

# Teaching English Idioms to EFL Students through Songs

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**Abstrak.** Bahasa Inggris di Indonesia telah diajarkan mulai tingkat pendidikan dasar. Bahasa Inggris ini dipelajari oleh para siswa mulai dari tingkat dasar sampai dengan menengah bahkan di perguruan tinggi. Di Indonesia para siswa mempelajari Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (*English as a Foreign Language*). Umumnya pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris mencakup grammar, writing, reading, listening, dan speaking. Namun demikian, para pengajar Bahasa Inggris juga perlu mengajarkan aspek budaya dari bahasa Inggris tersebut. Aspek budaya dari bahasa Inggris ini dapat ditemukan dalam idiom. Idiom yang merupakan bahasa kiasan seringkali digunakan dalam percakapan sehari-hari oleh para penutur asli Bahasa Inggris. Salah satu cara yang dapat dipergunakan untuk mengajarkan idiom adalah dengan instrument lagu. Tulisan ini membahas pengajaran idiom Bahasa Inggris melalui lagu-lagu berbahasa Inggris. Lagu-lagu berbahasa Inggris yang memuat idiom di dalam liriknya dapat menjadi sarana yang efektif, karena dengan mendengarkan lagu, murid-murid akan termotivasi untuk mencari tahu makna idiom yang terdapat dalam lirik lagu tersebut.

## Introduction

English language is seen as a significant part of education. The teaching of English language in Indonesia is now even started from the early level of education. This English teaching even gets more complex as the students reach higher education level. High-school students, for instance, is already expected to master the English tenses and in fact, all parts of English, namely, grammar, writing, reading, listening, speaking are comprehensively taught to the students.

In spite of the completeness of the English language teaching, we should bear in mind that the teaching of English language is not concerned only on learning the language itself, but also learning the expressions. That is, learning how people use figurative language in order to express certain meanings as they speak. This figurative language can be found in idioms.

## What is an Idiom?

An idiom is a phrase whose meaning cannot be determined by the literal definition of the phrase itself, but refers instead to a figurative meaning that is known only through common use. Jacqueline Ambrose explains that idioms share cultural and historical information and broadens people's understanding and manipulation of a language.

Among the various definitions of idioms are: (1) the language peculiar to a people, country, class, community or, more rarely, an individual; (2) a construction or expression having a meaning different from the literal one or not according to the usual patterns of the language (New Webster's Dictionary, 1993). It is the second definition that best suits the focus of this paper.

In someone's native language, idioms may be a natural part of speaking. An idiom is not really considered to be set in a language. They are more in one's culture. Idioms are mostly for just one language. In some cases, when an idiom is translated into another language the meaning of the idiom is changed or does not make any sense as it once did in another language. Idioms are probably the hardest thing for a person to learn in the process of learning a new language. This is because most people grow up using idioms as if their true meanings actually make sense.

Further, Saeed (2003) identifies an idiom as words collocated together happen to become fossilized, becoming fixed over time. This collocation -- words commonly used in a group -- changes the definition of each of the words that exist. As an expression, the word-group becomes a team, so to speak. That is, the collocated words develop a specialized meaning as a whole and an idiom is born. An idiom is a group of words in which the meaning of this group is different than what would be expected. If the actual words of an idiom were understood as they appear, the entire meaning would be changed and the group of words would make no sense in its context as if it was understood as to be an idiom. When a person uses an idiom, the listener might take the actual meaning wrong if he or she has not heard this figure of speech before.

Idioms tend to confuse those not already familiar with them; students of a new language must learn its idiomatic expressions the way they learn its other vocabulary. An example of English idiom is, *burn the midnight oil*. A listener who knows only the meanings of 'burn', 'midnight' and 'oil' would not be able to figure out what is the actual meaning being expressed; which is, to stay up very late working or studying. Although it can refer literally to the act of burning specific oil, native speakers rarely use it that way.

