

## Using Historical Insight and Digital Tools to Teach Idioms to L2 Learners

A Response to Carla Zimmerman-Edison's  
"Teaching and Learning English Idioms  
in the L2 Classroom" (Vol. 2, No. 1, 2015)

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In her article "Teaching and Learning English Idioms in the L2 Classroom," Carla Zimmerman-Edison (2015) provides a strong rationale for emphasis on teaching idioms to English learners (ELs), who are both numerous in today's U.S. schools and in need of pedagogical support in coping with this challenging topic. Indeed, idioms are not only pervasive across the range of English discourse forms, but also provide learners knowledge of idioms with insight into cultural conventions, which can help new arrivals to understand and participate in their community (Liontas, 2015; Liu, 2008; Nayak & Gibbs, 1990). Zimmerman-Edison's survey article provides a concise guide to scholarly definitions of idioms and a review of recent research into strategies that go beyond traditional rote memorization. However, she fails to elaborate on how to use specific strategies, such as employing technological means, to explore cultural origins and historical events of obscure idioms in developing ELs' idiomatic competence. Therefore, in what follows, we share insights from our experiences as current TESOL teacher trainers. Specifically, we look at how examination of the historical basis of a phrase can help learners relate to and retain culturally specific idioms, as well as how teachers and students can use the internet and other digital tools to assist in such explorations.

First, not all idioms are created equal, and, as Zimmerman-Edison (2015) notes, scholars differ over how broadly they define this class of semi-fixed multiword units (MWUs). We find useful the categorization offered by Bortfeld (2003), who divides English idioms into those that are (a) normally decomposable<sup>1</sup> (or, in Zimmerman-Edison's term, compositional), like *blind as a bat*; (b) abnormally decomposable,<sup>2</sup> such as *a flash in the pan*; and (c) non-decomposable,<sup>3</sup> such as *buy the farm*. Clearly, non-decomposable MWUs are the most challenging for ELs. Indeed, in our experience, Chinese ELs almost invariably misinterpret such expressions when they encounter them in American English—despite the fact

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<sup>1</sup>The literal and figurative meanings of *normally decomposable idioms* are similar, so that little analysis is necessary. In other words, the relationship between the surface structure of normally decomposable idioms and their figurative meanings is transparent (Bortfeld, 2003), and thus pose relatively little difficulty for L2 learners.

<sup>2</sup>The relationship between the literal meanings of *abnormally decomposable idioms* and their figurative meanings is somewhat distant (Bortfeld, 2003), and their understanding requires analysis (Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989).

<sup>3</sup>There is little relation between the literal meaning of *non-decomposable idioms* and their figurative meanings, which have a basis in historical incidents and/or cultural events or circumstances. It is challenging for ELs to understand non-decomposable idioms without relying on the etymological or historical approach (Grant & Bauer, 2004).

that many so-called English idioms have direct equivalents in Chinese: 沉默是金: *silence is golden*; 进退维谷: *between a rock and hard place*; 防微杜渐: *nip [something] in the bud*; 船公多了翻船: *too many cooks spoil the broth*; 一只耳朵进一只耳朵出: *in one ear and out the other*; 有其父必有其子: *like father, like son*; 雷声大雨点小: *his bark is worse than his bite*; 开绿灯: *give a green light*; 皮包骨: *to be skin and bones*; 勒紧裤腰带: *to tighten one's belt*. Upon closer examination, however, these are all figurative expressions. In other words, these “false friends” provide no reliable indication of how Chinese ELs will respond when confronted with MWUs of the second and/or third types.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, following Grant and Bauer (2004), Zimmerman-Edison states that “core idioms are non-compositional and non-figurative and will have to be learned/memorized as multi-word lexemes” (2015, p. 71). Nevertheless, the premise of her article is that a research basis exists for approaches to L2 idiom-learning that go beyond rote memorization, and that these approaches may provide advantages for teachers and learners. Under the heading “Etymology,” she reviews a study by Boers, Eyckmans, and Stengers (2007) in which the authors found a positive benefit to comprehension and recall when a group of Dutch university English majors was “first taught the original, literal use of the idiom” (Zimmerman-Edison, p. 73). Implicit in this approach, we believe, is a view similar to our own that one reason for the challenge they present is that many (core) idioms are both historically based and culturally specific. When ELs are not sufficiently familiar with the history and/or cultural resonance of these idioms, there is little chance that they will be able to interpret them correctly, let alone derive a benefit from them in terms of communication and socialization. Therefore, we too believe that it is important to explore the history of MWUs with students, and that exposure to the stories behind core idioms can make them more meaningful and memorable for ELs.

