

On Improvement of Undergraduates' Phraseological Competence Through U-learning: Exemplified by Use of English Idioms

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Abstract

Words or phrases are important to English learners, and an idiom is a group of words. This paper first analyzes idioms' classifications and features, then it tries to illustrate how to grasp idioms' meanings in different context, and how to apply them to undergraduates' English class, improving the students' phraseological competence.

Key words: English idioms; Classifications; Features; usage; Undergraduates

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INTRODUCTION

Linguist Wilkins has ever pointed out that only little meaning could be conveyed if there were no grammar, and no meaning at all could be conveyed if there were no vocabulary. (Wilkins, 1972, p.120). And lexicologist McCarthy has directly noted that if there are no words to express various meanings, no meaningful language communication can happen, no matter how wonderful he or she masters the sounds of a L2, and no matter how

successful he or she learns the grammar. (McCarthy, 1990, p.18). It is very clear that vocabulary or words or phrases (made up of words) are essential to language learners, especially to undergraduate students. And **an idiom is a group of words** whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words. Exemplifying some English idioms, this paper tries to analyze their classifications and features and apply them to undergraduates' English class, improving the students' phraseological competence. But how to improve? Through "U-learning".

"U-learning" refers to "Ubiquitous Learning" (泛在学习), characterized by sustainability, accessibility, immediacy, etc., meaning that no matter when and where, or by whatever devices, anyone can do anything about English learning. U-learning environment has brought great development space for the effective implementation in college English teaching class, providing advanced teaching methods and means for the improvement of undergraduates' English phraseological competence.

1. WHAT IS AN IDIOM

What is an idiom? An idiom is an expression that has a special meaning that is different from the meaning of the individual words. They have grown out of people's linguistic practice, ever since the language came into being, including proverbs, catchphrases, colloquialisms, slang expressions, etc. being made up of short sentences or set phrases. The Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (Seventh Edition) (Jin, 2009, p.1012) gives the following senses of the term "idiom": 1) [C] a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words. 2) [U, C] (formal) the kind of language and grammar used by particular people at a particular time or place. 3) [U, C] (formal) the style of writing, music, art, etc. that is typical of a particular person, group, period or place.

Eg.: bury the hatchet (come to friendly or peaceful terms), grass widow (a woman whose husband is temporarily away), keep in mind (remember), kick the bucket (die), like a breeze (easily), lip service (support only in words, not in deeds), take off (imitate), till the cows come home (forever), to no avail (useless), wear one's heart upon one's sleeve (show one's feelings plainly), Rain cats and dogs (rain heavily), (Pan, et al. 2007, pp.416-1116; Zhang, 2012, pp.181-182).

Every nation has its own history. In English history, Roman, Norman and other invaders had ever conquered Briton. At that time, all kinds of cultures were brought into English, among which, Roman and Greek ones were dominant. Therefore, English idioms are mainly from old Greek and old Roman's legend, such as "Achilles' heel (致命弱点)", "meet one's Waterloo (遭到惨败; 受到极沉重的打击)", "a Pandora's box (灾难和不幸的根源)" and so on. What's more, some idioms come to usage because of some famous historical events. Eg, "Damon and Pythias (生死之交; 莫逆之交; 刎颈之交)", "A Penelope's web (永远完成不了的工作; 拖延策略)", "Sword of Damocles (达摩克利斯之剑; 时刻存在的危险; 临头的危机)", "burn one's boats (bridges) (破釜沉舟, 背水一战)". Take the idiom "burn one's boats (bridges)" for example. This idiom originates from a historical event; The Roman emperor Julius Caesar burned the *boats (bridges)*, telling the soldiers they had no way back and they had to fight forwards until getting victory. In the following parts we will discuss the idioms' classifications, features, and usages in detail.

