

**The Advantages and Importance of  
Learning and Using Idioms in English**  
**La importancia de aprender y usar modismos  
en una lengua extranjera: inglés**

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Este artículo pertenece al Grupo de investigación Skills in Action, adscrito a la línea de investigación Innovación Pedagógica en la Enseñanza del Inglés.

## **Abstract**

This article has as main purpose to share the results of a small scale project based on guiding students in the use of idioms through dialogues and readings, in order to improve students' communicative skill. The project was applied at Universidad Santo Tomás - Tunja, with one group of eleven Electronic Engineering students who attend to an undergraduate education program. Dialogues, interviews, and informal speech or conversations were used to collect the data in this action research study. Findings demonstrated that by learning and using some idioms the learners were able to increase their knowledge about idioms, they learned new vocabulary, and improved their communicative skill.

**Key words:** idioms, dialogues, communicative skill.

## **Resumen**

Este artículo tiene como propósito compartir los resultados de un proyecto orientado a guiar promoción de modismos en lengua inglesa a través de diálogos y lecturas, con el objetivo de mejorar su habilidad comunicativa de los estudiantes. El proyecto fue aplicado en la Universidad Santo Tomás de la ciudad de Tunja, con un grupo de estudiantes de Ingeniería Electrónica, programa presencial de educación superior. Se utilizaron diálogos, entrevistas y discurso informal o conversaciones para recoger los datos de esta investigación acción. Los resultados demostraron que mediante el aprendizaje y la utilización de algunos modismos, los alumnos aumentaron sus conocimientos sobre modismos, aprendieron nuevo vocabulario y mejoraron su habilidad comunicativa.

**Palabras claves:** modismos, diálogos, habilidad comunicativa.

## **Introduction**

This article aims at sharing the results of a small scale project based on guiding eleven undergraduate Electronic Engineering at Universidad Santo Tomás, in the correct use of specific idioms in order to improve communicative skill. This project was carried out during the second semester of 2009.

I, as English teacher, have been concerned about the way English is taught at USTA (Universidad Santo Tomás) into the process of learning idioms. It is very interesting to university students to be enrolled in the procedure of learning specific idioms because of this way they can performance several activities through the use of idioms.

According to the researcher of this project, the integration of idioms has a very important attention in the teaching and learning process of English, especially as a form to implement effective techniques to incorporate idioms in the classroom. Idioms in and outside the classroom are widely believed to help teachers and students promote an innovative environment of communication. However, the integration of idioms in the teaching and learning process may be difficult or ineffective for some learners or teachers because it is not relevant or necessary for carrying out educational goals.

Furthermore, from teachers' perspectives, with a variety of activities based on idioms can help to facilitate needs and challenge students' learning process.

The type of activities and how they are constructed in the classroom is found as one of the most important aspects that help to the success of using idioms in and outside the classroom and the appropriate teachers' role.

The use of idioms has a great influence in the teaching and learning process of a foreign language, because it could be one of the ways to give students better conditions to improve communicative skill in the daily context.

Moreover, the researcher expresses that the common use of idioms in daily speech for English speakers has brought a necessity in the teaching field to implement the use of this tool in and outside the classroom in order to help students be competitive, increase their vocabulary and the informal way to speak in English.

English is a language particularly rich in idioms - those modes of expression peculiar to a language (or dialect) which frequently defy logical and grammatical rules. Without idioms English would lose much of its variety and humor both in speech and writing. The background and etymological origins of most idioms is at best obscure. This is the reason why a study of differences between the idioms of American and British English is somewhat difficult. But it also makes the cases, where background, etymology and history are known, even more interesting. Some idioms of the "worldwide English" have first been seen in the works of writers like Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott, Lewis Carroll or even in the paperbacks of contemporary novelists. An example of Shakespearian quotation can be found in the following sentence: "As a social worker, you certainly see the seamy side of life." Biblical references are also the source of many idioms. Sports terms, technical terms, legal terms, military slang and even nautical expressions have found their way to the everyday use of English language. (<http://www.sky-net-eye.com/eng/english/idioms/idiom-articles/English-idioms>).

