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***THESIS REPORT***

***PROBLEMS IN UNDERSTANDING AND USING IDIOMATIC  
EXPRESSIONS OF EFL STUDENTS FROM THE HIGHEST  
LEVELS OF GENERAL ENGLISH AT PUCESE IN 2014***

***TESIS DE GRADO***

***PROBLEMAS PARA COMPRENDER Y UTILIZAR  
EXPRESIONES IDIOMÁTICAS EN LOS ESTUDIANTES DE  
INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA DE LOS ALTOS  
NIVELES DE INGLÉS GENERAL EN LA PUCESE EN EL 2014***

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## **RESUMEN**

### **PROBLEMAS PARA COMPRENDER Y UTILIZAR EXPRESIONES IDIOMÁTICAS EN LOS ESTUDIANTES DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA DE ALTOS NIVELES DE INGLÉS GENERAL EN LA PUCESE EN EL 2014**

Esta investigación se trató acerca de la comprensión y uso de expresiones idiomáticas en inglés y de las dificultades que encuentran los aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera. Este estudio se centró en los estudiantes de los altos niveles de Inglés General de la PUCESE, a quienes se les pidió completar un cuestionario. Los resultados de este estudio fueron divididos en tres categorías con el fin de identificar y analizar el nivel de dificultad que los estudiantes tienen en la comprensión, el aprendizaje y el uso de modismos.

El cuestionario fue diseñado para analizar los tres factores de comprensión modismos; la familiaridad, la transparencia semántica, y el contexto. Se les presentó a los participantes diez modismos en un texto escrito con una tarea de selección múltiple para comprobar su conocimiento de modismos en inglés. En la prueba de la transparencia semántica, se les dio a los estudiantes algunos modismos comunes con sentido figurado para traducir al español. En la prueba de contexto, se les dio a los estudiantes siete expresiones idiomáticas en frases que debían ser traducidas al español de acuerdo al contexto. Y al final, se les preguntó a los participantes acerca de su conocimiento e interés en el aprendizaje de las expresiones antes presentadas sin hacerles saber que se trataba de expresiones idiomáticas. Por otra parte, se necesitó de los maestros para obtener información acerca de la importancia del aprendizaje y uso de modismos en inglés. En consecuencia, cuando se presentan modismos a los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera, no los pueden identificar y comprender con facilidad. De esta manera, fue posible demostrar el nivel de dificultad que tienen con la comprensión de modismos y cómo es posible superarlo.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **PROBLEMS IN UNDERSTANDING AND USING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS OF EFL STUDENTS FROM THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF GENERAL ENGLISH AT PUCESE IN 2014**

This research dealt with the understanding and using of idiomatic expressions, and difficulties encountered by EFL (English as a foreign language) learners. This study was focused on students from the highest levels of General English at PUCESE, who were asked to complete a questionnaire. The findings of this study were divided into three categories in order to identify and analyze the level of difficulty students have in the comprehension, learning and using of idioms.

The questionnaire was designed to analyze the three factors of idiom comprehension; familiarity, semantic transparency, and context of idioms. The participants were presented with ten idioms in a written text with a multiple choice task to check their familiarity with idioms in English. In the semantic transparency test, students were given some common idioms with figurative meaning to translate into Spanish. In the context test, students were given seven idiomatic expressions into sentences that must be translated into Spanish according to the context. And at the end, the participants were asked about their knowledge and interest on learning the expressions presented before, without let them know that those were idioms. Moreover, teachers were needed to get information about the importance of learning and using idioms. Accordingly, when idioms are presented to EFL students, they cannot identify and comprehend them with facility. In this way, it was possible to demonstrate the level of difficulty EFL learners have with the understanding and using of idioms and how it is possible to overcome it.

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1. Problem Statement**

The following research was based on the theories of how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners understand and use idioms, and the difficulties they find with them. EFL is a term used to say how speakers of different native languages study English. It is known that, English is a language taught and spoken in many countries; therefore it is learnt by speakers of other languages. If one speaker decides to learn EFL, it is because English is not an official language spoken in his country. This is the case of Ecuador, in which English is taught and learnt as a foreign language and that is included as a part of its culture.

Every language has its own idioms as English and Spanish. Carter (1987) as quoted in Mezmaiz (2010) defines “idioms as special combinations with restricted forms and meanings that cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of the words which make them up. Accordingly, an idiom is learned and used as a single unit. It should not be analyzed into its constituents; it is unchangeable and always carries a figurative meaning.” It means that idioms are expressions that can be understood differently in combination or separated, which causes problems in their use when speakers want to include them in their speech to express any idea.

This study was focused on the idiomatic expressions that are commonly used by native speakers of English and its effects on EFL learners. Most of them use these expressions in conversations every day, since they are part of their daily life. That is why, foreign learners need to learn them to become fluent in a second language (L2). Learners have difficulties in identifying, understanding and interpreting them, due to the fact that words and phrases can have different meanings depending on different factors. These factors that influence their comprehension could be the relationship to mother tongue expressions, familiarity, context, structure, or the figurative sense.

The translation of idioms is different to their interpretation. When English learners use their mutual intelligibility in using idioms, that is to say, a situation in

which two or more speakers of a language can understand each other, it often does not match the one used by a native speaker (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, and Harnish, 2001).

“Some idioms are not always obvious and some are more recognizable than others” (Eftekhari, 2008), because of the similarities between the mother tongue and the target language. When they find an idiom the first thing they do is to translate it literally, since they are not familiar with it, and then they notice it does not make sense. It shows that it is not easy to deal with them, if English learners do not have the ability to recognize and interpret them correctly, and also they do not have the chance to use them in daily conversations with native speakers.

Despite recent studies that were made in the field of translation theory and application, idiomatic expressions still pose a serious challenge for translators and EFL learners. So, it is necessary to discover how to overcome these difficulties.

### **1.1.1 Research Questions**

According to the above mentioned aspects, the research questions that will guide this work will be as follows:

- Which are the most common difficulties EFL students face with understanding and using English idioms?
- How these difficulties could be identified and analyzed?
- What is the level of difficulty students have in the comprehension of English idioms?
- How is it possible to avoid the difficulties in understanding and using idiomatic expressions?

