

## **Making Idioms “Stick”: Creative Activities for Communicative Competence**

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Few English language instructors would disagree with the notion that in the teaching of vocabulary, little is more challenging than the teaching of idioms. It is not that students object to learning them; nothing could be further from the truth. Students generally love the colorful and expressive bits and pieces of language we commonly refer to as idioms. They are happy to read and recite dialogues, complete cloze exercises, as well as other “fun” activities or drills found in the many idioms textbooks on the market; however, we have come to question whether these sorts of activities result in the kind of communicative competence Widdowson (1990), Brown (2000), and Nunan and Swan (2004) advocate.

The difficulty in learning idioms, or any vocabulary items for that matter, comes in remembering and being able to use them correctly in both the linguistic and cultural context of spoken and written English (Boers, Demecheleer, & Eyckmans, 2004; Folse, 2004). It is not enough for students to memorize the meaning of idiomatic expressions. They must find a need for using those expressions in meaningful production and exchange of information (Ellis, 2000), or those newly-learned idioms are unlikely to “stick.” When opportunity for meaningful exchange with native speakers is not an option, the teacher’s best resource is to create a need.

Materials for creating a need can come from many sources: idiom textbooks, dictionaries of idioms, movies, television sitcoms, TV and radio talk shows, newspaper and magazine articles, overheard communication between native speakers, as well as Internet or online communication such as that experienced by many students in chat rooms. No matter where they find the material, students will need to process newly learned idioms in multiple ways in order for those idioms to “stick.” Students need to do more than study, memorize, listen and repeat idioms. These vocabulary anomalies must be converted into mental images, massaged, and then used in communicative contexts of the students’ own creation in order for learning to take place.

## Getting Started

Given our students' passion for learning idioms, predicated no doubt on our own, we have developed a variety of activities that create a need for the acquisition and use of idiomatic language. These activities escalate in complexity, building from one-dimensional writing activities to multi-dimensional writing and oral presentations. Idioms are drawn from textbooks and from samples of language brought into the classroom. All activities require the use of a minimum of five idioms.

### Warming Up With Diaries

The initial activity asks students to keep a diary using idioms learned during class that week from both idiom textbook sources and supplemental material. Students underline or highlight the idioms to reinforce them and make the teacher's grading easier. Diaries also allow students to personalize the idioms and place them in a familiar context. Maria, a Mexican student, wrote about eating out while Gabriella, a Brazilian, wrote about her day off (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1.* Excerpts from student diary entries.

<p>We went at the seafood buffet at the Rio and we <u>pigged out</u>, I can't believe how much food we ate but everything was delicious and to satisfy our <u>sweet tooth</u> I ate an apple pie which was <u>to die for!</u> and he had a banana split that <u>made my mouth water</u>. The dinner <u>was on him</u> ...</p> <p style="text-align: right;">—Maria</p>	<p>... It took us more than two hours to get home because he had a <u>blowout</u> on the highway. He fixed it and when we almost get home we were in a <u>broadside</u>. An old lady was to blame for it. The <u>cops</u> came and made a report. I was <u>sick and tired</u> and I was thinking that I wished be worked instead this kind of days off. As you can see, wasn't a very good day, in my next day off I'll go <u>to the boonies</u> in this way I'll be <u>safe and sound</u>.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">—Gabriella</p>
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The diaries are not shared with anyone other than the teacher so that students can gain confidence in their writing and use of colloquial language.

### Expanding the Audience with Letters

Using the same strategy as with the diary, students direct correspondence to someone else in the form of a letter. They can choose to write to friends, family, or classmates. If students write to classmates, the teacher can set up an in-class postal network in which the receiver is either known or unknown to the writer. Claudia, a Cuban student, chose to write to a friend rather than a classmate (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Claudia's letter to a friend.

Dear Miriam,

Hey friend! What's up with you? I am here in Las Vegas having a blast! This city is pretty cool! You know, the attraction of the casinos makes me stay up till all hours of the night and sleep in every weekend. Even during the week I usually go out to dinner and take in a movie.

I met a nice guy in church. His name is Mark and he is to die for! I don't know him very good yet, but I'm just giving it a shot. I'm sure God is in control. Let's see, we two might hit it off in two nights.

