

Introduction: Who Is Afraid of Teaching Idioms?

We are. Idioms and idiomatic language are some of the most interesting and creative vocabulary terms to learn in any language. It is estimated that there are over 10,000 idioms in English, some relatively recent and some that have been used for more than 2,000 years (Brenner, 2011). Most linguists, language teachers, language learners, writers, poets, or anyone who has ever thought much about their language will freely admit that idioms provide vivid descriptions and expressions that are more powerful and effective than literal and nonidiomatic language. For example, consider the following interaction between Captain Kirk and Dr. Spock in the film *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (Nimoy, 1986).

Captain Kirk: If we play our cards right, we may be able to find out when those whales are being released.

Dr. Spock: How will playing cards help?

Captain Kirk could have simply stated something such as, “If we proceed in the correct manner, we will be able to ascertain when the whales are being released.” In fact, the aforementioned sentence resembles something Dr. Spock would probably say. Thus, it is certain



Figure 1-1. Raining Cats and Dogs

Source: <http://openclipart.org/homepage>

that idioms and idiomatic language make our language more colorful, and they easily provide learners with a way to subtly express their thoughts and sound more proficient; however, at the same time, idioms stubbornly resist easy classification and are some of the most difficult vocabulary terms to teach. Numerous English teachers, including the co-authors of this text, have been left “tongue-tied” when English learners come up with questions such as, “How can a fat chance and a slim chance be the same?” or “What do cats and dogs have to do with the rain anyway?” (Figure 1-1).

In fact, the motivation for writing this book comes directly from our own experiences as English language teachers¹ in a variety of settings coupled with our desire to find effective ways to address idioms, collocations, multiword phrases, and other types of formulaic language in our classrooms.

Putting aside the complex definitions of idioms and formulaic language for a moment, consider the following self-evaluation written by one of McPherron's university students in southern China about what he learned as a member of a team that created a business. Also putting aside the global verb and sentence structure errors (cf. Lange & Lane, 2011), notice the underlined terms and phrases that show the student's attempts at idioms and formulaic expressions.

After several weeks' hard work, we created out a company of ourselves. It's exciting that we were the first time to do such a big project. Though we met a lot of problems in the time, we had learned a lot.

To be successful is not so easy. Today's world go very fast. People found companies as a fashion. When we got the assignment, we think it's a piece of cake. But truly, it's easier say than done. We had to take all situations and details during our company working. Leaving a little thing, the project would possibly fail. For example, when we assigned the money, we argued that how much to each department. No more, no less, and we had to think the market supply and demand, and what would the same industry affect us. Problems not only lived in the capital assignment, but also in the persons' choices, like how to spend less money to employ the high-quality person must to be thinking. It's very important to a new company and we spent a lot of time on it.

In a word, as a college student, I think that leaning is important, but we could do something more than that. We should open our eyes to the outside world as to adapt the society in future.

¹We hesitate here to use the term *second language* or *foreign language* because many of our students are learning English as their third or fourth language or have learned English at the same time as another "first" language. Further, few places in the world can accurately be described as second or foreign language contexts, so we use the terms *English language learner* (ELL) and *English language teaching* (ELT) throughout the book.

During the project I felt the real fortune is not money but friendships. When we work with friends, maybe we pay much work, but we gain more happiness.

This project let me know more about the business and the difficulties of it. It helps me a lot.

Second language acquisition researchers and pedagogists have noted that formulaic language makes up a large portion of linguistic competence (Zyzik, 2011), and as illustrated here, even a novice writer with many errors has also learned and attempted to use a great number of idioms and formulaic language, some correctly, some not. For example, the student draws on his knowledge of collocations (*hard work*), multiword phrases (*in a word*), idioms (*piece of cake*), and idiomatic language (*open our eyes to the outside world*). Clearly, the student has studied and acquired many types of formulaic language, and McPherson felt that he needed to address idioms and formulaic language in his writing class, but where should he start? Should he only address idioms post hoc and focus on their infelicitous use on writing assignments, or should he start with some basic description of what idioms are and how they are used in different contexts (e.g., spoken versus written idioms, formal versus informal idioms)? Alternatively, many language researchers argue that idioms can largely be grouped according to a shared conceptual metaphor (King, 1999; Kövecses & Szabó, 1996; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), and perhaps the instructor should begin with teaching idioms as vocabulary items before focusing on their use. In this way, he could explain the base metaphors (e.g., light is knowledge) and then move toward more functional and register-based considerations of academic and informal idiomatic language use.