### **1.1.2 Significance of the Study**

This work is based on the study of idioms and how EFL students deal with them. Around the world, the teaching and learning of English is being widely extended and many speakers try to improve their English and become fluent speakers in any way and the proper use of idioms is one way to get it. For that reason, the learning of idioms is necessary for EFL learners in Ecuador, if teachers choose not to teach idioms, students will be missing an important cultural element of the language. Since, they are full of traditions and linguistic culture. It is necessary to learn them to speak fluently creating a proper environment for communication. In this way students can improve their communicative skills in the daily context. Taking into account that, in Esmeraldas there are some touristic places, in which people who are learning EFL can have interaction with foreign visitors who speak English. At the PUCESE there are students who take courses of General English, which is a requirement to become professionals in their different fields of study. So, it is necessary to have a good level of English if they will have interaction with English speakers at their workplace. Using idioms in their conversations would get more confidence to share a piece of culture through language.

On the linguistic aspect, the way EFL learners use idioms can produce a misunderstanding and it will be very embarrassing. In real situations where speakers use idioms in wrong contexts, nobody understands what they are trying to explain or what they really want to say and after all of that, the conversation is messed up. It can make a person sound unclear or even ridiculous. For this reason, English learners take certain risks when they attempt to incorporate idioms in their speech, therefore it is necessary to identify and use them in the correct way.

## **1.2 Objectives**

### **1.2.1 General Objective:**

- To analyze the difficulties EFL students from the highest levels of General English at PUCESE face to understand and use English idioms.

### **1.2.2 Specific Objectives:**

- To diagnose the difficulties EFL students have in using idioms in General English.
- To find out the level of difficulty students have in the comprehension of English idioms.
- To design an effective strategy for explaining idiomatic expressions through a booklet for teachers, so as to improve student's interpretation and use of them.

## 1.3 Theoretical Background

### 1.3.1 Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

SLA is the process of learning or acquire a second language after learning a native language. In this process, it is involved the learning of idioms for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. “Language acquisition refers to the process of natural assimilation, involving intuition and subconscious learning, which is the product of real interactions between people where the learner is an active participant” (Krashen, 1983). He states that, 'acquisition' can take place only when people comprehend messages in the target language (krashen, 1983). In the case of idioms acquisition, speakers acquire idioms when they understand its usage in the target language. They are learnt unconsciously if learners have a wide interaction with L2, so they should have a high level of language learning and speaking fluency.

Krashen (1985) claims that human acquire language in only one way by understanding messages, or by receiving ‘comprehensible input’. They are able to understand language containing unacquired grammar with the help of context, which includes extra linguistic information, our knowledge of the world and previously acquired linguistic competence. This is one of his language acquisition theories called *The Input Hypothesis*, which states that any person can acquire and comprehend language without learning its grammar system.

Another theory developed by Krashen (1983) is the *Monitor hypothesis*, it poses that acquisition and learning are used in very specific ways. Individuals who learn a second language can internalize the target language using two means. The first one is 'acquisition', which is an unconscious way of processing and acquiring language. The second one is a conscious way of learning a language by following specific rules. The 'monitor' is the mean by which a learner can correct himself after considering it needed. (krashen, 1983). This means, L2 learners go through both

process in the learning or acquisition of language depending on their necessity of language.

Krashen (1983), believes that:

'Fluency' in second language performance is due to 'what we have acquired', not 'what we have learned': Adults should do as much acquiring as possible for the purpose of achieving communicative fluency. Therefore, the monitor should have only a minor role in the process of gaining communicative competence. Similarly, Krashen (1983) suggests three conditions for its use: (1) there must be enough time; (2) the focus must be on form and not on meaning; (3) the learner must know the rule (p. 4).

This is to say, L2 speakers get fluency when they acquire language through interactions with real language in order to communicate. But, it is not the case of EFL speakers, since they have other purposes and other conditions for their language use.

### **1.3.2 Idioms**

According to Fowler (1996, as quoted in Roberto de Caro, 2009), “an idiom is a phrase where the words together have a meaning that is different from the dictionary definitions of the individual words, which can make idioms hard for ESL (English as a second language) students and learners to understand”. Idioms are easily included in oral conversations by native speakers; this is because they do not need to know their specific meaning before using them, and that is a problem for foreign speakers of English, because they do need it. To include idioms in their conversations, they should be careful with the structure, meaning and context. So, they find some difficulties to learn and use them.

Idioms can be very expressive, but they can also be very difficult for non-native speakers. Some idioms are easy to understand, for example (This is a piece of cake/ esto es pan comido) which means something is easy; it has many variations in other languages too. When they are similar to the mother tongue (Spanish): many idioms are translated and understood without any difficulty: Better safe than sorry (Más vale prevenir que lamentar) here the figurative sense is easy to understand as the next examples found in Idiom Site (n.d.):

- All roads lead to Rome. / Todos los caminos conducen a Roma.
- Actions speak louder than words. / Las acciones hablan más que las palabras.
- What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over. / Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente.
- Curiosity killed the cat. / La curiosidad mató al gato.
- A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. / Más vale pájaro en mano que ciento volando.
- Costs an arm and a leg. / Cuesta un ojo de la cara.

This is the similarity between idioms and proverbs; they both are said to express something in a metaphorical way in any situation, and speakers are not focused on their construction.

“The complexity of idioms is what makes them so difficult for non-native speakers to learn. However, this complexity is also what can make idioms so interesting to study and learn; they are rarely boring. Learning about idioms, provides a way to learn not only the language, but a little about the people who use it” (Dean Curry, 1982).

These kinds of idioms are composed phrases that refer to a kind of being, situation, or customs using a combination of words. Idioms are not only found in colloquial situations, but they are also used in formal or academic contexts. Their figurative meaning is very far from their direct meaning, we need to understand exactly their meaning before using them (Eftekhari, 2008). Thus, to comprehend the

meaning of an idiom it is necessary to know the context where it is originated, and this is just one of the reasons why English should be studied not translating words and phrases into its Spanish equivalent, rather it should be studied giving them an intrinsic meaning, a mental image or vague phrases of the idea.

Ex. By the way = this phrase means in Spanish “por cierto, a propósito” While translating literally into Spanish would look like this: "por la forma" which does not make much sense in a context in which speakers use this phrase to introduce a statement that was missed.

These analysis gives more light about what it should be taught and learnt about idioms, and what non-native learners should focus on to be able to master them.

### **1.3.3 Idioms and Language and Culture**

Idioms are part of every language culture. It is very important to teach idioms, since learners of L2 are including an important cultural element of language. Culture is a set of beliefs, customs and behaviors that a group of people have or practice according to Hymes, (1964) as quoted in Mezmaz (2010).

