
Idioms in Context: The Real McCoy

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Vicki: I'm fit to be tied. Our students just aren't getting the hang of using idiomatic English.

Cookie: Well, let's brainstorm and see if we can come up with a game plan.

Vicki: Okay. I've got a flash. Let me bounce this idea off you. Doesn't it stand to reason that if we show 'em something real, they'll catch on better?

Cookie: Hey, I think you've got something. Let's flesh it out a little more and then give it a shot in the classroom.

While this dialogue may seem somewhat contrived, its frequent use of idioms is typically American. Second-language students would have difficulty following such a conversation without some understanding of idiomatic English. In fact, successful communication in American English often depends on an understanding of idiomatic expressions.

The idiomatic expressions most often included in ESL textbooks run the gamut from metaphorical phrases (spill the beans) to phrasal verbs (to bring up). Whatever the form and function of the idiom, however, it must be learned, for each idiomatic expression has a special meaning which cannot be understood by looking at its individual words (Long & Summers, 1989).

Idioms are often taught through textbooks, which typically introduce the idioms at the beginning of a chapter and follow up with a dialogue (Goldman, 1981). Students are expected to memorize the meanings of idioms and then complete cloze exercises (Zucaro, 1992). Sometimes idioms are even taught according to distinguishing grammatical features (Feare, 1980). While these bookbound approaches are useful ways to introduce idioms to students, they don't always foster internalization or provide an authentic context for usage. In attempting to supplement textbooks, we've developed an approach which seems to help students bridge the gap from passive understanding to active usage of idiomatic vocabulary.

We begin our lesson by exposing students to media and materials in which idioms are used as an authentic means of communication. Newspaper articles, video news clips, radio announcements, print and television ads, and scenes from motion pictures all demonstrate natural use of idioms in context. After reading or viewing one of these

in a whole-group exercise, students then divide into small groups to figure out the meanings of idioms we have drawn attention to. This inductive process may be time-consuming, but it reinforces not only the practice of deriving meaning from context but also cooperative learning. Small groups share their definitions with the whole class so that we can make sure they're on the right track.

Once all the idioms seem to be understood, we pair up the students. Then we provide a stimulus in the form of a stick drawing, photo, or cartoon with dialogue balloons (see Figure 1). The students select five or six idioms from the source material and create their own dialogues.

