

**BỘ GIÁO DỤC VÀ ĐÀO TẠO  
TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC DÂN LẬP HẢI PHÒNG**

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**NGÀNH: NGOẠI NGỮ**

**HẢI PHÒNG - 2010**

**HAIPHONG PRIVATE UNIVERSITY  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT**

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**GRADUATION PAPER**

**THE STUDY ON TECHNIQUES TO LEARN ENGLISH  
IDIOMS AND PROVERBS**

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**CLASS:**

**NA 1003**

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**HAI PHONG – 2010**

**BỘ GIÁO DỤC VÀ ĐÀO TẠO**  
**TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC DÂN LẬP HẢI PHÒNG**

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**Nhiệm vụ đề tài tốt nghiệp**

Sinh viên: .....Mã số:.....

Lớp: .....Ngành:.....

Tên đề tài: .....

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## Nhiệm vụ đề tài

1. Nội dung và các yêu cầu cần giải quyết trong nhiệm vụ đề tài tốt nghiệp (về lý luận, thực tiễn, các số liệu cần tính toán và các bản vẽ).

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2. Các số liệu cần thiết để thiết kế, tính toán.

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3. Địa điểm thực tập tốt nghiệp.

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## CÁN BỘ HƯỚNG DẪN ĐỀ TÀI

### Người hướng dẫn thứ nhất:

Họ và tên:.....

Học hàm, học vị:.....

Cơ quan công tác:.....

Nội dung hướng dẫn:.....

### Người hướng dẫn thứ hai:

Họ và tên:.....

Học hàm, học vị:.....

Cơ quan công tác:.....

Nội dung hướng dẫn:.....

Đề tài tốt nghiệp được giao ngày 12 tháng 04 năm 2010

Yêu cầu phải hoàn thành xong trước ngày 10 tháng 07 năm 2010

Đã nhận nhiệm vụ ĐTTN

*Sinh viên*

Đã giao nhiệm vụ ĐTTN

*Người hướng dẫn*

*Hải Phòng, ngày tháng năm 2010*

**HIỆU TRƯỞNG**

**GS.TS. NGUYỄN Trần Hữu Nghị**

## PHẦN NHẬN XÉT TÓM TẮT CỦA CÁN BỘ HƯỚNG DẪN

### 1. Tinh thần thái độ của sinh viên trong quá trình làm đề tài tốt nghiệp:

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### 2. Đánh giá chất lượng của khóa luận (so với nội dung yêu cầu đã đề ra trong nhiệm vụ Đ.T. T.N trên các mặt lý luận, thực tiễn, tính toán số liệu...):

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### 3. Cho điểm của cán bộ hướng dẫn (ghi bằng cả số và chữ):

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*Hải Phòng, ngày ..... tháng ..... năm 2010*

**Cán bộ hướng dẫn**  
(họ tên và chữ ký)

**NHẬN XÉT ĐÁNH GIÁ**  
**CỦA NGƯỜI CHẤM PHẢN BIỆN ĐỀ TÀI TỐT NGHIỆP**

1. Đánh giá chất lượng đề tài tốt nghiệp về các mặt thu thập và phân tích tài liệu, số liệu ban đầu, giá trị lí luận và thực tiễn của đề tài.

2. Cho điểm của người chấm phản biện :

*(Điểm ghi bằng số và chữ)*

Ngày..... tháng..... năm 2010

**Ng- ời chấm phản biện**

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I am fully aware that shortcomings and mistakes are inevitable in my research. Any comments and suggestions would be highly appreciated for the perfect of my own research.

Haiphong, June, 2010

*Vu Hoang Thao*



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## **PART I: INTRODUCTION**

### **1. Rationale**

Nowadays, English is considered the global language and used in every field of our life. English is the first criteria concerned when we want to apply for a good job. The development of the whole society requires us not only to know English but also to reach a high level satisfying the high requirements of the job we want to apply for. Therefore, the need of studying this language today is higher and higher.

Apart from improving four skills including Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, it will be a big shortcoming when studying a foreign language without taking notice of the treasure of idioms and proverbs of the country where it was born. Studying and applying creatively English idioms and proverbs help students reach the flexibility in using this language and the creativity of simple but vivid sentences in daily speech. Moreover, this treasure can bring us the approach of other cultures. That is the quintessence of the linguistic treasure, the efficient tool for human's thought and affection exchange.

The diversity of English idioms and proverbs may make students confused at first. Thus, it is really important to have effective studying methods and I decided to choose a study on techniques to learn English idioms and proverbs as my final report.

## 2. Aims of the study

English idioms and proverbs are a fantastic treasure to discover for the benefits it brings. And my study aims at the following concrete targets:

- ✓ Enriching the English idioms and proverbs for students to learn this language.
- ✓ Assisting students to express thoughts and affection accurately, polishedly, concisely and vividly.
- ✓ Helping students to approach to British culture, customs and traditions and have a deeper look at our own culture, country and people as well.
- ✓ Giving some suggested advices and specific exercises.

## 3. Methods of the study

In order to finish my graduation paper, I try with my best effort to search the necessary documents in reference books or from websites on the Internet. I selected valuable information relating to my study after carefully reading those references.

I also applied my knowledge and experiences achieved during the process of studying at Haiphong Private University.

Especially, I received lots of useful advices from my supervisor and my friends as well.

#### 4. Scope of the study

Idioms and proverbs can be seen in every situation when we learn English. They make our daily speech become more natural, vivid and attractive. Except from developing the necessary skills, idioms and proverbs can bring us a better feel for this language and British culture as well.

#### 5. Design of the study

This paper consists of three parts:

PART I: INTRODUCTION - shows the rationale, aims, methods, scope and design of the study.

PART II: DEVELOPMENT (the main part of the study) is divided into three chapters:

Chapter I: Theoretical background – provides an overview on English idioms and proverbs, their features and the influence of British culture on their idioms and proverbs.

Chapter II: The study on techniques to learn English idioms and proverbs

Chapter III: Implication - Some problems when learning English idioms and proverbs of Vietnamese people and suggested solutions to learn well

PART III: CONCLUSION – The references and specific exercises.

## **PART II: DEVELOPMENT**

### **CHAPTER I: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

#### **1. An overview on idioms and proverbs**

##### ***1.1. What is idiom?***

What is an idiom?

Dubrovina (1995) defines "idiom" to be a set of phraseological units which meaning does not result from the meaning of its components.

The definition by Dean Curry (1994) is "the assigning of a new meaning to a group of words which already have their own meaning".

Moon (1998) says that idioms are typically institutionalized, lexico-grammatically fixed and non-compositional expressions.

Collins (2000) defines idioms as a group of words, which have a different meaning when used together from the one it would have if the meaning of each word were taken individually and that are usually employed in everyday language to precisely express ideas and concepts that can not be compressed into a single word.

