

FOR-PD'S READING STRATEGY OF THE MONTH

Idioms

April 2009



[Printable PDF Version](#)

RATIONALE

Some may find understanding an idiom is like “child’s play”; others may feel they are “swimming against the tide” in order to just gain a bit of insight. While there is an abundance of idioms in the English language, and we all have most likely said, heard, or read at least one idiom or idiomatic expression, there are many students in our classrooms that struggle with learning and understanding these little gems of culture and creativity. While writers often use idioms to communicate a feeling or understanding innovatively, students who struggle with language may find idioms problematic in deciphering and therefore experience a breakdown in their understanding and comprehension. In many ways, idioms are not such a “piece of cake.”

Idioms are viewed as “an expression whose meaning cannot be derived from its constituent parts” (Irujo, 1986). We find that if taken literally, the meaning will often not match the context and therefore certain students that are unfamiliar with the idiom can become confused and frustrated. English Language Learners (ELLs) are often among those students that struggle with idioms, along with students with language or cognitive challenges.

While some teaching materials may ignore idioms, or try to demote their importance, it is best for teachers to take the time to explain, discuss, and have their students use them. “Avoiding the use of idioms gives language a bookish, stilted, unimaginative tone” (Cooper, 1999). Students can benefit greatly from direct instruction of specific idioms within context and also as part of developing their word consciousness (Irujo, 1986; Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006). Overall, allowing the time for investigation, practice, and use of idioms in your classroom will benefit all of your students’ abilities to understand and use these useful expressions.

HOW TO USE THE STRATEGY

Transparent and Opaque Idioms

Idioms can be transparent and opaque in nature and knowing which are which is beneficial for both teaching and learning. Transparent idioms are those idioms that can be more easily derived. Opaque idioms are slightly more involved and may have specific meaning that cannot easily be discerned. Opaque idioms may need more direction explanation and the use of other descriptions to help students understand the figurative meaning.

Examples of Transparent Idioms – “lend me hand”, “hit the nail on the head”

Examples of Opaque Idioms – “he’s pulling your leg”, “green thumb”

Student-Created Idiom Paragraphs

After some practice with learning new idioms, have students create their own stories using both known and created idioms. Remind them to focus on their own culture or background and to use the context to help others derive the meaning of their idioms. Have them

use the literal meanings of idioms to help create the story around the idiom.

Example:

I couldn't find my pin anywhere and it was my mom's favorite. It was small and made with tiny little pearls. I looked under the couch, under the chair, behind the TV, and all over the house, basically. It was just so very tiny. It was like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

Idiomatic Charades

Have students separate into small groups and hand out cards with idioms or idiomatic expressions. Have members of each group act out the idiom's literal meaning and have the other group members deduce the appropriate idiom. Let them discuss both the literal and figurative meaning of the idiom and the connection between the two.

Comparing English and Native Country Idioms

If working with ELLs, try to find some idioms that reflect those that may be similar or identical to the student's native language/culture. "These comparisons can show students they can transfer their knowledge from their first language"(Irujo, 1986).


Logology

Known as wordplay or recreational linguistics, students benefit from logology by way of developing their word consciousness. Although not direct instruction, talking about words and experiencing idioms through word play will contribute to student's understanding of idioms they may be hearing on TV, in movies, or in their daily lives.

Idiom Literal/Figurative Comparisons (Baumann & Kame'enui, 2004)

A popular idiom activity is to have students draw idioms in both their literal and figurative formats. Students can explain why the literal meaning is often so different than the figurative, or provide insight into the connection they have to each other.


Examples

		Name _____	
Idiom Literal/Figurative Comparisons			
Draw a picture showing your literal interpretation of the idiom.		Draw a picture showing your figurative interpretation of the idiom.	
Idiom or idiomatic phrase _____	Idiom or idiomatic phrase _____	Idiom or idiomatic phrase _____	Idiom or idiomatic phrase _____
Sentence using idiom _____	Sentence using idiom _____	Sentence using idiom _____	Sentence using idiom _____
Literal Meaning of word _____	Literal Meaning of word _____	Figurative Meaning of word _____	Figurative Meaning of word _____

Idiom Comparison Activity --Blank Template


Florida Online Reading Professional Development Name elementary example

Idiom Literal/Figurative Comparisons



Draw a picture showing your figurative interpretation of the idiom.

Idiom or Idomatic Phrase: green thumb
 Sentence using idiom: When my mom said she had a green thumb, I told her she should go to the doctor.
 Literal Meaning of idiom: a thumb that is the color green.