Let us take two examples that we have observed to be particularly challenging for Chinese ELs: *yard sale* and *under the weather*. Both of these MWUs are non-decomposable (Bortfeld, 2003), or unanalyzable (Liu, 2008), and hence qualify as core idioms (Grant & Bauer, 2004). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, when a Chinese EL first begins to walk around American neighborhoods and encounters signs bearing the inscription *Yard Sale*, she tends to be somewhat dismayed. She wonders: *How do Americans sell their yards? How/why do Americans sell their yards without selling their houses? In China, people sell their houses with their yards or garages, but American people only sell their yards . . .!* Language teachers and students alike will recognize the comic relief that can result from sharing such stories of miscomprehension after the idiom has been learned, and this practice in itself may help new learners to fix the “proper” meaning of the phrase in memory. Exposure to the historical basis underlying such phrases, however, may help not only with retention but also with assimilation of the cultural insight that Zimmerman-Edison and others believe idioms can offer to learners. For example, what Americans now call a *yard sale*—historically, a *rummage sale*—has its origins in nautical terminology in the sixteenth century, when the latter term referred to sea-trading captains selling excess or unclaimed items at ports to make room for new merchandise (Beavis & McCloskey, 2013). The idea of rummage sales later became expanded to cover U.S. military personnel selling surplus goods to civilians. Gradually, rummage sales came to be held in churches or parks to raise money for charity. After World War II, Americans began selling their old and unwanted goods in their front yards or garages to make extra money or to make room for new goods. In the 1970s, yard sales became popular because homes were seen as the center of socializing within a community. Today, such sales remain common in U.S. neighborhoods, and the historical/etymological approach can help ELs to understand why they continue to resonate with a sense of community connection.

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<sup>4</sup>Those inviting and deceitful phrases are false equivalents of resembling idioms in ELs’ L1 (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001), which can be more “tricky and misleading” (Zimmerman-Edison, 2015, p. 73) than helpful.

Imagine, for our next example, a Chinese graduate teaching assistant at a U.S. university receives an email from her boss saying, “Rachel is *under the weather*. Can you please cover her job today?” Dismayed about why Rachel cannot fulfill her duties, she goes to another graduate assistant and asks: “The weather is nice. Why is Rachel *under the weather*?” Once again, teachers and students can have fun sharing such stories—perhaps with a blush or two. It may also help learners to know, however, that the idiom *under the weather* derives from the nineteenth century, when ocean voyages were common. As the weather became stormy, people “got seasick and were said to be suffering under the influence of bad weather. Soon the phrase was shortened to just ‘under the weather’ ” (Terban, 2006, p. 237)—and, eventually, generalized to its present meaning of *sick, unwell* (Beavis & McCloskey, 2013).

Finally, in addition to engaging ELs by stimulating their imaginations and providing them with cultural insight, investigating the “back stories” of idioms can provide an opportunity to leverage a common student fascination: modern, digital technology. A pedagogy suggestion on how to teach (core) idioms through exploring their historical backgrounds by using the internet and other digital tools can prove helpful. In our classrooms, we begin by posting an idiom such as *let the cat out of the bag* on a PowerPoint slide. Starting with the trial-and-error method, also discussed by Zimmerman-Edison (2015), we invite students to guess the meaning of the MWU based on its constituent parts. When, typically, the string is found incomprehensible, we discuss the nature of idioms—which, arguably, by definition carry meanings that exceed the sum of their parts (Zimmerman-Edison, 2015, citing Zyzik, 2011)—and broach the question of whether context will provide sufficient clues to understanding the phrase.

In addition, we provide a variety of natural language contexts for the idiom, whereupon students often discover that its meaning still eludes them. At this stage, we remind the students of something that many already know: that online resources exist to help learners come to grips with idioms, in many cases by providing accounts of the forgotten metaphors or historical circumstances that gave rise to the meanings in question. By this time, cell phones and other devices are out—with instructor permission!—and we visit web pages like <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2014/01/expression-let-cat-bag-come/>; <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/let-the-cat-out-of-the-bag.html>; and <https://www.englishclub.com/ref/esl/Idioms/L/let-the-cat-out-of-the-bag-196.htm>. Often, we encounter competing accounts of an idiom’s origin. At first, this can be confusing and frustrating for students, who are used to conceiving of vocabulary learning in terms of a one-to-one correspondence. This experience, however, not only provides a “teaching point” about the dangers of overreliance on L1 and the importance of understanding the semantic range of a lexical item within a given language system, it also offers opportunities to use games, discussion, role-playing, or debate to develop students’ creativity, critical thinking, and L2 rhetorical skills. The strategies chosen will need to take into account age, proficiency, and other learner characteristics. In the end, however, we can replace the frustrating task of memorizing inscrutable phrases with collaborative, *digital* explorations of history, culture, and meaning.

In sum, idioms will remain an area of challenge. Nevertheless, teachers can leverage their experiences and skills to create unique strategies that can help L2 learners achieve cultural insight and vocabulary retention when learning these seemingly inscrutable phrases.

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