

ENRICH YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ENGLISH THROUGH IDIOMS

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Abstract

We spend most of our time on speaking to one another. Speaking a foreign language like English creates prospective and expansive set-up for an individual. The paper presents strategic approaches for learning and using English idioms in our day-to-day conversations, discussions and writing or narrating short stories (creative writing) etc.. Learner involvement and engagement is the need of the hour in the language classrooms for meeting their needs and achieving communicative competence. The approach can be appropriate for teaching or learning English language (vocabulary words and phrases) as a skill. One has to understand idioms and phrases not only for to get command over oral communication but also to read the writings of good authors (such as Shakespeare) to be effective and confident communicator in English. Keeping this purpose in mind, a group of 20 students were strategically trained in learning and using English idioms and engaged them in skill based learner-centered activities. This paper also discusses the plan of action and the results achieved.

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The demand for English language has been increasing rapidly all over the world. English language-centered employment opportunities in BPOs and software fields require good speaking and writing skills in the language. Facilitating a skilled workforce has become a challenging exercise for most of the professional academic institutions like engineering and management in India. We often communicate in English; still 'whatever we have learned so far is an iota and what we should learn is like an ocean'. We need English language 'to express our feelings, to ask questions, to enquire, to share/exchange and to communicate globally and succeed in life and careers'. English language has become a primary need for many professionals in India. As there is no limit and ending for our dreams, the language also has no limit in its learning.

"...Central Board of Secondary Education in New Delhi reveals that ELT methodologies are constantly changing to meet changing needs. ELT practices are moving away from age-old teacher-centered, structural approaches to functional, communicative and activity-based approaches making learning more accessible than before." As stated, the shift from teacher centered methodologies to learner centered approaches is the need of the hour. Though the teachers and teacher educators experience many challenges, this kind of learner or learning centric approaches facilitate true learning of the language to be effective communicators instead of learning to develop the receptive skills for years since schooling. English should be learnt and taught to communicate but not to achieve certifications or degrees.

The ultimate root of the term is the Greek lexeme *idios*, meaning 'own, private, peculiar' (OED, V:20-1). The same underlying form can be found in the prefix *idio-* as well as *idiot* and its derivatives. While *idiot* underwent semantic specialization and projection, *idiom* became almost a vessel for any type of peculiarity which can still be filled with new concepts. Only in the *Supplement to the OED* (II, 239) is sense 3b to be found:

A characteristic mode of expression in music, art or writing; an instance of this.

The *OED* and the *Supplement to the OED* contain the following entry:

- 1a. The form of speech peculiar or proper to a people or country; own language or tongue.

- 1b. In narrower sense: The variety of a language which is peculiar to a limited district or class of people; dialect.
2. The specific character, property or genius of any language; the manner of expression which is natural or peculiar to it.
- 3a. A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one.

(1.1, Idioms in English: A Pragmatic Analysis by Jurg Strassler)

Jean Roemer stated that "The grammar and dictionary are no longer sufficient, and something more is wanted, which can be acquired only by practice and experience; that is the knowledge of the usual forms of phraseology – a knowledge so important to the student, that without it, though otherwise logically and grammatically correct, his language may be incomprehensible, from an unusual combination of words, often leading to awkward and ridiculous mistakes." Idioms can be considered special and strange expressions and language learners can actively be engaged in learning idioms in the class and use them whenever they feel necessary. As engineering students may work overseas, learning to use idioms in their communication may also be appreciated. The natives of English language express many ideas which hold a special significance in them and the use of idioms in one's speech shows that how familiar he or she is with the language and can be natural in his or her communication through the manner of the expressions.

"Understanding each individual word does not get us very close to the meaning of the phrase; we have to interpret the phrase as a whole, almost as if it was a single word in its own right. It is phrases like *a pig in a poke* and *haul someone over the coals* are known as 'idioms'". John Ayto.

Having a purpose in mind that to learn English idioms and understand them in the contexts and use in one's speech him/herself to be confident communicators in the language. A person, who learns to use idioms in his or her communication, can understand the native expressions and also builds the ability to read famous authors like Shakespeare. Also, his or her communication in English sounds more natural. The British Council has a lot of resources to learn English idioms.