Draw a picture showing your figurative interpretation of the idiom.

Idiom or Idomatic Phrase: green thumb
 Sentence using idiom: My mom has a green thumb because she grows the tallest sunflowers on the street.
 Literal Meaning of idiom: Someone that is talented at gardening.


Idiom Comparison Activity --Elementary Example

Florida Online Reading Professional Development Name Secondary example

Idiom Literal/Figurative Comparisons



Idiom or Idomatic Phrase: have egg on one's face
 Sentence using idiom: I had egg on my face so I had to wash it off in the sink.
 Literal Meaning of idiom: to have someone's face covered in egg.



Idiom or Idomatic Phrase: have egg on one's face
 Sentence using idiom: The girl was so embarrassed over what she said that she had egg on her face.
 Literal Meaning of idiom: to be embarrassed because of an obvious mistake.

Idiom Comparison Activity --Secondary Example

Idiom Chart

Having students use this chart for recognizing and keeping track of the idioms they encounter, along with their own thoughts about the idiom, can enhance their understanding between figurative and literal expressions.

Examples

Florida Online Reading Professional Development Name _____

Idioms Chart

Idiom	What I Think It Means	Actual Meaning	Write a Sentence Using the Idiom

Idiom Chart --Blank Template

Florida Online Reading Professional Development Name _____

Idioms Chart Example

Idiom	What I Think it Means	Actual Meaning	Write a Sentence Using the Idiom
A bull in a china shop	Something noisy or someone breaking stuff.	Someone who is careless and has a rough and awkward manner.	The juggler was like a bull in a china shop and bumped into others when he performed.
Raining cats and dogs	Not sure, something to do with animals.	Raining very heavily.	The sky got dark and then it started raining cats and dogs.
Everything under the sun	Plants, trees, people. Everything.	Everything in the world, anywhere, of any kind.	The women loved to shop and wanted to buy everything under the sun.
At the drop of a hat	Somebody dropped a hat because they got scared.	Something that is done immediately.	I heard there was a baseball game and decided to go at the drop of a hat.
Have a ball	Get a basketball or baseball.	To have a really good time.	My mom told my sister to have a ball at the party.

Idiom Chart --Elementary/Secondary Example

ASSESSMENT

You can evaluate each student's understanding and use of idioms by doing any of the following: (a) observing their participation in class discussions and use of idioms; (b) review of their literacy versus figurative comparisons; and (c) recognize their ability or inability to explain particular idioms in their own words.

RESOURCES

The Idiom Connection

<http://www.idiomconnection.com/>

The Idiom Connection is a collection of idioms, phrasal verbs and proverbs. These expressions are common expressions that one would generally expect to find in the average home, family, workplace or community in most English speaking countries. They can be found either in spoken English or in written English.

Eye on Idioms

<http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/idioms/>

Connect to this site to play a game where you complete the sentence by selecting the correct idiom from the list.

Pictorial Idioms

<http://www.edict.com.hk/vlc/idioms/default.htm>

Learn some interesting English idioms through pictures. These idioms have been classified into different groups based on the key word in each idiom.

Self-Study Idiom Quizzes

<http://a4esl.org/q/h/idioms.html>

Use these self-study quizzes to learn more idioms.

ESL Idiom Page

<http://www.eslcafe.com/idioms/id-list.html>

View a complete list of all idioms currently in the collection.

Idiom Site

<http://www.idiomsite.com/>

View an alphabetical list of idioms to use with your students.

REFERENCES

Baumann, J. K., & Kame'enui, E. J. (Eds.) (2004). *Vocabulary instruction: Research to practice*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Diamond, L., & Gutlohn, L. (2006). *CORE literacy library: Vocabulary handbook*. Berkeley, CA: CORE.

Irujo, S. (1986) A piece of cake: learning and teaching idioms . *English Language Teaching Journal* 40, 236-242.

[Go to Strategy of the Month Archive.](#)

 [Go to Adobe PDF instruction page.](#)

[About](#) | [Registration](#) | [Participants](#) | [Facilitators](#) | [Educators](#) | [Parents](#) | [Resources](#) | [Help Desk](#) | [eStore](#) | [Contact](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#)



For comments and suggestions, please contact us at forpd@mail.ucf.edu or 407-823-6153.

© Copyright 2003-2009 for FOR-PD by the [Florida Department of Education](#) and the [University of Central Florida](#). All rights reserved.