Idiomatic expressions are seen as a pervasive language that reflects culture in real situations. As a figurative language, they promote cultural beliefs, customs and behaviors of a speaker through the speech. Speakers include idioms in their conversations to express their emotions, thoughts or points of views (Yağiz, 2013). This is part of communication and they should be accurate with language transfer into the target language, since they tend to misunderstand or to be misunderstood in the transferring of the message. This is due to the relationship between language and culture; the way of communication is affected by the restrictions of the situation in culture, that is to say the place, people, customs and so on. However, Kovecses (2002, as cited in Yağiz, 2013) suggests that in contrast to the traditional view, an idiom is not merely an extraordinary and somewhat complicated utterance of meaning which is special and hard to understand and requires deep linguistic knowledge, but many of them arises from our conceptual understanding comes from

human conceptual system which is natural and not subtle. It means that non-native speakers should have a wide vocabulary and concept, in order to understand unfamiliar idiomatic expressions produced by native speakers in a better way. So, they will be able to transfer and learn culture through language.

According to Negro (2010) the motivation of many idioms derived from three sources: a) reference to customs, historical events, literary works or beliefs; b) reference to cultural domains; c) presence of a metaphor linked to the target culture. These idioms show elements that are part of the cultural heritage of every people. They are areas of reality or experiences that reflects the cultural idiosyncrasies. These are called domains, which are derived from physical experiences and are present in daily life such as sport, clothing, games, war, food, health, etc. When a domain is identified, idioms are recognized, easy to understand and remember (Boers, 2008).

Among the many skills required of the speakers who interpret or translate a language, it is essential having a good general culture. They must have enough knowledge of the source culture to understand those references in the text that are not explained within it as they are familiar and quotidian for most readers of the language of origin, and they should be able to adapt it into the target culture as the textual function.

#### **1.3.4 Idioms Processing and Difficulties in Understanding**

To understand the processing of idioms in a better way, it is necessary to focus on the input that ESL speakers receive and their language competence in their target language, as they acquire idioms in their daily speech (Krashen, 1982).

Cain, Towse, & Knight (2009) determined two different language processes contribute to developmental differences in idiom comprehension: The semantic analysis of an idiomatic phrase which involves retrieving alternate meanings of key words and computing a non-literal meaning of the phrase. And the inference from context which is the language process used to derive the meanings of unfamiliar or unknown idioms. Which means the development of these skills are fundamental for

processing and acquiring figurative competence of language, for instance it is possible to demonstrate a higher levels of idiom comprehension in earlier ages.

Cain *et al*, (2009) argued that semantic analysis and inference from context both support idiom comprehension. Their research supports the proposal that inference from context develops early and semantic analysis develops later. That is to say, learners can construct meaning after identifying language in context.

Cain *et & Oakhill and Lemmon*, (2005) demonstrated that there are three factors in idiom comprehension: familiarity, semantic transparency and context. They state that idioms that are presented in texts are easier to understand than those are presented in isolation. It means that L1 learners can easily comprehend idioms in context rather than meaning. They maintain that ‘context might facilitate the interpretation of figurative language by providing the necessary semantic information from which reader (listener) can extract or infer the appropriate sense of expression’ Cain *et al* (2005, p.67). Semantic transparency refers to the relative correspondence of an idiom’s literal and figurative meanings. Nippold & Taylor (1995) argued that, the frequency with which an idiom occurs in a language is often defined as familiarity (as cited in Fusté-Herrmann, 2008). Context refers to the contextual cues which are imperative for comprehension of unfamiliar idioms in either the oral or written modality, particularly if idioms are more opaque in nature (Qualls, O’Brien, Blood, & Hammer, 2003 cited in Fusté-Herrmann, 2008). For L2 learners, is not common to hear or use idioms in their environment, so they are not familiar with the expressions that have figurative meanings. But, they can find clues in the situation in context and it is possible to guess the figurative meaning of those expressions by comparing their L1 to L2. It is a heavy task, because these expressions usually do not have transparency.

Jacqueline Ambrose (2003) states that understanding the lexicon of English demands more than knowing the denotative meaning of words, it requires its speakers to have connotative word comprehension and more, an understanding of figurative language. This is another reason why EFL learners cannot easily deal with these demands frequently. Since, they do not have the ability to comprehend

the figurative language of idioms, this is to say, words with a meaning that is different from their literal interpretation. EFL speakers are not surrounded by natives, so there is not chance to adopt their idiomatic expressions in daily conversations. But, if they knew in which context use these expressions and what is the figurative sense of the message, it would be easier and helpful for them to interpret it when they associate the meaning and the situation in context, so they can realize if it has a metaphorical meaning or not.

According to Cooper (1999, as cited in Winis et Zakaria, 2013), idiom study presents a special language problem for all language learners because the figurative meaning is unpredictable. It is seen in the receptive skills, like listening and reading. Sometimes, EFL learners cannot predict the meaning of the message, because it requires a wide linguistic knowledge and a high level of comprehensibility. The more input they have, the more output they produce. Krashen (1985), cited in Bortfeld et Brennan (1997), states that we acquire the target language only when we understand language (*comprehensible input*). Then, the information (*intake*) is shown when language is produced as well as it is understood (*comprehensible output*). That is to say, the identification of a specific idiom and its meaning also depends on the level of familiarity and the degree of similarity between the two languages, the L1 and L2. If a language user is familiar with a particular idiom, he or she will process it more quickly (Liu 2008, cited in Kostadinova 2013).

Levorato & Cacciari (1992, cited in Zarei et Shahidi, 2013), coined the term *figurative competence* to focus on the production and comprehension of idioms. This type of competence refers to the ability to decode and encode figurative expressions. Which means the translation or conversion of a message from a code into the original form of language.

Cooper (1999) asserts that although L2 idiom comprehension have a high level of difficulty, learning these is essential for second or foreign language learners as idioms are used in all forms of discourse (as cited in Zarei et Shahidi, 2013). According to Ellis (1997, as mentioned in Zarei et Shahidi, 2013), the knowledge of idioms and the ability to know how to use them in a second language are important

indicators of the communicative competence of a language learner. These are two main reasons for learning and teaching idioms for EFL students. If they are able to manage them, it means that they can understand and use language to communicate in any social environment and consequently to achieve conversational fluency.