Here are some idiomatic expressions that are used in some situational conversations. A model dialogue between the teacher and a student:

Student: Good morning sir. I am Sameera.

Teacher: Good morning Sameera. How can I help you?

Student: Sir, I am working for some project on 'the contemporary learning technologies and the possibilities of learning English language'.

Teacher: That is very interesting. What can I do for you then?

Student: I need your suggestions and help in discovering a variety of learning technologies and their use for students of the tech-age.

Teacher: Great idea. But Sameera, Let me 'sleep on it'. So that I can help better!

Student: Pardon me sir! I really didn't get you. This is not the time for sleeping. I want you to help me.

Teacher: Oh..! Dear Sameera, I didn't mean it. Haven't you heard of the expression 'sleep on it'?

Student: No sir. I haven't heard it before.

Teacher: The expression means, 'Let me think about it' or 'to have more time to think about it' without making immediate decision about a plan or idea.

Student: It is interesting sir. Can we use it anytime in the situations related to such meaning sir?

Teacher: Of course Sameera. We can use it anytime in formal and informal situations too. It is commonly used expression these days.

For example: A boss assigns some job to his/her subordinate and says "You don't have to complete this immediately. *Sleep on it* and come with the best results."

Student: Very interesting sir. Thank you sir and I have learnt a new expression today and I believe you can help me out with my project.

Teacher: Sure Sameera. You are welcome.

Let us learn some more expressions which can be used in our daily communication through another *situational dialogue between a father and son*. Once a parent reprimands his son for his son's irregularity to the college:

Father: Raju, once come here (father calls his son in a commanding tone)!

Son: Yes, dad.

Father: Where did you go yesterday?

Son: I went to college dad.

Father: Shut up. I know that you didn't go to college yesterday.

Son: Umm...Dad... I didn't go anywhere (with fear).

Father: 'A little bird told me' that you are irregular to the college.

Son: Come on dad! How can a bird tell you about my irregularity?

Father: Shut up! I didn't mean that a little bird came and told.

Son: Then what dad?

Father: That is an idiomatic expression used when you don't want to reveal the name of the person who said or gave you the information.

Son: Oh..! I am sorry dad. I was absent for only two days. But dad, please tell me who told you about it!

Father: What is wrong with you Raju? Why didn't you attend the classes?

The expression can be used in many situations in our day to day communication. Whenever you don't want to reveal the name of a person who gave you some information about any

secret or something else, you can use the expression so that the opposite person will understand that you do not want to make it known. Let's continue the conversation with another expression...

Son: Dad, the classes are not that interesting and the teachers are not teaching well.

Father: Shame on you Raju. When many of your classmates could follow the classes and doing well, why only you could not?

Son: Dad I am very sorry. I was absent to some classes before and unable to follow the next classes. So I was bunking the classes.

Father: That is not correct Raju. You should go to the teacher and request him or her for clarifying your doubts.

Son: Dad...! Another reason was.... I have failed in 6 subjects so far. It was not my fault. The teachers also didn't teach well and my friends also were not supportive.

Father: Is that true!!! How come you hide that news from me and your mom? You started being dishonest.

Son: What can I do dad when nobody helped me and no good teachers?

Father: Do not '**cry over spilt milk**' Raju. You have made a blunder.

Son: I am not crying for milk dad. I am worrying about my loss.

Father: You are **crying over spilt milk** Raju. That means you are complaining about the loss. Crying over spilt milk doesn't fetch good results. You must have worked hard during the exams and if you had maintained good friends and approached the teachers for doubts, they would really have helped you.

Son: Dad, please don't '**blow off steam**'. I will surely change from today. I understood the value of education and realized dad. But I am already in loss now. I will surely work hard from today and never bunk the classes, dad. I promise you.

Father: What I can do more except blowing off steam. You were good when were at school and intermediate stage. But now you are friends with the bad.

Son: I can understand the reason for your anger dad. I will listen to you and never go in the wrong track dad.

