

Part 3

Suggestions for the Teacher

Idioms are an integral part of the English language. They are used often by almost all native speakers of English. Some are used often by some people, but not by others. There are some that everyone understands, but hardly anybody uses. Some are used and understood in some parts of the English-speaking world and not in others. Because idioms are rooted so strongly in culture and used in very specific situations, it is difficult for English language learners to know what idioms are used in what situations and by whom. That's a *tall order!* (A tall order is a very difficult and complex task.)

The best way to begin a study of idioms is to improve comprehension. We suggest that the teacher first focus on understanding definitions and situations so that students can make sense of what they hear or read.

The following classroom activities begin with tasks that focus on comprehension and progress to tasks that require speaking. Many of the activities in Part Three refer to the categories of idioms listed in Part Two. We encourage teachers to use their imaginations in creating integrated activities around idioms. The suggestions here are only a *jumping-off point*. (A jumping-off point is a starting place to help ideas develop.)

And remember, idioms are **fun!** You don't need to learn them all to speak English well, but knowing just a few can help make your English more colorful.

Matching

Purpose/Goal: to recognize idiom meanings

Number of Participants: any number

Materials: teacher-made handout with idioms and definitions

Procedure

1. Select up to ten idioms from this book.
2. Write the idioms on the left side of the paper (or board) and the definitions on the right side.
3. Ask students to write the letter of each definition next to the corresponding idiom.

Sample

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| 1. ____ Eleventh hour | a. unusual |
| 2. ____ Keyed up | b. anxious |
| 3. ____ Off the wall | c. late |
| 4. ____ Take off | d. inexperienced |
| 5. ____ Wet behind the ears | e. move quickly |

Multiple Choice

Purpose/Goal: to recognize appropriate idioms in context

Number of Participants: any number

Materials: teacher-made handout with sentences and idioms

Procedure

1. Select idioms from this book.
2. Write a sentence using each idiom, but leave a blank space for the idiom.
3. Give students three or four idioms that might belong in the blank, and ask them to choose the correct one.

Sample

1. Our company has been (losing money) for over three years now.
 - a. in the pink
 - b. in the red
 - c. in the black
 - d. in black and white
2. My father can do anything; he's a _____.
 - a. Jack of all trades
 - b. fish out of water
 - c. bull in a china shop
 - d. lame duck

Memory (*Card Game 1*)

Purpose/Goal: to recognize meanings

Number of Players: 2 – 10

Materials: teacher-made cards (30) marked with idioms and definitions

Procedure

1. Choose 15 idioms that you want your students to learn. Write each one down on a card or slip of paper.
2. On 15 more cards, write the definitions to the idioms.
3. Mix the cards up and place them face-down on a table.
4. Taking turns, the students turn two cards over to show the writing. Is there an idiom and a definition? Do they match? If they match, the student keeps the cards. If not, the student turns them back over and the next person takes a turn.
5. The student with the most matches at the end of the game is the winner.

Variation

Instead of writing the idioms and definitions on cards, write them on the blackboard in random order. Before the students are in the room, tape a piece of paper over each word and each definition. Play the game by having students come up one at a time to the board and remove two pieces of paper to see if they match. If they match, erase the words. If they don't match, replace the papers to cover the words and choose another student to come to the board.

Sorting (*Card Game 2*)

Purpose/Goal: to identify similarities

Number of Players: 1– 6 in each group

Materials: teacher-made cards (30 per group) marked with idioms

Procedure

1. Select about 30 idioms and write them on cards or slips of paper.
2. Write the same set of idioms for each group of five or six students.
3. Ask students to sort the idioms into categories by meaning.
4. Students can check this book or another source for the meanings, if necessary.

Variation 1 (Easiest)

Give students categories and tell them how many words are in each category. For example, ‘The categories are idioms about happiness, anger, sadness, and ill health. There are six in each category.’

Variation 2 (Harder)

Don’t give students any categories. Let them develop their own. Follow up by asking students to write their categories on the board. For example, ‘I’m not going to tell you the topics of the categories. Try to figure them out yourselves. You may come up with your own categories.’