(<http://www.languageinindia.com/june2009/urduidioms.pdf>)

According to Irujo (1986), "An idiom is a conventionalized expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts" and "Idioms

differ from other figurative expressions, such as similes and metaphors, in that they have conventionalized meanings”.

([http://pc171115.pc.waseda.ac.jp/ccdl/cl\\_korea/0515\\_handout-body.html](http://pc171115.pc.waseda.ac.jp/ccdl/cl_korea/0515_handout-body.html))

An idiom is an expression, word, or phrase that has a figurative meaning that is comprehended in regard to a common use of that expression that is separate from the literal meaning or definition of the words of which it is made.

(<http://www.alienartifacts.com/Idiom/encyclopedia.htm>)

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.

(<http://www.idiomconnection.com/whatis.html>)

For examples:

a. “let the cat out of the bag” means “to reveal a secret, to let somebody know a secret”.

*E.g: We'd planned a surprise party for Donna, but some guy she works with let the cat out of the bag, so now she knows.*

*Don't forget that this is a secret, so whatever you do, don't let the cat out of the bag!*

b. “feel like a million dollars” means “to feel wonderful, to feel well and healthy, both physically and mentally”.

*E.g. A quick swim in the morning makes me feel like a million dollars.*

c. “beat about the bush” means “to avoid coming to the point, to approach a subject in a round-about manner, instead of coming directly to it”.

*E.g. Stop beating about the bush and answer my question!*

d. “break the ice” means “to say or do something friendly in order to overcome shyness or to ease tension in a social situation”.

*E.g. The hardest part about a first date is breaking the ice.*

*To break the ice, let's invite our new neighbors to lunch.*

e. “to give up” means “to stop doing something”.

*E.g. If you give up smoking, your health will surely improve a lot.*

*Finally, they gave up the search because they were exhausted.*

f. “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.



*E.g. "Hold your horses," I said when my friend started to leave the store.*

The above explanations and examples are extracted from

<http://www.englishclub.com/ref/Idioms/index.htm>

and <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/>

## ***1.2. What is proverb?***

What is an proverb?

Miguel De Cervantes defines that “A proverb is a short sentence based on long experience”.

(<http://cogweb.ucla.edu/Discourse/Proverbs/Definitions.html>)

Lord Russell defined a proverb as “the wisdom of many, the wit of one”.

(<http://www.theology.edu/biblesurvey/proverbs.htm>)

A proverb is...

... a simple and concrete saying popularly known and repeated, which expresses a truth, based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity.

(<http://english-learners.com/2009/04/english-proverbs-sayings-3.html>)

... a condensed but memorable saying embodying some important fact of experience that is taken as true by many people.

(<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/proverb>)

... a brief traditional oral expression that generally remains in fixed.

([http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu\\_glossary.html](http://www.louisianavoices.org/edu_glossary.html))

A proverb is a short saying or sentence that is generally known by many people. The saying usually contains words of wisdom, truth or morals that are based on common sense or practical experience. It is often a description of a basic rule of conduct that all people generally follow or should follow. Proverbs can be found in all languages.

(<http://www.idiomconnection.com/whatis.html>)

**For examples:**

a. “Money doesn't grow on trees” means “Money is not easy to get and you must work hard for it”.

*E.g. The girl's father often says that money doesn't grow on trees when she asks him for money.*

b. “The early bird catches the worm” means “Arriving early gives one an advantage”.

*E.g. My boss always comes to work early because he believes that the early bird catches the worm.*

c. “The pen is mightier than the sword” means “Writing and ideas are more powerful than the use of force”.

*E.g. The pen is mightier than the sword and a good idea or strong beliefs will defeat the strongest army.*

d. “Rome wasn’t built in a day” means “Important things do not happen overnight”.

*E.g. Don’t get impatient! Remember that “Rome wasn’t built in a day”.*

e. “Love is blind” means “One sees no faults in the person one loves”.

*E.g.*

*- You know, Lisa always ignores all of her husband’s shortcomings.*

*- No doubt about it! Love is blind.*

(<http://www.idiomconnection.com/>)

## **2. The characteristics of English idioms and proverbs**

### ***2.1. The characteristics of English idioms***

Generally idioms have the following characteristics:

#### **a. Non-compositionality:**

Katamba (1993) says that “The meaning of an idiom is not a straightforward composition of the meaning of its parts”.

And according to Langacker (1986), “Idioms are widely defined as being non-compositional or even compositional after the meaning is known”.

Although the words that make up the idiom have their own literal meanings, in the idiom they have lost their individual identity. We can not predict the meaning of an idiom from the sum of its parts:

*E.g: Kick up one’s heels (means “to celebrate”).*

*Bite the bullet (means “to endure in a difficult situation”).*

*Hit the hay (means “to go to bed”).*

### **b. Non-substitutability:**

#### 1. Constituents can not be replaced:

Constituents of idioms can not be changed or replaced. For example, “kick the bucket” (means “to die”) can not be changed as “kick the pail” or “strike the bucket”.

#### 2. Word order can not be changed:

The word order can not be inverted or changed. For instance, “by twos and threes”, “at sixes and sevens” and “tit for tat” can not be turned into “by threes and twos”, “at sevens and sixes” and “tat for tit”.

#### 3. Constituents can not be deleted or added to:

The constituents of an idiom cannot be deleted or added to, not even an article. Take the idiom “out of the question” for example, it means “impossible”. If the article “the” is deleted, the idiomaticity will be lost and it will signify “no question” instead.

### **c. Non-modifiability:**

We can not modify an idiom or apply syntactic transformations. Some idioms are fixed, and do not present internal variation, while there is also a large proportion of idioms that allow for different degrees of internal variability, and with a variable number of elements.

Syntactically frozen idioms can not be syntactically transformed into the passive and still retain their figurative meaning.

*E.g.*

*John bought the farm # The farm was bought by John.*

*John bit the dust # The dust was bitten by John.*

#### **d. Institutionalization:**

According to Grant and Bauer (2004), institutionalization refers to the degree of recognition a particular phrase meets in a speech community. There are idioms that have cultural roots and are understood only by those communities that share the same cultural values.

For example, people from different cultures can easily understand idioms such as “cold as ice”, “firm as a rock”... due to their similar observation to the world.

On the other hand, owing to different living environment, social customs, religion and other factors, some images can not raise resonance.

For instance, in Western countries, the navigation industry is fast developed and they have many idioms which are related to sea life and people from countries of continental civilization may not easily understand them.