2. HOW TO CLASSIFY IDIOMS

According to *A Survey of English Lexicology* (Zhang, 2012, pp.183-187), we can classify idioms from different aspects:

1) **Grammatical function** (Lu, 1999, p.26): (1) **sentence idioms**. e.g. Kill the goose that laid the golden egg (杀鸡取卵); A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush (双鸟在林不如一鸟在手); (2) **adverbial idioms**. e.g. in nothing flat (soon), tooth and nail (with great violence and determination); (3) **verbal idioms**. e.g. follow the sea (become a sailor), give sb the bag (fire or dismiss somebody); (4) **adjectival idioms**. e.g. up in the air (uncertain), as poor as a church mouse (earning money only enough to meet one's needs); (5) **nominal idioms**. e.g. flesh and blood (relatives or family), Jack of all trades (can do various kinds of work but be good at none).

2) **Morphological structures** (Cowie, et al, 1975, p48; Vol.2. 1983, p26, and Makkai, 1975, p.56). e.g. sentence idioms or sayings and proverbs: Strike while the iron is hot (趁热打铁); clause idioms or phraseological idioms: make bricks without straw (巧妇难为无米之炊), blow one's stack (大发雷霆); phrase idioms or lexemic idioms: a bed of roses (称心如意的境遇).

3) **Semantic relationship**. i. e. the degree of connection between the meaning of the idiom and those of individual constituents (Rayevskaya, 1957, p.86), e.g. phraseological fusions: once in a blue moon (千载难逢); phraseological unities: show one's teeth (张牙舞爪); standardized word combinations: (as) green as grass (少不更事), etc.

4) **Various origins**. e.g. idioms from the Bible: see eye to eye with (看法完全一致), the salt of the earth (物以稀为贵; 非常正派); idioms with kitchen and cooking: have a finger in the pie (多管闲事), stew in one's own juice (自作自受); idioms connected with fish and fishing: a fish out of water (不得其所的人), drink like fish (牛饮); idioms from sea life: on the rocks (身无分文).

3. WHAT ARE FEATURES OF IDIOMS

According to *A Survey of English Lexicology* (Zhang, 2012, p188-193), they are as follows:

1) **Rhetorical Features**

(1) **Semantic features**: ① Euphemism: powder one's nose (上卫生间); ② Personification: The pot calls the kettle black (五十步笑百步); ③ Synecdoche: earn one's bread (谋生); ④ Metonymy: in the cradle (萌芽); ⑤ Metaphor: a grey mare (比丈夫能干的妻子); ⑥ Simile: Time flies like an arrow (光阴似箭); sleep like a log (睡得香), eat like a horse (吃得多), like a rat in a hole (瓮中之鳖).

(2) **Lexical features**: by and by, year in year out, again and again, here and there, back and forth, sooner or later, from head to foot, scream and shout, cut and carve, rough and tough, bits and pieces (odds and ends), null and void (without force or effect in law).

(3) **Phonetic features**: A little pot is soon hot (小人易怒), bag and baggage (with all one's belongings), toil and moil (work hard and long), fair and square (just, honest), chop and change (keep changing one's opinion).

2) **Stylistic Features**

(1) **Slang**: hit the sack: (AmE) go to bed; feel no pain: be drunk; in the soup: in serious trouble; cancer stick: cigarette; dish the dirt: gossip or spread rumors about others.

(2) **Colloquialisms**: big wheel: an influential or important person; make waves: create a disturbance, a sensation; hang in (there): not to give up.

(3) **Literary expressions**: cross swords: have an argument with, fight; be it that: even though; in the wake of: right after, following; give the lie to: call somebody a liar; of note: notable, well-known; come to pass: take place, happen.

4. HOW TO USE IDIOMS

Idioms in one language are somewhat hard for learners to understand or even impossible to guess. But good readers try to understand the cultural background that can help them figure out the meaning.

In fact, our daily life is full of idioms. If only we are interested in them and determined to study them well, we are the masters of them, especially based on the U-learning campus environment (due to wifi). The following is the author's experience to train the undergraduate students' phraseological competence, by using certain idioms.

Take the "Reading skill of Section B Unit 4 Saving the date" for example (Zheng, 2016, p.103).

1) Warming-up exercises: Guide the students to understand the idiomatic expressions.

① The night when he announced to the world that I was his girlfriend, I went along with him. (Para.4)

From the context, what goes before and after the sentence, we can possibly get the meaning of the phrase: to agree with or support someone or something. Look at another example using the same phrase: The president has announced a plan to cut taxes, and Congress is likely to go along with it.