In addition to considerations of how to address idioms in a writing class, Randolph noticed the following pattern of idiom learning when he taught a speech and debate course at a North American university. Unfortunately, there were no idioms in the textbook, so he taught a list of useful phrasal verbs and idioms as vocabulary, such as *at first blush*, *drive the point home*, *in a nutshell*, *come up with*, and *boil down to*. Initially, these and other terms were taught as daily vocabulary items. Although the students scored high on the quizzes given to check meaning and correct usage, they rarely used this vocabulary in their speeches and

debates. Randolph explained that these idioms are used naturally and that sometimes they are even more fitting than their single-word counterparts. He went on to explain that the single-word counterparts often seem contrived when used in speeches and that the phrasal verbs and idioms are more natural sounding.

The result of the use, or rather non-use, of the taught idioms and phrasal verbs was a clear case of avoidance, similar to the case study by Dagut and Laufer (1985) concerning Hebrew-speaking students of English. The Hebrew-speaking students did not have certain phrasal verbs in their own language and preferred to use the one-word equivalent. Although Randolph's students did have phrasal verbs and idioms in their respective languages, they reverted back to the one-word equivalents while giving their speeches. For example, instead of saying, "Finally, I'd like to drive my last point home," they said, "Finally, let me emphasize my last point." Instead of "There are many arguments that I have come up with regarding this point," the students reverted back to "There are many arguments I have produced regarding this point."

When asked why they did not incorporate the new vocabulary in their speeches, the majority of the students said that they were not comfortable with using "nonacademic" or "informal" English. Others claimed they couldn't remember the phrases, so they used what was "safe." In short, the desire to take risks was decreased because they were not confident in how to use these, despite their high scores on the quizzes, which required both a definition and natural use of the terms. Certain questions then arose in Randolph's mind: Do idioms and phrasal verbs inhibit the desire to take risks in the second language? Are these wonderful semantic tools unnecessary to teach?

These are just a few of the questions and concerns that have arisen in our own English courses, and in the following chapters we continue to ask these pedagogical questions about teaching and learning idioms and formulaic language. In this way, we draw on our own teaching experience as well as illustrations from a variety of classrooms around the world.

An Increasingly Popular and Infuriating Topic

If natural language had been designed by a logician, idioms would not exist. They are a feature of discourse that frustrates any simple logical account of how the meanings of utterances depend on the meanings of their parts and on the syntactic relation among those parts. (Johnson-Laird, 1993, p. vii)

From even a cursory glance at work in linguistics, applied linguistics, and TESOL, for quite some time, idioms and figurative language have been a popular but contentious topic (Chomsky, 1980; Fernando, 1996; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Katz & Postal, 1963; Liu, 2008; Moon, 1998; Nunberg, Sag, & Wasow, 1994). The contentiousness stems in large part from what linguists call the noncompositional feature of most idioms; that is, the meanings of most idioms and idiomatic phrases cannot be determined and are not predictable based on the sum of smaller word units within the idiom. As Katz (1973) writes, idioms “do not get their meanings from the meanings of their syntactic parts” (p. 358). To take an example from earlier, an English language learner (ELL) can know the meaning of *fat* and *chance*, but not the meaning of *fat chance*. This difficulty in defining and analyzing idioms may contribute to the reluctance of some ELL teachers and textbook writers to explicitly teach idioms or idiomatic language.

At the same time, as idioms have gained prominence as a theoretical linguistics topic, there has also been a heightened awareness in the field of English language teaching (ELT) of the critical role of vocabulary learning and teaching, and within the broad topic of vocabulary acquisition, most scholars agree that collocations, idioms, and lexical patterns make up as much or more of vocabulary competence than individual words (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002; Lewis, 1993). Taking this basic insight about the patterns inherent in all language use, many linguists have built and refined large corpora of authentic language use in order to study the collocations and related strings of words in discourse, and, as described in later chapters in this book, these corpora have become increasingly available and useful in the English language classroom, particularly when teaching idioms (Reppen, 2010, 2011).