*E.g. a big fish: an important and influential person*

*a fresh fish: a new prisoner*

*a poor fish: a foolish person*

<http://www.languageinindia.com/june2009/urduidioms.pdf>

## ***2.2. The characteristics of English proverbs***

Lord Russell defines a proverb as “the wisdom of many, the wit of one”. This points out three of the major features of a proverb:

1. They have an arresting and individually inspired form (the wit of one).
2. They have a wide appeal and endorsement (of many).
3. Their content comments itself to the hearer as true (wisdom).

Three additional common features of proverbs are:

1. They are usually short.
2. They are easy to remember.
3. They are most frequently transmitted orally.

Sometimes uniqueness of form is missing, but the content has sufficient appeal to win a wide audience:

“You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink”.

Though the proverb has little in its form to insure survival, its wide applicability insures its remembrance.

On the other hand, form may preserve a proverb whose content is not otherwise capable of sustaining it: “He who laughs last laughs best”.

The statement would not long be remembered if it were not for its assonance and alliteration.

Finally, there are proverbs that have both universal applicability and a compelling form: “Look before you leap”. The idiom warns of the importance of caution, and displays alliteration.

(<http://www.theology.edu/biblesurvey/proverbs.htm>)

### **3. The influence of British culture on their idioms and proverbs**

Culture and language is closely related and actually can't be separated. Language is influenced and shaped by culture. Every aspect of culture, either material or spiritual, directly influences language. Owing to this kind of close relationship, language is described as the carrier of culture and the mirror of cultural characteristics. Therefore, idioms and proverbs which are considered as the essence of language, are deeply influenced by culture. Different nations possess different cultures. As a result, idioms and proverbs of different nations must be affected by their own peculiar cultures. English idioms and proverbs are no exception to the rule. British geographical conditions, life experiences, histories, religious beliefs and literatures are all stamped on their idioms and proverbs.

#### ***3.1. The influence caused by geographical conditions***

Britain is an island country, with Atlantic Ocean to the west and north, the English Channel to the south and the North Sea to the east. Therefore, British culture can be regarded as sea culture. And British people also have a special passion for water. The British people live along the cost line and their livelihood is dependent on the coast, so they get a close relationship with sea and have many idioms and proverbs related to sea and water.

E.g.

“spend money like water”: to spend too much money in a careless way.

“to keep one’s head above water”: to manage to survive a difficult experience.

“all at sea”: in a state of confusion and disorder.

“a drop in the ocean”: a quantity too small to make any improvement.

“to rest on one’s oars”: to take an interval of rest after hard work.

The long and bendy coastline promotes British sailing and fishing, so idioms and proverbs of this kind are in large quantities.

E.g.

“plain sailing”: a course of action that is free from difficulties.

“when one’s ship comes home/in”: when one has become successful.

“a big fish”: an important and influential person.

“a fresh fish”: a new prisoner.

“a poor fish”: a foolish person.

“like a fish out of water”: to feel awkward because you are not familiar with a situation or because you are very different from the people around you.

“Don’t drown the man who taught you to swim”: Don’t hurt someone who takes care of you.

### ***3.2. The influence caused by weather***

The climate of Britain is the typical temperate oceanic climate, rainy and foggy. The annual rainfall of the whole Britain is about 1016mm. Moreover, it is foggy on the island, especially in winter. We can see that English idioms and proverbs clearly reflect their weather and climate conditions.

E.g.

“rain cats and dogs”: rain very heavily.



“fog-bound”: trapped by fog.

“It never rains it pours”: misfortunes usually come in large numbers.

“Every cloud has a silver lining”: it is always possible to get something positive out of a situation, no matter how unpleasant, difficult or even painful it might seem.

### ***3.3. The influence caused by history***

History, as part of social culture, is an influential factor not only for a nation but also for a language. It plays an indispensable role in the development of a country. It also promotes the evolution of a language and affects its idioms and proverbs.

E.g.

“to cross the Rubicon”: to take a decisive and irrevocable step.

The allusion is to Julius Caesar's act when with his army in 49 B.C. he unconstitutionally crossed the River Rubicon, which separated his province from Italy, and so brought on the Civil War.

“Do in Rome as the Romans do”: One should change one's habits to suit the customs of the place one is living.

The allusion is to the Roman Conquest of England.

“to sleep on brushwood and taste gall”: to undergo self-imposed hardships so as to strengthen one's resolution to wipe out a national humiliation.

The allusion is to the act of Yueh Emperor GouJian in the Warring Period, when his country was conquered; however, he did not lose heart but wanted to rebuild his empire.

“Lynch law”: The practice of killing (an accused person) by mob action and without lawful trial, usually in defiance of local authority.

“Every Caesar has his Brutus”: One should be aware of one's false friend. This proverb originated from Caesar's friend, Brutus, finally betrayed him.

### ***3.4. The influence caused by religious beliefs***

Religion exists in every nation and affects much in languages. And English is not an exception. Numerous idioms were generated from the fountain of religion.

E.g.

“to play the devil with”: seriously injure

“to ride hell for leather”: as quickly as possible

“as poor as a church mouse”: one is so poor that has no penny

(In Christian church, there is no devoted food. Therefore, the mice in the church, which have no food, can be said as poor).

Religion played a key role in British society especially before capitalization. The majorities of the English people believe in Christianity and regard the Bible as one of the most important classical works in their life. The Bible is comprehensive of nearly all the matters in life so that it acts not only a classic in religion but also an important supporter of British culture, or even of Western culture. Innumerable idioms are originated from the Bible, such as follows:

“to put new wine in old bottles”: referring to the unwise act of forcing the extremely conservative person to accept new conceptions.

“to make one’s hair stand on end”: describing thrilling horror caused by something.

“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”: denoting revenge in the same way.

### ***3.5.The influence caused by literature***

Literature is an art to reflect life experiences, convey thoughts and express emotions. It is an important part of spiritual culture. In ancient times, people created myths, legends, and fables. As time goes by, novels, plays, poems, etc, spring like mushrooms. These literature works have not only enriched people's spiritual culture, but also provided a plentiful of resources for idioms.

E.g.

“Achilles' heel”: the one weak spot in a man's circumstances or character.

The allusion is to the god Achilles whose heel is his vulnerable spot.

“Trojan horse”: any subversive group or device insinuated with the enemy ranks.

This phrase comes from the Trojan War.

“To claim one’s pound of flesh”: to insist on one’s rights and ruthlessly exact payment or service, even when that means extreme hardship.

This idiom originated from the play “The Merchant of Venice” written by William Shakespeare.

“There is the rub”: That is where doubt or difficulty enters.

This proverb comes from the play “Hamlet” written by William Shakespeare.

“Man Friday”: a faithful and willing attendant, ready to turn his hand to anything. (The young savage found by Robinson Crusoe on a Friday, and kept as his servant and companion on the desert island).

“Cakes and ale”: idle away one’s time in pleasure-seeking, enjoy pleasure.  
(“Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ales” in “Twelfth Night” - a comedy by William Shakespeare).

