

# Effective Activities for Teaching English Idioms to EFL Learners

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English idioms do not mean what they literally mean; however, mass media, textbooks and everyday language represent rich sources of idiomatic expressions. In addition, previous studies indicated that English idioms are difficult for English native speakers, and then they would be much more problematic for ESL/EFL learners (Cooper, 1999; Buchwald, 2000). Therefore, this paper presents various effective activities for EFL learner to learn English idioms effectively. Besides introducing English idioms in story contexts and with visuals, collaboration activities, such as group talk, Readers Theater, retelling, dialogue writing and role-play, can act as a key to increasing students' motivation and involvement in learning English idioms.

## Introduction

It is difficult for English native speakers to master English idioms, let alone EFL learners because the figurative meanings of English idioms cannot be predicted through an analysis of their individual word meanings. It is not surprising, "The trouble with foreigners in this country is that they take everything Americans say literally" (Buchwald, 2000, p. 104). However, idioms are common in American daily life and provide a rich source of American culture (Cooper, 1999). Nippold and Martin (1989) stressed, "Failure to grasp the meanings of idioms can impinge upon an individual's understanding of language in social, academic, and vocational settings" (p. 59). Apparently, teaching EFL learners to use English idioms is considerably critical for EFL teachers. In addition, Strassman and O'Connell (2007) found that students are often able to discuss content, take notes, or create semantic maps for writing; however, they often do not use the new words or concepts taught in class. Thus, I use various effective activities for teaching English idioms to college EFL students in order that they can not only learn them effectively but also apply them practically.

## Teaching English Idioms in Contexts

### The Role of Context in Learning Language

The role of context is central in language learning. It's common that EFL students don't really understand the various meanings of new words in different contexts. That's why EFL students don't know how to apply the words they have learned practically in various contexts. It's fundamental for teachers to provide a rich context for students' language learning and practice. For instance, linguistic contextual information enhances adolescents' interpretation of idioms (Nippold & Martin, 1989). The contextual cues surrounding a particular word can help readers get that's meaning. In contrast, context-reduced language will be hard for readers to tolerate (Brown, 2001). Consequently, it's more effective for EFL students to learn language in meaningful contexts than learn isolated words through memorization and drilling.

### Introducing English Idioms in Story Contexts

Stories have been popularly used to teach and entertain students in language learning. Interesting stories usually draw students' attention and easily make students absorbed in them. Since contextual information is significantly effective for aiding students' understanding English idioms, it is essential for EFL teachers to provide students with rich context. Thus, introducing English idioms within interesting stories can possibly help EFL students to understand and remember them better.

# **Teaching English Idioms with Rich Illustrations**

## **The Role of Illustrations in Reading**

Although there is lingering debate regarding the effect of visuals on reading comprehension, some researchers claim that reading materials accompanied by visuals will be more comprehensible. For example, Scarcella and Oxford (1992) stressed that teachers need to illustrate key vocabulary effectively by showing pictures and diagrams so as to improve the ESL students' reading comprehension (p. 107). Mayer (1999) found that words and pictures presented together helped students recall better than alone. 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.

## **Presenting English Idioms with Rich Illustrations**

According to the effect of illustrations on reading, I collected English idioms in one sentence context. English idioms were presented with pictures to one class of 30 students while without pictures to the other class of 30 students. They were told that those phrases were English idioms first and then they were asked to translate them into Chinese. I found that 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 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 (2000) 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.

### **Applying Group Discussion in Understanding English Idioms**

Students are likely to be passive learners when they receive lectures only in classrooms. On the contrary, small group discussion could stimulate students to be involved in the active process of constructing knowledge. Furthermore, during group discussions, students will learn from each other, whether consciously or unconsciously. Accordingly, I applied group discussion in students' active learning of English idioms before explaining the meaning of idioms to them. Students in group discussion could understand English idioms better than when they were introduced to English idioms within a story only. This demonstrated the significant effect of group talk on students' understanding of English idioms.

## **Teaching English Idioms with Readers Theater**

### **Readers Theater in Reading**

Readers Theater has been viewed as an interesting and 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 (Bafale, 2003) as well as to create interest in and enthusiasm for learning (Ruddell, 1999). Even slow learners can benefit from Readers Theater because there is no memorization required and there is no risk for them at all. Apparently, Readers Theater provides enough opportunity for practice--repeated reading in language learning. This activity also enhances interaction opportunities with peers and makes the reading task more appealing than learning alone.

### **Applying Readers Theater to Practice English Idioms**

I used Readers Theater to help students practice English idioms in order to enhance students' retaining them. Class observation and students' interviews further revealed their positive attitudes, such as excitement toward the implementation of Readers Theater in reading classes. Moreover, students retained English idioms better by applying Readers Theater because it provided students with opportunities for idiom oral practice because of rereading scripts. Consequently, it is obvious to see that Readers Theater has a significant effect on students' learning and retaining English idioms.

## **Teach English Idioms with Retelling and Rewriting**

### **Retelling in Reading**

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 (Brandi-Muller, 2005). 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 (Brandi-Muller, 2005). As a result, retelling activities can reinforce integration of recently learned reading.

### **Applying Retelling and Rewriting to Practice English Idioms**

Since retelling activities are good techniques to facilitate students' reading retrieval, this motivates me to apply the activities in teaching English idioms. After I introduced the meanings of English idioms to my students, I asked my students in pairs to retell the content in their own words instead of the English idioms and to rewrite sentences provided in class by using English idioms. The retelling and rewriting activities provided 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**

### **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). In addition, putting pupils into pairs for the role-play in the daily dialogues is an effective way of oral practice for various ages and levels (Scott & Ytreberg, 2000). Nunan (2003) stressed that role-plays are also excellent 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.

### **Applying English Idioms through Dialogue Writing and Role-play**

Dialogues and role-play are useful written and oral activities so that I assigned my students in pairs to write one dialogue by using the English idioms introduced in class and then act out the dialogue out in the following class. 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.

## **Conclusion**

Since it is vital for EFL learners to learn English idioms in order to master English, it is important for EFL teachers to design various activities for students to use with English idioms and subsequently acquire them efficiently. Moreover, students learn

better when they are provided with collaborative activities because they can interact with peers and share fun in learning. Finally, when teachers integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing activities together in teaching English idioms, students can be involved in the application of English idioms in four skills. Thus, it is effective to teach EFL learners English idiom when they are provided with various activities to practice and utilize English idioms in different contexts.

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