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### ***Working with idioms in first year at advanced courses***

In the process of learning the English language, even at a certain advanced state of mastery, we have all faced some kinds of construction whose elements, individually considered, have been perfectly known, but altogether have turned incomprehensible. We have all been shocked, undoubtedly, by these peculiar language combinations that have been traditionally labeled as Idiomatic Expressions. But these types of structures which have permeated the English language of an invaluable source of semantic resources, uncountable expressive means, and of a unique density in the external formulation of thought, not only result extremely interesting from the linguistic standpoint, which faces us with a great singularity, but also from the didactic point of view, due to the fact that difficulties in mastering these combinations are widely known by all the people devoted to the teaching-learning process of English.

The consideration of the problem from the didactical point of view presents three main aspects: difficulties of methodological sort, which emerge from the characteristics pointed out; the high frequency of usage, which makes these difficulties worsen in direct proportion and finally, the fact that the problem has not been sufficiently regarded or at least with enough deepening and extension.

For all this above mentioned, and out of the great interest gotten to feel for these aspects, we have been encouraged to put this work forward, having as our first main objective to introduce the teaching of idioms since early stages of the learning process of English. For this purpose the work consists of a semantic part, that is, a compilation of idioms related to the different themes one can find in the lessons taught in first year.

This procedure is intended to help students focus on a certain topic and remember particular idioms, following the idea of association as a didactic pattern for recognition. We assume that students, being exposed to this type of language in a systematical way, will certainly make a better appropriation of it.

On the other hand, it is also our purpose, or better, our desire, that this work could possibly contribute to give practical solutions to the methodological problems around the topic, making it somehow easier for its study and learning.

On these grounds we have suggested some typical exercises that can be put into practice while teaching idioms in first year. For our interest we have chosen Spectrum I, one of the textbooks used in class in the majoring of English at the universities in Cuba in first year, during the first term.

This paper is quite longer, however, we have made it shorter to fulfill the requisites for its presentation in the symposium. Therefore we will present some important notes, few examples and the bibliography.

Having already established the semantic and methodological aspects as our main basis for research, we would not like to proceed to that extent, without having a peep inside the world of Idioms.

What is an idiom?

It is worth saying that the terms set expressions, phraseology, idiomatic expressions, and idioms, all stand for the same notion, for what we are going to deal with. However, the term set expressions has been formally selected in preference to such ambiguous terms as phraseology and idioms, since this term is more definite and self-explanatory, pointing out the main characteristics they have: their stability and ready-made nature.

Again, what is an idiomatic expression?

If you understand every word in a text and still you failed to grasp what the text is all about, chances are you are having trouble with the idioms. For example, suppose you read or hear the following:

"Sam is a real cool cat. He never blows his stack and hardly ever flies off the handle. What's more, he knows how to get away with things. Well, of course, he's getting on too. His hair is salt and pepper, but he knows how to make up for lost time by taking it easy. He gets up early, works out and turns in early. He takes care of the hot dog stand like a breeze until he gets time off. Sam's got it made; this is it for him".

Needless to say, this is not great literary style, but most of English speakers, specially Americans, will use expressions of this sort. If you have learned the words cool, cat, blow, stack, fly, etc., you will still not understand the above sample of conversational American English.

An idiom \_ as it follows from these observations \_ is the assigning of a new meaning to a group of words which already have their own meaning.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary offers also a definition worth taking into account:

"An expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in grammatical construction or in having a meaning which can not be divided as a whole from the conjoined meanings of its elements".

Here we have a translation of this highly colloquial American English text we had presented above into a more formal, and relatively idiom free variety of English:

"Sam is a real calm person. He never loses control of himself and hardly ever becomes angry. Furthermore, he knows how to manage his business financially by using a few tricks... Needless to say, he, too, is getting older. His hair is beginning to turn gray, but he knows how to compensate for wasted time by relaxing. He rises early, exercises and goes to bed early. He manages his frankfurter dispensary without visible efforts, until it is someone else's turn to work there. Sam is successful, he has reached his life's goal".

If we are to explain how the units are organized in this text, we would have to make a little idiom dictionary.

The interesting fact about most of the idioms is that they can easily be identified with the familiar parts of speech. Thus, some idioms are clearly verbal in nature such as get away with, get up, work out, etc. An equally large number are nominal in nature, thus hot dog and White House (official residence of the President of the United States) are nouns. Many are adjectives as in salt and pepper; many are adverbials as the example like the breeze. These idioms which correlate with the familiar parts of speech can be called lexemic idioms.

The other most important group of idioms are of larger size. Often they are an entire clause in length, as the examples to fly off the handle and blow one's stacks. There are great many of these in American English. Some of the most famous ones are to kick the bucket 'die'; to be up the creek 'to be in a predicament or dangerous position'; to be caught between the devil and the deep blue sea 'to have to choose two equally and unpleasant alternatives'; and so on.

Idioms of this sort have been called tourneures (from French), meaning 'turn of phrase or simply phraseological idioms'. What they have in common is that they do not readily correlate with a given grammatical part of speech and require a paraphrase larger than a word.

