

# 2021 TEACHER TRAINING COURSE

## TEACHING IDIOMS

Idioms used in the webinar are defined below, except where the meaning is absolutely obvious.

- “**From the bottom of my heart**”: sincerely.
- “**It’s raining cats and dogs**”: It’s raining heavily.

27 English Idioms picture: <https://i.redd.it/43x6kswg7ik21.jpg>

All 27 Idioms in the picture: <https://justpublishingadvice.com/can-you-find-all-27-figure-of-speech-examples/>

### Drawing Activity

- Put students in pairs.
- Give each pair a different English idiom, with an associated meaning, to draw. (e.g., “as cool as a cucumber”: calm and composed)
- Now, students have to draw a cartoon-like picture to illustrate the literal meaning of the idiom.
- Students should also write a sentence using the idiom in context. The teacher should check that these are correct.
- When students have finished the picture and the example, they can present it to the class.
- Each group explains the idiom to the rest of the class. The teacher writes the idiom and its meaning on the board.

### Guessing Game Activity

- “To hit the nail on the head” is an English idiom.
- “You really hit the nail on the head when you said the team is lacking a strong defence.” What does it mean?
  1. To say something offensive.
  2. To describe a problem exactly. (correct).
  3. To show your ignorance by saying something stupid.

This could be made into a fun, creative activity that also requires students to think about possible meanings, an important skill to encourage language independence.

- Divide students into pairs.
- Give each pair a different idiom, its definition and an example of its use. These are easily found online. Try to choose idioms that are substantially different on Italian.
- Each pair has to write two alternative definitions of the idiom that could be possible for the example.
- Each pair presents their definition to the rest of the class, who guess which is the correct meaning.
- The teacher puts the correct meaning on the board for all students to copy.

### Mixes and matches

Some idioms have mistaken alternative forms created by native speakers. These could be used for further practice in the classroom.

- Search the internet for commonly mistaken idioms
- Present the idioms in context and challenge students to find the mistake and write the correct idiom
- Some idioms this could work for are:
  - **We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it** (We will deal with that situation when it becomes relevant)/don’t burn your bridges (don’t makes enemies you do not need to)
  - **A blessing in disguise**: An event that at first seems like bad luck, but the result is good luck
  - **To nip it in the bud**: To stop a situation before it becomes a problem
  - **It’s a dog-eat-dog world**: It’s a ruthless and competitive environment

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### Idioms and stories

- Some idioms come from proverbs and stories like Aesop's fables, e.g. The Wind and the Sun matching the proverb **You catch more flies with honey than vinegar**: You can motivate people to do what you want better with kindness than cruelty.
- You could present idioms by introducing short stories with a moral first, then matching the correct idiom with the correct story
- Once you are confident students know the idioms, you could get them to invent stories that have their favourite idioms as moral, providing further practice and hopefully making the meanings more memorable. Below are some idioms you could try with this.
  - **Too many cooks spoil the broth**: Too many people doing one task will ruin the result
  - **Don't bite the hand that feeds you**: Don't treat badly people on whom you rely for something
  - **A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush**: Don't lose what you have by trying to gain something extra

### Conclusions

- Always present idioms with an example of their use (or a few if possible)..
- Idioms can also be taught to reinforce common grammatical structures.
  - as (adjective) as a (noun): **as good as gold** (well behaved [for people] or in perfect condition [for objects]); **as safe as houses** (very safe); **as quiet as a mouse** (very quiet – usually for people); **as dumb as a bag of hammers** (very stupid)
  - Conditionals **If it ain't broke, don't fix it** (note that the very informal "ain't" is always used in this expression); **If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing well**; **If you can't beat them, join them**.
  - **A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush**: Don't lose what you have by trying to gain something extra
  - Imperatives (particularly negative): **Don't cry over spilt milk** (It's no use worrying about something that has happened and can't be changed); **Don't hold your breath** (Don't expect something to happen soon)
  - Phrasal verbs: **to get on like a house on fire** (to get on very well with someone immediately), **to get away with murder** (to do something very bad without being punished)
- Idioms often use animals and food to symbolise adjectives: why not teach them together?
  - **As blind as a bat**: totally or virtually blind
  - **To get the lion's share**: to receive the largest part of something.
  - **To smell a rat**: to suspect something suspicious.
  - **A couch potato**: someone who spends all their time on the sofa, usually watching TV or playing video games.
  - **To be full of beans**: to be full of energy (for a person)
- Be careful with the use of grammar in idioms. Often it is idiosyncratic or archaic.
  - **Waste not, want not**: If you don't waste things, you'll never be in need of things (note: "want" is used to in a meaning of "need" in this idiom);
  - **Tongue in cheek**: sarcastically or ironically (e.g., a tongue in cheek remark", "to say something tongue in cheek")
  - **Monkey see, monkey do**: Learning by imitating (often used to criticise someone doing a stupid action)
  - **Holier-than-thou**: excessively or hypocritically pious.
- Idioms must be used carefully. They are not flexible in their meaning or their grammar. Using an idiom incorrectly will totally ruin its impression on your intended audience.
- As in Italy, idioms are often local. They may be only used in one part of the English-speaking world.
- Many English idioms derive from Shakespeare. "The green-eyed monster" (jealousy): Othello. Incorporate them into your literature lessons.
- Common abbreviated idioms:
  - **When in Rome ....(do as the Romans do)**: you should follow the customs of a place when you visit that place
  - **If the shoe/cap fits ...(!, wear it)**: Used to inform a person that a negative thing that people say about that person is actually true, and that the person should accept it.
  - **Time flies ....(when you're having fun)**
  - **Don't count your chickens .... (before they've hatched)**: Don't make plans that depend on a situation turning out well if it could easily turn out badly too.

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### USEFUL SITES

[www.phrases.org.uk](http://www.phrases.org.uk) : A very comprehensive website with extensive descriptions of idioms, with meanings, examples, worldwide use and often extended descriptions of origins.

[www.idiomconnection.com](http://www.idiomconnection.com) : Many quizzes on idioms and phrasal verbs, organised alphabetically or by topic.

[www.openenglishworld.com/the-weekly-idiom](http://www.openenglishworld.com/the-weekly-idiom) : Every week a new idiom, with a listening dialogue

[idioms.thefreedictionary.com](http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com) : Part of fantastic The Free Dictionary website. According to the website: “the largest collection of English idioms and slang in the world.” Videos too. Also available as an app.

[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) : Too many videos to mention here, but a great way to learn idioms from native speakers.

[www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/phrases-that-people-get-wrong.html](http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/phrases-that-people-get-wrong.html) | Main site linked above, this page deals with common mistakes native speakers make in idioms.

[www.aesopables.com](http://www.aesopables.com) Source for many short stories with a moral that you could use to present common proverbs and idioms.

**Podcasts:** Use your favourite podcast client to find lots of idiom podcasts made by native speakers. Try “Whole 9 Yards” and “The Language Lie”.

**Apps:** Check your device’s app store for free idiom apps. Try thefreedictionary.com’s “Idiom and Slang Dictionary” or “Idioms Game”.