TAMING IDIOMS AT THE ENGLISH CLASS

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Abstract: Idioms are very intricate expressions, which makes them especially difficult to translate into another language. The reason behind this difficulty is that first of all, idioms are culture-bound, i.e. specific to particular culture and society, secondly, their meaning is rather metaphorical than literal, and hence they should not be translated word for word. Idioms are like metaphors; their meaning is hidden, and you need to know what idea the whole idiom carries because dissecting it into words and trying to work out their meaning will not give you any clue. So how to translate an idiom, is there any golden rule? The golden rule is that when it comes to translating an idiomatic expression, you cannot create anything on your own by simply translating it word for word. Idioms are well-established expressions and what you need to do is to find the closest equivalent in the target language.

Keywords: translation, taming, idioms, difficulty

The postmodern classroom places the language learner at the very heart of the whole learning process, and that is the reason why learners' behaviour and strategies used in acquiring the new language have been so vastly discussed. Tremendous attention has been paid to idiomatic language in learning a second language. Not long ago, it has been acknowledged by L2 language researchers that when it comes to idioms, the majority of the students have a positive attitude towards learning new ones and are fully aware of the importance of this type of figurative expressions in written and spoken, formal and informal language. Our students enumerate countless learning strategies, the most popular and efficient is that of inferring meaning from context, followed by repetition, visualization and looking up information about the respective idiom. Language teachers should get familiar with the strategies their students use when gathering these figurative expressions, so as to work aut the most adequate and productive way of acquiring them, without frustrating the L2 speakers, they need to design the best curriculum and the most efficient teaching materials that will correspond to and enhance their students' learning experience.

Idioms are essential elements of every language and are well-suited to denote quite complicated feelings and phenomena in only a few words, which makes them crucial in all layers of a language and teachers of languages must not avoid them duet o their demanding and laborious memorization. As pointed out by Suzanne Irujo, in her fundamental piece in the field of teaching idioms, Don't Put Your Leg in Your Mouth: Transfer in the Acquisition of Idioms in a Second Language, absolute starters can successfully use idioms on their own if the language teacher sifted them out considering frequency and simplicity. "By doing so, language teachers bring their students one step closer to becoming a competent second or foreign language user." (Pucelj, 2018)

When teaching idioms, educators must make sure not to just hand out a long list of idioms, as it will be a simple enumeration of these phrases or a bothersome list of some more things to learn by heart for students. If we provide too many idioms, it will simply turn into an introduction of what these expressions are instead of ways of understanding, remembering

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and efficiently using them. It is highly recommended to teach idioms in context, so that the meaning can be fully or more or less understood. Teaching them in spoken form rather than written form, so that they see how the phrases work in a communicational situation – setting up a dialogue in classroom is a great idea, too. Of course, it is crucial to define or demonstrate what the constituent words actually mean. For instance, in order to understand ”it was raining cats and dogs”, one must know the animals and the weather phenomenon also.

The absence of idiom understanding has a scholarly impact on students' general achievement. It is important for both students and teachers to acquire idioms in a convenient setting, where problems like the exact definition of idioms and the teaching technique can easily be clarified.

Idioms are extremely intricate expressions, which makes them especially difficult to translate into another language. The reason behind this challenging feature is that first of all, idioms are culture-bound, i.e. specific to particular culture and society, secondly, their meaning is rather metaphorical than literal, and hence they should not be translated word for word.

Idioms are like metaphors; their meaning is hidden, and you need to know what idea the whole idiom carries because dissecting it into words and trying to work out their meaning will not give you any clue. So how to translate an idiom, is there any golden rule? The golden rule is that when it comes to translating an idiomatic expression, you cannot create anything on your own by simply translating it word for word. Idioms are well-established expressions and what you need to do is to find the closest equivalent in the target language.

Suzanne Irujo asks: ”What happens when language learners try to use idioms? Do they generalize from other idioms which they have heard in their second language? Or do they use their knowledge of idioms in their first language and attempt to transfer that knowledge?” (Irujo, 1986) The idea of transfer is founded on the concept that all we've learnt previously will influence all we acquire later. Not long ago, in the 1950's-60's, a renewed concept became influential, that ”interlingual transfer was the most important factor in learning another language” (Pollitzer, 1965) The basic idea was that idioms showing a degree of alikeness or comparability would prove to be more interfering than idioms showing signs of divergence. ”It was therefore hypothesized that similar idioms would show more interference than different idioms on tests of production. On tests of comprehesion, positive transfer would affect identica land similar idioms equally, and both would be comprehended much better than different idioms.” (Irujo, 1986).