There are also idioms derived from ancient legends and fables.

E.g.

“Hobson's choice”: The acceptance of what is offered when there is no alternative, no choice. (Hobson was a legendary figure who hired out horses. However, he always insisted that a hirer should take the one nearest the stable and gave no choice to his customers.)

“To cry wolf”: to raise a false alarm.

The allusion is to the crying of wolf by a shepherd boy.

“A frog in a well”: a person with a very limited outlook.

### ***3.6. The influence caused by social fashions***

The social fashion is traditional habit or is popular in a period of time in the society. It concludes living habits, etiquette, tradition, behavior standards, etc. These factors influences the daily life of each person in the society. Meanwhile, these influences reflect the language; especially they reflect the English idioms. For example:

“Let one’s hair down”: to relax after a period of tense.

(In the past, in whatever occasion, the English women’s hair were very clean and tidy and combed u. Only when women were alone, they let their hair

down. Therefore, people use the idiom of “let one’s hair down” to express the relaxation after a long time of working and tense situation).

“Take off one’s hat to someone”: pay one’s respect to someone.

(Long ago, the English people wore the hat as a fashion. When they greeted with people in the social occasion and showed the respect to someone, they took off their hat. For this reason, “take off one’s hat to someone” extends the meaning to show the respect to someone).

“Go down the aisle”: get married, enter into matrimony.

(The Westerners almost believe the Christianity, their weddings always hold in the church. When the wedding starts, the father of the bride always companies with her walk down the aisle. Therefore, the idiom of “walk down the aisle” expresses “enter into matrimony”. Therefore, the idiom “go down the aisle” is produced to indicate “get married”).

### ***3.7. The influence caused by food and drinks customs***

People coming from various nations have different food customs because of their different living conditions. Because of the influences of sea to the Britain’s weather, the weather is not very cold or hot. So the wheat, barley and oats of main grain are adapted to this climate of Britain. The staple food of Britain people includes bread, milk, butter and cheese. Those are daily food eaten in British families and there are many idioms originated from them. Here are some examples as follows:

“Baker’s dozen”: thirteen

“Bread and butter”: livelihood, a way of earning money.

“Bread and circuses”: food and amusement.

“Bread with someone”: to have dinner with somebody.  
 “Bread line”: the long queue of the unemployed people to receive the relief.  
 “Take the bread out of someone’s mouth”: grab somebody’s job.  
 “Butter would not melt in his mouth”: very honest.  
 “Like a hot knife through butter”: very easy to do something.  
 “Bread buttered on both sides”: living a comfortable life.  
 “Cry in one’s beer”: forget worries by drinking.  
 “Big cheese”: an important figure, boss.  
 “Out of a jam”: live out of the desperate straits or get out of troubles.  
 “Save one’s bacon”: shake off one’s difficulties.  
 “Live on the breadline”: living in the condition of poverty line.  
 “Jam tomorrow”: something you want but it does not belong to you.  
 “Small beer”: trivial things or people of little importance.  
 “beer and skittles”: “the carefree life one enjoys most”.  
 “Know which side your bread is buttered”: to know what will be of most gain to yourself.  
 “Don’t cry over spilt milk”: don’t waste time feeling sorry about something that can not be changed for the better.

### ***3.8. The influence caused by pets:***

For years, animals have a very close relation with mankind. We keep animals as pets, thus, we forms “pet culture” and there are a lot of idioms and proverbs generated from such a culture as follows:

“Like a dog with two tails”: to be very happy.  
 “Dog-tired”: extremely tired.  
 “The dog days”: the hottest days of the summer.  
 “A dog's breakfast”: something that has been done very badly.  
 “Fat cat”: someone who is ostentatiously and smugly wealthy.

“Play cat and mouse with someone”: to be coy and evasive with someone.

“Put the cat among the pigeons”: to do or say something that causes trouble and makes a lot of people angry or worried.

“To leave before the last dog is dead”: to leave as early as possible.

“Love me, love my dog”: If you love someone, you should accept everything and everyone that the person loves.

“Every dog has his day”: Everyone gets a chance eventually.

“Curiosity killed the cat”: Being curious can get you into trouble.

“All cats are gray in the dark”: When in the dark, appearances are meaningless, since everything is hard to see or unseen.

“He that lies down with dogs must rise up with fleas”: He who associates with bad people will acquire their faults.

“Let sleeping dogs lie”: Leave something alone if it might cause trouble.

“When the cat's away, the mice will play”: When no one in authority is present, the subordinates can do as they please.

[http://snailflying.blog.hexun.com/8072824\\_d.html](http://snailflying.blog.hexun.com/8072824_d.html)

After all of the factors mentioned above, we can see English idioms and proverbs are either the crystallization of English language or the mirror of British culture. Studying the British culture will help us have an sufficient understanding about their language in general and their idioms and proverbs in particular to achieve success in learning this language.

## **CHAPTER II: THE STUDY ON TECHNIQUES TO LEARN ENGLISH IDIOMS AND PROVERBS**

Each language has its own idioms and proverbs. They are the quintessence of the language and contribute to the colour of the language.

It is the idioms and proverbs in English that brings a natural, conversational and creative feel. Therefore, if we want to speak English fluently, just like a native speaker, it is important that we learn English idioms and proverbs. Idiomatic expressions make the English sound very warm, easy-going, interesting and creative.

To learn, remember and use English idioms and proverbs effectively, students have to study very hard and spend lots of time. There are some techniques learners should apply to their process of study to gain the success as follows:

### **1. Studying English idioms basing on thematic categories:**

Students should divide the idioms and proverbs they have to learn into categories. Dividing idioms into thematic categories will make them easier to learn. The themes that can be used is various such as idioms of comparison, body, animal, time, clothing, money, weather, proper names and so on. Learning the idioms and proverbs systematically will help learners avoid mistakes and remember them well.

#### **1. Idioms of Comparison:**

Idioms of comparison (also called similes) are used in description of people, their appearance, character, mood, actions, things, objects, places, etc. Speakers and writers use similes to emphasize a certain characteristic of a



thing. In a simile, the words “like” or “as” are used to signal that a comparison is being made between the two things.

The listener or reader can form a mental image of the comparison. This increases understanding of what the speaker or writer is trying to communicate.

*E.g. Working on her project, Mary was as busy as a beaver.*

In the above example, “as busy as a beaver” is the simile, and as is the word used to signal that a comparison is being made. The two things being compared are “busy” and “beaver”. When building a dam a beaver keeps busily working until the dam is completed. A mental image of Mary being as busy as a beaver while working on her project would show her working very hard. This would bring out that the speaker or writer is saying that Mary was putting a lot of effort into her project and would keep working until it was completed.

