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Presenting and Mastering Idioms in Cultural Context

"John bit the nail right on the head!" "He got under Anna's skin." "These guys painted the town red last weekend." "They had a blast yesterday." Have these phrases been taken from a horror movie? Are they all associated with blood shedding? No, far from that. *"Rose often puts her foot in her mouth."* *"She is jumping out of the frying pan into the fire."* *"Her bark is worse than her bite".* Would you like your son to date a girl with such manners? Of course, why not. You understand

that these phrases have nothing to do with manners and one shouldn't understand phrases like these literally. These are idioms. Each language contains expressions that make no sense or may be misinterpreted when translated word for word into another language. However, using them in writing or speaking you make your speech more natural and smooth. It means putting things in an English or American way. It is generally recognized that it is usually not so difficult to distinguish between a native speaker and a learner of English. Native speakers use English instinctively peppering it with informal expressions and idioms. Many of us have achieved mastery over the formal elements of the language. We can produce speech which is perfectly understandable and grammatically correct, but our English is not as lively as that of the native speakers because it lacks idioms. Idioms play an important role in the language of most native speakers who speak and write idiomatically unconsciously, whereas many of the language learners consider idioms to be the most confusing part of the language they are exposed to and not only because idioms are embarrassing for understanding but also because many idiomatic phrase-forms are explained by custom and history and not by logic or grammar, as "by and large", "many is the time", "look up an old friend" or "fiddle while Rome burns".

Just as each person has a unique, characteristic signature, each language has unique idioms. If you do not know the idioms mentioned above, you might get the wrong information about the people mentioned. You may be confused or even amused. Other idioms are connected with the history of the country or some specific terms and make no sense to a foreigner if he does not know the historic events or the terms used in the idiom. Here is a very well-known example of an English idiom "Carry coals to Newcastle" which can be easily translated into other languages but only makes sense to those who know that Newcastle is a coal-mining city. Knowing the literal meaning of idioms will not enable you to understand and widely use them in your speech unless you know what they allude to. Such ignorance is your *Achilles' Heel* and it means that we should pay more attention to learning idioms and studying the allusion of the foreign language term. This is *Alpha and Omega* to stop idioms from being an *Albatros Around Your Neck*. Foreign language teachers paying no attention to teaching idioms will have to weep *Crocodile Tears* when their students are not able to communicate with native speakers or read newspapers and magazines in the language taught.

Many idioms are connected with the culture, so the students will only be able to use idioms correctly and easily after extensive seeing and practicing the situations within British or American culture and then transferring them to their own culture whenever possible, thus expanding the sphere of their usage and making them a part of the active vocabulary. Idioms can surely be better recognized and studied in context. Therefore, students should be exposed to the real-life language in which idioms are freely incorporated.

This is not a new idea and I first read about it in the textbook by Dana Watkins *The Idiom Advantage* (Watkins 1995, ix-xii). Dana Watkins made a good collection of idioms and classified them according to the spheres they are mostly used in. She presents twelve topical chapters, each introducing approximately twelve new idioms. Here are some examples of the chapters: "Negotiation", "Effort", "Problem Solving", "Ambition", "Arguing" etc.

This article is going to dwell upon the work on idioms in a particular sphere, i.e. leisure and holidays. The readers will have opportunities to meet idioms contextualized in authentic language. Certain activities and exercises will be introduced to ensure that students hear, read and use the idioms correctly and creatively. Choosing the right idiom is largely a matter of experience and students should be provided with it.

One of the most useful aspects will be learning idioms through a series of real magazine and newspaper advertisements that incorporate the idioms on the subject taught. Print ads have several peculiarities if compared with other examples of idiom use. First, the text is not long, so students cannot be distracted from the idiom itself. Second, students will learn to identify idioms, even if their meaning is not quite clear at first. Third, they will have a chance to work with the lively authentic language. Next, which is no less important, advertisements bring our students to contact with the cultural experience of this or that English speaking country. They can also provide material for discussing its history, culture and traditions. At last this is only the beginning of the process in the course of which a teacher can make a wonderful classroom collection of newspaper ads containing idioms, for there are numerous examples used in an authentic context. The students may enthusiastically help. Furthermore, I think the context should be expanded and we are to teach our students to use the same idioms in other situations related to the culture of their own countries and their everyday concerns as well. Keeping in mind that American University in Central Asia (AUCA) is an international university, all the students will also benefit getting to know more about the culture in its diversity in other countries. Learning idioms this way students will have both use and fun. They will be active participants in the learning process, which is no less important.