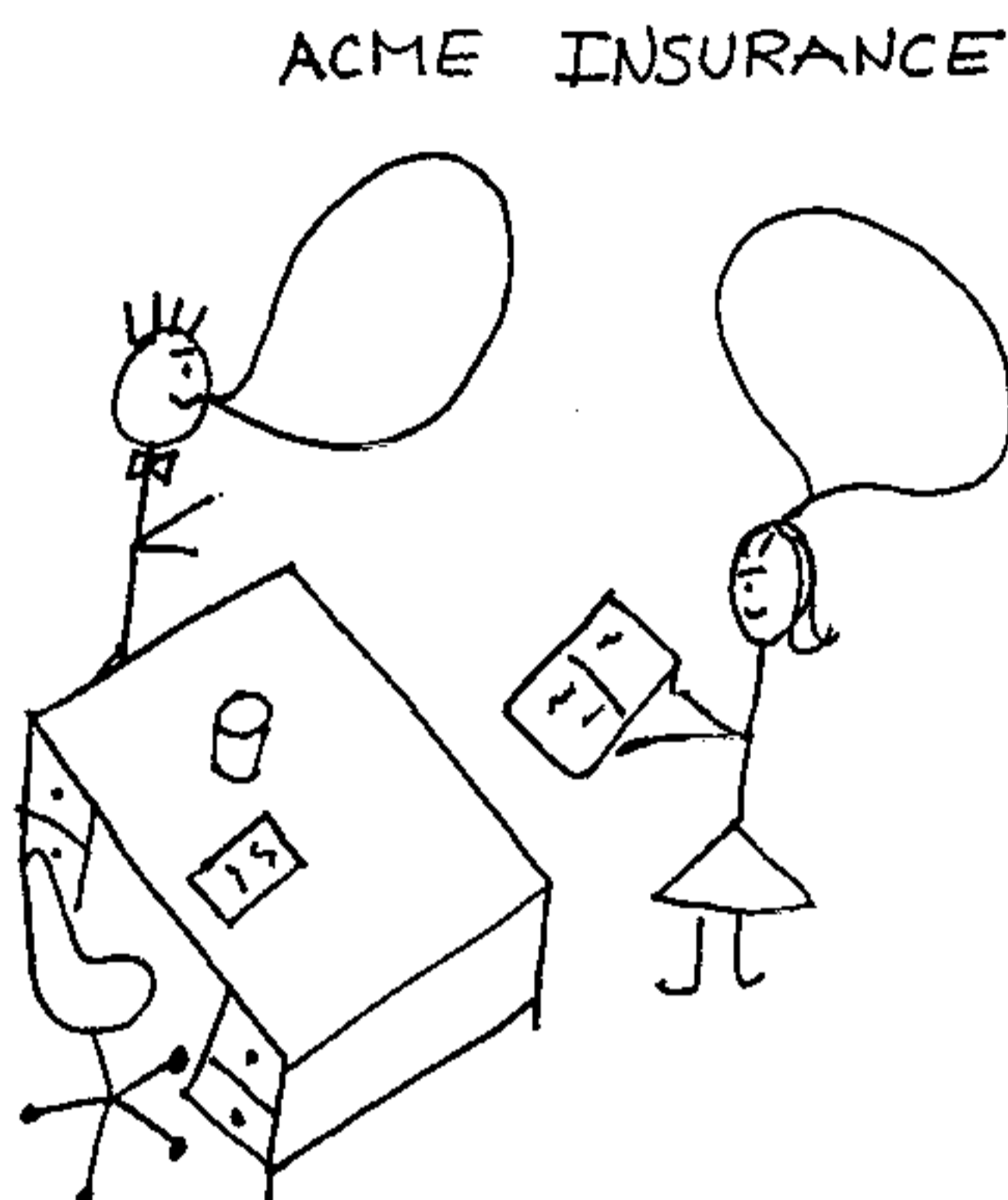


Figure 1. Simple cartoon stimulus

They're invited to try out their dialogues on a native speaker as well as rehearse them aloud. At the next class meeting, the teams present their dialogues, sometimes even using props to liven up their productions. It never fails to amaze us how creative and humorous students can be when given the opportunity. Their joyous discoveries about the English language create a lively atmosphere in which learning idioms turns out to be fun.

A recent lesson used the ABC news show *Nightline* as the source for idioms related to business. A student from Togo, paired with one from Nicaragua, presented an interpretation of a rather heated dialogue between an employee and her supervisor:

Setting: Sanoussi and Martha are in the office having a conversation.

Sanoussi: Martha, I've noticed that your paperwork hasn't been meeting the deadlines. I think you should take advantage of your spare time and put in long hours.

Martha: Listen, I have to juggle a career and a family!

Sanoussi: I have gone out on a limb for you, but that just doesn't cut it!

Martha: It's not as bad as you're making it seem. You just like to boss people around!

Sanoussi: The bottom line is you're lazy!

Martha: I'm not going to respond to that. Some things are better left unsaid.

A follow-up option on computers can take us back to the textbook model for teaching idioms: a dialogue, definitions, and cloze exercises. But our textbook is unique; it's written by students. Their short dialogues are entered into *Idioms in English* (Moulton, 1992), which turns original student work into interactive cloze exercises (see Figures 2,3,4,5).

A Workplace Argument

Sanoussi and Martha are in the office having a conversation.

Sanoussi: Martha, I've noticed that your paperwork hasn't been meeting the deadlines. I think you should take advantage of your spare time and put in long hours.

Martha: Listen, I have to juggle a career and a family!

Sanoussi: I have gone out on a limb for you, but that just doesn't cut it!

Martha: It's not as bad as you're making it seem. You just like to boss people around!

Sanoussi: The bottom line is you're lazy!

Martha: I'm not going to respond to that. Some things are better left unsaid.