Here are some more idioms of comparison with the structure “be + as ... as ...”:

As black as the Ace of Spades / soot / coal / midnight

As bold as brass / a coot / a lion

As bright as silver / noonday / day

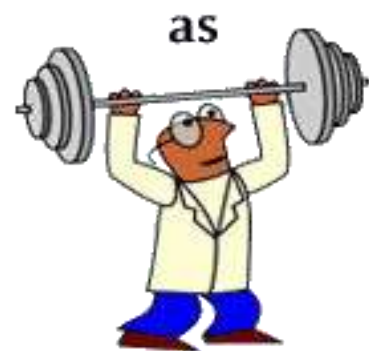
As changeable as the weather / the moon

As clear as the nose on your face

As cold as ice

As cunning as a fox

As deaf as a post



As different as chalk from cheese  
As dry as a bone / a stick / dust  
As dumb as a fish  
As fierce as a tiger  
As green as grass  
As hot as fire  
As light as a feather / air  
As loud as thunder  
As mute as a fish  
As old as the hills  
As pretty as a picture  
As quick as lightning  
As red as fire / blood / a cherry / a rose  
As sour as vinegar  
As strong as an ox  
As timid as a rabbit  
As wet as a drowned rat  
As white as snow  
Etc.



like a



*E.g. Last night Bob slept like a log.*

In this example, “slept like a log” is the simile, and like is the word used to signal that a comparison is being made. The two things being compared are “slept” and “log”. A log just lies in one place and does not move. A mental image of Bob sleeping like a log would show him lying in one place without moving. This would bring out that the speaker or writer is saying that Bob had a long, deep, and undisturbed sleep and not just a nap.

Here are some commonly used similes in which “like” is used to signal the comparison:

To drink like a fish

To eat like a horse

To fight like cat and dog

To fit like a glove

To go like the wind

To run like a hare

To shake / tremble like a leaf

To smoke like a chimney

To spend money like water

To spread like wildfire

To take to something like a duck to water

To work like a Trojan

Etc.

These simile examples will help speakers and writers bring freshness to what they have to say.

(<http://www.how-to-study.com/study-skills/en/language-arts/12/similes/>)

## **2. Body-related idioms:**

There are many English idiomatic expressions relating to various parts of the body.

| IDIOMS                               | MEANING   | EXAMPLES  |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>all ears</b>                      | <i>fully listening</i>  | Give me a minute to finish my work and then I'll be <b>all ears</b> to hear about your project.     |
| <b>break a leg</b>                   | <i>good-luck</i>  | Today's the big game, eh? <b>Break a leg!</b>   |
| <b>cold feet</b>                     | <i>nervous just before a big event</i>  | My sister didn't get <b>cold feet</b> until she put her wedding gown on.                            |
| <b>cost an arm and a leg</b>         | <i>be very expensive</i>  | These cakes are delicious, but they <b>cost an arm and a leg</b> .                                  |
| <b>face the music</b>                | <i>meet, stand up to unpleasant consequences, for example criticism or punishment</i> | I stayed out all night. When I eventually got home I had to <b>face the music</b> from my wife.     |
| <b>flesh and blood</b>               | <i>relative</i>   | I have to hire Mia. She's my own <b>flesh and blood</b> .   |
| <b>get something off one's chest</b> | <i>tell someone your problems</i>   | Thanks for listening to me complain about my boss. I just needed to <b>get this off my chest</b> .  |
| <b>give a hand, lend a hand</b>      | <i>help (someone) do something</i>  | I can <b>give you a hand</b> when you move if you like.   |
| <b>have one's head in the clouds</b> | <i>be unaware or unrealistic about something</i>                                      | Amy <b>has her head in the clouds</b> if she thinks she's going to pass her exams without studying. |
| <b>head over heels</b>               | <i>deeply in love</i>   | My brother is <b>head over heels</b> for his new girlfriend.  |
| <b>keep an eye on</b>                | <i>take care of, watch</i>  | I'll <b>keep an eye on</b> the dinner while   |

|                                      |   |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
|                                      | <i>in order to protect</i>                    | you're on the phone.  |
| <b>keep one's chin up</b>            | <i>try to be cheerful</i>                     | <b>Keep your chin up.</b> I'm sure you'll make some friends soon.                                     |
| <b>learn by heart, know by heart</b> | <i>memorize</i>                               | <b>I learned my multiplication tables by heart</b> in the fourth grade.                               |
| <b>let one's hair down</b>           | <i>relax, have fun</i>                        | Go to the cottage and <b>let your hair down</b> this weekend.   |
| <b>(an) old hand</b>                 | <i>an experienced person</i>                  | My uncle's <b>an old hand</b> at car repair. He'll know what the problem is.                          |
| <b>over my dead body</b>             | <i>not unless I'm dead and can't stop you</i> | My daughter wants a tatoo. I told her she'd get one <b>over my dead body</b> .                        |
| <b>pat on the back</b>               | <i>recognition or a thank-you</i>             | The party organizers deserve a <b>pat on the back</b> for a job well done.                            |
| <b>play something by ear</b>         | <i>do something without a plan</i>            | We don't know if the weather will be good enough for camping. We'll have to <b>play it by ear</b> .   |
| <b>pull one's leg</b>                | <i>joke or tease someone</i>                  | I was just <b>pulling your leg</b> . I'm not really a police officer.                                 |
| <b>see eye to eye</b>                | <i>agree</i>                                  | The couple don't <b>see eye to eye</b> on how to train their pets.                                    |
| <b>sweet tooth</b>                   | <i>a love of sugar or sweet things</i>        | I need three spoonfuls of sugar in my tea. I have a <b>sweet tooth</b> .                              |
| <b>thick in the head</b>             | <i>not very intelligent</i>                   | I'm a bit <b>thick in the head</b> when it comes to reading a map.                                    |
| <b>wash one's hands of something</b> | <i>stop dealing with an issue or problem</i>  | I'm <b>washing my hands of Mary's addiction</b> . She is going to have to get some professional help. |