The idioms I'm going to deal with here are:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| – paint the town red | – live it up |
| – right at one's feet | – take one's breath away |
| – have a blast | – take it easy |
| – top-of-the-line | – on the house |
| – make one's day | – catch one's eye |
| – dressed to kill | – beneath one |
| – keep up with the Joneses | |

The first step is to identify the idioms. Dana Watkins (Watkins 1995, 132) presents them in an authentic advertisement and offers a number of exercises to follow. This article provides some examples of the exercises from her book. Below there is an extract from an advertisement. The task is: read the advertisement and find the idioms listed above. Underline the idioms, and number them on the list in the order, in which you find them. Can you explain what they mean by how they are used?

Take It Easy!

Are you tired of business meetings, telephone ringing, heartburn and indigestion? Do you wish you could forget about headlines, appointments, schedules, and late hours? Have you had enough of headaches, bills to pay, and keeping up with the Joneses? Don't you think you need to take it easy?

Sit back for a moment! and imagine warm, Caribbean breezes... white beaches covered with sand as fine as powder, lined with gently swaying palm trees... golf, tennis, swimming, windsurfing, waterskiing... brilliant tropical sunsets that will take your breath away...all the comforts of a top-of-the-line resort right at your feet...

Now that the idioms are identified the students have to learn how to use them. The following sequence of exercises will help them. There is no need to introduce all the exercises here; the examples given below intend to demonstrate to a reader the systematic and consistent, step by step work on the idioms presented in the extract (Watkins 1995, 134-137).

Getting the Meaning

Notice the highlighted phrase in each of the following sentences. Pay attention to how the idiom is used and try to guess its meaning. You may also refer to the preceding advertisement. Write the meaning of the idiom on the line. **The first one is done for you.**

1. Judy's always worried that her neighbors are going to drive up in a nicer car than hers. She spends all her money just trying **to keep up with the Joneses**.
to compete with one's neighbors in obtaining material goods
2. Don't worry about the deadlines you have to meet at work next week. It's Saturday – **take it easy!** _____
3. The size and capacity of the new nuclear plant will **take your breath away**. _____
4. I'll have a salesman show you our **top-of-the-line** computer. There is no other model that is as good as this one. _____
5. When my grandfather came to America, he felt that the government had put every opportunity to succeed **right at his feet**. _____

Choosing the Best Answer

Listen carefully to the following taped statements. Read the choices listed below for each statement you hear. Select the sentence that best relates to the original statement, and circle the corresponding letter.

1. Pete has a brand new stereo with more buttons and dials than you could count.
 - a. He takes it easy.
 - b. It's top-of-the-line.
 - c. It's beneath him.
2. The research library has all the information you'll need. Just ask the librarian.
 - a. It's on the house.
 - b. It will catch your eye.
 - c. It's all right at your feet.
3. I didn't do much during the holiday.
 - a. I took it easy.
 - b. It made my day.
 - c. I was trying to keep up with the Joneses.

Retelling the Story

Read the advertisement again. The sentences below refer to statements in the ad. Restate the statements, using the appropriate idiom in each one. **The first one is done for you.**

1. Are you tired of getting headaches, paying your bills, and trying to compete with the rest of the world?
Have you had enough of headaches, bills, and keeping up with the Joneses?
2. Imagine a place that will amaze you with its beauty.
3. All the comforts of the resort will be readily available to you.

Putting the Idioms into Practice (Watkins 1995, 138-139)

You work for the Travel and Tourist Information Bureau for the city of Mountaincrest, a relatively small mountain village that subsists mostly on its tourist industry. Travelers to the area often call your office to ask for suggestions or advice on any of the attractions your city offers. One day you answered the following phone calls and responded to the callers' questions. Rephrase each answer by substituting the highlighted phrase for one of the idioms studied.

9.04 What attractions does Mountaincrest have for tourists?

*Skiing, boating, horseback riding, and biking, as well as many museums, art galleries, and cultural events – all of these activities are **easily accessible and available** to all visitors.*

There are a number of attractions right at your feet, such as skiing, boating, horseback riding, hiking, and a variety of museums, art galleries, and cultural events.

