Making Meaning: English Idioms and the ESL Learner

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English language has made a great impact on people and cultures across the globe. However, this impact is somewhat checked in the ESL classroom, due in part to the restraints put on an ESL learner by English idioms. English idioms are problematic and difficult for ESL learners to understand and use intelligibly because of their rather fixed structure and unpredictable meaning. An idiom is a type of formulaic language stored in unique, *fixed chunks that operate as a single unit of meaning*

**Characteristics of Idioms**

Idioms can be transparent or opaque. There are a range of expressions that are inferable from their constituent parts. For example: Margaret is *under pressure* to meet the deadline. Lower level students will have no difficulty inferring the meaning, but would not be able to generate the expression themselves from their knowledge of the individual words (Gairns and Redman 1986, p.36). Opaque idioms, such as *face the music* (incur the penalty) or *have a soft spot* (be partial to or have affection for someone), are far more difficult because it is not possible to figure out their meanings from the individual words. In addition, opaqueness depends on the inherent nature each idiom.

An idiom can only be used as a verb, with limited subject changes and tense changes. For example: I *sat* on the fence and *did not* give my opinion or Many people *are sitting* on the fence about the tax issue. However, *Jack was kicking the bucket yesterday* sounds rather odd. In addition, idioms possess no uniform grammatical category, but diverse structures, for example: *pull somebody’s leg* (verb + object); *be in seventh heaven* (verb + prepositional phrase). Furthermore, idioms exhibit flexible tenses, for example: you are *barking up the wrong tree* (continuous form) or garage sale *springs to mind* this fine morning (present simple form). The point is that each idiom is peculiar and this aspect is a major source of problem for the ESL learner.

**Typical Difficulties for Learners**

In my teaching experience, the problems with idioms relate to recognition or comprehension and production.

**Comprehension** Students are unable to recognise the multi-word (lexical chunking) form/meaning of the verb in spoken and written texts. They often assume that each word in an utterance contributes to the meaning independently, e.g.: when coming across a chunk such as *toe the line* (do/say what an authority has demanded), learners thought it meant tracing a certain line with the big toe! If learners recognize a lexical chunk, they tend to focus on the verb part only. This results in misunderstanding the message.

**Production** Problems with production are varied, but mostly relate to limited language/ exposure to lexical chunking. Generally, lower level learners leave out the particles altogether. For example: “I have butterflies” for *I have butterflies in my stomach*; “I first see her first time in this class, I gonna *pop* here.” for *I’m going to pop the question* here “I look forward the holidays” for *I look forward to the holidays*.

In my classroom observation, advanced students go to great lengths substituting words in an idiom. For example: “My *friend’s job* is a cash minter’ for “My friend’s job is a cash cow” (makes a lot of money).
use of metaphor at this stage is promising, however, that may bring about over-simplification. There is a need to find ways to channel the learners’ growth appropriately.

**Practical Ideas**

**What to teach?**

Gairns and Redman (1986) suggest teaching useful idioms, such that can blend with the students’ productive vocabulary. It is advisable to begin with parts of the body idioms (*lose your head*-be unable to act in a sensible way) then to general life situation idioms (*light at the end of the tunnel*-nearly at the end of a difficult time) or business idioms (*start the ball rolling*-start the discussion). McCarthy, O’Dell and Shaw (1997) have divided idioms into thematic categories to make them easier to learn. For examples: Body parts, Animals, Binomials, etc.

**When to teach?**

Lewis (1993) asserts that idioms ‘must be introduced relatively early in the learning program’. Gairns and Redman (1986) believe that since idioms contribute to a colloquial ease as fluency asset in language learning, it is desirable to maximize their value by in-cooperating idioms into systematic whole lessons to ensure that they are taught well.

**How to teach?**

Lewis (1993) asserts that introducing the idea of chunking to students and providing them with materials which encourage the identification of chunks should be one of the central activities of language teaching. To help the automatic identification of idiom types, it is important to emphasize their semantic peculiarity and their restricted flexibility. From my experience, it is useful to recycle chunks in different exercises to help the internalization of the language studied. Moon (1998) asserts that idioms can only be fully understood if they are considered in the context of the texts in which they occur because, in contrast, context-reduced language will be hard for readers to tolerate (Brown, 2001).

**Idiom Lesson**

To teach Useful idioms based on themes within Whole lessons, to encouraging the idea of chunking, then, we might begin with **Body Parts Idioms**

**Suggested Lesson Procedure**

- Preview words related the body:
- Use *Simon says: touch your head/ears/chin/cheek, etc.*
- Display a picture of a head with target body parts
- Get students to match parts of the body with the right label on the picture
- Check that students are familiar with target body parts
- Model an idiom and show what it would mean literally
- Point out which parts of the idiom can be changed and which *cannot* be changed
- Use suitable exercises to assess students’ understanding.
A Useful Exercise

Matching

In each of the following sentences, an idiom has been underlined. Below are the explanations to the idioms. Match the idioms with their explanations.

Example:

a) Angela’s garden is blooming! She has got green fingers. A
b) Don’t lose heart before the fight. Mike Tyson isn’t much stronger than you. H

1. If we split hairs this way, we will never reach an agreement.
2. Why are you crying? Well, face the music! It was all your fault that we missed the train!
3. You will surely get the elbow if you visit his parents without his permission.
4. Now, it is dad who has to foot the bill.
5. He does not like the rules, but he’ll toe the line just to avoid trouble
6. Don’t believe anything he says. He’s just pulling your leg.

A—be good at gardening
B- jokingly lying
C- accept blame/punishment for what you have done
D- go into unimportant details
E- to be responsible for paying the cost of something
F- to do what somebody in authority orders you to do
G- to be told by someone that they no longer want to have a relationship with you
H—panic

In conclusion, difficulties in understanding and using idioms appropriately notwithstanding, teachers in ESL classrooms can choose appropriate approaches and activities to help learners recognise and use these lexical items. I do believe that to be effective, teaching idioms must be systematic, structured, and conscious.
Bibliography


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