The form of these idioms is set and only a limited number of them can be said or written in any other way without destroying their meaning. Many of them are completely rigid and can not show up in any other form whatever. Consider the idiom kick the bucket, for example. If you passivize this, you get an unacceptable form such as the bucket has been kicked by the cowboy, which no longer means that the cowboy died. Rather it means that he struck a pail with his foot. Idioms of this type are regarded as completely frozen forms. Notice, however, that even this idiom can be inflected for tense, e.g., He kicked the bucket, he will kick the bucket, he has kicked the bucket.

Speakers disagree as much as grammarians, whether or not, for example, it is all right to use this idiom in the gerund form as in 'his kicking the bucket surprised us all'. It is best to avoid this form.

The next largest class of idioms is that of well-established sayings and proverbs. These include the famous types of don't count you chickens before they are hatched (meaning 'do not celebrate the outcome of an undertaking prematurely because it is possible that you will fail, in which case you will look very ridiculous'). Many of these originated from some well-known literary source or come to us from the earliest English speakers.

Why is English, and specifically American English so heavily idiomatic? The most probable reason is that we develop new concepts, we need new expressions for them, but instead of creating a brand new word from the sounds of the language, we use some already existent words and put them together in a new sense. This, however, appears to be true of all languages. There are in fact, no known languages that do not have some idioms.

All these widely recognized word-combinations which have been adopted by the language have been unjustly classified as cliches. Debates of this kind proceed from a widely mistaken notion that the term cliché is used to denote all stable word-combinations.

Whereas it was coined to denote word-combinations which have long lost their nobility and become trite, but which are used as if they were fresh and original and so have become irritating to people who are sensitive to the language they hear and read. But actually, what

is familiar should not be given a derogatory label. On the contrary, if an expression has become familiar, that means it has won general recognition and by iteration has been accepted as a unit of the language". (I)

If a person always uses a bookish, stilted expression, and never uses an idiom in the right place, he might develop a reputation of being dry, unimaginative speaker, or one who is trying to be too serious and too official.

The use of idioms is, therefore, extremely important. It can strike a chord of solidarity with the listener. The more idioms you use in the right context, the more at ease native speakers will feel you and the more they will think of themselves 'This is nice and friendly person, look at how well he expresses himself!'

### Relation of idioms following the themes of Spectrum I

#### Unit I                      Moving in

Someone has just moved into a new neighborhood. In this unit we are going to deal with idioms made up by words related to moving, dwelling, and also with words as house, home, apartment, and by whichever nouns and verbs convey these ideas.

dwell up on (v)	- think, speak or write at length about something: She dwells too much about the past
pull up one's stakes (v)	- leave a place where one has lived or worked: She got disappointed with the house she bought and immediately pulled up her stakes.
pull up one's roots (v)	- leave a place where one has lived for a long time with difficulty: When she left her country she felt like pulling up her roots.
bring down the house (v)	- to start an audience, laughing or clapping enthusiastically: The principal story was funny in itself and also touched their royalties, so it brought down the house,
close to home (v)	- too near to someone's feelings, wishes or interests ( a cliché ) : When John made fun of Bob's way of walking, he struck close to home; it was too personal a matter to Bob.
move in (v) , slang and colloquial	- to take over something that belongs to another: She moved in on my boyfriend and now we are not talking to each other (She stole my boyfriend from me).

There are some typical exercises that can be used during the classes in which the idioms are going to be taught such as:

1. Fill-in-the blanks exercises.
2. Substitution exercises.
3. Matching.
4. Writing a new sentence.
5. Paraphrasing.
6. Using idioms in conversations.

They are just a model to follow. However, professors may choose any kind of exercise for practice whether oral or written. We present some exercises as samples which can be used in a similar way if the teacher thinks it is convenient.

### Exercise I:

Read the following paragraph carefully.

I was going downtown, where there were great crowds of people, and, of course, the last thing I expected was to meet my friend Betty there. She actually came out of the blue. We really had not seen each other for such a long time, and had so many little, unimportant gossips to tell that when she once started to talk, she talked through her hat. Indeed, I saw her once in a blue moon, so she told me we had to go out together and really paint the town red. I had to tell her the truth, I just could not celebrate because I had already dipped into my own purse.

- Once in contact with the context try to paraphrase the underscored idioms, that is, give a definition of your own for each of them.
- Use each of them in a new sentence.
- Make up a story using these idioms and others you already know.

### Exercise II

#### Conversation C of the Unit "In Your Opinion".

A: I don't like cities.

B: I don't either.

A: Well, I think in that point you are after my own heart.

C: Let me take the credit for the subject. I do (like big cities). I think they are exciting. There's always something to do.

A: Yeah, I'm in compliance with you in that, but everything costs too much. And cities are dangerous. I like the suburbs.

B: I back you up. It's safe in the suburbs.

C: I'm at odds with you about that. The suburbs aren't really safe either, and they are expensive too.

We have already pointed out how interesting and puzzling these idiomatic expressions we have been dealing with turn out to be. They present great difficulties not only from the linguistic point of view but also from the didactic standpoint. Hence we have tried to find a recipe useful for teacher to introduce the teaching of idioms at early stages of the teaching-learning process of the English language. The efforts and emphasis to get the students familiarized with this type of language is worth doing since they make their first steps in their walking alongside the themes taught in first year that can lead them to a certain degree of mastery.

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