9.30 We are looking for some beautiful scenery that we can take pictures of. Where should we go?

*There is a waterfall nearby that is so beautiful it will **astound you**.*

10.15 We are sick of eating at fast-food restaurants. Can you recommend a really good place to eat?

*One of the best restaurants in town, that serves **the highest quality** food, is called "The King Feast."*

The next step is finding the idioms in ads and interpreting the ads. Students determine what is being advertised and what idiom is featured in the ad. Then they are offered a number of questions to answer. Below is an example of an advertisement and questions to it.

Now it is time to use the idioms creatively. I have made a good collection of ads on various subjects from diverse magazines and asked my students to change the language of the ad and use as many idioms under consideration as possible. Sometimes students prefer to bring advertisements from the magazines they enjoy reading. It may be a pair or a group work. The principle of "two heads are better than one" works well in this situation. I would like to give an example to show the result of this activity. First is the ad itself. It is from the magazine *Winter Texas* (*Winter Texas* 1996-1997, 15).

The Oldest Town In Texas

Nacogdoches, TX. Welcome to Nacogdoches, where people literally live in the footsteps of history. Nacogdoches, "The Oldest Town in Texas", is where the drama of Texas history began with the Caddo Indians, Spanish Missions, the Texas Revolution, the first newspaper in Texas and signers of the Texas Declaration of Independence, helped Texas become what it is today. A visit to the many museums and historical homes or a walk along the streets of the downtown area will tell tales of how Texas forged its beginnings. Along these brick streets, one will find numerous antique shops, art galleries and specialty shops.

No matter what type of relaxation getaway you need, we can accommodate. In Nacogdoches, you will find legends, lakes, recreation and warm friendly people.

For more information...

And here is the students' version of the same ad with the idioms we have studied:

The Oldest Town In Texas

If you dream of a perfect vacation, if you want to live it up, come to Nacogdoches. History is *right at your feet* here! Nacogdoches, "The Oldest Town in Texas", is where the drama of Texas history began. The Caddo Indians, Spanish Missions, the Texas Revolution, the first newspaper in Texas and signers of the Texas Declaration of Independence helped Texas become what it is today. Numerous museums and historical homes are sure to *make your day*. The streets of the downtown area will *take your breath away* and tell tales of how Texas forged its beginnings. Along these brick streets, one will find numerous antique shops, art galleries and specialty shops.

No matter what type of relaxation getaway you need, *take it easy!* We can accommodate. In Nacogdoches, you will find legends, lakes, recreation and warm friendly people.

For more information...

There is a cultural aspect here, too. After you deal with the vocabulary of the ads, you can turn to discussing them and ask students to make some inferences concerning culture of this or that country and this work is especially interesting if you have international audience as we often have here at the AUCA. You can ask your students questions like:

Which of the ads will appeal to (will be rejected by) the people in your country? Explain why.

Which of the ads demonstrates cultural values of the people in your country? Develop your idea.

One of my students, a girl from Korea, chose to express her opinion on the ad illustrating food from McDonald's with the following words below the photo: "If it doesn't make your day, we'll make it over." I would like to quote some of her thoughts: "I have chosen the ad with the hamburger because American people, like people all over the world now, are interested in eating cheap, fast and tasty food. As a result, lots of Americans gained weight which resulted in numerous diseases and now the problem of fast food is becoming more and more urgent. Scientific research tells us how fast food affects our health. More and more people hear about numerous side effects of eating greasy and unhealthy fast food. So people in my country are now avoiding that kind of food and they are really interested in healthy life and food. Because of that, in order not to be left by their customers, fast food companies in Korea are trying to change the menu from greasy to healthy food. For example, they use olive oil instead of cheaper vegetable oil and offer more vegetables. Returning to the ad, I conclude it would not appeal to the audience in my country." It is interesting to note that this ad caught everybody's eye and all the students in the group chose to speak on it. They were unanimous that fast food appealed to teenagers and was avoided by their parents. The grounds were the same as mentioned above.

My students represented Korea, China, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. They also expressed their opinions on other ads. Thus a student from Turkey said that men in his country would be impressed by the ad of an automobile with the following words accompanying it: "Don't just keep up with the Joneses. Pass them," while women would definitely be drawn to the ad of ClubHouse Inns with the text: "Have breakfast and cocktails on the House..." Men are interested in cars and everything related to them. Women enjoy planning their family's holidays and the idea of saving a little will certainly appeal to them. These considerations account for the Turkish student choice.