### 3. Idioms and proverbs relating to animals:

| IDIOMS                        | MEANING  | EXAMPLES  |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>ants in one's pants</b>    | <i>unable to remain calm out of nervousness</i>                        | Lisa had <b>ants in her pants</b> the day before her interview.   |
| <b>cat nap</b>                | <i>a short sleep</i>   | I'm going to have a <b>cat nap</b> while you're cooking dinner.   |
| <b>cat's got one's tongue</b> | <i>said about someone who doesn't speak (usually due to shyness)</i>   | It looks like the <b>cat's got your tongue</b> , Lucy. Are you always this quiet?                               |
| <b>chicken out</b>            | <i>to decide not to do something out of fear (usually just before)</i> | I was going to take a ride on Geoff's motorcyle, but I <b>chickened out</b> when he gave me a helmet to wear.   |
| <b>copy cat</b>               | <i>a person who does the same thing as someone else</i>                | My sister is such a <b>copy cat</b> . First she bought the same car as me, and now she's applying to my school. |
| <b>dog days</b>               | <i>very hot days</i>   | I sleep in the basement during the <b>dog days</b> of August.   |
| <b>fishy</b>                  | <i>odd, suspicious</i>   | I knew something <b>fishy</b> was going on when I saw all of my friends' cars in my mom's driveway.             |
| <b>have a cow</b>             | <i>get extremely upset (often over something minor)</i>                | My teacher <b>had a cow</b> when she realized nobody had done the homework.                                     |
| <b>hold your horses</b>       | <i>wait and be patient</i>   | <b>Hold your horses!</b> I'll be done in the washroom in a minute.  |
| <b>horse around</b>           | <i>play roughly</i>  | If you're going to <b>horse around</b> ,  |

|                                      |  |  |
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|                                      |  | please go outside.   |
| <b>get the lion's share</b>          | <i>get the greatest percentage</i>   | My aunt <b>got the lion's share</b> of the inheritance.  |
| <b>kill two birds with one stone</b> | <i>get two things done at once</i>   | If you pick the groceries up when you drop George off for his shift, you will <b>kill two birds with one stone</b> .     |
| <b>let the cat out of the bag</b>    | <i>reveal a secret</i>   | Who <b>let the cat out of the bag</b> about the surprise party?  |
| <b>(a) little bird told me</b>       | <i>I heard something (usually secretive or unknown) from someone (not named)</i> | <b>A little bird told me</b> that you are thinking of quitting your job.   |
| <b>Monkey see, monkey do.</b>        | <i>silly/unintelligent people tend to copy each other's actions</i>              | Our one-year-old is saying bad words now. I told my husband, <b>"Monkey see, monkey do!"</b>                             |
| <b>pig out</b>                       | <i>eat a lot of something</i>  | I <b>pigged out</b> on pancakes so I don't have room for lunch.  |
| <b>raining cats and dogs</b>         | <i>raining heavily</i>   | I forgot my umbrella, and it was <b>raining cats and dogs</b> .  |
| <b>rat race</b>                      | <i>fierce, competitive struggle for power, position, etc</i>                     | I'm ready to leave this <b>rat race</b> and retire in Mexico.  |
| <b>smell a rat</b>                   | <i>begin to suspect trickery</i>   | I asked my brothers not to tell my parents that I went out, but I could <b>smell a rat</b> as soon as I opened the door. |
| <b>straight from the horse's</b>     | <i>directly from the original source</i>   | I know Jenny is pregnant, because I heard it <b>straight from the horse's</b>  |

|                                   |  |   |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>mouth</b>                      |  | <b>mouth.</b>   |
| <b>take the bull by the horns</b> | <i>face a challenge or danger boldly</i> | If you really think you deserve a promotion, you'll have to <b>take the bull by the horns</b> . |
| <b>until the cows come home</b>   | <i>for a very long time</i>              | I could eat pizza and ice-cream <b>until the cows come home</b> .                               |

#### 4. Colour-related idioms and proverbs:

| IDIOMS   | MEANING                                    | EXAMPLES   |
|--|--|--|
| <b>beet red</b>                                | <i>dark red (usually to describe face)</i> | My sister's face turned <b>beet red</b> when I caught her singing in front of a mirror.          |
| <b>black and blue</b>                          | <i>bruised and beaten</i>                  | We found the poor guy <b>black and blue</b> near the train tracks.                               |
| <b>black and white</b>                         | <i>straight forward, very clear</i>        | The rules we gave the kids were <b>black and white</b> . No answering the phone or the door.     |
| <b>black out</b>                               | <i>faint</i>                               | I always <b>black out</b> at the sight of blood.   |
| <b>black sheep</b>                             | <i>the odd or bad member of the group</i>  | My oldest brother was the <b>black sheep</b> in our family. He dropped out of school at fifteen. |
| <b>born with a silver spoon in one's mouth</b> | <i>born into a rich family</i>             | Keiko hasn't worked a day in her life. She was <b>born with a silver spoon in her mouth</b> .    |
| <b>catch red</b>                               | <i>catch someone in</i>                    | The kids were <b>caught red handed</b>   |



|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <b>handed</b>                                     | <i>the act of doing something wrong or illegal</i> | stealing chocolate bars.   |
| <b>golden opportunity</b>                         | <i>the perfect chance</i>                          | The models' conference was a <b>golden opportunity</b> for me to sell my beauty products.                                      |
| <b>Grass is always greener on the other side.</b> | <i>you always want what you don't have</i>         | I always wanted to go to university, but now I wish I had time to get a job. <b>Grass is always greener on the other side.</b> |
| <b>the green light</b>                            | <i>permission</i>                                  | The builders were given <b>the green light</b> to begin the tower.   |
| <b>green with envy</b>                            | <i>very jealous</i>                                | I am <b>green with envy</b> over Julio's new wardrobe.   |
| <b>have a green thumb / have green fingers</b>    | <i>be skillful in the garden</i>                   | You can tell by her flower garden that Sheila <b>has a green thumb</b> .   |
| <b>in the dark</b>                                | <i>unaware</i>                                     | Antoine left his wife <b>in the dark</b> about their honeymoon destination until they got to the airport.                      |
| <b>in the red</b>                                 | <i>in debt</i>                                     | When we were <b>in the red</b> we almost had to sell the house.  |
| <b>once in a blue moon</b>                        | <i>very rarely</i>                                 | We only go out for dinner <b>once in a blue moon</b> .   |
| <b>out of the blue</b>                            | <i>unexpectedly</i>                                | I got a phone call from a long lost cousin <b>out of the blue</b> last week.   |
| <b>red tape</b>                                   | <i>official or bureaucratic tasks</i>              | There is still some <b>red tape</b> to deal with in terms of the inheritance.  |
| <b>roll out the red</b>                           | <i>treat someone like</i>                          | When relatives come to town my   |

|                              |   |  |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>carpet</b>                | <i>royalty</i>  | grandmother <b>rolls out the red carpet</b> .  |
| <b>rose coloured glasses</b> | <i>unrealistic view</i>                                     | Paula imagines Hollywood with <b>rose coloured glasses</b> .                         |
| <b>see red</b>               | <i>be very angry</i>  | I <b>saw red</b> when that guy grabbed my sister's purse.                            |
| <b>tickled pink</b>          | <i>very pleased and appreciative</i>                        | My mom was <b>tickled pink</b> when my father brought roses home for her.            |
| <b>true colours</b>          | <i>real self</i>  | Suzanne doesn't show her <b>true colours</b> when we have guests over.               |
| <b>white lie</b>             | <i>an innocent lie to protect another person's feelings</i> | We told Grandma that her cake was delicious, which was actually a <b>white lie</b> . |
| <b>with flying colours</b>   | <i>with distinction</i>                                     | I passed my road test <b>with flying colours</b> .                                   |

