactic unit.
- d) Idioms often appear in different proficiency tests e.g. SAT, IELTS or TOEFL.

The quest for a wider exposure to the phenomenon of idioms seems obvious, given the present inappropriate pedagogical approach. Students need to be aware of the strong connections of idiomatic phrases with everyday language, as well as their complex nature. By so doing, we can increase both, learners' motivation and ability to

acquire idioms from a very early level in their linguistic development.

## 2. Analyzing Idioms and Solutions to Problems

### 2.1 Recognising the idioms

True idioms are totally fixed syntactically, therefore, another difficult element to consider is their fixed lexis form. It is this form that is the very first problem my students face : they often fail to recognise idioms as associated words. Let us consider the above-mentioned model made up of five constituents : "*She gave him the creeps*." If the student doesn't know that this phrase is an idiom, it's obvious that the holistic meaning of it is unknown to him/her. My teaching practice shows that the very first thing he/she does in order to work out the meaning of the sentence is looking up the word "*creep*" in a dictionary, although he/she knows the literal meaning of it. The student simply thinks the word "rocket" has more than one literal meaning.

In other words, he/she fails in recognising that the phrase needs to be computed idiomatically, because, unlike native speakers, he/she cannot instinctively recognise its pragmatic properties. So, the question arises: What kind of structure do idioms have?

Cognitive linguists are currently studying such a field, but as far as I know, they do not as yet have any definitive theory. Therefore, while I cannot rely on basic rules, what I do in order to help my students make up ground on identifying/understanding idioms is:

- a) I let them know that idiomatic phrases do not have a unique form, they can be found compromising nearly any kind of syntactic phrases, e.g. *hot dog, salt and pepper, I'm up to my eyes in work* at the moment, etc.

- b) Activate their schemata by saying well in advance that there is an idiom in the body of the sentence. Sometimes I underline the idiom, other times the students have to identify it.
- c) I try to build a more positive student attitude by offering repeated exposures to idiomatic discourse and by dividing idioms into thematic/word categories.

## 2.2 Grasping the Right Meaning

One of the main problems in teaching idioms concerns the ambiguity of these expressions. In fact, there exist two readings for “*She gave him the creeps*”. The non-idiomatic reading features the meaning components in their semantic representation, e.g. ‘give’ and ‘creeps’, whereas the idiomatic reading does not involve the formers in their semantic. It is believed that no linguistic relationship exists between the two readings, but the difference between the different readings of idioms constitutes its compositionality [3]. The reader’s competence in English guarantees the right result. As my students do not have the competence of a native speaker, they often find it difficult to work out the meaning of idioms, unless a strong contextual support is given. Pinnavia [4] helps clarifying the meaning of idiomatic expressions by emphasising the importance of the patrimony of the culture and tradition of a group. She claims that idiom top structures always tell a story that justifies their bottom meanings. For example, the idiomatic expression “*to kick the bucket*” originates from life lived with all sort of animals (swine, in this case), where ‘bucket’ is believed to be the name in Norfolk for the beam upon which the pig is suspended after it has been slaughtered. Although her thesis is by no way a generalization of the origin of idiomatic language, because “each idiom demands its own complex analysis in terms of its syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and conceptual properties” [5] (Gibbs 1993), her findings have helped me in teaching idioms in my class in the following ways:

- a) Exposing students to English culture, habits and history, has facilitated their understanding of idioms, e.g. If students come to know the old English custom of rolling out a long red carpet for an important guest who was arriving, they can easily comprehend the idiom: “roll out the red carpet”. In the same way, if they know that “slip” (noun) is an old English word for a fake coin - if you bought something and paid for it with a fake coin, you gave the seller “the slip” – the idiom
- b) “To give someone the slip” makes sense to them. I have encouraged my students to use the same meaning-deciphering approach, discussed above, and in few cases it has worked, e.g. they have arrived at the meaning of idioms like “cross your fingers”, “touch wood”, “dry spell”, etc by claiming their relationship to old habits, superstition, etc.