To make this possible, it is necessary to have some knowledge about teaching and learning of idioms specifically for EFL learners.

### **1.3.5 Teaching and Learning Strategies**

When teachers teach idioms to their students, they should choose traditional idioms, because they are more obvious instead of choosing the most useful ones. So, they could copy the ones they hear in any situation they use English language. However, it would be appropriate that idioms are taught to upper-intermediate or advanced students, assuming that these are individuals who are ready to take their English fluency to the next level.

Lennon (1998) believes that students will become highly motivated to translate their language's metaphors into the target language so as to share with the class their own culture method of metaphor encoding (as cited in Winis et Zakaria, 2013). This is one reason why idioms should be taught in the classroom in order to develop their abilities, especially in speaking skill since, it allows learners to make use of them unconsciously, so they get fluency. They are usually curious and anxious to learn how to say their common expressions in L2. This is a higher motivation for them and teachers should use strategies that allow them to increase their vocabulary and enrich their linguistic knowledge, so they can be involved with the activities through the interaction with idioms in different situations and contexts.

In relation to this, an interesting study case made by Cooper (1999, as cited in Zarei et Shahidi, 2013), analysed the online processing strategies used by nonnative speakers of English who were given the meaning of idioms presented in a written context. The findings showed that most of the participants engaged in a *heuristic approach* to idioms comprehension. It means that in their L1, they tend to

discover the semantic of idioms through their mutual intelligibility and identification of language in context, which is helpful to guess the possible meaning of the given message. However, they tend to fail their comprehension when they use their L1 knowledge and it does not provide enough information. This happens when they find similar idioms between their mother tongue and the target language.

### **1.3.6 Theories of Teaching**

In this study the object of inquiry is the formal learning in which the learners receive instruction that takes place in a classroom Saville-Troike (2006), cited in Rannveig (2014). The language teaching in a classroom where students learn and use L2 is called formal instruction. To teach L2 language teachers apply some teaching methods as the direct method, which emerged at the end of the 19th century, the target language should be the only language used in the classroom. As a result, the Grammar-translation method, which translated sentences from the target language (L2) to the students' first language and vice versa, was abandoned. A few centuries later, under the influence of the behaviourists, the direct method was transformed into the Audio-lingual method. By applying a stimulus-response-reinforcement model where small fractions of the L2 were drilled, the learners were shield from making mistakes argued by Harmer (2007) cited in Rannveig (2014). All of these teaching methods are adaptable and useful for the learning of idioms especially for the different skills development. For the productive skills as speaking, teachers can create an English-environment applying the direct method in order to make students include idioms in their oral conversations, at least in the classroom. For writing, teachers should apply the grammar translation method to make students translate some idioms in literary texts, taking into account punctuation, spelling and genre. On the other hand, for the receptive skills as listening students can be asked to repeat some useful idioms given by the teacher to improve pronunciation, intonation and accents. For reading, teacher can promote reading texts for scanning and get vocabulary to make students become adapted readers.

In the classroom there are three sources of input, the teacher, the materials utilized and the other learners according to Gass and Selinker (2001) cited in Rannveig (2014). The teacher is the mediator, who tries to create an English environment for encouraging students to talk and develop their linguistics skills. The materials are the resources used by the teacher to facilitate language teaching and get students' interest. The other learners are the peers who are in the same learning process and may help the others with some difficulties.

The use of the students' L1 could have positive effects in terms of identity, group dynamics, and the noticing of differences and comparisons between their L1 and L2. However, the students must be challenged to speak and produce their L2 in order to practice, Harmer (2007) cited in Rannveig (2014). It is unavoidable not to use L1 for EFL students, nevertheless they can feel identified and be encouraged to use L2 using the same phrases they get used to say in the same way they do it in their L1. Once they have learnt vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation, they are able to practice and feel more confidence and be accurate with the language use.

### **1.3.7 Language Learning Strategies (LLS)**

As every learning process should have strategies or methods in order to acquire language with effectiveness. In the acquisition of idioms there are strategies to learn them too. Williams and Burden (1997) cited in Zarei et Shahidi (2013) state that the cognitive approach to language learning has affected language learning strategies research. This is because the effect of language learning strategies on language learning is undeniable, argued by Zarei and Elekaei (2012, cited in Zarei et Shahidi, 2013). That is to say, learning strategies influence the domain of the language learners, so that they will seek ways to improve the implementation of such strategies. As Cotterall (2000), cited in Zarei et Shahidi (2013) argued, every learner has his own learning style, so he can be able to notice what strategies could be applied in his learning process. In previous studies is shown that these strategies are created and applied according to learner's proficiency and competence.

Cooper (1999, as cited in Zarei & Shahidi, 2013) identified a number of other strategies, used by learners to understand the meaning of L2 idioms, including the following: (the frequency of use is mentioned in parentheses)

- Guessing from context (28% of the time)
- Discussing and analyzing the idioms (24%)
- Using the literal meanings of idioms (19%)
- Using background knowledge (7%)
- Repeating or paraphrasing the idioms (7%)
- Connecting L2 idioms to L1 idioms (5%)
- Other strategies like personal discussion and meta-analysis of the idiom (2%)

According to the mentioned strategies, it is shown that most of the speakers guess idioms from context, which is more helpful for them in every situation in context when they relate both languages, so it is possible to interpret idioms with facility. As a second option they choose discussing and analyzing the idioms which is more complex but necessary when there is not any clue or any relationship between both L1 and L2. After that, they choose to use the literal meaning of idioms which is the way to recognize them and see what should be the appropriate meaning of a word or expression.

Zarei et Shahidi (2013), refer that:

“Language learning strategies can be generally divided into two main categories: direct and indirect strategies. Memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies are considered as direct strategies. Metacognitive, affective, and social strategies are indirect strategies. Unlike direct strategies, indirect strategies do not have a direct effect on the target language, but have a significant effect on language learning” (Oxford’s, 1990).

Mäntylä (2004) also suggests that there are many techniques that can be used for comprehending and learning idioms:

- Using images and imagination
- Making a relation between meaning and form
- Using actions, objects, and pictures
- Using guessing strategies
- Using contextual clues

These are the most common and valid techniques used by L2 learners when they find idiomatic expressions in a text or speech, in order to comprehend them after having identified them.