Thus, in recent years, idioms and idiom learning have received more and more attention from ELT researchers and textbook writers

(Grant, 2007; Irujo, 1986; King, 1999; Liu, 2003; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). Much of this work, however, has been narrowly focused on either the goal of surveying the most common idioms in spoken English (Liu, 2003) or proposing lessons and activities for idiom learning in the classroom (King, 1999). Psycholinguists have also focused their research on the processing and cognitive features associated with the use and acquisition of idioms (Abel, 2003; Boers, Demecheleer, & Eyckmans, 2004; Prodromou, 2003), but for English language teachers, outside of Liu (2008), there have been few resources that collect and analyze various theoretical and pedagogical research studies on idiom learning and relate them to actual classroom practices. The field seems to be able to do one or the other: experimental/discourse studies *or* teacher lessons. What is needed, however, is a balanced analysis and presentation of the two.

Therefore, in addressing the complex questions around teaching idioms, our main goal for this book is to never stray far from the classroom, but to inform all of our classroom discussion with theoretical and experimental studies of idioms and formulaic language. We are both English teachers and draw on our many years of teaching English in diverse settings throughout the world—from Japan and Romania to Carbondale, Illinois, and Stanford, California. And we also draw on the perspectives of teachers and learners from these and other learning contexts around the world.

Zyzik (2011) notes that psycholinguistic researchers have made advances in experimental knowledge of how idioms are processed and retained by learners, but “we are still in the initial stages of understanding the acquisition of idioms by non-native speakers” (p. 414). Similarly, it has been our experience that much of the research, discussion, and writing on idioms in applied linguistics and education journals has taken a narrow, experimental approach to studying idiom acquisition, and outside of lesson plans and shared learning activities in teacher blogs and journals—all important sources, of course—little work has drawn together research findings with actual classroom and teacher perspectives on learning. As teachers know intuitively, any research finding or theory looks very different when viewed through the perspective of actual classroom and student activity. Further, we have noticed that a great deal of recent research into how the brain

works and processes language, including idioms, has direct connections to our classrooms, but much of this work is only reported as scientific reports for neuroscientists or made into popular culture books on how to improve your brain's functions, bypassing important links that can be made between neuroscience discoveries and English language teaching. Thus, it is our hope that this book can summarize and relate recent advances in research about idioms and idiom learning to actual classroom practices and perspectives, with the understanding that we are all still in the initial stages of developing both research and pedagogical understandings of how best to teach and learn idioms.

Three Important Caveats

One of the main goals with this book is to move between classroom practice and research on learning and teaching idioms; therefore, the chapters are organized around the following two perspectives. In the first section, “Theoretical and Pedagogical Research Into Learning and Teaching Idioms,” we survey recent work on learning and teaching idioms from diverse perspectives in the linguistics and educational research literature. We focus on various definitions of idioms from theoretical and pedagogical literature, in particular, cognitive, neurolinguistic, cross-linguistic, and social-constructionist research. In the second section, “Teaching Idioms to English Language Learners Around the World,” we summarize and critique idiom learning from teacher, student, and classroom perspectives by presenting results of our own surveys on how students and teachers address learning idioms, a collection of lessons from around the world, and a review of textbooks and other resources for teaching idioms.

The division of the book into the two sections is somewhat misleading in that all of the chapters offer both classroom teacher and language researcher perspectives. We decided to start the book with an extensive review of recent theoretical and pedagogical research into learning and teaching idioms in order to clear the ground for the second part of the book's more concentrated focus on illustrations from classrooms around the world. However, in each chapter in the first section, we end with a “Pedagogical Perspective” on the research presented in the chapter, and at the end of Chapters 6, 7, and 8, in the second section of the book, we include an “Implications for Future

Research on Teaching and Learning Idioms” section to connect the teacher, student, and classroom perspectives presented in these chapters to research projects and themes from the first section of the book.

Also, it is important to note that the book is designed primarily for practicing teachers who are interested in learning about recent research into teaching idioms while simultaneously gaining practical suggestions and lessons that they can use in their classrooms. The book, however, should also appeal to graduate students in teacher education classes (particularly MA-TESOL courses) as well as other linguistics, psychology, and education students and researchers who are interested in examining research and pedagogical perspectives on learning idioms in English. In addition, the book is not necessarily designed for language learners as a textbook or guide to learning idioms, but we feel that advanced English language learners, particularly graduate students who are learning English as an additional or multiple language, may find the background information in the first section interesting and use the resources in Chapter 9. Overall, in mixing research and pedagogical perspectives throughout the book, our aim is that no one view or theme dominates or appears more important and integral to teaching and learning idioms; instead, we hope that the book offers something for many members in the TESOL professional community.