## 2.3 Using idioms

As it was argued above, the reasons why idiomatic phrases are seen as a bitter pill for L2 learners to swallow are to be sought to some extent in the culture-bound nature of idioms, partly in their very complex nature, and mainly in the way students are instructed. Indeed, textbooks, presents idiomatic

phrases at an advanced pre-intermediate level, surprisingly, after 400 hours of studying the language. To stretch the point even further, teachers do not take any better approach, as they often forget these expressions until the end of the course, when a list of most frequently-test-occurring idioms is handed out to our students to be learnt off by heart for exam purposes.

It is really no use to try to discard idioms as marginal language. I want my students to identify/acquire/use idioms and I try to achieve this in the following way:

- a) Introducing idioms in an earlier stage of studying, either in written text or in idiomatic language I use in the class. ‘*An idiom a day*’ is an encouraging activity I recently used with my elementary students. Students each, taking turns, looked up for an idiom in dictionaries/books, drew a picture of it at home, and showed it in the class. He/She also wrote two key-words on the whiteboard and his friends tried to guess what the idiom was.
- b) Looking for multiple opportunities to increase students’ idiomatic knowledge base by editing/enriching Headway texts, exercises.
- c) Encouraging/motivating students to use “rich authentic language” in their free speaking activities, e.g. challenging students to use only idioms for 5-10 minutes in the class, encouraging students to text an idiom into each-other’s mobile outside of the class, inviting students to count the idioms used in a thirty-minute set of “Coupling”- the BBC comedy currently broadcasted in Albania, and so on.

## 3. Idioms, Albanian Students’ Level and Research

Albanian students are at a disadvantage in understanding L2 figurative expressions, because of a lower level of linguistic competence in the L2, but as it was argued in this paper, even their different culture and traditions play an important role in interpreting idioms. Furthermore, Irjudo [6] states that factors that might effect the level of difficulty of an idiom can include salience, frequency of exposure, and ease of production. In her experiment she asked the Spanish learners of English to recognise and give the meaning of three groups of English idioms. Based on the data obtained from this study Irjudo [7] created three lists of English idioms:

- Identical idioms to L1 – easiest to understand and produce
- Similar idioms to L1
- Different idioms from L1 – hardest to understand and produce

While it is not known yet what kind of exact comprehension strategies are used in L2 idioms processing, my conclusion (based on my teaching experience) is in line with Irjudo’s findings in the sense that my students find it necessary to use knowledge of Albanian language to comprehend idioms. Regardless of the type of idiom, different or similar to L1 idiom, my students tend to activate Albanian language background in order to give a conventionalized meaning to a group of words which tell very little on their own. To give credence to this conclusion is the use of Albanian language

my students make in my classes. As a rule, no Albanian words are allowed in our English classes and my students always obey this rule, but when it comes to processing idioms quite often they tend to translate them into Albanian, even though I never ask them to do it.

**Students profile Table 1.** Therefore I often ask my students to write down the idioms they encounter under these heading:

#### 4. Practice Survey and Research in the Class

They all prefer speaking activities; they need to work on all areas. Although the students have been together for a short period of time, they have already established a good rapport with each other.