### **1.3.8 Effective Activities for Teaching English Idioms to EFL Learners**

According to Wu (2008) “Apparently, teaching EFL learners to use English idioms is considerably critical for EFL teachers”. This is because they do not know what to expect on students and their reactions, for that it is necessary to apply strategies for teaching idioms and to encourage students to learn and use them in proper situations. In the follow activity it is applied one strategy that Wu (2008) suggests to teach idioms:

“Applying English Idioms through Dialogue Writing and Role-play” Dialogues and role-play are useful written and oral activities, so that students are asked to work in pairs and to performance the dialogue in front of the class. In this way they are motivated to write freely and practice the use of idioms with confidence and having fun. They can remember the dialogues they wrote as they share them with their classmates. Thus, dialogue writing and role-play are useful and interesting activities for students’ meaningful and efficient drills (Wu, 2008).

Once idioms are acquired and learnt, it is necessary to be aware about its usage and domain, taking into consideration its importance in communication.

### **1.3.9 Importance of Metalinguistic Awareness Competence**

Tunmer & Herriman (1984) defined Metalinguistic awareness as “the ability to reflect upon and manipulate the structural features of spoken language, treating language itself as an object of thought, as opposed to simply using the language system to comprehend and produce sentences”. This is what EFL teachers should have in order to teach language and make students to be aware of their language behaviour in social situations, which means that they will be more careful when speaking. Students develop their language competence when they know what to say; thinking about expressions that may be appropriate to the situation or conversation in process, considering to the listeners and their level of comprehension. So, they unconsciously study language process on their minds before produce it. Research shows that the metalinguistic ability becomes more developed during school-age and adolescent years, Nippold and Taylor (1995) cited in Rannveig (2014). In this period learners have more awareness and more competence to think about what they want to express and how to do it.

On the other hand, Gass and Selinker (2001) cited in Rannveig (2014) define metalinguistic awareness as “one’s ability to consider language not just as a means of expressing ideas or communicating with others, but also as an object of inquiry”. L1 speakers have linguistics competence since they are children, which means this competence is more developed when they grow up, and they start to analyze their L1 and make questions like why is it necessary to order the words (morphology), to order the sentences (syntax), to follow grammar patterns for creating phrases (grammar) and so on. The only thing they know is they need to communicate with the others and they can do it through language. When they answer those questions to themselves and clarify their doubts, it is said they are developing their metalinguistic awareness.

According to Nippold (2006) cited in Rannveig (2014), figurative expressions, such as idioms, are learnt through metalinguistic strategies. Nippold points out three metalinguistic strategies important to the process of learning a

language: contextual abstraction, metalexical analysis, and world experience. The first one is the pragmatic awareness, it involves the purposes for which we use language. The second one is syntactic awareness which is the ability to think about the structure of language. The final category is phonological and word awareness which refer to the ability to think about and use phonemes and words according to Snow, Burns, & Griffin (1998 as cited in Lightsey & Frye, 2004).

The contextual abstraction is the strategy applied when the learner makes use of the linguistic context surrounding the expression in order to infer meaning, whereas the learner applying the metalinguistic analysis only uses the lexical items of the expression to infer meaning. The learner's amount of exposure to figurative expressions in a meaningful communicative context shows the importance of the third metalinguistic strategy, 'world experience' argued by Nippold (2006) cited in Rannveig (2014).

The comparisons and translations that L1 students make between their L1 and L2, whether consciously or subconsciously, are considered a contribution to the development of a learner's metalinguistic competence argued by Gass and Selinker (2001) mentioned in Rannveig (2014). Since, students learn to translate L1 into L2 they may discover their ways to talk into the L2 acquiring the same vocabulary they use in their L1. They have to make sure the translation is correct, once they have analyzed the grammatical and lexical items. In this way they show their ability to think and analyze the language structure they are using.

As a teaching method, translation of L2 idioms into L1 can reveal the variety of idiomatic ways of saying things to the learner Harmer (2007) cited in Rannveig (2014). Using this teaching method, teachers may discover some ways to give instructions to students using idiomatic words or expressions in order to create an English environment in the classroom and make them acquire some vocabulary on their speaking.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Method**

The method used in this research was the analytical method; it analyzes the generalizations and checking that were given in the research development. This method allowed writing conclusions and recommendations after analyzing the obtained results in this work, which could be taken into consideration for the scientific community and the public in general.

### **2.2 Research Design**

The type of research applied in this study was descriptive; it allows to get information about the current state of a phenomenon or situation and it is used to analyze how a phenomenon and its components occurs. Basically, it details the phenomenon studied by measuring its attributes. In this case, it describes the situations in which EFL learners are involved and the problems they found in this process. For that, it is necessary to highlight the similarities, differences and meaningful relationships between English and Spanish idioms, through collecting data on the theoretical basis of a hypothesis. This type of research will help to provide answers to the research questions.

### **2.3 Population and Sample**

The development of this research was carried out at the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador in Esmeraldas from January 27<sup>th</sup> to February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

A total of 52 participants were asked to fill a survey. A group of 37 students of 4 classes in General English from fifth and sixth of Computer Systems, and seventh levels of Accounting and Auditing, and International Business were taken to fill the survey. There were two reasons for this; the first due to the fact that, there are a small number of students in the highest levels of the different careers at PUCESE; and the second is that, they supposed to have a high level of English

learning to understand and use idiomatic expressions. And also, 15 teachers from General English took the survey to get information about the using of idioms in the classroom.

## **2.4 Instrumentation**

To fulfill the objectives posed, a survey was developed to obtain the specific information about the difficulties EFL students face with idiomatic expressions. But, firstly the pilot test was applied to a small group of students from fifth level of International Business, just to check its validity and reliability.

This survey was developed through a questionnaire applied to collect specific information about the comprehension, learning and using of idiomatic expressions in English. After that, the obtaining of results was given using Microsoft office Excel 2013 to make the count of the answers per each question and finally make the mathematical calculation and apply the statistical analysis.

## **2.5 Ethical Standards**

This study was developed in two weeks with the permission of teachers from General English of the PUCESE who were very cooperative, by completing the survey addressed to them and allowing the researcher to take the survey to students in their class time.

## **2.6 Data Collection Procedure**

The collection of information was aimed to teachers and students from General English at PUCESE. A questionnaire of four papers was given to the participants to collect specific information about the comprehension, learning and using of idioms in English in order to identify their difficulties.