## Teaching Idioms for EFL Learners

Idioms as a part of everyday speech are undoubtedly important for the EFL learners. For many reasons, idioms are difficult to learn and to teach. As stated by McPartland (1981), idioms are not literal: they do not mean what they say. The easiest are those which have exact counterparts in the learner's mother tongue, and the most difficult ones are those which have no counterparts and whose meaning cannot be derived from the conjoined meaning of their constituents. In line with the previous statements, in her article on learning and teaching idioms Irujo (1986) asserts that second language idioms are very difficult to learn because they are not literal and they do not mean what they say. In additions she attributes the difficulty of idioms to the following:

First: Idioms are frequently omitted in the speech addressed to second language learners. Native speakers tend to use simple, concrete, everyday vocabulary when they address second language learners. Second: Idioms vary in formality from slang and colloquialisms to those which can be used in formal situations. If learners try to rely on their first language to help them use them in their second language, they will be successful in only a very few instances. In most cases this strategy will produce an incorrect and often comical form. Third: Many second language materials either ignore idioms entirely or relegate them to the "other expressions" section of vocabulary lists, without providing exercises for learning them.

In spite of the difficulty to teach English idioms, it is still necessary for the English teachers to teach their EFL students these idioms. The reason is because idioms are common in American daily life and provide a rich source of American culture (Cooper, 1999). The previous statement clearly confirms that learning English language is not merely learn the system of the language but also covers the cultural part of the language or more precisely the native speaker of the English language.

Examples of idioms are as follows:

1. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush; which means:  
having something that is certain is much better than taking a risk for more, because chances are you might lose everything.
2. A blessing in disguise; which means:  
something good that isn't recognized at first.

3. A chip on your shoulder; which means:  
meaning: being upset for something that happened in the past.
4. A dime a dozen; which means:  
meaning: anything that is common and easy to get.
5. A doubting Thomas; which means:  
a skeptic who needs physical or personal evidence in order to believe something.
6. A drop in the bucket; which means:  
a very small part of something big or whole.
7. A fool and his money are easily parted; which means:  
it's easy for a foolish person to lose his/her money.
8. A house divided against itself cannot stand; which means:  
everyone involved must unify and function together or it will not work out.
9. A leopard can't change his spots; which means:  
you cannot change who you are.
10. A penny saved is a penny earned; which means:  
by not spending money, you are saving money (little by little).
11. A picture paints a thousand words; which means:  
a visual presentation is far more descriptive than words.
12. a piece of cake; which means:  
a task that can be accomplished very easily.
13. a slap on the wrist; which means:  
a very mild punishment.
14. a toss-up; which means:  
a result that is still unclear and can go either way.
15. Actions speak louder than words; which means:  
it's better to actually do something than just talk about it.
16. Against the clock; which means:  
rushed and short on time.
17. All Greek to me; which means:  
meaningless and incomprehensible like someone who cannot read, speak, or understand any of the Greek language would be.

18. An arm and a leg; which means:

very expensive. A large amount of money.

19. Apple of my eye; which means:

someone who is cherished above all others.

### **Teaching Idioms Through Songs**

A student willingness to learn can be encouraged through a motivation. As maintained by Frith (1997):

*“Motivation can be defined as the internal drive directing behavior towards some end. Inertia is a property of matter by which it remains at rest or in uniform motion in the same straight line unless acted upon by some external force. Motivation helps individuals overcome inertia.”*

In conclusion, she emphasizes that motivation to learn is paramount to student success. Corresponding to this statement, Boekaerts (2002) confirms that motivational beliefs act as favourable contexts for learning. Motivational beliefs refer to the opinions, judgements and values that students hold about objects, events or subject-matter domains. Researchers have described the beliefs that students use to assign meaning to learning situations. A specific set of motivational beliefs pertains to the value students attach to a domain.

As elaborated in previous paragraph, motivation has an important role for learning process; thus, teachers should find a way that can elevate students' motivation to learn. For an English teacher, one of the effective ways to teach English to EFL students is by using teaching instrument. In this case, the teaching instruments that can be used to teach idioms to EFL students are songs.

Songs are utilized for the listening activities. The songs that are used should contain idioms in their lyrics. By doing so, the students can enjoy the listening activities and at the same time they are also learn idioms. Lyrics of popular songs are linguistically authentic, as they are what song writers and singers want to say using English, but not for the sake of teaching English. These songs have something that appeals strongly to people. Sometimes understanding English popular song is a learner's principle interest or reason for learning English, as well as understanding movies and books (Adachi, 1991).