On the other hand and based on the importance of using specific idioms and its background, the researcher of this project decided to work with students who belong to the several academic programs at Santo Tomás University (USTA). They take five English levels during their academic programs. The investigator, as an English teacher, has analyzed the way English is taught at USTA. Most of the students (approximately 80%) are able to attend to class during the day and around 20% of them can attend classes during the evenings. Learners have to take their first English level since their first semester of their academic programs in order to continue with the learning process of English. They take 3 hours per week and 1 tutoring hour. Most of them have to face implications and trouble such as time-consuming, sources such as English's books, likes and dislikes of English subject, during their learning process of English as a foreign language, because the learners consider that English is not a relevant subject.

There are some Electronic Engineering students who have the chance to travel abroad and after a period of time when they have come back to Colombia, they have concluded that learning idioms is one of the most important issues in English. When these students were in

the United States, they experienced many difficulties even if they were able to speak in English because they did not understand the meaning of many idioms that native speakers use in their daily conversation. Considering the previous experiences and issues, the current study was focused on helping learners by guiding them in the use of some idioms, in order to improve their communicative skill.

Based on the above statements, it is very important to know that native speakers of a language use idioms all the time. Students are often embarrassed and frustrated if they cannot understand the idioms a person is using. A strong knowledge of idioms will help students be better speakers. The high number of idioms and their high frequency in discourse make them an important aspect of vocabulary.

Finally, since idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, this issue requires special attention in language programs whose purpose is helping students improve their communicative skill.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The undergraduate Electronic Engineering students of Universidad Santo Tomás in which this small scale project was carried out were enrolled in an academic program. English is among the subjects the learners had to take. Once these students were registered in each level of English, they needed to deal with five English levels as a requirement from Languages Department, with the purpose to fulfill the academic goals that English subject demanded.

The learners attended 40 hours in order to achieve their purposes during the course. In the English course, there were several components such as: grammar, reading, speaking, listening and writing through the use of idioms. At the beginning of the course the students did not know how to understand and use idioms correctly in their process of learning English as foreign language. Also, they were not aware of the importance and advantages of idioms.

The learners did not know the implications and importance they faced without knowing the use of specific idioms. Thus, the English teacher had to lead the students to become competitive learners. Approximately 90% of the time the students did not have the opportunity to learn idioms into the syllabus and the other 10% owned knowledge of some idioms because they had traveled abroad.

This was why the students were used to translating word by word in order to get understanding of the idiomatic expressions in songs, movies and, texts. Furthermore, the learners gave wrong meaning to idioms. In order to solve this situation, four workshops were designed to

help students to learn and apply idioms in English into their daily speech and improve their communicative skill.

However, working with idioms has been difficult in the teaching and learning process of English. This issue is a challenge for teachers and students because it does not have an authentic context to support the educational process.

According to the above aspects, the research question that guided this project was as follows:

What are the findings in a group of eleven undergraduate Electronic Engineering students at Universidad Santo Tomás after having been exposed to the use of specific idioms?

## **Research Setting and Participants**

### ***The Context***

This research was carried out during the second semester of 2009 at Universidad Santo Tomás which is a private university in Colombia. This university offers programs in Electronic, Mechanics, Systems, and Civil Engineering, Law, Business Administration, Accounting, and Architecture. Learners take five English levels. Each English level consists of thirty four sessions, three hours per week, distributed throughout the semester. Students attend two sessions every week. Each session is organized as follows: the first session of two hours and the second session of one hour plus one tutoring hour. Also they have to do their homework outside the class in order to reinforce the topics worked in class. The teaching and learning process of the English program includes listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. Students receive feedback and then they are tested by the teacher to identify their constant learning and improvement of English as a foreign language.

### ***Participants***

The participants of this project were eleven students. The learners belonged to Electronic Engineering program and they were attending English V. They were aged around 16 and 18 years old. The course offered to these students was developed every Monday morning and every Wednesday, in the afternoon. All of them are full-time students and they live with their parents and have a high social status. Sometimes, when the students attended classes, they showed motivated, but sometimes they were worried about other subjects which had more credits.

