

## ENGLISH IDIOMS – THEORY AND PRACTICE

## ANGLICKÉ IDIÓMY – TEÓRIA A PRAX

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**Abstract**

*This paper is part of the KEGA project entitled Idioms in Business Communication, which is subsidised by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. The main aim of the project is to examine current phraseology in the realms of economics, diplomacy and law and to develop the students' reading literacy as well as their speaking skills with the focus on idioms used in the professional settings. The author of the paper presents the results of teaching and studying efforts in this field and describes certain peculiarities in students' interpretation of the idioms.*

**Keywords:** communication, decoding, encoding, ESP – English for Specific Purposes, idiom.

**Abstrakt**

*Predkladaný článok je súčasťou projektu KEGA pod názvom Idiomatické výrazy v obchodnej komunikácii podporovaný Ministerstvom školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky. Hlavným cieľom projektu je preskúmať súčasnú frazeológiu v oblasti ekonómie, diplomacie a práva a rozvíjať čitateľskú gramotnosť a návyky hovorenia študentov so zreteľom na idiomatické výrazy používané v profesionálnom prostredí. Autorka článku prezentuje výsledky pedagogického a študijného snaženia v danej oblasti a uvádza tiež študentské osobitosti v interpretácii idiomatických výrazov.*

**KLúčové slová:** komunikácia, dekódovanie, kódovanie, odborný anglický jazyk, idiomatický výraz.

**Introduction**

Communication nowadays takes many different forms, especially in professional settings such as business, international trade, diplomacy, or law. Effective communication is crucial, it is vital to organizations. Their success or failure depend on the art of communicators to express their ideas clearly and coherently. Good and effective interlocutors, very often in the role of negotiators, are a valuable asset for any business.

When speaking, we are able to make choices about which lexical units we use – choices that are influenced by our desire to ensure that we really communicate effectively, and by our sense of identity. When we encode language, we make judgements about which of our lexical units the listeners or readers will be able to find in their own lexicons. In some cases we may deliberately introduce them to a new item in order to create space for a shared identity. Non-native speakers may elect not to use large lexicon, may elect not to use for example phrasal verbs or fixed idiomatic expressions, because they associate them with a group with which they do not fully identify.

Options also exist for decoding. That is, as listeners or readers we constantly have to make judgements and choices about what the speaker or writer is most likely to have meant. It is on that basis that a native speaker can intentionally or unintentionally reject the easy mapping of a form produced by a non-native speaker.

Students at more advanced levels, or those learning a language for specific purposes, would require practice with additional categories and different lexical phrases, such as

institutionalized expressions, variable phrasal constraints, sentence builders as well as idiomatic expressions.

### Formulaic Language

It is the nature of formulaic language to take many forms and to be difficult to define and identify on the basis of its particularities. But in essence, it is a simple phenomenon – according to Wray (2012) it is “*the multiword subset of lexical units*” (Wray, 2012, p. 286). Formulaic language is often defined as a kind of word strings that appear to be treated like a single unit during processing. Wray claims that “*multiword strings are maintained in the lexicon as the way of expressing their message that it was possible to access them easily without the activity of the standard linguistic processing routes*” (Wray, 2012, p. 200). Researchers try to answer the question what happens “at the boundaries” when language operates beyond its normal scope, where there are unusual constraints on communication that make formulaic language more evident, or where language users choose, or are forced to favour previously assembled output over something more spontaneous.

One puzzling aspect of patterns observed in linguistic research is that “*idiom comprehension is very poor in almost all impaired groups, even those with a high productive ability for formulaic sentences. Since idioms are generally viewed as the most clearly identifiable type of formulaic sequence this finding can be explained in terms of the default processing model*” (Wray, 2012, p. 200). It has been hypothesized that the normal brain synthesizes macro- and micro-interpretations of input. According to Jung-Beeman the right hemisphere weakly activates large diffuse semantic fields, including information distantly related to the words, while the left hemisphere strongly activates small and focused semantic fields (Jung-Beeman, 2005). Paul claims that natural language comprehension occurs by means of bilateral activity which ensures the integration of the information, so that the specific message is understood within its communicative context (Paul *et al.*, 2003). As a result, according to Wray, there is a proposal “*that right hemisphere damage would weaken the role of the macro-interpretation, making it more difficult to select the holistic meaning of an idiom over its literal meaning. However, it should also follow that if the left hemisphere is damaged, it will be the literal interpretation that is difficult to bring into the frame, so the holistic meaning of an idiom is preferred*” (Wray, 2012, p. 201).

It is plausible that a person who could understand the idiom in a communicative context, when it carried its normal functional load, would not be able to understand it out of that context. When speaking about testing idioms in academic settings, it may be that the holistic reading is never actually accessed in the tests.