② I cried out, "Good Heavens. No! We're too young to tie the knot. We haven't even graduated from college yet!" (Para. 9)

The context clue tells us it may have to do with marriage since the author says "We're too young to tie the knot". Also the entire text is talking about romantic love, so we can assume it must have the meaning of getting married. Without the context, it's impossible to associate the phrase tie the knot with marriage.

2) Guessing meanings: Ask some students to guess the meaning of the underlined idiomatic expressions in the following sentences from Text B before students read it.

① For example, my roommate and her boyfriend were friends for four months before their chemistry clicked. (Para. 5) (Meaning: They became romantically attracted by each other.)

② A plurality of young men say women should chip in and help pay after a few dates. (Para. 6) (Meaning: share the dating expense or split the money with the date)

③ Either "going Dutch" or allowing my date to pay can be a definite challenge. (Para. 7) (Meaning: sharing the cost of a meal in a restaurant)

④ With a knot in the pit of my stomach, I conquer my fear and ask, "Hey, how about lunch after class on Friday?" (Para.12) (Meaning: a tight and uncomfortable feeling because of nervousness)

⑤ Thrilled and smiling broadly, I confirm, "Well then, we'll save the date!" (Para. 14) (Meaning: mark the date on our calendar)

3) Further understanding: The author wrote some sentences containing "idioms" on the blackboard, letting students identify their actual meanings.

① Money can move even gods. (有钱可以通神; 有钱能使鬼推磨)

② The government of the country is at sixes and sevens over the issue of domestic security. (在国内安全问题上, 政府一片混乱)

③ Practice makes perfect. (熟能生巧)

④ She has a big mouth and can't keep my secrets. (她话太多, 不能保守秘密)

⑤ The boundary line was the apple of discord between the two countries. (边境问题是这两国争端的根源)

⑥ His voluntary offer to help may be a Greek gift. (他主动提出帮忙, 可能有诈)

4) Speaking practice: Tell students to discuss together and make up sentences containing certain "idioms" with the help of cellphone and wifi. (10minutes later)

Student A: The assignment I just finished was a piece of cake. (作业非常简单, 完成是轻而易举的事)

Student B: The final exam is coming, I might need to go to the library and hit the books. (期末考试就要来了, 我也可能该去图书馆看看书学习一下了)

Student C: --- Do you think you can ever win the lottery? (你觉得你会中彩票大奖吗?) ---Yes. When pigs fly. (等猪会飞的时候我就会中奖了, 不可能发生的事)

Student D: Every time I see a snake, even in a zoo, I get goose bumps all over. (由于害怕而起鸡皮疙瘩)

Student E: When her husband lost his job, she really started to feel the pinch.

(她老公丢了工作以后, 她真正开始感到手头拮据了)

Student F: I think I would be sick if I ate all that food, but Joe seems to have a cast iron stomach. (吃掉所有那些食物的话我会吃坏肚子的, 但乔的铁胃就没有任何问题)

Student G: That LV bag costs me an arm and a leg. (LV包价格非常贵)

Student H: A friend in need is a friend indeed. (患难之时见真情)

Student I: Failure is the mother of success. (失败是成功之母)

Student J: Actions speak louder than words. (事实胜于雄辩)

Student K: Well begun is half done. (好的开始是成功的一半)

Student L: Where there is a will, there is way. (有志者事竟成)

Student M: The bad man has kicked the bucket. (坏人死了)

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CONCLUSION

Language is the carrier of culture, and idioms are the essence of a language, because idioms not only carry rich cultural information, vivid image and philosophical figure, but also embody distinct national features and geographical characteristics. Due to cultural differences, English idioms are different from Chinese ones in cultural backgrounds, even cultural conflicts. While using idioms, we should not neglect these discrepancies, otherwise we will fail to convey original meanings (Wang, 2018, pp.57-61).

In a word, undergraduate students should make good use of U-learning environment to practice idioms more often and use idioms more correctly, aiming to improve their English phraseological competence.

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