There was also an advertisement about science class at school. It contained a photo of a teacher and students who had their science class outside the classroom. They had a trip to the Space Center and above the photo we could read the words: "Mrs. Blume's Science Class Is A Blast". Students from both Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan used this ad as an example speaking about cultural values in their countries. What is especially interesting is that they used them in the contrary way. Their approach towards the same ad was quite different. A student from Turkmenistan expected this ad would appeal to schoolchildren in her country because this kind of trip is a very interesting and exciting way of learning and provoking students' interest in the subject. She remembered her science classes at school and was sorry that they were all alike and only implied the teacher's explanation of some theory and the students' studying the material at home using their textbooks. The students from Kyrgyzstan were unanimous in the opinion that this would be the least appealing advertisement here. They think nobody is interested in science development in the country. Little money is invested in this sphere and schools are so poorly equipped that it is next to impossible for the teachers to teach this subject and for the students to appreciate it.

This kind of work caused the students' interest. They worked in groups choosing ads revealing cultural values in their countries and trying to account for their choice. With no less interest did they listen to the other groups' opinions.

The next step is advertising with idioms. Students are supposed to make up an advertisement for some place in their countries. **The teacher explains to them what steps to follow:**

1. Choose a place you would like to advertise. It would be nice if this place is specific of your country's culture.
2. Think of the people you are going to address.
3. Try to imagine what value(s) will appeal to them. Keep it (them) in mind when working on your ad.
4. Try to illustrate your ad.
5. Write the ad. Try to use as many idioms as possible.
6. Present it to the class.

This can be considered as a group project, which develops both creativity and cooperation. And in the international university as is ours it encourages interest towards other nations contributing to friendly relations. Students are usually motivated at this step more than ever and put their hearts into work. The following examples show how it worked.

The first two presentations are from Korea.

Hwarang Institution of Learning.

It is a Korean style hall for spiritual discipline. Profound information on the ideology of Hwarangdo, fidelity, faith, trust, courage, generosity based on Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, *is right at your feet here*. The ideology of it became the motive power of unification of the three kingdoms. To succeed such sublime spirit, a special hall was built and main trainees are high school and college students. Magnificent architectural beauty of Shilla *catches your eye* at a distance and *takes your breath away*. You cannot *have a blast* or *paint the town red* here but a visit to Hwarang Institution is sure to *make your day*!

We invite you to **Kyongju, Old Capital of Shilla Dynasty Enlivened with 2000-Year History.**

Is passive lying on the beach *beneath you? Take it easy!* Come to Kyongju and we will *make your day!*

Thanks to its preserved civilization of two thousand years, which is not common elsewhere, Kyongju was named by UNESCO in 1979 one of the world's ten historical sites. Kyongju is not only an old cultural capital but also a cultural heritage important enough to be named a world's historical site. The place is dotted with many cultural heritages to the extent that we can say that numerous relics and rocks, large and small streets and valleys filled with various legends and touch of Shilla people are *right at your feet* wherever you go. This old capital deserves the name of an open museum.

Now comes the turn of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz students decided to advertise

Rukh Ordo Tashkul-Ata, a unique cultural center on the coast of Lake Issyk-Kul.

Is it time for your vacation? Are you afraid that you can't afford to go abroad to *keep up with the Joneses*? *Take it easy!* If you want to *live it up* you are welcome to Lake Issyk-Kul! Numerous summer camps to any taste and comfortable *top-of-the-line* hotels are waiting just for you. Walk, lie and do sports on our sandy beaches, enjoy our sunny weather, swim in our crystal clear lake. *Have a blast!* And you shouldn't miss Rukh Ordo in Cholpon-Ata! This is a cultural and historical center embracing the richest history, legends and myths of the whole world. What makes this place so unique is the unity of the main world religions and cultures. The author of this fabulous complex Tashkul Keriksizov decided to create a place, which would never be influenced by contradictions, ethnic disagreements and fights, a place where people would forget that they are of different nationalities and beliefs. Welcome to our cultural center and you will enjoy water from the purest spring, which helped great Tamerlan to gain spiritual strength and come to unmistakable decisions. This visit to Rukh Ordo will be the most unforgettable day of your life. Our brilliant guides will do their best to *make your day!*

I think we can draw the conclusion that the students have learnt how to apply the idioms that we have studied, they have used the cultural context and thus my goal has been achieved.

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