Most of the participants owned knowledge of the English language because they studied it at high school; also, they had been studying this subject since their first semester of their academic program at USTA.

### ***The Teacher***

There was a teacher - researcher who holds a B.A. in Modern Languages. She currently belongs to an M.A. program in Language Teaching at the UPTC. She taught idioms as part of the planner in English V. The students received the necessary input such as photocopies, examples, and clear explanation based on idioms, in order to achieve one specific goal: the development of the communicative skill.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The project was based on guiding students in the use of specific idioms into dialogues and daily conversation in order to improve the communicative skill. For this reason, it is necessary to take into account the following concepts: The definition of idiom, its structure, and the communicative skill. These issues supported the developed of this small scale project.

There are different definitions about idioms. Let's analyze some of them.

According to Fowler (1996), an idiom is a phrase where the words together have a meaning that is different from the dictionary definitions of the individual words, which can make idioms hard for ESL (English as a second language) students and learners to understand (<http://www.usingenglish.com/reference/idioms>).

An idiom is a combination of words that has a meaning that is different from the meanings of the individual words themselves. It can have a literal meaning in one situation and a different idiomatic meaning in another situation. It is a phrase which does not always follow the normal rules of meaning and grammar. For instance, "To sit on the fence" can literally mean that one is sitting on a fence "*I sat on the fence and watched the game*". (<http://www.usingenglish.com/reference/idioms>).

However, the idiomatic meaning of "to sit on the fence" is that one is not making a clear choice regarding some issue. The politician sat on the fence and would not give his opinion about the tax issue.

Many idioms are similar to expressions in other languages and can be easy for a learner to understand. Other idioms come from ancient phrases which have changed over time. For example "To hold one's horses" means to stop and wait patiently for someone or something. It comes from a time when people rode horses and would have to hold their horses while waiting for someone or something "Hold your horses," I said when my friend started to leave the store (Niergarth, 2007).

Other idioms come from such things as sports that are common in the United Kingdom or the United States and may require some special cultural knowledge to easily understand them. "To cover all of one's bases" means to thoroughly prepare for or deal with a situation. It comes from the American game of baseball where you must cover or protect the bases. I tried to cover all of my bases when I went to the job interview (<http://www.idiomconnection.com/whatis.html#42>).

### ***Structure of Idioms***

Most idioms are unique and fixed in their grammatical structure. The expression to sit on the fence cannot become to sit on a fence or to sit on the fences. However, there are many changes that can be made to an idiom (<http://www.idiomconnection.com/whatis.html#42>).

Some of these changes result in a change in the grammatical structure that would generally be considered to be wrong. To be broken literally means that something is broken. The lamp is broken so I cannot easily read my book. To be broke is grammatically incorrect but it has the idiomatic meaning of to have no money. I am broke and I cannot go to a movie tonight.

There can also be changes in nouns, pronouns or in the verb tenses. I sat on the fence and did not give my opinion. Many people are sitting on the fence and do not want to give their opinion.

Adjectives and adverbs can also be added to an idiomatic phrase.

The politician has been sitting squarely in the middle of the fence since the election. It is for these reasons that it is sometimes difficult to isolate the actual idiomatic expression and then find it in a dictionary of idioms.

### ***Learn English Idioms - It's a "Piece of Cake"***

When you learn English idioms, you take English out of textbook and into the real world. The English language can be considered as being made up of two components: (2) "Textbook



English" and (2) "Natural English". The textbook form of English is composed using proper English vocabulary, while strictly adhering to the rules of English grammar. The sentences in textbook English are necessarily grammatically correct and complete in all respects. The natural form of English, on the other hand, allows liberal use of slang, jargon, phrases and idioms, lending a colorful hue to the language.

Natural English is spoken at an informal level, and it is the idioms in the language that give it a natural, conversational and creative feel. So, if you want to speak English fluently, just like a native speaker, it is important that you learn English idioms.

Before you go ahead and learn English idioms, consider these sentences - If you want to speak English like a native, then you have "no other go" but to learn English idioms. If you are hitting on any other website - other than LearningEnglishA-Z.com - then you are "barking up the wrong tree", because we are the "cat's whiskers" when it comes to English resources, and we make learning English "a piece of cake". Remember, we are here to "give you a hand" and teach you English "at a fast clip".