**Teacher:** Evis Celio

**Lesson duration:** 50'

Name	Age	Nationality	Profile
Spartak	23	Korean	Spartak was mainly exposed to writing and grammar activities for five years in his own country. Accordingly, what he expects from EFL teachers in the UK is student-centred lessons and fluency activities. Although he has been living in UK for the last three years, he still finds listening tricky and has some problems with his pronunciation. He is more of a kinaesthetic learner, who has both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons for learning English. One is for 'fun' and the other is to help him in his future flight attendant profession.
Myan Yong	25	Korean	Myanyong has got a short-term goal (to do well on the next exam in December) and a long-term goal (to teach Korean to foreigners). In addition, she likes the communicative way in which English language is taught here, therefore she appears to have both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. She is a visual learner, but she does like problem solving challenges. Although she is a sociable girl, especially on vocabulary tasks, she would rather work on her own.
Karmen	31	Turkish	Studying English in the UK, on the face of expenses, seems to Karmen the best choice, since, because of the way of teaching in her country, students don't really study natural English, and therefore she has been studying at BEET for 18 months. Gluten feels she has made progress but wants to improve further, especially her speaking. She prefers working alone as she can concentrate better. She needs English for her career and therefore is extrinsically and instrumentally motivated.
Dersan	31	Turkish	He has been studying English in the UK for two months. Although partly instrumentally oriented in needing to improve his formal written English for his job, Dersan is also intrinsically motivated. He appears to be a predominantly visual learner who is willing to take risks and try the language out. He prefers interpersonal tasks where he can fully interact with others. He is confident orally but tends to use rather formal expressions and would benefit from increasing his lexicon.
Laroka	22	Japanese	She needs to improve her English for her job (extrinsic motivation). However, she likes watching English movies, learning about famous British people and making non-Japanese friends (integrative and intrinsic motivation). Although she has been studying English for a long time (10 years in Japan and 4 months here), she still feels she needs to improve her spelling, writing and grammar knowledge.
Gabriel	41	Argentinean	Gabriel is intrinsically motivated, as he has given up his successful business career to improve his English. He has only been in the UK for 2 months and has not received any formal language training since his school years but has experienced interactive class techniques on his MBA at Harvard. He is quite fluent in his oral English, but he feels that he needs to work on his grammatical accuracy. He is an interpersonal and kinaesthetic learner who values an interactive teaching style.
Harris	24	German	Harris will soon start work for a company which does public relations work for food products. She is intrinsically motivated to study English as it is not particularly necessary for her job. She feels her listening is quite strong and writing is her weakest area. She would like to revise her grammar and expand her lexicon as well as increasing fluency. She likes a lot of variety in lessons or she becomes bored.
Samantha	21	Swiss	Samantha is in the process of completing a law degree and feels English will be helpful in her career. She is also quite intrinsically motivated as she says she wishes to brush up her English which she has not used since school for her own satisfaction. She enjoys group work because it gives her the opportunity to practice speaking, something that was lacking when she studied English at school.

**Number of students:** 8-10

**Class level:** Upper Intermediate

**Assessment date :** 04.5. 2014

**Room :** 22

**Materials used :** own material.

##### a) Class Profile

This is a group with a slightly mixed level. All students **Table 1.** are studying English full time and they are mostly young adults of different nationalities : Samantha is Swiss and differs in accent, Spartak and Myanyong are Korean, Karmen and Dersan are Turkish, Laroka is Japanese and Gabriel is Argentinean Dersan and Laroka are the weakest,

and Myanyong has a much higher level of grammar than speaking. Gabriel is the strongest and can dominate.

##### b) Schedule

The students at this upper intermediate level are all studying general English. This class takes place on Tuesday. We started the week with discussing what an idiom is and how people use them in everyday speech. The teacher also had the students come up with idioms they had heard before. This class will focus on a list of idioms (probably new for students) to give an opportunity to them to enrich their idiomatic background.

**c) Main objectives**

- To study/practice a new set of idioms.
- To raise students' awareness of the literal/idiomatic meaning of idiomatic phrases.
- To raise students' awareness of the similarities and differences English idioms share with their L1 idioms
- To raise students' awareness of the semi-frozen form of most idioms in English.

**d) Subsidiary objectives**

- To develop spoken fluency
- To practise deducing meaning from context

**e) Personal Teaching Goal**

- In this lesson I will try to give better instructions and demonstration, if needed.
- I will try to give students explicit feedback after tasks completion.

**f) Assumptions**

- Students should be aware of the non-literal way in which we process idioms.
- Students may come across a couple of new words in this lesson, e.g. belt & bucket.
- Most of the idioms which appear on the handout might be new for the students.

