

Idioms: Workshop Notes and Activities List

Six Strategies for Teaching Idioms

1. Make the idioms relevant:

a) Choose based on need

-Has something come up in a reading or listening? Has a learner overheard an idiom or expression that was confusing?

b) Choose based on theme

-If you have the same learner(s) for an extended period of time, consider using themes in your sessions. Some possible themes for all levels are:

- Money
- Shopping
- Food
- Nutrition
- Going to the doctor
- Speaking to your child's school
- Employment
- Environment
- Canada
- Culture Shock
- Learning Styles
- Holidays and Special Events

2. Reference the literal meaning as well as the metaphorical meaning of an idiom. Often the literal meaning gives a deeper understanding to the metaphorical meaning. For example, "To step up to the plate" means to literally step forward because it is your turn to complete an action (hit a baseball). Metaphorically, it means to take action or to volunteer to take action. You can make the connection between the two as they are very similar!

3. Watch your complexity! For basic learners, choose easier and more common expressions. For intermediate and advanced learners, choose more complex idioms and phrases.

4. Pre-teach vocabulary needed for new idioms. The learner must first understand what each individual word is before they can explore the metaphorical meaning of the phrase. For example, when teaching "Don't put the cart in front of the horse," do the learners know what the "cart" is?

5. Limit your number. Don't burden students with too many idioms in one session. There is no "magic number" for the amount of idioms, so use your judgment.

6. Repetition, repetition, repetition! Repetition aids retention. Go back to idioms you've introduced in previous sessions. Repeat the same idiom in different situations to illustrate context.

Idiom Activities to do with Learners

It is important to note that the following activities can be adapted to almost all levels. You can match idioms to definitions with any type of learner—basic to advanced. As a tutor, adjust the complexity level of the task for different learners by choosing simpler or more advanced idioms. For an example of adjusting complexity levels for a task, look at the handout “Basic Activities: Matching Idioms with Pictures (Employment Theme).” Here we have a seemingly basic activity that would be completed in an intermediate or advanced setting as the idioms are more complex (ex: dog eat dog world).

Basic Activities

- 1. Matching Idioms with Definitions:** Split up the idiom from the definition/explanation and have learners match the two together. This can be done individually, in a pair, or in a small group setting in a scramble at a table. Alternatively, you can give learners the separate parts and have them walk around to match the idiom and definition.
- 2. Matching Idioms with Pictures:** Give learners an idiom and have them match it with a picture representing the idiom. You can supply a picture of the literal meaning, the figurative meaning, or both.
- 3. Partner Matching:** Great for groups of 4 or more. Give one learner half of an idiom and another learner the other half. Walk around the room and try to find their partner to create one idiom. Have the learners guess what the idiom means.
- 4. Translation:** Once an idiom is defined and explained, ask the learners if there is a similar expression in their own language. Learners can then present their idiom in their first language to others and explain it in English.

Intermediate Activities

- 1. Idiom of the Day/Week:** The tutor can supply a new idiom at the beginning of the tutoring session and let the learner think about the meaning before the definition is discussed. Use the idiom in your session to give the learner context, and ask the learner to use it by the end of the session.
- 2. Scrambled Idioms:** Break down an idiom into separate words. Write each word on a separate index card and scramble them. Learners must rearrange the words to create an idiom and then guess the meaning.

3. Drawing: Have learners draw literal interpretations of idioms. For example, learners will draw a representation of “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” Then learners can discuss how their drawing represents the metaphorical meaning.

4. Idioms in Music: Find songs with idioms in the lyrics. Have learners listen to the songs, read the lyrics, and pick out the idiom(s). Discuss the meaning in context. This is also great for all types of idiomatic language, expressions, and colloquialisms. Here are some samples of appropriate songs with idioms:

- *1234: Feist*
- *I'm Yours: Jason Mraz*
- *Beat It: Michael Jackson*
- *Crazy: Barenaked Ladies*
- *Someone Like You: Adele*
- *Every Rose Has Its Thorn: Poison*
- *Blue on Black: Kenny Wayne Shepherd*
- *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Marvin Gaye*
- *Bridge Over Troubled Water: Simon and Garfunkel*

Advanced Activities

1. Idiom of the Day/Week: If you have the same learners for a longer period of time, make learners responsible for finding new idioms for each tutoring session. The learner can present it to the group by discussing the origin and meaning.

2. Researching Idioms: This can be a great homework assignment if you do not have access to computers during your tutoring sessions. Give learners a small thematic grouping of idioms to research online, and they must find a definition, the origin, and an illustration depicting the idiom (if possible).

3. Videos with Idioms: Find a video that goes well with your lesson or theme. Either pre-teach the idioms that you encounter in the video or have the learners pick out the idioms as they hear them. Discuss the idioms in context of the film. You may also do this with television shows or movie clips.

4. Reading Passage: Write a passage for the idioms you want to teach. Learners can guess the meanings of the idioms from the context, or can fill-in-the-blanks with an “Idiom Bank” that accompanies the passage.

5. Describing Idioms to a Partner: Give learners different idioms with their meanings and history explained. Have them read their own idioms and re-tell the information to a partner without the use of their sheet. This works well to develop summarizing and presentation skills.