You will notice that the phrases above that are enclosed in quotation marks do not make much sense literally, but when used in the idiomatic sense create a magical effect in the language. Idioms make the English language sound very warm, informal, easy-going, interesting and creative (<http://www.learnenglish-a-z.com/learn-english-idioms.html>).

Idioms are a cluster of words or phrases that have a meaning of their own peculiar to that language. For example, we have said above that learning English with us will be a piece of cake - now, you cannot take the meaning of "a piece of cake" in the literal sense; you have to understand it in the idiomatic sense, in which it means "easy" (Gillett, 2004).

According to Corelli (2005) to put it simply, an idiom can be defined as an expression. You may also have understood that idioms may contradict the basic tenets of English composition, but are indispensable nevertheless because they have a culture of their own. You will be surprised to know that phrases and idioms spoken many, many years back have now been engraved in the human psyche, and many idioms and phrases, or their mutations, are commonly used in advertisements and in film dialogues (<http://www.brighthub.com/education/languages/articles/41653.aspx>).

### **Communicative Skills: Teach English Idioms with Dialogue Writing and Role-Play**

Dialogues can provide situations for students to practice ordinary conversation and offer students ample practice with basic speaking skills in context. Firstly, dialogues can be

viewed as short plays and used for students to act out rather than simply read aloud. Moreover, the dialogues the students write function as basic communication at all levels (Scott, and, Ytreberg, L., 2000). In addition, putting pupils into pairs for the role-play in the daily dialogues is an effective way of oral practice for various ages and levels (Scott, W., and Ytreberg, L., 2000). Nunan (2003) stressed that role-plays are also excellent activities for learners' speaking in the relatively safe environment of the classroom before they must do so in a real environment. Therefore, dialogues offer students opportunities to act out and practice oral skill before encountering the real world.

### **Applying English Idioms through Dialogue Writing and Role-play**

Dialogues and role-plays are useful written and oral activities. So that, I assigned my students in pairs to write one dialogue by using the English idioms introduced in class. Then, they acted the dialogue out in the following class. Dialogue writing could motivate students to write without burden. Pair collaboration and role-play activity could help them remember the dialogue they wrote through repetitive practices. It was easier and fun for them to remember English idioms because they shared and enjoyed learning English idioms with friends. Thus, dialogue writing and role-play are useful and interesting activities for students' meaningful and efficient drills (<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Wu-TeachingIdioms.html>).

### **Research Methodology**

#### ***Type of Research***

This project is an action research process because it included three important aspects: observation and a diagnosis of a problem, the implementation of a proposal, and the evaluation of the proposal.

According to Johnson (2002), action research can be defined as the process of studying a real school or classroom situation in order to understand and improve the quality of actions or instruction. It is a systematic and orderly way for teachers to observe their practice or explore a problem and a possible course of action. Action research is also a type of inquiry that is preplanned, organized, and can be shared with others.

Action research has the potential to change education; to keep our teaching practices evolving. Change is the natural order of things. To refuse change is the first step in devolution. Thus, we must continue to change and adapt our pedagogical practices in order to keep pace with ever - changing needs of our society. Change, however, is not

always easy. To leave the safe confines of what is known, to go into the new and unknown, and allow ourselves to be transformed is to take heroic journey describe so aptly by Joseph Campbell (1968). This is the journey that confronts us in our classroom and throughout our lives (Johnson, 2007).

### ***Data Collection Procedure***

There were several instruments which were used with the purpose of collecting information. These were: questionnaires, oral questions to students or interviews, the teacher's diary, and dialogues. The oral questions or interviews were conducted at the beginning and at the end of the semester in order to know what student thought about idioms, how important idioms were for them and the advantages of using idioms in the English program. The questionnaires were focused on knowing how student were using idioms after giving input about this issue. The teacher's diary was aimed at collecting information about the different facts that happened in the classroom while the teacher guided learners in the use of idioms. Finally, the students produced dialogues using the idioms worked in class.