The questionnaire was designed on three papers based on the three factors of idiom comprehension; familiarity, semantic transparency, and context of idioms. On the first one, were presented 10 common idioms in a multiple choice task selected

from the English club webpage (n.d.) to check if students were familiar or unfamiliar with those expressions, by choosing the correct answer. On the second one, were presented 10 idiomatic expressions with figurative meaning, and students were asked to translate them. On the third one, were given 7 idiomatic expressions into sentences that must be translated into Spanish according to the context. And at the last paper, the participants were asked about their knowledge and interest on learning the expressions presented before, without let them know that those were idioms. Also, for teachers was given a survey to check the learning and using of idioms. After that, the collected data was counted, scored and put in tables to better visualize the obtained results and make the interpretation, discussion and final conclusions of this research.

Moreover, to meet the third objective of this research a booklet was designed to provide teachers some effective strategies they can choose for teaching idioms in the classroom. The tool used to design this booklet was Microsoft Publisher and all the information was selected and put in three sides. The strategies used were chosen to EFL students but, they could be adapted for other English learners. Teachers can find in the booklet some tips and activities to develop in the classroom in order to encourage students to learn idiomatic expressions in English. And also, some useful resources were given to teach idioms and it was suggested how to assess students in order to check their learning.

### 3. RESULTS

The findings of this study were divided into three categories in order to identify and analyze the level of difficulty students have in the comprehension, learning and using of idioms.

#### **Idiom comprehension**

Questionnaire applied to students:

**Table I: Familiarity**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Familiar	143	38,65
Unfamiliar	227	61,35
Total	370	100,00

#### **Interpretation:**

Among the 370 total expressions shown to the participants, 38,65% were familiar to them and were well identified and 61,35% were totally unknown expressions. So, the majority of the students were unfamiliar with those expressions and they could not identify them.

**Table II: Semantic Transparency**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Figurative meaning	76	20,54
Literal meaning	149	40,27
None	145	39,19
Total	370	100

**Interpretation:**

According to the results; 20,54% of the idiomatic expressions translated into Spanish were given a figurative meaning, 40,27% were given a literal meaning, and 39,19% were not given any meaning. So, the majority of the expressions was given a literal meaning and it was related with idiomatic expressions in Spanish.

**Table III: Context**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
In context	91	35,14
Out of context	168	64,86
Total	159	100,00

**Interpretation:**

The results showed that, 64,86% of the expressions given to the participants were translated out of context and 35,14% were translated within context and with a figurative sense. So, the majority of the expressions presented into sentences were translated out of context without any concrete sense.

## Learning of idioms

**Table IV: Idioms knowledge**

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Yes	20	54,05
No	17	45,95
Total	37	100,00

### **Interpretation:**

Among the 37 participants surveyed; 54% stated they have seen or heard the expressions presented and 46% said they have not. So, the majority of the participants have some knowledge about idiomatic expressions.

**Table V: Learning's source of idioms**

Alternatives	Frequency	%
Classroom	16	43,24
Movie	11	29,73
Internet	11	29,73
Conversation	4	10,81
Radio	1	2,70

### **Interpretation:**

In relation to the previous question, the participants chose the different sources in which they could have heard or seen about those expressions. The 43,24% of the participants said they have heard about those expressions from the classroom, the 29,73% from movies, the 29,73 also from internet, the 10,81% from conversations and the 2,70 from the radio. So, the major source used to learn idioms was in the classroom.

**Table VI: Frequency Use of Idioms**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Never	9	24,32
Rarely	16	43,24
Sometimes	10	27,03
Often	2	5,41
Always	0	0,00
Total	37	100,00

**Interpretation:**

The results show that; the 24% of the participants never use these expressions in the classroom, the 43% do it rarely, the 27% sometimes, the 6% often, and no one do it always. Most students rarely use these expressions in the classroom.

**Table VII: Interest on Idioms Learning**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	37	100
No	0	0
Total	37	100

**Interpretation:**

The results clearly shows that all the 37 participants would like to learn more about these expressions and they are interested in learning them, and no one said the opposite

## Using of idioms

Survey addressed to teachers

**Table VIII: Idioms Use in conversations**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	9	60
No	6	40
Total	15	100

### **Interpretation:**

According to the statistical analysis, 60% of the teachers said they do use idioms in their daily conversation, and 40% said they do not. So, most teachers do use idioms in general.

**Table IX: Frequency use of idioms in daily conversation**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Never	6	40,00
Rarely	4	26,67
Sometimes	2	13,33
Often	3	20
Always	0	0
Total	15	100,00

### **Interpretation:**

Among the 15 participants; 40% said they never use idioms in their daily conversation, 27% do it rarely, 13% sometimes, 20% often, and no one do it always. So, the majority answered they never use idioms in their daily conversation.

**Table X: Frequency use of idioms in the classroom**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Never	0	0
Rarely	9	60,00
Sometimes	4	26,67
Often	2	13,33
Always	0	0
Total	15	100,00

**Interpretation:**

According to the results, none of the teachers said they never use idioms in the classroom, 60% do it rarely, 27% sometimes, 13% often, and no one do it always. So, the majority answered they rarely use these expressions in the classroom.

**Table XI: Skills development on teaching of idioms**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Speaking	15	100
Listening	12	80
Writing	3	20,00
Reading	5	33,33

**Interpretation:**

According to the statistical analysis; the participants were asked to choose the more developed skills by teaching idioms in the classroom, and 100% answered the speaking, 80% chose listening, 20% writing and 33,33% reading. So, the majority think the speaking skill would be the more developed if they teach idioms in the classroom.

**Table XII: Importance of idioms in the linguistic aspect**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	15	100,00
No	0	0
Total	15	100,00

**Interpretation:**

It is clearly shown that all the teachers think the teaching of idioms in English would help students to get language fluency, and no one disagreed.

**Table XIII: Importance of idioms in the cultural aspect**

<b>Alternatives</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	15	100,00
No	0	0
Total	15	100,00

**Interpretation:**

The table showed that all the teachers think the using of idioms would enrich the English learners' cultural background and no one disagreed.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

In relation to the objectives posed in this study, the results showed the difficulties EFL students from the highest levels at PUCESE have with the understanding and using of idioms. Through the questionnaire were identified the students' difficulties in the comprehension, learning and use of idioms and therefore, the level of difficulty they have.