Father: That is good. Your hard work **bears fruit**. It is your life and you should live it by yourself and with your own strengths.

Son: Of course dad, you are correct. I can **bring the house down**. I will perform better in my exams this time and prove myself. Thank you dad.

Father: I know my son that you can do it. But you have **had your chips**. Good luck my son.

Son: Dad I do not understand what you just said.

Father: Dear son. If I say that you **had your chips**, that means you have completely failed in what you really wanted to achieve.

Son: Thanks dad, for your wise advice.

Father: Any time my boy!

The above expression '*Cry over spilt milk*' is used in situations when we complain about 'a loss'. It may be due to your mistake or someone else's. Many of us may procrastinate our actions and at the eleventh hour we worry over the postponement and 'Cry over spilt milk'. Instead we can be on time in our actions and conscious about our responsibilities. So, the one who postpones his or her actions should '*Taste of his/her own medicine*', because, *our past actions result in the present*. As Swami Vivekananda said... *We are the creators of our own destiny*.

The other expression '*Blow off steam*' means expressing anger or frustration. We all express anger or face someone's anger or witness somebody's anger or frustration, we can use this expression "blow off steam" during such situations. And another is '*Bear Fruit*' means; *if something bears fruit it produces positive or successful results*. If we really work hard and put all our efforts into it, surely it *bears fruit*. And, the expression '*bring the house down*' means '*you give a very successful performance*'. It can also be used in situations like...dancing, singing performances. The expression '*had one's chips*' used in situations like '*when someone fails in some achievement*'. You set out to achieve something, but you have failed in it, you can use this expression "I have had my chips in the recent running competition".

Did you notice that I have used another expression in the above paragraph? Let's see that expression in use... a conversation between two friends (Ram& Raj):

Raj: Hi Ram.

Ram: Hi.

Raj: How are you?

Ram: I am good. Thanks.

Raj: Ram! What you did to me is not good. I am really unhappy with your actions these days.

Ram: What are you talking about? I really don't get you.

Raj: Stop acting Ram. I know that you know what I mean to say.

Ram: Yeah. I know. So what now?

Raj: Why did you do that to me? I am your friend, aren't I?

Ram: Of course. You are my friend. I just did it just because you should '*taste of your own medicine*'.

Raj: What do you mean Ram?

Ram: I mean that you have stolen my books and sold them to someone. Do you think that I don't know about it? When I was searching for the books, you pretended that you knew nothing about it.

Raj: So you stole mine and sold??

Ram: Of course I did.

Raj: It is not fair Ram.

Ram: Come on Raj. You have no right to blame me. Because you were dishonest with me, so I did this just to teach you a lesson. Because you should *taste of your own medicine!*

(Raj feels ashamed and leaves the room and goes off.)

The above expression is used in the situations like, whenever 'something happens to you, or something is done to you, that you have done to somebody else'. We should be honest and should not deceive anyone and specially our friends. Parents, Teachers and elders teach these good words since our childhood. But, some people (dishonest) '*take them with a grain of salt*' which means *we don't take what people say too seriously*. They ignore such good lessons from life and conduct themselves dishonest.

They convey a lot of hidden sense of information which creates interest and sparkle our conversations. When students gain an understanding of American idioms, and the facility to use them, they are truly a part of the American English speech community. It will lend a great help for Indian engineering students who aim for career opportunities in the US and overseas.

As the mobile technology has got advanced, we can download free mobile android application on idioms and learn anywhere and anytime. There are so many free mobile apps developed for learning English idioms. The students downloaded mobile apps on idioms and installed in their phones and started learning them with examples. One or two of good free mobile apps for learning English idioms are: "English Idioms and Phrases" by Miracle FunBox Education and "English Idioms" by Dreamob (Free Apps from Google Play) are some and even the learners can get free mobile offline apps from Oxford and Cambridge app developers too. But, many a times the apps are supposed to be purchased.