Languages like English have a wide range of ways to express meanings using regular and transparent formulations. Yet native speakers tolerate the retention of irregularity and opacity. Sinclair (1987) identifies two principles at work in the language: a) *the open-choice principle*, which works on the assumption that language users have a relatively free choice in composing phrases and sentences where words are concerned, constrained only by grammaticality, and b) *the idiom principle*, which works on the assumption that language users have available to them a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices. Idioms have the potential of appearing anywhere and everywhere, and are marked as occurring in mature written or spoken discourse (Fernando, 1996).

According to Fernando (1996), ideational idioms “*convey impressionistic representations of aspects of the physical, social, and emotional worlds of a language community*” (Fernando, 1996, p. 252). “*They contribute to the subject matter and enable the language user to talk about the world in an impressionistic way and in imagist, metaphorical terms. Typically, they are realized by units smaller than the clause, i.e. nominals, verbals, adjectivals, adverbial, and clauses themselves*” (Hrdličková, 2017, p. 23).

Hrdličková also claims that “*the most common patterns of idioms in Business English are:*

a) *traditional idioms (e.g. get the picture, tie the knot),*

b) *idiomatic compounds (e.g. a glass ceiling, the smart money, hard and fast),*

c) *prepositional idioms (e.g. at the end of the day, from scratch),*

d) *comparisons (e.g. be like talking to a brick wall),*

e) *exclamations and sayings (e.g. You must be joking!, Practice makes perfect), and*

f) *clichés (e.g. a golden handshake, when the going gets tough, the tough get going)”* (Hrdličková, 2017, p. 25).

### **Idioms and Language Teaching**

One common pattern in language acquisition is that learners pass through a stage in which they use a large number of unanalyzed chunks of language in certain predictable social contexts. They use, in other words, a great deal of “prefabricated” language. Finding an appropriate theoretical framework of language use presents its own difficulties, which a good teacher should take into his/her account in order to organize seminars that lead students to use prefabricated language to learn how to produce, comprehend, and analyze the new language.

The extent of prefabricated speech in performed language now seems far greater than once was thought. Much attention in linguistic theory has been directed to “*idioms – complex bits of frozen syntax, whose meanings cannot be derived from the meaning of their constituents, that is, whose meanings are more than simply the sum of their individual parts, e.g. step on the gas, raining cats and dogs*” (Nattinger, DeCarrico, 2014, p. 33). Nattinger and DeCarrico find the other sorts of formulaic fixed phrases that need to be attended to as well, e.g. “*clichés – that are similar to idioms in that they too consist of patterns that are relatively frozen, but they are unlike them in that the patterns usually consist of larger stretches of language and that their meaning is derivable from the individual constituents, e.g. there is no doubt about it, a good time was had by all*” (Nattinger, DeCarrico, 2014, p.33) or “*non-canonical phrases that are different from both of the above in that their patterns do not have the typical shapes of English structures, e.g. off with his head, by and large*” (Nattinger, DeCarrico, 2014, p. 33).

In teaching such lexical phrases as mentioned above the emphasis should be on teaching them for comprehension and production, and their function in discourse, especially in case of advanced learners and learners of language for specific purposes. In other words, learning to speak means learning to converse. Students need to learn idioms and other sorts of formulaic language not as isolated, planned answers, but rather to learn how to use these structures to create the flow and purpose of a spontaneously unfolding conversation in professional settings. Students can be taught by first illustrating a basic lexical phrase frame, then it is recommended to teach some representative lexical material that appears in the slots within that basic frame, and, finally, teaching some representative variations and expansions of the frame itself in case of variables. Students should also be taught to recognize and analyze more and more lexical phrase frames on their own as they occur in lecture discourse or in authentic texts.

At the Faculty of Applied Languages, University of Economics in Bratislava the KEGA project *Idioms in Business Communication* has been carried out since 2017.

### **Teaching idioms – practice**

Students of three faculties at the University of Economics in Bratislava, the Faculty of International Relations, the Faculty of National Economy and the Faculty of Commerce participated in the KEGA project *Idioms in Business Communication*. Within their studying groups they are divided into two parallel groups – so called the experimental group, in which business English is taught and studied with the focus on idioms, and the controlling group, in which business English is taught and studied without any specific concentration on idiomatic expressions.

At the beginning of the winter semester of 2017/2018 students of both groups were asked to translate 60 English idioms into Slovak in order to find out what they know about idioms and if they understand their meaning.

At the Faculty of International Relations 18 students of the experimental group participated in the informative idiomatic test, 14 students, i.e. 77.7%, were successful, they wrote the test for more than 51% (the best one reached 88.3 %) and 4 of them, i.e. 22.3%, failed (the worst one reached 43.3%). In the controlling group there were 19 students of the Faculty of International Relations. Ten out of 19 learners, i.e. 52.63%, wrote the test successfully (for more than 51%, the best reached 75%) and 9 students, i.e. 47.37%, had serious difficulties with idioms (the worst one reached only 26.6%).