Finally, before you delve into the book chapters, we want to draw your attention to our glossary of key terms (Appendix A). Although we make every effort to provide examples, definitions, and explanations for key terms throughout the book, we realize that there may be passages in which we use a term that is unfamiliar to our audience. In order to clarify the terms, we added a definition and example. Thus, we highlighted in bold the first time we use terms that are included in the glossary. Most of the terms are in the first five chapters.

Sections of the Book

Adopting the above outline and goal of moving the line between research and practice, in Chapter 2, we discuss the variety of perspectives on how to define idioms and what implications different definitions have for teaching. This chapter also surveys corpus and sociolinguistic research on the roles of idioms in spoken and written discourse

and analyzes various lists of idioms from different written and spoken contexts.

In Chapter 3, we survey important parts of the brain and discuss significant areas and functions that teachers ought to be aware of, and we offer suggestions on the best ways to activate the key functions of our brains for optimal idioms learning. We also present cognitive and neurolinguistic research on how vocabulary, idioms, and figurative language are processed, stored, and retrieved by both native and non-native speakers of English.

In Chapter 4, we review research about methods and materials for teaching idioms. We present the findings from both experimental research on idiom learning and classroom-based studies and reviews of pedagogical methods. In particular, we summarize the different best practices and recommendations that TESOL and applied linguistics researchers have made in regard to choosing, organizing, and presenting idioms in textbooks, dictionaries, and class lists.

In the final chapter of the first section, Chapter 5, we connect the literature on materials and methods from Chapter 4 to a review of best practices for classroom and learner-based activities for acquiring idioms. In this chapter, we offer more of our own thoughts on what could, if at all, be considered a best practice for teaching idioms. We pay special attention to the variety of teaching and learning contexts and cultures around the world. We emphasize an eclectic and **postmethod approach** (cf. Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006) to teaching idioms in which teachers draw on the work of theorists, researchers, and other teachers, but ultimately make pedagogical choices that fit with their own teaching context.

In the second part of the book, we focus on teacher and classroom perspectives from learning contexts around the world. In Chapter 6, we present findings from our survey of and interviews with English language teachers in a variety of countries and teaching contexts. We present and analyze both the fears and problems encountered by teachers as well as their best practices and effective methods. In Chapter 7, we present findings from our survey of and interviews with English language students in a variety of countries and contexts, and we compare these student perspectives with the results of the teacher surveys in the previous chapter. Chapter 8 is the most “hands-on” and

practical as we outline lessons from around the world that address idiom learning and use. We connect these lessons to the previous summaries of research and our findings from teacher and student surveys as well as offer example work produced by students in these diverse settings. Finally, in Chapter 9, we offer practical suggestions for teachers looking for textbooks and curricula to use in their classrooms. We summarize textbooks, dictionaries, and online resources, and we offer critiques of the best and most useful materials for teaching and learning idioms.

In the final chapter of the book, we end with a brief overview of the key aspects and themes in the book: (1) the need to address idioms and idiom learning in the English language classroom, (2) the importance of developing idiom learning materials that are appropriate to specific classroom and learning needs, and (3) the development of an eclectic and postmethod approach to teaching and learning idioms.

The Mythos and Logos of Language

The ancient Greeks developed an understanding of language and discourse as a dichotomy between *mythos* and *logos*, in which the former expressed poetic, cultural, religious, and even spiritual experiences, and the latter was considered to express facts and the “real” world that can be verified. Western understandings of scientific discourse and rationalism have emphasized *logos* discourse over the seemingly more subjective *mythos* discourse, associated with poetry, allusions, metaphors, proverbs, idioms, irony, and other imaginative and nonrational ways of speaking. Work by cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Raymond Gibbs (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), however, reveals the figurative and metaphorical aspects of all daily and scientific language use. They argue against a simple subjective versus objective dichotomy, and as Berendt (2008) points out, the study of figurative language has revealed the power of conceptual schemata and metaphors that constrain “how we think and express our ideas in both our everyday, technical, and literary discourses” (p. 3). Thus, teaching idioms and other forms of figurative and formulaic language, as discussed throughout this book, may reveal a host of definitional questions and usage problems for students, but we deal

with some of the fundamental aspects of human communication and thought. And, as Berendt further notes, these elements of language or mythos discourse can “give contexts of meaning to make our mundane lives worthwhile” (p. 2). Making the mundane into the sublime, or at least elevating the literal into the poetic—we cannot think of a better reason to teach idioms.