Similarly, Richards and Rodgers (1987) promote that ask students to listen to a song can raise students' interest. After they listen to the song, the students are asked to catch the words in the song and write them down.

The criteria for the songs utilized in this learning process are songs that contain idioms. There are several popular songs that the writer offers in this paper. The first song is "Out of the Blue" performed by Michael Learns to Rock, the second song is "Anyone of Us" performed by Gareth Gates and the third song is "Puzzle of My Heart" sung by Westlife.

Each song is elaborated in the following section:

1. "Out of the Blue"

The idioms contains in this song are as follows:

- a. *lose my faith*, which means not having a confidence anymore to something
- b. *stole my heart*, which means to make someone feel attracted
- c. *out of the blue*, which means something that suddenly and unexpectedly occurs
- d. *frozen mind*, which means a mind which has become indifferent to something
- e. *out of the darkness*, which means to release someone from a sad situation and make him/her become happy
- f. *brought me out in the sun*, which means to make somebody's life become cheerful
- g. *breathing air below my wings*, which means give a spirit or passion to someone who has been desperate
- h. *took me right out of the night*, which means to free someone from a depressing situation
- i. *filling my heart with light*, which means to bring happiness to somebody's life

2. "Anyone of Us"

The idioms contains in this song are as follows:

- a. *let you down*; which means to make someone disappointed
- b. *the situation get out of hand*, which means a situation that cannot be controlled
- c. *anyone can fall*, which means anyone can make a mistake

- d. *hearts break*, which means when someone feel that he/she lose something very precious
- e. *a little crazy*, which means act wildly

### 3. "Puzzle of My Heart"

The idioms contains in this song are as follows:

- a. *she fills my sense*, which means someone who makes us always thinking about her
- b. *I'm losing my defences*, which means a situation when we cannot deny the strong feeling over someone
- c. *takes me through the night*, which means to give the ability to cope with every difficulty
- d. *the picture is complete*, which means a feeling that someone's life is perfect
- e. *puzzle of my heart*, which means someone who makes our life become perfect

Furthermore, there are general steps that can be applied in the classroom in order to teach the idioms through songs. The steps are as follows:

1. Give introductory explanation. Before the activity is begun, the teacher explains the purpose of the activity to the students. The reasons of doing this are to stimulate interest in the program and also to give a good idea of what would be expected of them in terms of learning from the listening activity.
2. Play the song. Before distributing the text copies, the teacher play the song first. The students are asked to listen to the song quietly and carefully.
3. Distribute the incomplete text of the song and ask the students to read it. The incomplete text was meant to represent an intermediate stage in students' attempt to write down the words and predict the content and form of the incomplete parts.
4. Play the song repeatedly. The students are asked to catch the missing words or lyrics in the song and write them down while they are listening to the song repeatedly, for example three times..
5. Check the students' predictions. The teacher gives the students the opportunity to let him/her know their predictions of the missing words that they had written

down in their text by asking them to write down the missing words on the whiteboard.

6. Correct the mistakes in students' predictions.
7. Create an active guessing activity. Through a discussion about the text, the students are invited to make an active guessing activity of the unknown words.
8. The teacher shows the idioms in the text.
9. Give comprehension questions about the songs so that the students can catch the message or the idea that the song writer would like to convey through the lyrics in his/her song.
10. Invite the students to sing along.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching English language to EFL students is not only about teaching the systems of the English language, but also concerned with the cultural aspect of the native speaker. This cultural aspect can be learnt through idioms. Since English idioms shows the uniqueness of the culture, a unique phenomenon as well as a distinctive expression of American. Thus, teaching idioms is seen as important for EFL student. Yet, it is not an easy task for the EFL teacher. However, there is an instrument that can be used to teach idioms, that is, songs. Songs can motivate students to learn English, therefore, through songs, the EFL teacher can teach idioms in an enjoyable way. English songs that contain idioms can be an effective means to learn idioms. By utilizing songs, EFL teachers can practice the listening skills of the students and at the same time, improving their knowledge of the English idioms.

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