### 5. Clothing idioms:

| IDIOMS                              | MEANING                                   | EXAMPLES  |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>at the drop of a hat</b>         | <i>without needing any advance notice</i> | My Grandma will babysit for anyone <b>at the drop of a hat</b> .                          |
| <b>(have a) bee in one's bonnet</b> | <i>something that is annoying someone</i> | Milan has had a <b>bee in his bonnet</b> all day, but he won't tell me what's wrong.      |
| <b>caught with one's pants down</b> | <i>unprepared</i>                         | My students <b>caught me with my pants down</b> on Monday. I forgot about the field trip. |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <b>(have a) card up one's sleeve</b>     | <i>have a secret or reserve plan</i>          | I think Josh has a <b>card up his sleeve</b> cause he wants me to wear a dress to the fast-food restaurant. |
| <b>buckle down</b>                       | <i>work extra hard</i>                        | It's almost exam time, so I need to <b>buckle down</b> this weekend.  |
| <b>dress to kill, dress to the nines</b> | <i>dress in nice clothes</i>                  | My cousin was <b>dressed to kill</b> on her birthday.   |
| <b>fit like a glove</b>                  | <i>fit perfectly (tight to one's body)</i>    | Anita's prom dress <b>fits me like a glove</b> .  |
| <b>fly by the seat of one's pants</b>    | <i>do by instinct, not by plan</i>            | I had never taught art to kids before. I had to <b>fly by the seat of my pants</b> .                        |
| <b>handle with kid gloves</b>            | <i>treat delicately</i>                       | Please <b>handle</b> my grandmother's tea set <b>with kid gloves</b> .                                      |
| <b>hand-me-down</b>                      | <i>used clothing</i>                          | We buy <b>hand-me-down</b> skates because the kids' feet grow so quickly.                                   |
| <b>in one's birthday suit</b>            | <i>in the nude</i>                            | The swimmers in the lake were <b>in their birthday suits</b> .  |
| <b>keep one's shirt on</b>               | <i>try to stay calm</i>                       | I know you're in a hurry, but please <b>keep your shirt on</b> .  |
| <b>keep something zipped</b>             | <i>keep something a secret</i>                | We know we're having a boy, but we're <b>keeping it zipped</b> from the grandparents.                       |
| <b>pull up one's socks</b>               | <i>try harder</i>                             | Marco will have to <b>pull up his socks</b> if he wants to make the football team.                          |
| <b>put one's thinking cap</b>            | <i>think hard in order to solve a problem</i> | I can't remember where the Christmas decorations are. I'll have   |

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <b>on</b>                                  |  | to <b>put my thinking cap on</b> .  |
| <b>put oneself in someone else's shoes</b> | <i>imagine what it would be like to be in someone else's situation</i> | <b>Put yourself in Amber's shoes.</b> She doesn't even have a car to drive.                     |
| <b>roll up one's sleeves</b>               | <i>get down to hard work</i>   | The celebrities <b>rolled up their sleeves</b> and washed cars for charity.                     |
| <b>take one's hat off to someone</b>       | <i>recognize or honour someone for something</i>                       | I <b>take my hat off to Jim</b> . The doctors said he'd never walk, and he just ran a marathon. |
| <b>wear one's heart on one's sleeve</b>    | <i>display emotions openly</i>   | My Dad's not afraid to cry. He always <b>wears his heart on his sleeve</b> .                    |
| <b>wear the trousers</b>                   | <i>be in charge, make the rules</i>                                    | By the looks of things, the kids <b>wear the trousers</b> in this household.                    |

## 6. Food idioms:

| IDIOMS                          | MEANING                                   | EXAMPLES  |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>apple of one's eye</b>       | <i>a person that is adored by someone</i> | Baby Jessica is the <b>apple of her father's eye</b> .                                |
| <b>(have a) bun in the oven</b> | <i>be pregnant</i>                        | I don't think Jan will come to the bar because she has a <b>bun in the oven</b> .     |
| <b>bad egg</b>                  | <i>a person who is often in trouble</i>   | I don't want my little brother hanging around with the <b>bad eggs</b> on the street. |
| <b>big cheese</b>               | <i>very important</i>                     | I thought I was just going to   |

|                                      |   |  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
|                                      | <i>person (VIP)</i>   | interview the secretary, but they let me talk to the <b>big cheese</b> himself.                  |
| <b>bread and butter</b>              | <i>necessities, the main thing</i>                                      | Just explain the <b>bread and butter</b> of your report. You don't have to go into details.      |
| <b>bring home the bacon</b>          | <i>earn the income</i>  | My husband has had to <b>bring home the bacon</b> ever since I broke my leg.                     |
| <b>carrot top</b>                    | <i>person with red or orange hair</i>                                   | Simon is the first <b>carrot top</b> I've ever gone out with.                                    |
| <b>as cool as a cucumber</b>         | <i>very relaxed</i>   | I thought I was afraid of flying, but I was <b>as cool as a cucumber</b> all the way to England. |
| <b>cream of the crop</b>             | <i>the best</i>   | We hired the <b>cream of the crop</b> to entertain us at the Christmas party.                    |
| <b>(don't) cry over spilled milk</b> | <i>get upset over something that has happened and cannot be changed</i> | The mirror is broken and we can't fix it. There's no need to <b>cry over spilled milk</b> .      |
| <b>(not my) cup of tea</b>           | <i>something you enjoy (usually used negatively)</i>                    | Opera isn't exactly my <b>cup of tea</b> .   |
| <b>egg someone on</b>                | <i>urge someone to do something</i>                                     | The gang tried to <b>egg us on</b> but we didn't want to fight.                                  |
| <b>full of beans</b>                 | <i>have a lot of energy</i>   | The kids were <b>full of beans</b> after the circus.   |
| <b>gravy train</b>                   | <i>extremely good pay for minimal work</i>                              | The unionized grocers have been enjoying the <b>gravy train</b> for twenty years.                |
| <b>hard nut to</b>                   | <i>difficult to</i>   | Angelo is a <b>hard nut to crack</b> when  |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>crack</b>                              | <i>understand (often a person)</i>          | something is bothering him like this.  |
| <b>hot potato</b>                         | <i>a controversial or difficult subject</i> | Choosing a location for our new store is a <b>hot potato</b> right now.  |
| <b>in a nutshell</b>                      | <i>simply</i>                               | <b>In a nutshell</b> , I'm having a good day.  |
| <b>one smart cookie</b>                   | <i>a very intelligent person</i>            | Your daughter is <b>one smart cookie</b> . She reads much higher than her grade level.   |
| <b>piece of cake</b>                      | <i>very easy</i>                            | The exam was a <b>piece of cake</b> .  |
| <b>put all of ones eggs in one basket</b> | <i>rely on one single thing</i>             | Even though I'm majoring in Art, I'm taking a maths course because my Dad says I shouldn't <b>put all of my eggs in one basket</b> . |
| <b>souped up</b>                          | <i>made more powerful or stylish</i>        | The car was <b>souped up</b> with shiny rims and a loud stereo.  |
| <b>sell like hot cakes</b>                | <i>bought by many people</i>                | The new Harry Potter books <b>sold like hot cakes</b> .  |
| <b>spice things up</b>                    | <i>make something more exciting</i>         | I wanted to <b>spice things up</b> in the office, so I bought some red and gold paint.   |
| <b>spill the beans</b>                    | <i>reveal the truth</i>                     | On Monday, I'm going to <b>spill the beans</b> about my travel plans.  |
| <b>use your noodle</b>                    | <i>use your brain</i>                       | You're going to have to really <b>use your noodle</b> on this crossword puzzle. It's an extra difficult one.                         |

