# DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING IDIOMS AND PROVERBS

**Andreea Năznean, PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi**

*Abstract: The purpose of this article is to reveal the difficulties which idioms, proverbs and metaphors might bring about when the students learning a foreign language choose to work with them. More precisely, the socio-pragmatic characteristics of foreign language teaching will be taken into account by offering the necessary information in the investigated field.*

***Keywords: translation, idioms, language, proverbs, metaphors***

According to the online Merriam Webster Dictionary, an idiom is "an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words of its own; a form of a language that is spoken in a particular area and that uses some of its own words, grammar, and pronunciations; a style or form of expression that is characteristic of a particular person, type of art, etc." (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/idiom)

When we introduce idioms in an English class with emphasis on translation activities, we might be surprised to see how many alternatives the students might suggest for the translation of such expressions. I used the following examples selected from *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*, published in 1998 by Cambridge University Press, in my attempt to help the students better understand the use and the meanings of the idioms with the help of translation.

The following worksheet is the one I gave my students in the 11$^{th}$ grade and the results were quite surprising. I gave them the idioms, but I also gave them their explanations and an example; the students had to translate the examples into Romanian.The class includes 30 students and all of them solved this worksheet. Of the total of 30 students, 13 got very good marks, between 9 and 10 (43.3%), 11 got marks between 6 and 8 (36.6%) and 6 students got marks of 4 and 5 (20%).



BDD-V1650 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:49 UTC)

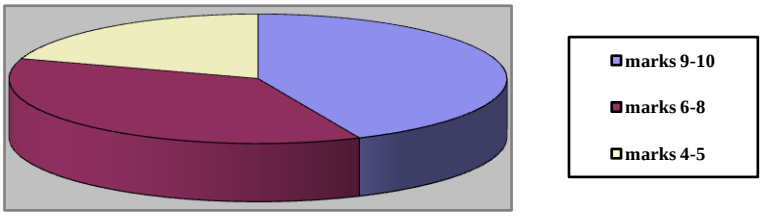



Figure 1. Results of the 11th grade test

**CLASS: 11E, 17 year olds, 11th year of study**
**Philology, Bilingual English, 5 English classes/week**
**WORKSHEET**
**Translate the following idioms into Romanian:**

**1.** ***"be up in the air"***: if a matter is up in the air, no decision has been made, often because other matters have to be decided first.
I may be moving to New Zealand, but it's still up in the air. (1998: 5)
.....
**2.** ***"the balloon goes up"***: if the balloon goes up, a situation suddenly becomes very serious or unpleasant.
The balloon went up last Friday when the scandal became public. (1998: 21)
.....
***3.*** ***"an earth mother"***: a woman who has children and who has a natural ability as a mother.
My older sister's a real earth mother. She has four kids and she's completely happy to stay at home all day with them. (1998: 111)
.....
**4.** ***"go the extra mile"***: to make more effort than is expected of you; (often + **for**)
He's a nice guy, always ready to go the extra mile for his friends. (1998: 119)
.....
***5.*** ***"a laughing stock"***: someone who does something very stupid which makes other people laugh at them; (usually + **of**)
I can't cycle around on that old thing! I'll be the laughing stock of the neighborhood. (1998: 221)
.....
***6.*** ***"part and parcel"***: if something is part and parcel of an experience, it s a necessary part of that experience which cannot be avoided.
Being recognized in the street is all part and parcel of being famous. (1998: 291)



BDD-V1650 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:49 UTC)

.....

***7.*** ***"a straight arrow"***: someone who is very honest and careful to behave in a socially acceptable way.

Friends describe Menendez as a straight arrow who rarely drank and was close to his family. (1998: 373)

.....

***8.*** ***"Truth will out"***: something that you say which means the truth will always be discovered.

They're bound to find out what you've done. Truth will out, you know. (1998: 404)

.....

***9.*** ***"up- and-coming"***: becoming more and more successful in a job; (always before noun)

She founded a summer school for up-and-coming musicians. (1998: 410)

.....