The students have not only developed conversational skills in English, but also they have learnt to write conversations and short stories using idioms and learnt to be part of group discussions actively and exchange the idiomatic expressions with their proper sense of usage. The activities such as conversations, discussions and writing and narrating short stories facilitate authentic information about how the learners prepared to apply idiomatic expressions in daily communication. They also create awareness about the importance of English idioms, can exchange intended ideas or share knowledge, learn to use the same idiom in different contexts, create interesting and joyful language learning environment, engage and involve the learners or peers actively, develop command over the speaking skills, give practice in reading, understanding and guessing idioms in contexts, and facilitates an opportunity for learning English with joy and learner autonomy (learners can choose an idiom they like and prepare to discuss) besides interpersonal communication skills among peers.

Plan of Action:

For conversations, students can be asked to form pairs and each pair can be given 10 minutes and each can introduce a new idiom and converse about its meaning, using the idiom in real life situations with examples. An idiom can be used in different contexts.

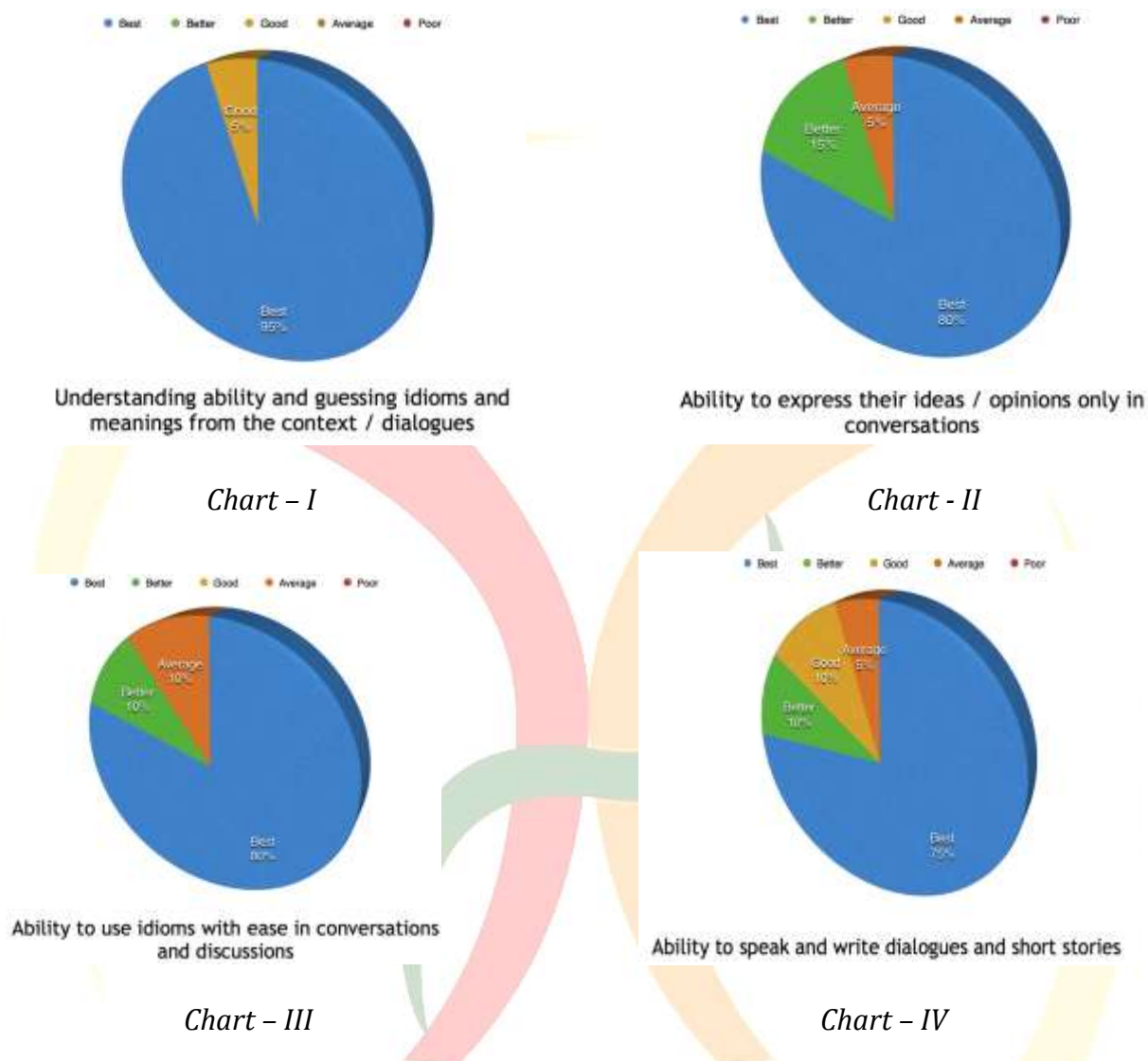
For group discussions, a group of 5 to 6 students can be apt and each group can be given 15 to 20 minutes time. Each student introduces an idiom and its meaning and makes one or two examples and asks the co-participants to construct example sentences using the idiom. Besides sharing or discussing example sentences, they also discuss appropriate situation to use the idiom(s). For example, *Cry over spilt milk* is idiom can be used in the academic contexts of a student as:

- When a student worries a lot for his failure in the recent exams, the friends who cleared the exam can go to him and say, "Do not cry over spilt milk. You can work hard and do well in the next chance." We gain nothing worrying for past mistakes.
- The same idiom can also be used in any professional contexts as:
 - When a boss is aggressive at an employee for his inappropriate behavior at work and state that he would fire him if he repeats the same. The employee might certainly worry for facing such situation. He should stop *crying over spilt milk* and start changing his conduct to be appropriate at his tasks to meet the boss expectations.

20 to 30 minutes spent by students to write short stories and 5 to 10 minutes for narrating the story would be ideal to achieve desired goals in learning English idioms.

	Best	Better	Good	Average	Poor	Total
Understanding ability and guessing idioms and meanings from the context / dialogues	19	0	1	0	0	20
Ability to speak and write dialogues and short stories	15	2	2	1	0	20
Ability to use idioms with ease in conversations and discussions	16	2	0	2	0	20
Ability to express their ideas / opinions only in conversations	16	3	0	1	0	20
Students liked,enjoyed,supported and recommended	20	0	0	0	0	20

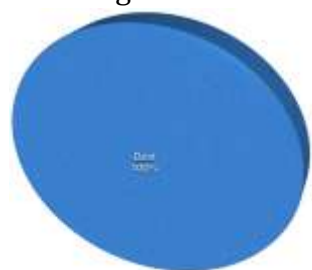
Table – I: Total No. of Students and the Results Achieved



The above table presents information about the total number of students, part of the activities and the results they stood after the period of practice. Total 19 (95%) students on 20 have mastered the ability to guess idioms from contexts and dialogues and understanding the meanings. Only 01(5%) student lacked the ability to understand idioms meanings but got the ability to guess idioms from the given situations. 15 (75%) students stood the best, 02 (10%) as better, 02 (10%) as good and 01 (5%) as average in achieving the ability to converse and write dialogues and write & narrate short stories. 16 (80%) students at the best, 02 (10%) at better and 02 (10%) at average levels developed the ability to use idioms with ease in conversations and discussions. And, 16 (80%) students at the best, 03 (15%) at better and 01 (5%) at average levels stood in developing the abilities to express their views or ideas only in conversations. The students who stood at average levels lacked the practice and unable to grammatically well constructed sentences and they

also need to practice in building self confidence and should avoid stage fright. On the whole, all students 20 on 20 (100%) liked the learner-centric activities and demonstrated their support and recommended as the quick language learning activities.

Learning is an autonomous activity and every learner can be creative and innovative in his/her own learning. One can learn, unlearn and relearn. Learning a foreign language like English is a must for every professional student these days. They aim at great success in the life and aspire to work overseas. Because of the Internet's involvement in most of our actions, the world is global village and Learning English for various purposes, international business, trade and commerce and education today made all things possible. Information access and exchange of knowledge or communication on social networking sites can make you dream big and fly high in your career and life. Because, English is the only language which is widely spread and largely spoken all over the world.



Students liked, enjoyed, supported and recommended

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Further Reading:

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www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/language/theteacher/.