### ***Pedagogical Proposal***

There was a pedagogical proposal implemented and it was divided into three steps: the first step, in which the diagnosis of a problem was made; a second one, in which an action was taken and a third one, based on the evaluation of the action.

*Stage I.* After answering the questionnaire and having analyzed the information obtained from the informal conversations with them who were involved in this small scale project, I established the following findings for the diagnostic stage:

- Most of my students did not have previous knowledge about idioms.
- Students had trouble when they traveled abroad because they did not know about idioms.
- Students needed to improve communicative skills through idioms.
- Students did not know how to use idioms.
- Students had not been trained to use idioms.

When the first stage was done, it was found that students needed to get knowledge about idioms and instruction on how to use them.

*Stage II.* Taking into account the findings mentioned above, a proposal was implemented to teach idioms and use them in order to improve communicative skills.

Four workshops were designed to help students use idioms, improve their speaking skills and increase their vocabulary. The different workshops had specific stages. The first part was the presentation of useful idioms with clear examples. The second part was a dialogue with idioms in which the students analyzed the correct use of them into real situations and the third part had some questions and exercises to be developed based on the meaning of idioms and the real students context in written and oral way.

The goal of the workshops was to guide the students on how to improve their communicative skill through the use of idioms and increase their vocabulary. The teacher helped the students during the different classes and clarified their questions about meaning, pronunciation, functions and so on. The dialogues and information for the workshops were taken from the internet.

The teacher began to develop each workshop by setting the main purposes; for example, understanding the meaning of some idioms, reading sentences with the idioms selected and making sentences correctly using them. Afterwards, the students read the dialogues and identified idioms into the text; then they answered questions based on real context and used the idioms.

Finally, the teacher assigned the homework; the learners had to select some idioms worked in class, write sentences and then dialogue; they had to work in groups of three students and then the teacher checked their written. Later, the students corrected their mistakes, if necessary and prepared a performance in front of the group; other groups had the opportunity to comment if the use of the idioms helped them understand the dialogue.

*Stage III.* The last stage of this project was the evaluation. The students socialized their role plays and a dialogue. The teacher analyzed some important aspects for the evaluation. The items were: suitable use of idioms, proper pronunciation, fluency, and the structure of the sentences.

Most activities that are planned in the curriculum can influence the outcome of the practical use of idioms. I propose to include this issue in each unit of the curriculum in order to help students improve their communicative skill.

It is a challenge for students and teachers to incorporate the use of Idioms in the lessons and keep up with the curriculum because students can perform well in their communicative skill.

### ***Pedagogical implications***

There were several pedagogical implications during the development of this small scale project into the teaching and learning process of English. First of all, there were a lot of colloquial idioms with difficult vocabulary. There was a complicated process for recognizing what kind of idioms were suitable for the students. Second, lack of time because the participants did not have enough time to fulfill all their goals. Third, drawing or acting showed literal meaning of an idiom, making up dialogues in which the literal use of an idiom created a misunderstanding or a humorous situation. All of these activities were particularly useful with idioms which have no first language equivalent.

However, with the development of this project was found that the activities in the language classroom were successful and relevant when students understood the purpose of using idioms.

### **Findings**

The data was collected during an academic semester. Theories from (Scott, W. and Ytreberg, L. 2000) and Nunan (2003) were used during the process because they state,

"Dialogues can provide situations for students to practice ordinary conversation and offer students ample practice with basic speaking skills in context. Firstly, dialogues can be viewed as short plays and used for students to act out rather than simply read aloud. Moreover, the dialogues the students write function as basic communication at all levels. In addition, putting pupils into pairs for the role-play in the daily dialogues is an effective way of oral practice for various ages and levels" (Scott, W., and Ytreberg, L., 2000). Nunan (2003) stressed that role-plays are also excellent activities for learners' speaking in the relatively safe environment of the classroom before they must do so in a real environment. Therefore, dialogues offer students opportunities to act out and practice oral skill before encountering the real world.

At the end of the small scale project, the teacher and the students had advantages in English learning course from the use of idioms, because they increased their vocabulary, improved communicative skill, understood conversations easily, and gave the right meaning of idioms. While implementing several workshops, the students were able to understand dialogues including idioms. Some idiomatic expressions were: "get out of here, brain, bubbly, toasted, roomies, chip in on, butt in, was a like and john".