Some idiomatic expressions were understood and interpreted correctly by the majority, if not all, of the students, e.g. to be like a fish out of water – *nebyť vo svojom živle/svojej koži, cítiť sa ako ryba na suchu* (*He lives in the city and when he goes to the countryside he's like a fish out of water.*), to give it to sb straight – *povedať niečo niekomu na plné ústa/od srdca* (*I'm going to give it to you straight. I don't love you anymore.*), to go downhill – *ísť dolu kopcom s niekým /s niečím /zhoršovať sa* (*His health went downhill after the accident.*), to take its toll on sth – *vyžiadať si/vybrať si svoju daň* (*All that hard work has taken its toll on her health.*), to be a brainbox – *otvorená hlava/hlavička/veľmi inteligentný človek* (*Martin is a brainbox of the class. He always gets top marks.*), look down sb's noses at sb – *divať sa na niekoho pohrdavo* (*Some of the people look down their noses at us, just because we aren't as rich as them.*), start from scratch – *začať od nuly/od začiatku* (*I lost my project on the computer so I had to start from scratch.*).

On the other hand, there were a few idioms in the informative idiomatic test that were not interpreted at all by anybody, for example: to be dead to the world – *spať ako zarezaný* (*Better leave Craig – he is dead to the world.*), to be larger than life – *vzbudzovať pozornosť* (*Ernie is the life and soul of the party! Yes, he is larger than life!*) or only few students could interpret the idiomatic expressions such as to be off the beaten track – *byť od ruky/d'aleko od ostatných miest* (*We went to a little cottage in the countryside right off the beaten track.*), to have a bee in sb's bonnet – *mať chrobáka v hlave/byť niečím posadnutý* (*He's got a bee in his bonnet about graffiti.*), to make a song and dance about sth – *robiť cirkus okolo niečoho/narobiť veľa rečí okolo niečoho* (*Don't make a song and dance about your homework.*), a dark horse – *tichá voda* (*Steve is a bit of a dark horse. I wonder what he is really like.*), a pen pusher – (obyčajný) *úradník* (*You haven't got any real responsibility. You are just a pen pusher.*).

The list of idioms was prepared from materials of textbooks used in secondary grammar schools, as students had declared (Harris, M., Mower, D., Sikorzyńska, A.: *New Opportunities Upper Intermediate Students' Book*, Carr Comyns, J., Parsons J.: *Success Upper Intermediate Students' Book*. Fricker, R.: *Success Upper Intermediate Workbook*).

During two semesters of Business English courses in the academic year 2017/2018 students worked either in the experimental group or the controlling group. Both groups used the *Market Leader Business English Course Book Upper Intermediate* (Cotton, Falvey, Kent, 2011) as their compulsory literature. But the experimental group worked also with the materials in the university textbook *Ideational Idioms in Business English Communication* by Hrdličková (2016). Moreover, in the summer semester of 2018 they were asked to read the authentic texts from on-line newspapers and magazines such as *The Telegraph* ([www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk)), *The New York Times* ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)), *The Guardian* ([www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)) or *The Diplomat Magazine* ([www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com)), *The Economist* ([www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)), *Foreign Affairs* ([www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com)), *World Politics Review* ([www.worldpoliticsreview.com](http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com)) with the aim to highlight idioms and check them in dictionaries. The findings were sent to the teacher by means of [moodle.euba.sk](http://moodle.euba.sk).

At the end of each semester in the academic year 2017/2018 the idiomatic test was written. Idioms were taken from the studied materials of the *Market Leader Business English*

*Course Book Upper Intermediate* (Cotton, Falvey, Kent, 2011) and *Ideational Idioms in Business English Communication* (Hrdličková, 2016). In the winter semester of 2017/2018 there were 20 students of the Faculty of International Relations in the controlling group. Seventeen students out of 20, i. e. 85%, passed the test (reached more than 51%, the best one reached 93,33%) and 3 students out of 20, i. e. 15%, failed (the worst one reached only 38%).

The same idiomatic test was also written by 19 students of the experimental group. The test results were much better compared to the controlling group. All students passed the test, no one failed. The best one wrote the test for 93,33% as in the controlling group, and the worst one was written for 61.66%, it means still passed.

Approximately a half of idioms were understood and correctly interpreted by all students in the experimental group, e.g. to be on the warpath – byť na vojnovom chodníku/byť na vojnovej nohe (*Bill's on the warpath again – there are mistakes in the publicity material sent out.*), half the battle – dobrý začiatok – polovica úspechu (*If you can convince the commercial attaché here, that's half the battle.*), fighting a losing battle – bojovať vopred prehratú bitku (*Manufacturers often feel they are fighting a losing battle against counterfeiting.*), look before you leap – dvakrát meraj, raz strihaj (*Look before you leap into franchising.*), to be crystal clear – celkom/úplne jasný/zrozumiteľný (*You can't communicate with the outside world until your internal message is crystal clear.*).

