7 tips on teaching idioms in the EFL classroom

How can we effectively teach idiomatic expressions in a foreign language?

Here are 7 points to consider when introducing L2 idioms to our language learners.

It is estimated that the English language contains over 10,000 idiomatic expressions that are widely used both in written and spoken discourse. Whereas in our mother tongue we typically acquire idioms through exposure, in a foreign language environment such expressions may be more difficult to understand and memorize from the first time we encounter them. As Thornbury (2002:127) points out, idioms in a foreign language present problems in “both understanding and in production”. Most idioms allow no variation in their form and a single change or omission of a word could alter their meaning. Many of them also have a narrow register range, which means that they are only used in specific contexts by native speakers. This can be confusing to foreign language learners as they may understand the meaning of an expression but still use it in wrong contexts.

It is therefore a challenge for EFL teachers to find the right teaching techniques for our specific language classrooms in order to help our learners to fully grasp the meaning behind these ‘tricky’ language chunks and to successfully incorporate them in their written and spoken L2 output.
Below you can find some tips in order to facilitate the acquisition and memory retention of these tricky L2 lexical items:

1. **Contextualization: Teaching idioms in their contexts of use**

Placing newly introduced lexis in meaningful contexts is vital for effective vocabulary learning and in particular when it comes to teaching idioms in a foreign language. Our learners need not only to be able to recognize the meaning that underlies L2 idioms, but to also fully understand the contexts in which they are used. In many cases, our EFL students have limited exposure to the foreign language outside the classroom. It is therefore important to provide them with enough **comprehensible input** and with a **variety of examples** of idioms in spoken and written discourse in order for them to be able to become fully aware of the figurative usage of the L2 idiomatic expressions. Contextualization is key to learning idioms as it is through extensive exposure to TL input that our students will slowly be able to detect the positive and negative connotations that underlie the TL idioms and the register in which they are used.
## Teaching idiomatic expressions in the EFL classroom

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### References
2. Deciding what to teach:
   Frequency of use – level of complexity - usefulness

Deciding which idioms to focus on and how to introduce them to the language classroom is also a process that needs our attention. For Schmitt (2000) idioms in a foreign language should be taught based on their frequency of use, their level of complexity and their usefulness. We should therefore be focusing on idiomatic expressions that will be useful to our learners not only for their upcoming language exams but also for communicative purposes.

Examining the level of difficulty of these ‘word chunks’ is also important. We must make sure that our students possess the knowledge and language skills in order to successfully process and infer the meaning of the idioms we introduce them to. We also need to examine which of these expressions will be taught in order to be produced by our learners or simply to be recognized by them in their contexts of use. Our students’ level, age and needs will also determine which lexical items we should be focusing on. Younger learners have a limited cognitive capacity and need to be introduced to lexical chunks that match their level, whereas more advanced levels will need a more intensive focus on idioms in order to achieve native-like proficiency in the TL.

3. Attention to ‘overload’

Many of the idiomatic expressions we find in a foreign language are culture-specific. It is therefore a challenge for foreign language learners to be able to fully grasp the underlying meaning and figurative usage of these word chunks. As Nation (2001) points out, it is unlikely that our EFL learners will immediately store such expressions in their mental lexicon for future use. As a result, introducing only a few idioms at a time to our language classrooms is key, since we cannot expect our learners to remember all these expressions from the first time they encounter them. Recycling and repetition will be very beneficial as our learners need to be given as many opportunities as possible to encounter these expressions in multiple contexts.

4. Boosting memory retention
   (Stories/visuals/examples/Grouping idioms by theme)

Since L2 vocabulary acquisition forms an important part of foreign language teaching, we need to carefully examine and see what works best for your specific classrooms. It is important to examine our students’ different learning styles and adapt our teaching to suit their needs. Visual learners will prefer some sort of realia or vocabulary flashcards, auditory types could benefit from listening to short stories as examples of idiomatic usage, whereas more kinesthetic types will find interactive activities more useful in picking up new vocabulary.

Grouping idioms together by theme could be beneficial to our learners, as they will put together in their mental lexicon words and lexical chunks that are synonymous or
We need to be careful here as grouping idioms that are only notionally related (ex the ones associated with parts of the body) could easily confuse our students (Schmitt, 2000).

The following webpage groups idioms by theme so English teachers can choose which ones to use:


_Treating idioms as lexical chunks_

Treating idiomatic expressions as individual lexical items, as one single ‘unit’ of information will promote memory retention. Our learners need to recognize and memorize them as ‘multiword chunks’ that ‘cluster together’. They need to grasp the meaning behind the words and understand how they are being used figuratively in the TL. They also need to be trained to use contextual clues and detect the positive and negative connotations behind these chunks so that they can use them appropriately in the future.
5. **Student-centered learning: discovering meaning through group work**

Schmitt (2000:145) focuses on the benefits of both explicit teaching and incidental/autonomous learning in vocabulary acquisition and retention. Depending on our specific language classrooms and our students’ needs of it is important to use a variety of different teaching strategies when introducing or recycling L2 lexis and idioms in particular. Some groups of learners could benefit from the explicit teaching of new words, whereas others may pick up or retrieve new lexis more easily from group work and interactive tasks.

6. **Indirect vocabulary learning: guided inferencing**

Moving from explicit vocabulary teaching to implicit learning can also prove to be very beneficial to our learners. This ‘noticing’ can be achieved through the use of a listening/reading task in which learners have to first answer some comprehension questions and then listen/read again in order to focus on the meaning of certain key ‘lexical chunks’. Teachers do not give out the explanations, they make no attempt to highlight the TL forms, but simply guide their learners towards the discovery of the meaning behind the idiomatic phrases through the use of contextual clues. This makes our ss more actively involved in the learning process and fosters language acquisition.

**Learner autonomy**

In addition to focusing on our learners’ active involvement during the lesson, we must also encourage independent thinking to promote vocabulary acquisition. This learner autonomy needs to take place outside the lesson hours too, during individual study. To boost our students’ successful self-development, we must teach them the strategies they need to use to be in charge of their learning and make conscious decisions about it. They must be trained to set their own personal goals, to notice what their strengths and weaknesses are and to reflect on what they should be focusing on based on their individual needs. This of course greatly depends on our learners’ age and level and involves a great amount of effort from the teachers' part as well in order to effectively guide and train their learners towards success.

7. **Recycling and repetition**

In his book *How to Teach Vocabulary*, Thornbury (2002:22) stresses the importance of both receptive and productive skills in the acquisition of lexis. Recycling and repetition of newly acquired vocabulary through a variety of tasks is key to successful language learning. Extensive reading and exposure in general to TL input (through movies, interviews, tv series, podcasts, news broadcasts etc.) is vital to successful vocabulary acquisition and retention. Our learners need to be given the opportunities to encounter the newly acquired idioms in their cultural context and to deepen their understanding of their use in the L2.
When it comes to idioms in particular, we need to regularly check that our students have fully understood their underlying meaning not only through a variety of examples and multiple encounters in different contexts, but also through extensive practice using a variety of different vocabulary tasks. We need to encourage as much practice and give our learners a reason in order to retrieve the words they have previously learned and actively use them to communicate meaning in the TL.

References