I heard about your brother's accident, that's nuts, isn't it? But, take it easy! Everything will be all right.

I miss you.

Love,  
Claudia

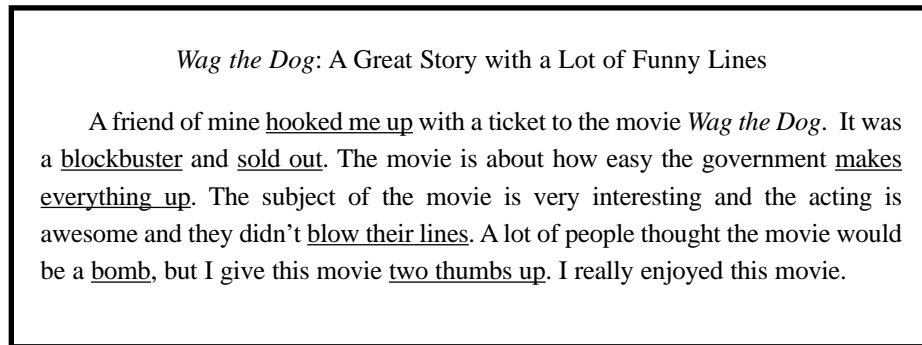
While class time does not always allow the letter receivers to respond, the awareness that a classmate or friend will read the letter encourages students to write authentically.

### Adding Voice With Movie Reviews

To combine speech and text, the students next prepare movie reviews of their choice of films, either current or classic, American or foreign, on television or in a theatre. Because reviews are less familiar than diaries or letters, more extensive preparation is needed. We analyze reviews of current movies that students may have seen, looking for use of idioms as well as format. We often watch a short film and write a review as a class to model the basic concepts of film criticism. The students present their reviews to the

class as if they were film critics such as Ebert and Roper, and like such film critics, their performances are videotaped—for their own viewing and self-critique, not for the public. Mandana, an Indonesian student, chose to review a movie current at the time of the class (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Mandana’s review of *Wag the Dog*.



Students are usually enthusiastic about this assignment because it allows them to share movies from their culture and discuss the latest events in the lives of their favorite stars.

### **Interacting through Dialogues**

Writing dialogues is particularly flexible and engaging as it involves pair or trio work and can be adapted for any group of idioms. To begin the assignment, the students imagine characters with a problem in a particular setting. After writing a dialogue for the imagined situation, they rehearse the scene for presentation and then bring in props and costumes, if necessary, for their performance in front of the class. However, two Japanese students, Tomo and Makiko, didn't need any props or costumes for their between-class dialogue (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Makiko and Tomo's dialogue.

Tomo: What do you say we grab a bite, Makiko?

Makiko: Could we do it another time? I'm not in the mood to eat right now.

Tomo: What's eating you? I never see you get bent out of shape before!

Makiko: You know what, I went to the DMV at West Flamingo today and I aced the written test! 'Cause I pulled an all-nighter to cram for that...but I flunked the driving test!

Tomo: What's up with your driving test anyway?

Makiko: Well, unfortunately my examiner was so nasty! He didn't give me any chance to take a make-up when I ran a stop sign.

Tomo: Just one?! How could he possibly flunk you?

Makiko: What is worse, I cut a Vicky's class for that.

Tomo: Oh my god! She's going to freak out if she knew it!

Knowing that they will have an audience for their work often inspires students to write humorous and realistic exchanges and provides an opportunity to demonstrate authentic communication.

### **Selling the Public through Advertisements**

Focusing on advertisements raises the students' awareness of the ubiquity of idioms in American English. First, the teacher points out the use of idiomatic language in magazine and newspaper advertisements. For instance, an advertisement for a well-known credit card company featured an Olympic high jumper and led off with the line, "You don't have to bend over backwards to pull for the team," while an advertisement for an arthritis medication urged, "Don't let your joints get you down." In preparation for designing their own advertisements, small student groups then examine teacher-collected magazines, looking at advertisements for idioms and trying to decipher their meanings. They share their findings with another group to broaden their awareness of idioms in advertisements. Then, individually, in pairs, or in teams, students select a service or product and create their own sales pitch, which they will later present to the class. Asuka, a student from Japan, sold the students on diet pills while Galina, a student from Bulgaria, sold them on pizza (see Figure 5).