**4.2 Refer Problems and Tactical Solutions****Table 2**

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Solution</i>
Few students might not recognise that idioms need to be computed not literally.	- Ask students what they know about idioms - Clarify this point at the very beginning of the lesson. - Draw on the board the literal meaning of an idiom students are likely to know.
Few students may have difficulties accepting two different readings (literal and idiomatic) for the same expression.	- Give students time to reflect. - Involve students in activities which raise their awareness of the different readings.
Some students may get stuck at few new non- content words in the body of certain idioms, e.g. bucket, tighten, etc.	- Encourage understanding in context. - Clarify that idiomatic meaning does not require the meaning of each single word.
Some of the students may understand the literal meaning of the new idioms, but might have difficulties to process the idiomatic reading of it.	- Provide language in context to give the student an opportunity to deduce the meaning in context.
Students may have difficulties to find identical English idioms in their language.	Insert in the list idioms which are 'international' - e.g. 'to break the ice', 'to tighten one's belt', etc – or at least idioms which exist in Turkish and Korean .
Some students might not understand certain idioms, as they have a different cultural background.	Make sure the idioms appear on the handout apply to a mixed-nationalities class. Explain the differences, if necessary.
Some students may have difficulties to pronounce the	Close monitoring. - Give them an opportunity to hear

idioms properly.	what the idiom sounds like. (read it yourself, or students each read their idioms out one by one).
Some activities may take longer than anticipated and there might be little time for practice.	<b>Give the homework:</b> a) What are two good things to do in order to break the ice at a party? b) When was the last time that you felt you were between the devil and the blue sea? What were the choices? c) Say two things you think are lemons in your life. Why do you think so?

**4.3 The analysis and the system of working.****4.3.1 System analysis****4.3.2 Lexis**

Lexical set of idioms which appear on the handout.

**Table 3**

<i>Idiom</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
<u>To be</u> under the cloud (informal)	If somebody is under this, then other people thing that he has done something wrong and they are suspicious of him.
<u>To bite</u> <b>somebody's</b> head off (informal)	To shout at somebody in an angry way, especially without reason
<u>To pump</u> iron (informal)	To do exercises in which you lift heavy weights in order to strengthen you muscles
<u>To tighten</u> <b>one's</b> belt (informal)	To spend less money because there is less available.
<u>To save</u> something for a rainy day	To save something for a time when you will really need it.
<u>Pull</u> <b>somebody's</b> leg (informal)	To play a joke on somebody, usually making them believe something that is not true.
<u>To be</u> between the devil and the deep blue sea	In a difficult situation where there are two equally unpleasant or unacceptable choices.

The underline verbs in **Table 3** and the **possessive adjectives in bold** are the only items we can change in the above idioms.

**5. Conclusion**

As it was shown in this paper, because of their complexities, idiomatic phrases remain a difficult aspect of English language for both, teachers and learners; but, different approaches in which teachers can help students better understand the topic were suggested here. Indeed, after two years of adopting the above approaches in my classes, we are delighted to notice that not only have my students acquired idioms with some success, but – on the contrary to what is believed - they enjoy using idioms in their free talk activities and surprisingly they try to use them with a certain frequency. Since there is no 'real' need for my students to make use of idioms in their speaking activity, because they are all Albanian and therefore they don't need to declare themselves part of a certain social/origin group by using idiomatic language, the only reason why they use idioms, I assume, can be attributed to their 'frozen form'. Unlike non idiomatic sentences, where students are required to choose



the right collocations, appropriate prepositions and so on, idiomatic language is defined “non creative” because of its ‘ready to be used’ form, which means the learner is required only to put the verb in the right tense. Thus, it can be argued that once the student is exposed to the form/meaning of an idiom, providing an encouraging environment, it is likely that he will use it in his free conversation, since the idiomatic language facilitates his speaking process.

After all, one does not need to be sensitive, creative, or poetic in order to use idioms. If the students doesn’t learn in way we are teaching than we must teach in the way they learn.(Ritta Dunn)

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## Author Profile



**Evis Celo (Ph.D)** received Master Degree In Tirana University in excellent point In 2006.By July 2013 he received a Doctorate degree excellently too. Actually is holding the position of Lecturer in Vlora University, She has published many books and papers. She is also part of writer association in Albania, Romania-Craiova “Carmina Balcanica” and part of editorial board of IJELC.