***10.*** ***"ways and means"***: methods of achieving something; (often + of).

Surely there are ways and means of achieving our objectives which don't involve spending quite so much money. (1998: 418)

.....

The words that constitute the Romanian equivalent are different from those in English. A word-by-word translation of the Romanian idiom into English might have no meaning to a speaker of English, while an equivalent word-by-word translation of the English idiom into Romanian would also have no sense to an English speaker. For this reason, students need a lot of practice before they are assigned translation exercises with focus on idioms, since they need lexical knowledge and also to be conscious of the fact that accurate translation is not possible, but they need to find an adequate meaning which has the same impact on the target reader as the source sentence has on the source reader.

Proverbs are also fairly difficult to be introduced in translation activities, but, on the other hand, the students like such assignments because they have the chance to seek for alternatives and compare the meanings of the source sentences with the ones of the target sentences. I made use of the following worksheet in one of my translation classes with the students in the $10^{th}$ grade, after having solved similar exercises for more than a week.

The class includes 28 students and all of them translated the following proverbs into Romanian. Of the total of 28 students, 16 got very good marks, between 9 and 10 (57.14%), 9 got marks between 6 and 8 (32.14%) and 3 students got marks of 4 and 5 (10.7%).



BDD-V1650 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:49 UTC)

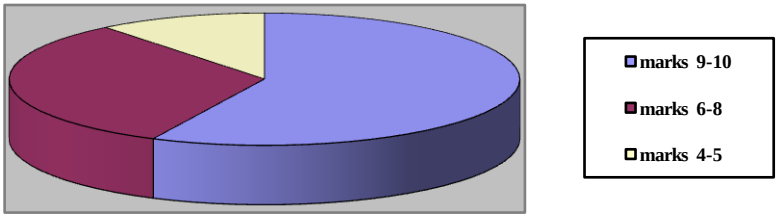



Figure 2. Results of the 10th grade test

**CLASS: 10A, 16 year olds, 10th year of study**
Mathematics-Computer Science, Bilingual English, 5 English classes/week
**WORKSHEET**
**Translate the following proverbs and their explanations into Romanian:**
(http://www.phrasemix.com/collections/the-50-most-important-english-proverbs)

1. **"The pen is mightier than the sword."**

Trying to convince people with ideas and words is more effective than trying to force people to do what you want.

2. **"When in Rome, do as the Romans."**

Act the way that the people around you are acting. This phrase might come in handy when you're traveling abroad notice that people do things differently than you're used to.

3. **"No man is an island."**

You can't live completely independently. Everyone needs help from other people.

4. **"People who live in glass houses should not throw stones."**

Don't criticize other people if you're not perfect yourself.

5. **"There's no such thing as a free lunch."**

Things that are offered for free always have a hidden cost.

6. **"A watched pot never boils."**

If something takes time to finish, don't watch it too closely because it will seem like it's taking forever.

7. **"One man's trash is another man's treasure."**

Different people have different ideas about what's valuable

8. **"There's no time like the present."**



BDD-V1650 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:49 UTC)

If you need to do something, don't wait until later. Do it now

9. **"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."**

Different people have different ideas about what's beautiful.

10. **"Don't put all your eggs in one basket."**

Have a backup plan. Don't risk all of your money or time in one plan.

Very often, proverbs cannot be translated into Romanian accurately because they might cause misinterpretations and every translation might not provide the Romanian or English specific correspondents.

The metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or a phrase that usually means a specific thing is used to refer to or describe something completely different, consequently making an implied association. One of the most famous metaphors is the one that Shakespeare wrote: "All the world's a stage" meaning that men and women play various parts in this life.

Nevertheless, when we introduce exercises in our classes with focus on metaphors, we need to make sure that the students have solved such exercises before; they need certain practice and experience in order to be able to work with metaphors and to understand them. Nowadays here are many ways we can find tasks based on metaphors, there are both many books and many websites we can use when we want to develop such exercises in class. I gave my students in the 11th grade the following worksheet with emphasis on metaphors after we had solved similar exercises for almost two weeks and the results were fairly good.