In order to check the students' idiom comprehension three factors were analyzed; familiarity, semantic transparency and context. The participants were presented with ten idioms in a written text with a multiple choice task to check their familiarity with idioms in English. It showed that most of them were not familiar with idioms, so they were not able to identify them. As Eftekhari (2008) stated "Some idioms are not always obvious and some are more recognizable than others", because of the similarities between the mother tongue and the target language. When learners find an idiom the first thing they do is to translate it literally, since they are not familiar with it, and then they notice it does not make sense. In the semantic transparency test, students had to translate idioms with figurative meaning, but some did not match the correct meaning and others did not give any meaning to the idioms. So, it was easier to them to give literal translations, since they could not recognize them and understand its figurative sense. Eftekhari (2008) agreed that, their figurative meaning is very far from their direct meaning, it is necessary to understand exactly their meaning before using them. Thus, to comprehend the meaning of an idiom it is necessary to know the context where it is originated, and this is just one of the reasons why English should be studied not translating words and phrases into its Spanish equivalent, rather it should be studied giving them an intrinsic meaning, a mental image or vague phrases of the idea.

In the context text, most of the idiomatic expressions put into sentences were translated out of context and they did not have any sense. It showed, students were not able to give an appropriate sense to sentences according to its context. In this

way, it was possible to demonstrate that, the majority of the students had big idiom comprehension difficulties.

To check the using of idioms, it was necessary to check the students' knowledge on idioms, the results showed that most of them had heard or seen those expressions without knowing they were idioms. For that, it was needed the source of learning and they asserted they have heard about idioms in the classroom, but very rarely. However, it is shown that all of the students have interest on learning idiomatic expressions in English, since they asserted they would like to learn more about them.

On the other hand, teachers were needed to get information about the importance of learning idioms. So, it was demonstrated they use idioms in their daily conversations, but very rarely. Subsequently, the frequency use of idioms in the classroom is very rarely. But, teachers are conscious that students can develop different skills if they are taught idioms. Moreover, they think the speaking skill would be the more developed if they teach idioms in the classroom. Accordingly, they all agreed that teaching of idioms would help learners to get language fluency and to enrich their cultural background.

In comparison to the background, idioms are difficult to understand and use for EFL learners, since they are rarely taught in the classroom. The results showed that, EFL students from PUCESE have these difficulties with idiomatic expressions in English, because they are not taught in the classroom, so they are not used very often. Accordingly, when idioms are presented to EFL students, they cannot identify and comprehend them with facility. It demonstrates, there is a high level of difficulty in the comprehension of idiomatic expressions.

In view of this situation, the third objective of this research was accomplished in order to avoid these difficulties. A booklet was designed to teachers in which were suggested some effective strategies for teaching idioms in the classroom.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 CONCLUSIONS**

After having analyzed and discussed the results of this research, it was possible to conclude that:

- The majority of the students from the highest levels of General English at PUCESE have difficulties in the comprehension, learning and use of idioms.
- EFL students cannot identify and comprehend idiomatic expressions with facility.
- There is no knowledge about idioms on students but, all of them have interest on learning idiomatic expressions in English.
- The teaching of idioms is important in two aspects: in the linguistic aspect to help EFL learners to get fluency and in the cultural aspect to enrich their cultural background.

### **5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- It should be appropriate the teaching of idioms in the classroom, encourage students to learn them, and make students know its importance in the English language learning.
- In order to avoid the difficulties with idioms, it would be necessary for teachers to use some effective strategies for the teaching of idioms to EFL learners and also use them in the classroom.
- It is necessary to highlight the advantages of idioms learning in both, linguistic and cultural aspect of the English language learning.

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# **ANNEXES**

## Illustrated American Idioms

Idioms	Definition
Actions speak louder than words	The things that people do (actions) are more important than the things they say (words)
Bark up the wrong tree	To misdirect one's efforts or argument
Break the ice	To get things started, particularly by means of a social introduction or conversation
Bury the hatchet	To end a dispute
Be on target	To achieve a desired goal; to be correct in one's analysis or assessment of something.
Catch (someone's) eye	To attract someone's visual attention
Come out of (one's) shell	To stop being shy
Cost (someone) a mint/ an arm and a leg	To cost a great deal of money
Cry over spilled milk	To be unhappy because of a past event that cannot be changed
Get (a) hold of (someone)	To contact someone or communicate with someone, usually by telephone.
Get it in the neck	To receive something unpleasant, such as criticism or punishment.
Get the message	To understand something that is only hinted at, perhaps because it is unpleasant
Give (someone) a ring	To call someone on the telephone.
Head over heels in love	very much in love; uncontrollably in love
In the same boat	In the same bad situation.
Kill two birds with one stone	To accomplish two objectives with one action.
Miss the boat	To miss an opportunity because one is too late.
Once in a blue moon	very rarely,
A piece of cake	Something that is easy to do.
Poker face	An expressionless face; a face that reveals nothing of one's feelings or thoughts.
Pop the question	To ask someone to get married.
Shoot the breeze	To chat or to pass time by chatting; to talk idly.
Spill the beans	To reveal a secret.

**TEST**

- *Purpose: To diagnose the difficulties EFL (English as a foreign language) students from the highest levels of General English at PUCESE face to understand and use English idioms.*
- *Responsible: Tatiana Yáñez*

➤ **CIRCLE YOUR ANSWER:** Match the sentence with the appropriate item.

**1. *face to face***

Monica and Sam first met face to face...

- a. in an online chatroom
- b. at a party in Paris
- c. over the phone

**2. *kill two birds with one stone***

Sandra killed two birds with one stone by going to Paris. She practiced her French before her exam and she...

- a. got better at speaking French
- b. read a book on French history
- c. went to her friend's wedding

**3. *kill time***

If you're stuck in traffic jam, a good way to kill time is to...

- a. leave the car and walk
- b. get some beers and have a party
- c. read a book

**4. *a piece of cake***

Her homework was a piece of cake because,

- a. the house was very quiet
- b. it was filled with nuts
- c. it was so easy to do

**5. *a pain in the neck***

Mark's being a pain in the neck this morning, so...

- a. I'll try to avoid him

- b. I'll help him with his work
- c. I'll give him a massage

**6. *caught red-handed***

The guy in the apartment next door was caught red-handed...

- a. watching bad T.V.
- b. peeping on our cute neighbor
- c. cooking an awful dinner

**7. *see through rose-colored glasses***

If someone sees through rose-colored glasses, they don't see...

- a. the unpleasant side of things
- b. the funny side of things
- c. the bright side of life

**8. *put your foot in your mouth***

I really put my foot in my mouth. I felt...