F1 STORY F2 WORDS F3 EXERCISE F4 MENU F5 QUIT

Figure 2. Simulated computer screen: dialogue

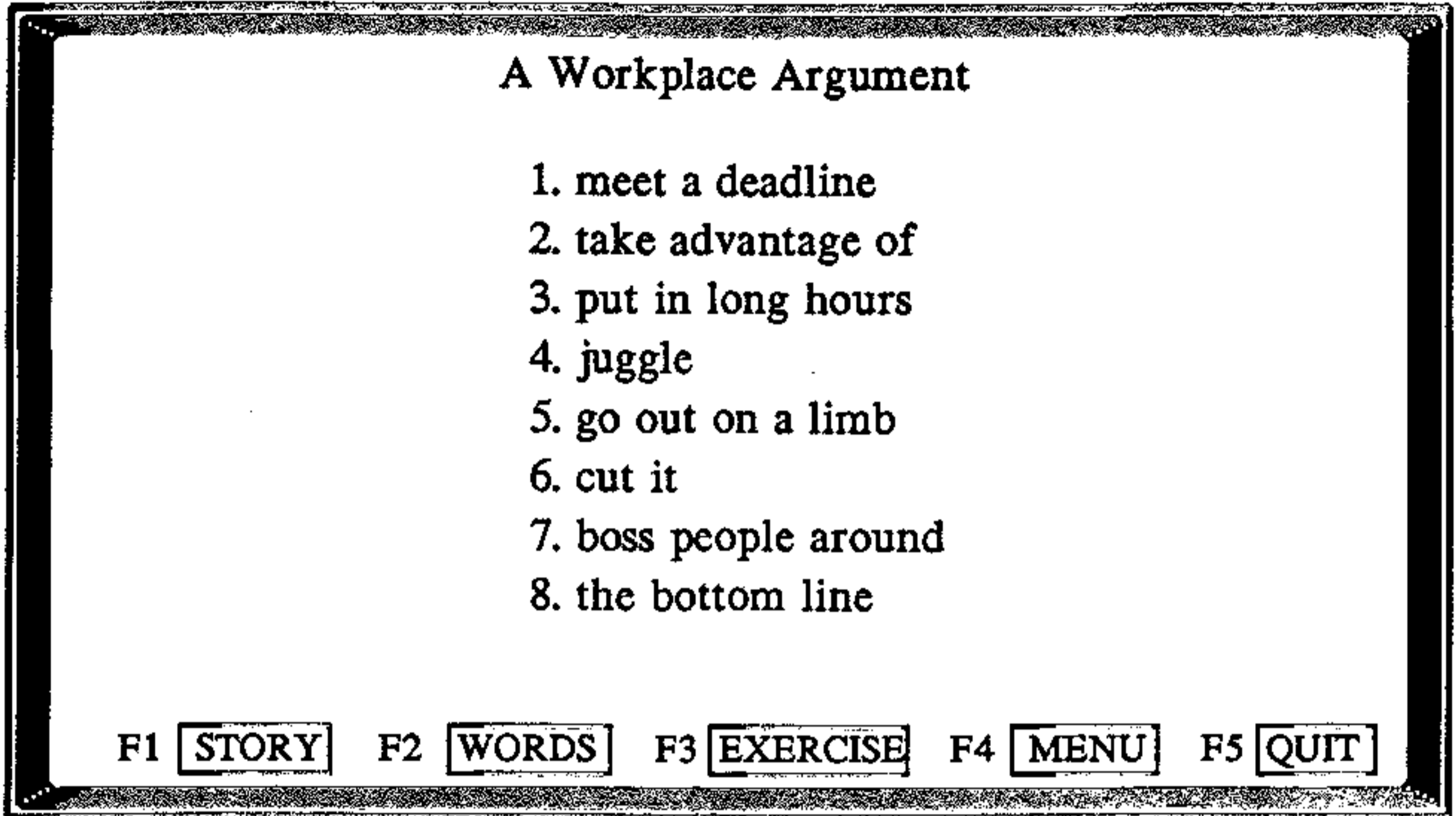


Figure 3. Simulted computer screen: Idiom Menu

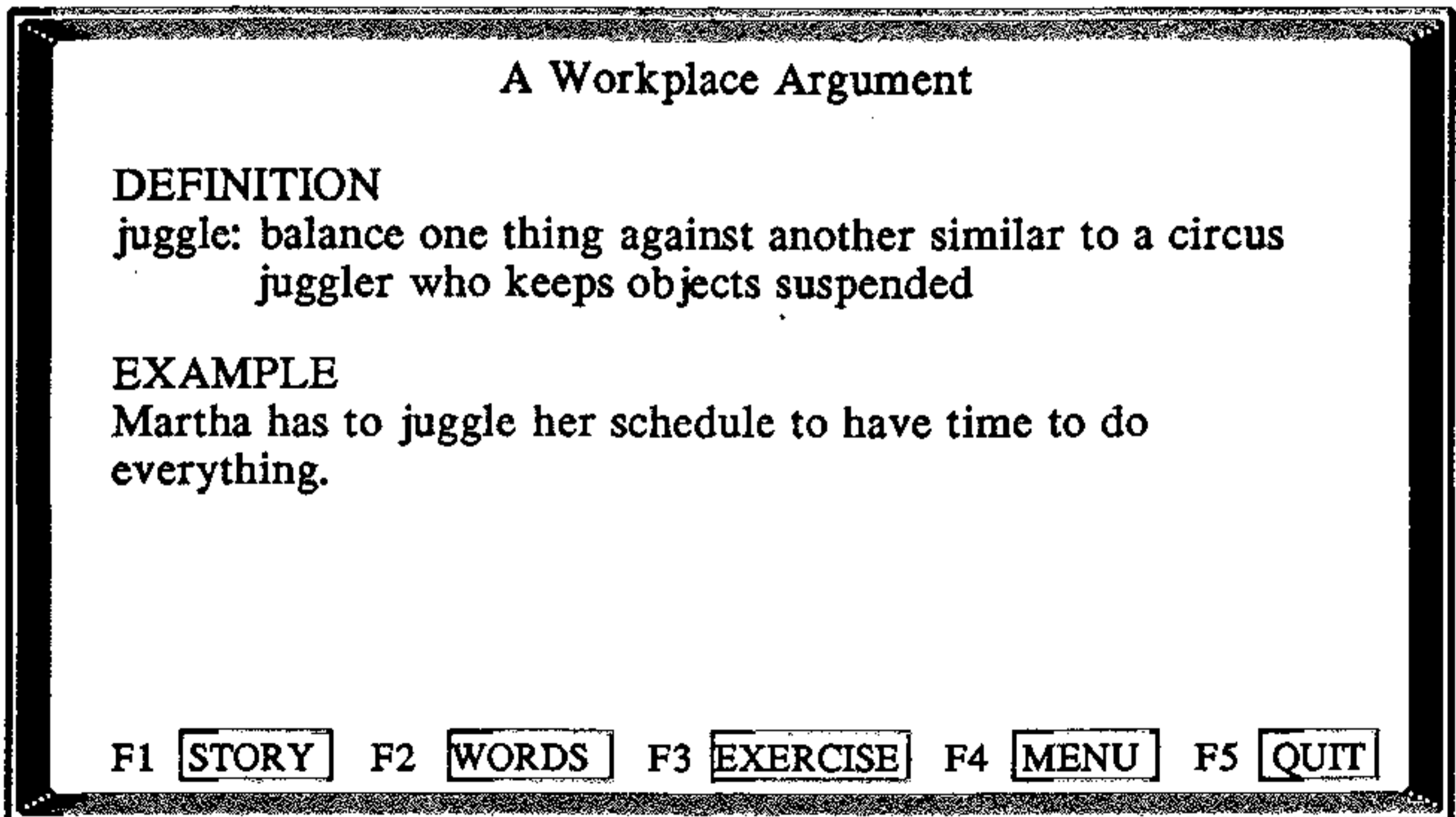


Figure 4. Simulated computer screen: Definition

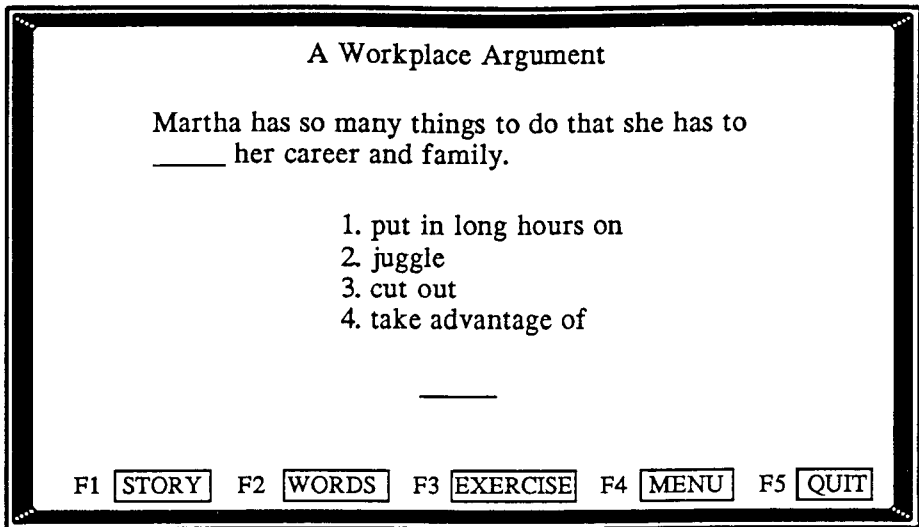


Figure 5. Simulated Computer Screen: Cloze exercise

This activity, using idioms in context, is an integrated skills approach to learning. Students read or listen to source materials. They intuit meanings and discuss and negotiate interpretations. They write dialogues and present them orally. And if computers are available, they can even gain some technological skills. With this approach, our students not only begin to “get the hang of” idioms but also “get a kick” out of doing so.

References

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