Idiom-a-week

Purpose/Goal: to notice selected idioms

Number of Participants: any number

Materials: none

Procedure

1. Choose an idiom to be the idiom of the week.
2. Post the idiom somewhere in your classroom for all students to see—for example, at the top of your blackboard.
3. Students must find the meaning of the idiom in this book, in their dictionaries, on the internet, or in other resources.
4. Ask students to compare their findings with each other to see how many different ways the idiom is used.
5. Have students keep track of how many times they hear or read that idiom during the week.

Pocket Reminders

Purpose/Goal: to use all five senses to learn idioms

Number of Participants: any number

Materials: small blank cards or slips of paper

Procedure:

1. Have each student choose an idiom from this book or another source.
2. Have each student write the idiom on a slip of paper or index card.
3. Ask each student to put the idiom in his or her pocket and keep it there for the whole week. Each time they see or touch the slips of paper, they will be reminded of their idioms. They can also try to use the idiom in their English language conversations during the week.

Note to Teacher

This idea is based on the theories of peripheral learning. If students are surrounded by new vocabulary and take it in through all of their senses, they will have a better chance of learning and remembering words or phrases. The pocket reminder uses the sense of touch as a learning tool.

Idiom Journal

Purpose/Goal: to keep active, individualized lists

Number of Participants: any number

Materials: journal paper or writing books

Procedure:

Have each student keep an idiom journal. This is a list of idioms they have used, either in speech or writing. (If students are already keeping a vocabulary journal, have them designate a separate section just for idioms.)

Variation 1

Students can write down the idioms that they plan to use in the next week. They then can check them off once they have used them.

Variation 2

Students can keep track of how many times they have used a new idiom, either spoken or written.

Variation 3

Students can use their journal to write down new idioms they discover. These new vocabulary items may come from movies, books, magazines, or television. They can share and compare these with their classmates and then find their meanings in their resource books or on the internet.

Note to Teacher

An idiom journal is not just a list of phrases; it should be an interactive tool for learning. If students are actively engaged in their learning, they have a better chance of retaining learned material. By writing their own journals, students strengthen their own learning strategies and improve their opportunities for acquisition.

Comparison of Expressions

Purpose/Goal: to compare idioms or expressions in two languages

Number of Participants: any number

Materials: none

Procedure:

1. Prepare a list of English idioms that have meanings similar to idioms or expressions in the students' L1.
2. Variation: Ask students to think of an expression in their own language that has a meaning similar to an English idiom.
3. Ask students to write the phrase in their L1 and to translate it into English.
4. Discuss and compare the similarities and differences between the two languages.

Sample

English

Your Language

1. Head over heels in love _____
2. Under the weather _____
3. In hot water _____
4. Shoot the breeze _____
5. Beat around the bush _____

Write an Idiom Story

Purpose/Goal: to use idioms in personal stories

Number of Participants: any number

Materials: paper

Procedure:

1. Have students think of an especially eventful day in their lives.
2. Tell them to turn to a partner and tell him/her about that day.
3. After both partners have talked, give students 20 to 30 minutes to write a narrative of the day's events: who they met, how they felt, what they did. (This can also be done as homework.)
4. Have students read their own writing again, and add appropriate idioms to their stories.
5. Ask the students to exchange papers and read their partners' narratives. Have students suggest idioms that their partners might use, explaining why they think each idiom is appropriate.
6. Have each student tell the rest of the class what idioms they have used in their writing.

Note to Teacher

Contextualizing idioms is very difficult. Idioms are so deeply connected to cultural identity and communication norms that non-native speakers have difficulty in using them correctly. This activity is for advanced speakers of English. It is not meant to be an activity with right and wrong answers. It is meant to give learners a chance to 'play' with idioms in the context of their own writing.

Discussion Questions

Purpose/Goal: to reinforce comprehension of selected idioms

Number of Participants: any number

Materials: none

Procedure:

The following discussion questions are based on idioms in the categories in Part Two of this book. After teaching the selected idioms, use the following example questions as whole-class or small-group discussions. These are open-ended follow-up discussions that reinforce the meanings of idioms.

Category: People (page 103)

1. Describe the members of your family or a group you belong to.

Who is a *chip off the old block*? In what ways is he or she? How is he or she not?