A bit problematic idioms remained the following ones: rank-and-file – radový zamestnanec/pracovník (*Applied to a firm's internal organization, the owner, the middle management, the lower management and the rank-and-file are included in communication.*), the status quo – súčasný stav (*'You can't be content with maintaining the status quo', Sandler said. 'You must push the limits. Dare to be different!'*), quid pro quo – protihodnota/aký požičaj, taký vráť (*Although networking is not exactly quid pro quo, it includes the element of exchange.*), fly-by-night – pochybný/pokútny/s pochybnou povest'ou (*These fly-by-night companies are more concerned with making a quick buck than with sustaining growth over a long period.*). In these cases students didn't write anything if they couldn't understand the meaning or they did, but incorrectly. In the experimental group there were a few students who managed even these problematic idioms while in the controlling group in these cases no one gave the correct answer.

In the summer semester of 2018 there were 16 students of the Faculty of International Relations in the controlling group. A half of them, i.e. 50%, passed the test (the best one reached 100%) and a half, i.e. 50%, failed (the worst was written only for 16,66%). Compared to the winter time the summer semester test results in the controlling group were worse despite the fact that in more cases than in the winter semester nearly all students translated idioms into Slovak correctly, e.g. big guns – veľké zviera, pipe dreams – vzdušné zámky/chiméra, take risks – riskovať, a shining example – žiarivý príklad, a great deal of sth – veľká časť/veľa, practice makes perfect – cvičenie robí majstra.

On the other hand, quite many idioms studied during the semester remained problematic, e.g. laissez-faire – liberálny, a priori – a priori/v zásade, brightest sparks – prešibani/chytrí ľudia, at one's fingertips – po ruke/k dispozícii, a battle cry – vojnový pokrik/pokrik, new kids on the block – nováčikovia na scéne/zelenáči, thrown in at the deep end – hodený do vody.

The same idiomatic test was again written by 18 students of the experimental group. Like in the winter semester, all students passed the test, no one failed. The best test was written for 100%, the most problematic one for 51,6%, it means still passed. In terms of translation English idioms into Slovak, like in the winter time, more than a half of idiomatic expressions were no problem for learners, e.g. big guns – veľké zviera, to name a few – uviesť zopár (príkladov), call to arms – povolanie na konfrontáciu, in other words – inými slovami/inak povedané, pipe dreams – vzdušné zámky/chiméra, take risks – riskovať, a shining example – žiarivý príklad, ice breakers – témy na prelomenie ľadov/osmelenie sa, a great deal of sth – veľká časť/veľa, practice makes perfect – cvičenie robí majstra, calling to shots – rozhodovanie/ rozkazovanie/hrať prvé husle, do battle with sb – viesť s niekým (ostrý) spor,

laissez-faire – liberálny, new kids on the block – nováčikovia na scéne/zelenáči, the big picture – nadhľad/globálne hľadisko. Some idioms remained difficult for students of the experimental group, for example a priori – a priori/v zásade, per capita – na obyvateľa, in their own right – plným právom.

In general, tests demonstrated better results in the experimental group than in the controlling group. These idioms were taught and studied within the communicative context and with the specific concentration on them using various methods including reading authentic texts in on-line newspapers and magazines as well as discussions aimed at idioms. In the controlling group idioms were part of the studying materials but mostly just mentioned. If there was no specific attention paid to these fixed expressions supported by various pedagogical methods less perceptive students couldn't benefit much. The KEGA project reveals the need to apply more effective methods in teaching English idioms, especially the need to study them within the large communicative context. This way the advanced students could be taught how to comprehend idioms and produce them in their professional settings.

### Conclusion

Lexical phrases, including idioms, are basic, pervasive units in language production, used as an intersection of structure, function, and use, should provide an effective unit for measuring linguistic variation. However, there remain questions about the most effective methods for introducing these phrases to students, to non-native speakers. All kinds of syntactic units occur as lexical phrases, and the more experienced the speaker, the more they draw on different kinds of units to maintain communication. Concentrating on these phrases, rather than on complete sentences enables learners to manipulate the direction of discourse effectively. On the other hand, our research and experience from language teaching with the focus on idioms has demonstrated the need to introduce these fixed phrases in the communicative context. Based on the whole context and by means of reading comprehension trainings, presentations and through active use of idioms in learning language students are able not only to draw the meaning from the context, but they are able to maintain discussions on professional topics in the fields of economics, especially marketing, finances, banking as well as diplomacy and law. Real interaction allows production and monitoring of language at the C1 level and enables learners to speak and negotiate their own way. The KEGA project *Idioms in Business Communication* has shown that these methods seem to be very effective for further language acquisition.

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