*Figure 5.* Asuka and Galina’s advertisements.

Advertisements can lead to rich discussions of pop culture, idiomatic language, and the media and how they influence each other. Writing their own advertisements also inspires students’ creativity and expands their use of idiomatic language.

### **Predicting the Future through Horoscopes**

Virtually every newspaper in the United States as well as others in the English-speaking world have daily horoscopes. These columns are filled with little language jewels in the form of idiomatic expressions. The first step in this activity is for the class to review several weeks’ worth of horoscopes from the local paper, deciphering the meaning of the idioms from the context. The students and teacher construct an idiom word-bank on the blackboard, forming the basis for their own writing of horoscopes. With the groundwork completed, students choose from among the idioms in the word bank and from various options for writing their horoscopes: a lengthy daily or weekly horoscope for their own sign or short daily horoscopes for all twelve signs of the zodiac. Some students really “get into it” as did Sandy, a student from Peru, who added art work to her horoscope (see Figure 6). Ripa, an Indonesian student, wrote about a happy social life while Bojidar, a Bulgarian with a dark sense of humor, wrote about having a bad day (see Figure 7).

Figure 6. Sandy's artistic prediction.

Figure 7. Astrological forecasts of Ripa and Bojidar.

<p>June 3: You'd like to <u>keep up</u> with friends, but your friends may be <u>running out of money</u>. Your day <i>will take a turn</i> for the worse. <u>Get a grip</u>. Make plans to <u>hang out</u> at the club. Get <u>dressed to kill</u> and <u>hit the town</u>. You will meet <u>a hunk</u> and <u>have a crush</u> on him. Don't <u>lead him</u> on because he will <u>love you at first sight</u>.</p>	<p>Today the stars show a real black day for the Scorpions. Whatever you are going to do just <u>skip it!</u> Do not go to work—your boss is going to freak out and he <u>can't stand</u> you today without any visible reason! It doesn't matter how much you <u>kiss up</u> to him you will always <u>rub him the wrong way</u>. It is just one of those days. If you are a student, you better <u>cut classes</u> today. Your teacher has already prepared a <u>killer</u> test and you will totally <u>blow it</u>. It doesn't matter that you are a <u>straight A</u> student.</p>
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After composing the horoscopes, students share their writing in four-person groups, reading their horoscopes aloud as the members of the group read along. This step not only anchors the idioms in the students' active vocabulary but also gives them an opportunity for focused listening and comprehension.

### **Taking a Trip via Travel Brochures**

Designing travel brochures is the culminating activity. With plenty of samples gathered from travel agents, hotel racks, newsstands, and tourist destinations, pairs of students analyze two or three brochures for the use of idiomatic language. For example, a brochure from Bonfante Gardens in Gilroy, California, boasts “a little environmental education thrown in for good measure,” while a Disneyland brochure urges visitors to “check out all of the seasonal fun.” As a class, the students make a list of all the idioms taught throughout the semester as well as of others garnered during that time. Then, each student selects a locale for his or her own brochure. The choice can be the student's own country, a place to visit, or a fantasy destination. After collecting pictures from magazines, the Internet, other travel brochures, and family photos, the students create text to match the pictures, using the idioms to entice travelers to their chosen destinations. Ji-Young, a Korean woman, designed a brochure to attract visitors to Thailand while Eman used dialogue boxes in his pictures to call people to his native country of Algeria (see Figure 8).

*Figure 8.* Excerpts from travel brochures by Ji-Young and Eman.



Using a computerized projection of their completed brochures, students make a sales pitch to the rest of the class, followed by question-and-answer sessions. The overall activity seems to bring out the most creativity in our students, perhaps because of their fondness for travel or their desire to show off their homeland.

### Winding Down

These seven activities, used in a single class on teaching idioms, all involve created communications that are either realistic, as in letter-writing, or that are imitative, as in movie reviews or travel brochures. As such, they force students to use idioms as part of their own oral and written expressions rather than as fill-ins for textbook exercises.

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