- a. my foot
- b. so happy
- c. so embarrassed

**9. *(it's) raining cats and dogs***

It's raining cats and dogs, so...

- a. watch out for falling animals
- b. make sure you take an umbrella
- c. keep your pets inside

**10. *Have your head in the clouds***

William's head is in the clouds. He needs to...

- a. take better care of himself
- b. be a bit more realistic
- c. stop thinking he's better than everyone else

➤ **TRANSLATE THE FOLLOWING EXPRESSIONS INTO SPANISH:**

1. CROCODILE TEARS

---

2. A STORM IN A TEA-CUP

---

3. TO HAVE SOMETHING ON THE TIP OF ONE'S TONGUE

---

4. A PAIN IN THE NECK

---

5. KILL TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

---

6. IT'S A PIECE OF CAKE

---

7. ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

---

8. IT COSTS AN ARM AND A LEG

---

9. IF THE SHOE FITS, WEAR IT

---

10. HIT THE NAIL ON THE HEAD

---

➤ **COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES INTO SPANISH**

1. Monica and Sam first met face to face at a party in Paris.

Mónica y Sam se vieron por primera vez \_\_\_\_\_ en una fiesta en Paris.

2. Sandra killed two birds with one stone by going to Paris. She practiced her French before her exam and she went to her friend's wedding.

Sandra \_\_\_\_\_ yendo a Paris. Ella practicó su francés antes de su examen y fue a la boda de su amiga.

3. Her homework was a piece of cake, because it was so easy to do.

Su tarea fue \_\_\_\_\_, porque fue tan fácil de hacer.

4. Mark is being a pain in the neck this morning, so I'll try to avoid him.

Mark está siendo \_\_\_\_\_ esta mañana, así que trataré de evitarlo.

5. It's raining cats and dogs, so make sure you take an umbrella.

\_\_\_\_\_, así que asegúrate de llevar un paraguas.

6. William's head is in the clouds. He needs to be a bit more realistic.

\_\_\_\_\_. El necesita ser un poco más realista.

7. They lost all their money in the casino, and now they're broke.

Ellos perdieron todo su dinero en el casino, y ahora \_\_\_\_\_.

## SURVEY

### ➤ CHOOSE AND TICK YOUR ANSWER

1. Have you ever seen or heard the expressions previously presented?

YES  NO

2. If so, where from?

In the classroom

In a movie

On the internet

In a conversation

On the radio

3. How often do you use these expressions in the classroom?

Always  Often  Sometimes  Rarely  Never

4. Would you like to learn more about these expressions?

YES  NO

**Thanks for your cooperation!**

**SURVEY**

- *Purpose: To diagnose the difficulties EFL (English as a foreign language) students from the highest levels of General English at PUCESE face to understand and use English idioms.*
- *Survey addressed to teachers of General English at PUCESE*
- *Responsible: Tatiana Yáñez Chillambo*

➤ **Choose your answer:**

1. Do you use idioms in your daily conversation?

YES  NO

2. If so, how often?

Always  Often  Sometimes  Rarely  Never

3. How often do you use idioms in the classroom?

Always  Often  Sometimes  Rarely  Never

4. Which skills would be more developed by teaching idioms in the classroom?

Speaking  Listening  Writing  Reading

5. Do you think the teaching of idioms in English would help students to improve their fluency?

YES  NO

6. Do you think the using of idioms would enrich the English learners' cultural background?

YES  NO

ANNEXE #4



## RESOURCES:

- **The Idiom Connection**  
<http://www.idiomconnection.com/> it's a collection of idioms, phrasal verbs and proverbs.
- **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.
- **Idiom Site**  
<http://www.idiomsite.com/> View an alphabetical list of idioms to use with your students.
- **ESL Idiom Page**  
<http://www.eslcafe.com/idioms/id-list.html> View a complete list of all idioms currently in the collection.



## References

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- Smith, L., & Zygonis-Coe, V. (2009). Idioms. For-Pd's Reading Strategy of the Month.
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Teaching of Idioms

IT'S A PIECE OF CAKE

2 + 2 =

**EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM**

▶ Encourage your students to learn idioms.

*It's never too late to learn.*

## TIPS AND STRATEGIES YOU CAN USE TO TEACH IDIOMS IN THE CLASSROOM

The teacher deals with proverbs and idioms when they crop up in their contexts, such as in reading and listening tasks or when you use one naturally in class.

- ♦ The teacher teaches several 'body idioms' together. E.g. to be head and shoulders above the rest, to be long in the tooth, to shoot yourself in the foot etc. It will be easier for students to remember some of them if they're in groups.
- ♦ The teacher uses visuals and pictures to help learners remember them. For example, draw a bird in the hand and two in the bush.
- ♦ The teacher does some matching activities. For example, give students five proverbs that have been cut in half and get them to match them up.
- ♦ The teacher asks students if any of the proverbs translate directly into their own language. Most of the time students will know a similar expression in their language and it can help them to remember them if they compare the differences between English and their language.
- ♦ The teacher tries to put idioms into context. Try to use situations when people actually use the expressions and get students to create dialogues or role-play and to use a few of the proverbs or idioms to reinforce the meaning.



## Effective Activities for Teaching English Idioms to EFL Learners

**Teaching English Idioms in Story context:** Introducing English idioms within interesting stories can possibly help EFL students to understand and remember them better.

**Presenting English Idioms with Rich Illustrations:** English idioms with illustrations could increase college students' idiom understanding better. Thus, it is effective to present English idioms accompanied by visual stimuli that clearly illustrates the idioms being taught.



**Teaching English Idioms with Group Discussion:** group discussion appears to be an effective technique to enhance students' reading comprehension, when understanding the meaning of challenging words, getting the main ideas, and answering questions about what they read.

**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.

**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.

**Teach English Idioms with Retelling and Rewriting.** The retelling and rewriting activities provide students with more chances to be aware of the meanings of English idioms and be

familiar with the English idioms they have just learned.



**Teach English Idioms with Dialogue Writing and Role-Play.** Writing and role-play are useful and interesting activities for students' meaningful and efficient drills. Therefore, dialogues offer students opportunities to act out and practice oral skill before encountering the real world.

## 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;
- c) recognize their ability or inability to explain particular idioms in their own words.
- e) draw literal representations of selected idioms.



teaching of idioms

Get Caught  
Red Handed