Suzanne Irujo's study confirmed that we all rely on our mother tongue when we try to understand and introduce idioms into our L2 speech, ”they (the subjects in the study)also used target-language related strategies. (…) Other target-language related strategies included providing an incomplete idiom (”cost an arm” for ”cost an arm and a leg”), using a different English idiom than the expected one, either an acceptable equivalent (”I've had it” for ”I'm fed up”) or an unacceptable non-equivalent (”play all my cards” for ”put my cards on the table”), using a figurative expression which is not a known idiom (”a nail in the back yard” for ”a needle in a haystack”), or using a literal expression (”what's wrong with her?” for ”what's bugging/eating her?”)” (Irujo, 1986)

I asked my students to make a list of the best ways to 'tame/translate' idioms. These are a few examples of how they view this issue:

1. Try to find an idiom in the target language which uses the same words, the same structure and has the same exact meaning. This is the top notch solution, but you often will not find it.

2. Try to find an idiom in your language which uses different words, but has the same structure and the same exact meaning

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3. Try to find an idiom in your language that has different words, different structure but the same exact meaning

4. Try to find an idiom in your language that has different words, different structure and a slightly different meaning, and complete it with a short explanation.

5. Try to find an English native speaker who can explain the meaning to you. Then, once you get the meaning you'll probably find in your memory a similar idiom in your mother tongue. Alternatively, you can always ask your grandma, who is usually an endless source of idioms!

Visualizing idioms

Consider for a second what one can visualize when coming across these English idioms for the very first time:

These are examples of vivid images my students came up with when getting more familiar with English idioms. This creative exercice helped them remember and comprehend the phrases much more efficiently.

Face the music



Blow off steam



Up in the air

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On the ball- quick to understand and react



To go from rags to riches

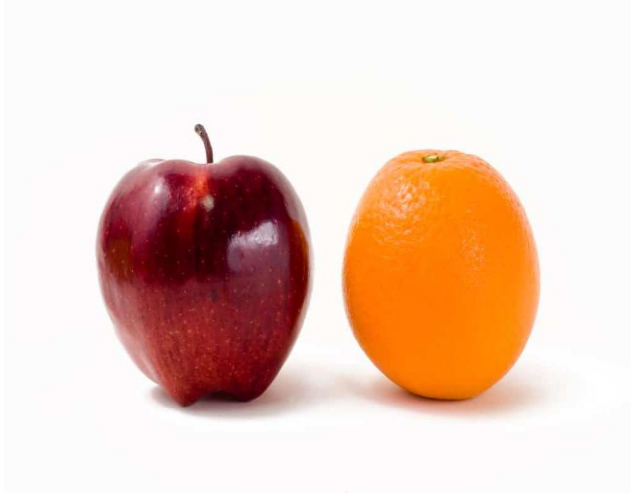


A piece of cake



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Compare apples and oranges



A bad apple



Chasing rainbows



Once in a blue moon

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Barking up the wrong tree



Teaching Idioms in Contexts

”Context in Learning Language” (Wu, 2008)

Context is essential in learning languages, therefore teachers must provide learners with rich context for the learning process. ”For instance, linguistic contextual information enhances adolescents’ interpretation of idioms’” (Nippold & Martin, 1989) The contextual clues around a word could easily help the learners understand its meaning. ”In contrast, context-reduced language will be hard for readers to tolerate. Consequently, it’s more effective for EFL students to learn language in meaningful contexts than learn isolated words through memorization and drilling.” (Brown 2001)

”Introducing English Idioms in Story Contexts” (Wu, 2008)

Using stories in teaching has always been extremely popular, as tales and anecdotes tend to keep students’ imagination alert, helping them to stay focused. Stories which captivate their imagination will make it easier for them to stay immersed in the teaching process.

Teaching Idioms with Rich Illustrations

”The Role of Illustrations in Reading” (Wu, 2008)

Even if there is a constant debate concerning the efficiency of visuals in the process of reading comprehension exercises, researchers like Scarcella and Oxford emphasize the importance of text being accompanied by pictures as the text will be much more comprehensible to its reader-our students. For instance, they ”stressed that teachers need to illustrate key vocabulary effectively by showing pictures and diagrams so as to improve the ESL students’ reading

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comprehension. (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) found that words and pictures presented together helped students recall better than alone. (Mayer, 1999) It is efficient to provide interesting pictures to foster and reinforce vocabulary development. Consequently, visuals must be stimulating, interesting and motivating to students' comprehension and retention of reading."

"Teaching Idioms with Group Discussion" (Wu, 2008)

"Group Discussion in Reading Comprehension"

"Students' discussing what they read is a helpful strategy to increase their comprehension. Group talk can provide learners with rich opportunities to acquire social and linguistic knowledge necessary for understanding new texts they encounter." (Freeman & Freeman, 1994) Klingner & Vaughn stressed that ESL students engaging in collaborative talk during content reading, they assisted one another in understanding the meaning of challenging words, getting the main ideas, and answering questions about what they read. As a result, group discussion appears to be an effective technique to enhance students' reading comprehension." (Klingner & Vaughn, 2000)

"Teaching Idioms with Readers Theater"

Readers Theater in Reading (Wu, 2008)

This method has always been considered to be a motivating strategy "that can provide readers with a legitimate reason to reread text and further improve their word recognition, reading fluency and reading comprehension. Researchers claim that Readers Theater offers a way to improve fluency and enhance comprehension" (Bafile, 2003), as well as "to create interest in and enthusiasm for learning." (Rudder, 1999). Those learners who are more likely to be slower in learning can benefit from this method, as their memory is not challenged at all, and risks of frustrations are low. This strategy involves more repeated reading, which does not implicate an independent knowledge of the language – and chances that peers will assist them instead of ridiculing are higher than in the case of other strategies.

