

Title: Stepping into the Minefield of Idioms**Authors:** Sandra Burger, University of Ottawa sburger@uottawa.caJeanette Gallina, Young People's Language School, jeanette.gallina@ypls.ca

Studies of metaphors have shown that figurative expressions are ubiquitous (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). As Boers, Demecheleer and Eyckmans (2004) point out, it is almost impossible to discuss non-concrete subjects, such as emotions, society, the meaning of life, without using figurative expressions. Since metaphors are so pervasive in everyday language, second language learners will need to be able to understand and use them in order to communicate successfully. If they are so common, and if there are so many, how should we go about teaching them?

Until recently, language was conceived as a grammar and lexis dichotomy with grammar rules on the one hand and lists of individual words on the other. Figurative idioms were thought to be merely ornamental parts of speech. It was assumed that the meaning of idioms was absolutely unpredictable, so students just had to blindly memorize them (Boers et al. 2004). In the current view, language is considered to be a continuum from simple units to more complex ones (Langacker 1991:2). Idioms would be somewhere in the middle of that continuum. A large portion of figurative language is not arbitrary at all. The meanings of idioms are not fully predictable from their constituent parts (Lakoff, 1987). In addition, second language acquisition research acknowledges that the mastery of ready-made chunks like fixed and semi-fixed expressions helps students produce fluent language under real-time conditions (Skehan, 1998). Learners need to build a large repertoire of idiomatic expressions for active use in order to successfully communicate messages.

An idiom is a relatively fixed expression where the meaning of the whole is not transparent from the meanings of the constituent words (Lewis, 2002). According to cognitive semantics, many figurative expressions can be traced back to a relatively small set of concrete source domains. Mostly, based on our experience of general physical space, they map abstract ideas onto concrete experience; for example, an expression like "top of the class" is based on the schema of more is 'up'. These schemata may be universal and therefore more transparent to second language learners than the second

category of metaphoric expressions, which are more culture dependent. Such figurative expressions map our experience of more specific source domains onto our understanding of abstract phenomena. For example, if we think of life as a journey, expressions like, “to drift along through life”, “the road to Hell is paved with good intentions” and “the road to success”. The learning of idiomatic expressions in specific source domains such as boats and sailing, sports, and gardening may be facilitated by helping students trace the idiom back to its original source domain and by reactivating the literal meaning of the expression. Boers et al. (2004:58) called this process ‘etymological elaboration’.

Boers et al. (2004) offer two explanations for why this works. The first is Paivio’s (1986) dual coding theory, according to which, activating the literal or original sense of the figurative idiom is likely to call up a mental image of a concrete scene. Information is thus coded in dual fashion, providing an extra pathway for recall. The second explanation is Craik and Lockhart’s (1972) levels of processing theory, which maintains that deep level processing enhances memory storage.

Thus, our method of presenting idioms is to group them thematically choosing a manageable number (20) at a time for a lesson. We tell a story orally or in writing related to the source domain and explain the original meaning for each idiom along with its current figurative meaning. This approach follows DeBoers’ et al.’s (2004) etymological elaboration which we feel fosters learning.

How do we choose which idioms within a source domain to teach and how do we present them? Contrary to our intuition which would lead us to choose to teach sets of words, such as the days of the week because they should be easier to store in the brain, easier to retrieve, easier to learn and help the learner to related them to each other and differentiate them from each other, Nation (2000), maintains, based on research on interference, that it takes longer to learn words that relate to each other than it does to learn words that are unrelated to each other or that are related to each other in a kind of story line. Higa’s (1963) research using nonsense words to represent foreign language words found that near synonyms, such as *fast* and *rapid* were more interfering than coordinates such as *apple* and *pear*. The following chart ranks pairs of words in terms of their interfering effects.

Effect of the set	Relationship	Explanation	Example
Most interfering	Near synonyms	Rather similar meanings.	Fast Rapid
	Free associates	One word is a free associate of the other.	Bed Asleep
Neutral	Opposites	Opposite meanings. No meaning connection.	Dark Light
	Unrelated	Not synonyms but close in meaning to each other.	Bread foot
	Connotation	Partial response identity	See Vision
Most helpful	Partial response identity	The words have similar free associates. E.g. light	Dark Lamp
	Coordinates	The words occur under a headword, such as <i>fruit</i> .	Apple pear

For Higa it is harder to learn words like *a shirt*, *a jacket* and *a sweater* together because they could each substitute for one another in a sentence such as:

a shirt.

I am wearing a jacket.

a sweater.

On the other hand, words linked grammatically such as the adjectives and verbs in the following sentence would more easily be learned together:

The green slimy frog croaked and hopped into the pond.

Tinkham (1997) found that learning was faster for thematically related pairs than for related pairs although not as fast as for unrelated pairs. Nation (2000) also suggests that new words or expressions be presented in texts, under topics, themes or tasks to ensure learners are exposed to normal use. Furthermore, George (1962) pointed out that if two items share strongly related, common features, the similarities between them strengthen the association between them and the differences interfere with each other. For example, *cold* and *hot* are related to temperature and if taught together may be confused by the learner. Thus Nation (2000) suggests that such items be presented at different times and in widely differing contexts. Once items have been reasonably well established, it is a good idea to bring them together to point out the differences between them.

Thus, when we introduce idioms, we select them thematically and present them in the context of an oral or written story. We have found twenty idioms at a time to be manageable for one unit. Within each theme we choose idioms with different meanings and try to avoid pairs that are similar to each other and which would therefore cause interferences. For example, in the gambling unit we would only choose one of “*The dice are loaded*” and “*The cards are stacked against you.*” We provide etymological elaboration of each idiom, that is we relate each item to its original meaning within the source domain and explain the current meaning of the idiom. We then provide a non-contextualized practice exercise and then a contextualized practice exercise. For example the idiom “*to let the cat out of the bag*” is from the nautical source domain. The cat refers to a nine-strand whip made of leather which was used to discipline misbehaving sailors out at sea. The *cat* was kept in a bag and when it was brought out, the sailor knew he was in trouble. In modern usage the idiom means to reveal a secret. Another idiom *not enough room to swing a cat* is from the same domain. The *cat* is once again the whip and originally this expression was used to describe a very small space, not big enough to swing the whip. The modern meaning of the idiom is the same although the reference to the cat is unknown to most users. The two idioms about the cat are related thematically, and come from the same source domain, but are so different in meaning, they are not likely to be confusing for the learner.

Even though the teaching of idiomatic expressions might seem like a daunting task, teachers should feel confident rising to the challenge. It is possible to put order in the seeming chaos of the multitude of idioms of the English language. Understanding the research that underpins this approach to the teaching and learning of idioms is essential for teachers who want to step into the minefield of idioms with their students. Finding the source domain of the idioms enables the teacher to group them for teaching purposes and to find the original meanings, and thus facilitate etymological elaboration. The students benefit from knowing the original meaning and are able to form associations with the current idiomatic meanings. After the idioms have been explained, practice exercises should be provided to make sure students understand the meanings clearly. Finally, students should be given practice opportunities using the idioms in context.

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