Who is the *apple of your father's eye*? Is it you or one of your brothers or sisters?

Who is a *big shot* / an *eager beaver* / a *good egg*?

2. What happened to your grandmother (grandfather/mother/aunt/etc.) when she was *knee high to a grasshopper*?
3. Discuss the characteristics of someone you know who is the *salt of the earth*.
4. Describe someone you know who is a *stuffed shirt*.
5. What work would someone do if he were a *white-collar worker* / a *blue-collar worker*?
6. Who would you rather marry, a *good egg* or a *Jack of all trades*? Why?
7. Would you rather be *footloose and fancy free* or *filthy rich*? Why?
8. Do you know anyone who is an *old fuddy duddy*? Who?

Category: Conversation (page 103-104)

1. Tell us about people who don't let you *get a word in edgewise*.
2. Talk about a time when you had a *heart to heart* talk with a parent.
3. Do you know someone who *sticks his/her nose* in other people's business? What does he or she do?
4. Discuss a time when a teacher put you *on the spot*.
5. Tell us about somebody you like to *shoot the breeze* with.
6. Talk to your friends about a time when you *got something off your chest*.
7. When should you *lend someone an ear*?
8. Name a topic that you *don't know beans about*.

Category: Success and Happiness (page 104)

1. What makes you feel *tickled pink*?
2. Have you ever felt like you were *on cloud nine*? Tell your friends about it.
3. When have you felt *happy-go-lucky*? What made you feel that way?
4. Do you know someone who leads a *charmed life*? In what ways?
5. Have you ever felt *head over heels in love*? What did you do?
6. What is the best thing to say to *pop the question*?
7. What would a woman wear if she is *dressed to kill*? What would a man wear?
8. Does your family *keep up with the Joneses*? How?

Category: Anger/Being Upset (page 104)

1. When was the last time you *flew off the handle*? What did you do?
2. Have you ever *lost your cool* or *gone bananas*? How did other people react?
3. What makes you *hopping mad*?
4. When were you *at the end of your rope*? How did you help yourself feel better?

5. Talk about a time when someone was *on the warpath/rampage*.
6. What might happen to make you *chew someone out*?
7. Did you *get up on the wrong side of the bed* this morning? Or any other morning?
8. Did your mother or father ever *put his or her foot down* when you wanted to do something? What?

Category: Ill Health (page 104)

1. What makes you feel better when you are *under the weather*?
2. When was the last time that you were *black and blue*? What happened?
3. What makes you feel *burned out*?
4. Have you ever felt *down and out*? What was the situation?
5. Have you ever felt like just letting yourself *go to pot*? When? Why?
6. Tell your friends about a time when you *didn't know if you were coming or going*.
7. How would you describe someone who is *off their rocker*?
8. How do you cheer yourself up when you are *blue*?

Category: Negative Situations (page 104-105)

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt you were *in over your head*? Tell your friends about it.
2. Have you ever been *in a jam*? What got you there? What got you out?
3. Tell your friends about a time when you were *in hot water* with your teacher/boss.
4. If you are *in a rut*, what do you do to get yourself out of it? What about your friends?
5. When you were a kid, were you ever *in the doghouse*? How did your parents punish you?
6. If a friend comes to you and says, 'I am *in a bind*,' what do you do?

Category: Time (page 105)

1. Discuss something you do *once in a blue moon*.
2. Tell your classmates about a party where you danced *till the cows came home*.
3. When you have *time to kill*? What do you do?
4. Is there something you would do *at the drop of a hat*?
5. Tell us about times when you had to *burn the midnight oil*.
6. What have you done *in the nick of time*?
7. What have you done on the *spur of the moment*?
8. If you have *time to kill* today, what will you do?

Category: Money (page 105)

1. Who *brings home the bacon* in your family?
2. Tell us about something that *cost your family a mint*.
3. What you would do with *money to burn*?
4. Talk about something you *bought for a song*.
5. Do you know a *penny pincher*? What do they do?
6. Have you ever been *flat broke*? What did you do?
7. How much money should you *save for a rainy day*?
8. Is it ever appropriate to *go Dutch* in your country? With whom and in what situation?