Furthermore, the eleven undergraduate Electronic students at USTA were using different idioms that were further practiced in class when trying to communicate their ideas with their classmates. One of the students enrolled in the project mentioned that he did not know the importance and advantages of using idioms in English since when he tried to understand them, he used to deduce wrong meanings or translate word by word in reading texts, dialogues, songs and films.

Besides, the participants could understand better what people communicated through the use of idioms. Also, the students improved their communicative skill. Moreover, if they have the opportunity to travel abroad once more, for sure they will feel better with themselves when using their English. The researcher supported these ideas because she noticed that the native English speakers frequently use idioms and colloquialisms thus, when native speaker use them, the foreign learner is at a loss. English has many rules that students can learn. Teachers can encourage students to learn idioms and this is also a good suggestion when learners want to increase their vocabulary.

When people learn idioms, they can get involved into the real world. Everybody is able to speak natural English and it is the idioms in the language that give it a natural, conversational, and creative feel. So, if people want to speak English fluently, it is necessary to learn idioms in order to improve their communicative skill.

For the se reasons mentioned above, learning idiomatic expressions is a very necessary and important part of the language learning process; likewise, a lot of daily speech is based on idioms; in this way, the learners will become more fluent in English and will be able to communicate better, because many idioms are words and expressions used all over the English speaking world.

When the students presented their own roleplays, they stated, "The best way to learn idioms is through their use and we liked many things with these activities; for example, we used idioms without being aware that a group of words can be come an idiom".

At the end of the workshops one student asserted, "English as a foreign language has a lot of idioms and learning idioms provides different advantages such as fluency, better understanding, and new vocabulary. I have analyzed that movies, songs and native speakers usually use idioms, now I can understand better when I found these expressions in songs or texts".

Besides, English classes were dynamic because these allowed the students to develop important roles (presenters, analytics and guiders) during this project. When student worked in small

groups, this stimulated them to be involved in the active process of building knowledge and they were able to learn from each other.

Finally, it is relevant to mention that the students and the teacher noticed that using idioms helped them go deeper into the language and be close to the culture and tradition of a foreign country. Also, teaching idioms give the students useful understanding.

## **Conclusions**

It is necessary to mention that before developing the workshops, just a few students were able to recognize the importance and advantage of using idioms in a foreign language. Few of them were abroad; the participants were based on their own experiences. The majority of the learners who participated in the project were not ready to use idioms. After developing several workshops, it was clear that the use of idioms helped students learn new vocabulary, improve their communicative skill based on the use of idioms in their spoken/written English. The learners were motivated in classes, also they felt happy because they were able to make dialogues, make sentences and understand texts with idioms.

The outcomes of this project show that the use of specific idioms can be included in the syllabus as a useful strategy to help the learner improve their communicative skill. For example, this language component is a way to help student understand the native English speakers, movies, songs and increase their lexicon, because when students know how to use idioms, they feel better and they can trust on themselves since they are able to understand what English speakers want to express by using idioms.

At the end of this project the students were able to: recognize a variety of idioms in the English language, gain specific knowledge about the English language through idioms, appreciate and value the effort and talent of all the participants.

At the end of the course the students and the teacher had positive perceptions when integrating the topic of idioms in the syllabus. This is why the use of idioms can become a helpful and well-functioning instructional tool.

On the one hand, the development of this small scale project was useful because it allowed to give to the students practice communicative skill connected with idioms, including grammar, vocabulary and collocation. Also, this study helped students go deeper on the use of specific idioms, their definitions, the several kinds of expression, and features of a foreign language.

On the other hand, lack of idioms knowledge has an academic impact on the learners' overall performance. It is necessary for teachers and students to deal with idioms in a suitable environment, where issues such as idiom definition or teaching methodology are solved; in this way, the teaching learning process of English as well as students and teachers will receive advantages related to the development of communicative skill.

Finally, English teachers must be aware of the importance and advantages of using idioms and integrate this issue in the development of the four language skills in English.

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