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## WHY IDIOMS ARE IMPORTANT FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The English language has more than 1,000,000 words and is one of the most flexible languages in the world. It's a living language, like those other languages we use today. Understanding the lexicon of English demands more than knowing the denotative meaning of words. It requires its speakers to have connotative word comprehension and more, an understanding of figurative language. Idioms fall into this final category.

The focus of this paper is to share the importance of idioms for non-native speakers as part of their mastery of the English language.

Idioms share cultural and historical information and broadens people's understanding and manipulation of a language. Among the various definitions of idioms are: (1) the language peculiar to a people, country, class, community or, more rarely, an individual; (2) a construction or expression having a meaning different from the literal one or not according to the usual patterns of the language (New Webster's Dictionary, 1993). It is the second definition that best suits the focus of this paper.

Idioms include all the expressions we use that are unique to English, including cliches and slang. Prepositional usage is also a common part of idiomatic expressions (Princeton Review, 1998), but this paper addresses idioms as used in figurative language.

The following sentence contains two idioms: Carol's father was going *to see red* as she failed tomorrow's exam. She was *burning the midnight oil* because she hadn't been taking her school work seriously.

These idioms can be explained as:

- *to see red* – to become very angry;
- *burning the midnight oil* – staying up late at night studying or working.

Speakers who aren't sure of what these phrases mean can use contextual clues to understand these idiomatic expressions, but they're part of the average native

speakers' vocabulary. Accordingly, they should also be part of second-language learners' (L2) vocabulary. Every idiom will not be learned, but as people become more comfortable with English and are exposed to a greater amount of native English language, depending on their interests, they will encounter a larger number of idioms.

I recently found myself explaining an idiom by using another idiomatic expression, which made me think about just how common they are in English. Some categories into which they fall are: food, sports, hobbies, education, careers, and music. While there are some different idioms used in American and English language variants, there are many more that are shared.

Idioms are pervasive. They're used in formal and informal speech, conversation and writing and are part of standard speech in business, education and the media. L2 learners are expected to understand a variety of common idioms, which is advantageous for those planning to work in a world that increasingly uses English as the language of communication and commerce. Whether it is working in one's native country or in an English-speaking country, idioms are important as part of the shared knowledge among English speakers.

While idioms are commonly used for official business, a distinction must be made about slang. Slang is "currently widely used and understood language, consisting of new meanings attributed to existing words or of wholly new words, generally accepted as lying outside standard polite usage. It usually passes out of usage in time or is accepted into standard usage" (New Webster's, 1993). Referring to someone's apartment as his or her "crib" is slang, and "crib" is a word now out of style.

I believe the phrase, subtleties of the language, best describes a general area into which idioms can be categorized. They transmit certain information about the speaker that might not be obvious. Students of English who effectively communicate with idioms show a certain understanding of the language. They understand and communicate on a deeper level of the language. I use the word "subtle" not as one of its definition where something is hard to grasp or difficult to define but in a more expansive way. The wider meaning consists of a definition where lexical usage shows a deeper understanding of the target language and culture.

Since vocabulary and culture are intertwined, L2 speakers can gain more vocabulary through idioms and conversely, can learn more about idioms from being exposed to the target culture. The more comprehensible input there is, the more

learners' listening, speaking, writing and reading skills will improve.

In American English, there are many idioms about sports: baseball, American football, golf and basketball. For people who don't understand American baseball, the expression, "He struck out," may have little or no meaning. Native speakers will know this is a reference to someone who was unsuccessful in achieving a desired goal.

Ideally, vocabulary shouldn't be learned in a vacuum, and this is especially true for idioms. There are a variety of idiom dictionaries for those who wish to learn more about idioms. Newspapers and magazines, radio programs, television shows and films also sources of idioms. Roleplaying, writing and interactive activities such as matching the parts of idioms are some activities that can help L2 expand their knowledge and use of idioms.

Knowing which idiom should be used when comes with practice and time. "If you *keep an open mind* and *play your cards right*, your proficiency in English will soon be *something to crow about*" (Laflin, 1996).

## SOURCES CITED

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