The class includes 31 students and all of them solved the task. Of the total of 31 students, 15 got very good marks, between 9 and 10 (48.3%), 12 got marks between 6 and 8 (38.7%) and 4 students got marks of 4 and 5 (13%).

The following exercise is taken from the website: http://www.englishdaily626.com/similes-metaphors.php?002

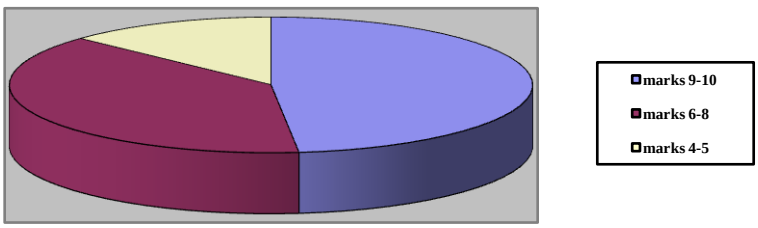



Figure 3. Results of the 11th grade test



BDD-V1650 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:49 UTC)

**CLASS: 11D, 17 year olds, 11th year of study**
**Social Studies, intensive English, 4 English classes/week**
**WORKSHEET**

Find the correct answer and translate the sentences into Romanian:

1. My mother does not like me to go out with him because he is as wily as a.....
   a) wolf b) wizard c) fox d) lily
2. The child was as hungry as a..... . He ate up a full bowl of rice in minutes.
   a) dog b) wolf c) fox d) pig
3. This bus is as slow as a..... We may not be able to reach there on time.
   a) bear b) clock c) tortoise d) snake
4. She likes spoiling people's fun. She is really a.....
   a) couch potato b) wet blanket c) hard nut d) hard bargain
5. She exercises regularly and keeps herself as fit as a.....
   a) flower b) fiddle c) fish d) falcon
6. I find him extremely annoying; he is getting under my.....
   a) brain b) arms c) back d) skin
7. Her heart..... when she learnt that she had not been given the job.
   a) jerked b) sank c) jumped d) shattered
8. The boxer was fighting like a..... and overpowered his opponent.
   a) tiger b) gorilla c) snake d) wolf
9. His punches were as..... as lightning and caught his opponent by surprise.
   a) sharp b) dazzling c) brilliant d) quick
10. This is a..... scheme. No way am I going to be part of it.
    a) lily-livered b) blood red c) hare-brained d) greenhorn

Nevertheless, metaphors, in comparison to idioms and proverbs, are not so complicated to teach and learn as they can basically be comprehended using various sentences exemplified in appropriate situations.

**Conclusion:**

Acquiring the competence in the field of metaphorical language is one of the many difficulties in the teaching of a foreign language. All features illustrating idioms, proverbs, and metaphors give the impression that they cause intricacy for students.

As a result of the previously described activities with emphasis on idioms, proverbs and metaphors, we can conclude that we must help our students grow to be communicatively qualified in the foreign language if we want them to become proficient in its use. Successful communication involves both exercising and also identifying the suitable situations when the use of the foreign language is required.



BDD-V1650 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:49 UTC)

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Bassnett, S. (2002), *Transaltion Studies*, London and New York: Routledge

Chesterman, A. (2000) "Teaching Strategies for Emancipatory Translation" in C. Schäffner and B. Adab (eds.), *Developing Translation Competence*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Dollerup, C. (2006), *Basics of Translation Studies*, Iaşi: Institutul European

Harmer, J. (2007), *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th edition), Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited

Mccarthy, M. and Press, C. U. (1998), *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*. 4th edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

http://www.englishdaily626.com/similes-metaphors.php?002

http://www.phrasemix.com/collections/the-50-most-important-english-proverbs

http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/idiom



BDD-V1650 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:51:49 UTC)