"Teach Idioms with Retelling and Rewriting" (Wu, 2008)

"Retelling in Reading"

A story told by the teacher or by a colleague may present a tremendous wealth of interesting turns and opportunities to improvise and enrich a given story. Learners can be asked to listen to a story or to watch a short film, which then they must retell as accurately as possible, alternatively, in an as colourful way as possible. "Retelling has been a good strategy to know how much students have learned and to increase their comprehension. Retelling activities can facilitate students' reading retrieval because the activities can encourage students to try to recall. Their recalling help teachers understand how much information their students have obtained. Older students can benefit from retelling stories because it allows students to learn to organize and describe events, which enhances reading comprehension. In Brandi-Muller's classroom, she found that her ELL students not only became more enthusiastic and willing to take a chance and read aloud but also remembered the vocabulary better with this method."[1] (Brandi-Muller, 2005) Consequently, activities that ask students to retell stories are likely to enhance and energize the learning and memorizing activity.

"Applying Retelling and Rewriting to Practice English Idioms" (Wu, 2008)

[1] Brandi-Muller, J. (2005). Retelling stories. http://www.colrincolorado.org/article/13282, accessed on 10.05.20.

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As far as our classes are concerned, retelling activities are great strategies to make the reading comprehension exercises much easier to approach, their attitudes changing in the meantime, too, I tried newer and newer variations on these techniques. For instance, we can ask them to retell or rewrite the content of an idiom or idiomatic phrase after having plenty of time to grasp its meaning-though this time they have to reproduce the sense avoiding the exact words of the phrase; this time they are encouraged to retell or rewrite using solely their own words. I noticed that this way, they could get more familiar with the new and strange phrases, their motivation to learn other idioms instead of disappearing, grew stronger.

"Teach English Idioms with Dialogue Writing and Role-Play" (Wu, 2008)

Dialogue Writing and Role-play in Reading

"Dialogues can provide situations for students to practice ordinary conversation and offer students ample practice with basic speaking skills in context. Firstly, dialogues can be viewed as short plays and used for students to act out rather than simply read aloud. Moreover, the dialogues the students write function as basic communication at all levels." (Scott & Ytreberg, 2000) Moreover, "putting pupils into pairs for the role-play in the daily dialogues is an effective way of oral practice for various ages and level.s" (Scott & Ytreberg, 2000) Nunan emphasized that these role-plays are brilliant "activities for learners' speaking in the relatively safe environment of the classroom before they must do so in a real environment. Therefore, dialogues offer students opportunities to act out and practice oral skill before encountering the real world." (Nunan, 2003)

"Applying English Idioms through Dialogue Writing and Role-play"

As we all know, languages are alive, changing all the time, so the best way to learn them is in fact live communication, in this respect, dialogues and role-play are the most efficient oral (and written) activities. Keeping this in mind, I often assign my students in pairs to make up and write down a dialogue, using all the idioms learnt at class. They take it seriously as the next class they will know their dialogue by heart and act it out. "Dialogue writing could motivate students to write without burden because of pair collaboration and role-play activity could help them remember the dialogue they wrote through repetitive practices. It was easier and more fun for them to remember English idioms because they shared and enjoyed learning English idioms with friends. Thus, dialogue writing and role-play are useful and interesting activities for students' meaningful and efficient drills." (Nunan, 2003) I found that these kinds of activities are all time favourites among students – due to the extent of creativity involved and the chance to collaborate with peers – and I must admit that in time I grew to like these activities, though at first I was reticent, owing to the noise and the chaotic atmosphere involved.

All things considered, idioms can be playful to teach and learn and they make students sound more like native speakers and improve their listening skills, and resonate more to not only colloquial, but also formal English. Language becomes colourful and imagery powerful, which makes the learning process a lot of fun. The moment we represent fish out of water, snail mails, cats and dogs falling from the sky, the entire experience will be much more creative and playful., however, it will be challenging to figure out what they actually mean. The lesson immediately turns into a deciphering game, throughout which the students soon realize that when certain words come together in a fixed phrase, the

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resulting meaning will possibly be totally different from the initial meaning of the constituent words. Whenever a non-native speaker uses an idiom, they sound extremely eloquent, even proficient. However, the very moment an L2 speaker uses the idiom incorrectly, the impression made will be confusingly bad.

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