(<http://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/idioms.htm>)

There are many more themes students should divide idioms and proverbs in so that they can remember well such as Business, Court and Judge, Education and School, Legal and Law, Relationship and Love, Time, Money, Weather, Number, Proper Names, Sports, Health, Lifestyle, Problems and Difficulties, Safety and Danger, Success and Failure, Luck and Opportunity, Initials, etc.

## **2. Practising on English - Vietnamese idiomatic expression translation**

Practising on English - Vietnamese idiomatic expression translation day by day is a good way for students to learn and memorize English idioms and proverbs because “Practice makes perfect”. However, learners will have to face problems of equivalence and non-equivalence during their translating process. So how to deal with translating idiomatic expressions?

a. Using an idiom or a set expression of similar meaning and form:

It is sometimes possible to find a Vietnamese idiom or expression with a similar meaning to an English idiom or expression, and which is expressed in the same way. For example, the idiom “to fight like cats and dogs” is expressed using the same words in Vietnamese: “Cãi nhau như chó với mèo”.

Some other examples are “Better late than never” (“Muộn còn hơn không”), “Step by step” (“Từng bước một”), “Break someone's heart” (“Làm tan vỡ trái tim ai”), face to face (“Đối mặt”), “Crocodile tears” (“Nước mắt cá sấu”), “Eyes bigger than stomach” (“Mắt to hơn bụng”), “In the same boat” (“Cùng hội cùng thuyền”), etc.

It is ideal if such a match can be found, but this kind of correspondence is not very common.

b. Using an idiom or a set expression of similar meaning but different form:

It is possible and easy to find a Vietnamese idiom with a similar meaning for an English idiom or set expression. A good example can be found is the translation for “to carry coals to Newcastle”: “Chở củi về rừng”. The meaning here is clearly the same for both idioms - to bring something to a place that has an abundance of that thing - but the way in which each language expresses is bound to be the culture of that language.

Here are some typical examples:

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder - Yêu nên tốt, ghét nên xấu.

Beggars can't be choosers - Ăn mày đòi xôi gấc.

Every dog has its day - Ai giàu ba họ, ai khó ba đời.

Man proposes, God disposes - Mưu sự tại nhân, thành sự tại thiên.

Necessity is the mother of invention - Cái khó ló cái khôn.

One good turn deserves another - Ở hiền gặp lành.

Pick and choose - Kén cá chọn canh.

So many men, so many minds - Chín người, mười ý.

Tit For Tat / An Eye For An Eye / A Tooth For A Tooth - Ăn miếng trả miếng.

Walls have ears - Tai vách mạch rừng.

c. Translating by paraphrasing

This is by far the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the target language or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target text because of differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target languages.



E.g.

*“For the best” - unpleasant now but will turn out well in the future.*

*“Prepare the ground” - create a good/ suitable situation for something to take place.*

(<http://www.translationdirectory.com/articles/article1739.php>)

*“Khôn ăn cái, đại ăn nước” (wise to eat the substance; foolish to eat the broth)* Customarily it is said a wise person eats the substance from which broth is made; the foolish person eats the broth that comes from the substance used to make it. Since the substance to make the broth is not nutritious, eating something stodgy at least makes one feel full until the next meal.

(<http://www.tinhhoavietnam.net/book/tntviet.html>)

### **3. Studying English idioms and proverbs through their origins**

Idioms and proverbs are like the human being. They must go through the process of being born, growing up, developing and changing. There are many idiomatic expressions used today originated long long ago. We discovered that each of the idioms and proverbs has its own life and destiny. Behind each idiom or proverb, there is a story or an incident preceding it helping students easily remember to use in their daily communication. Besides, every idiom and proverb holds a philosophy, an outlook or a life experience stimulated from generation to generation of the native people that students should show their concern for. Using idioms in writings, speeches and in daily conversations has become an artistic style of communicating. Through the

following examples, students may clearly understand the background of some idiomatic expressions in order to apply to the suitable situations in life.

1. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” (Our feeling for those we love increases when we are apart from them).

*E.g. “Cheer up Dude, everybody knows that absence makes the heart grow fonder”.*

In 1604, Shakespeare echoed this sentiment in “Othello” (Act 1, scene ii), when Desdemona confessed, “I dote upon his very absence”. James Howell, in “Familiar Letters” (1650) says that “Distance sometimes endears friendship, and absence sweeteneth it”.

2. “Armed to the teeth” (To be fully armed).

*E.g. “Don't even think about going into Chicago's housing projects unless you are armed to the teeth”.*

This is a pirate phrase originating in Port Royal Jamaica in the 1600's. Having only single shot black powder weapons and cutlasses, they would carry many of these weapons at once to keep up the fight. In addition they carried a knife in their teeth for maximum arms capability.

3. “Break a leg” (A wish of good luck, do well).

*E.g. “Break a leg in your game today!”*

“Break a leg” is sourced in superstition. It is a wish of good luck, but the words wish just the opposite.

It was once common for people to believe in Sprites. Sprites are actually spirits or ghosts that were believed to enjoy wreaking havoc and causing trouble. If the Sprites heard you ask for something, they were reputed to try to make the opposite happen. Telling someone to “break a leg” is an attempt to outsmart the Sprites and in fact make something good happen. Sort of a medieval reverse psychology.

4. “Cat bird seat” (A highly advantaged position, to have it all).

*E.g. “Some might describe Bill Gates as sitting in the cat bird seat”.*

Mocking birds are sometimes referred to as cat birds. Mocking birds typically sit at the top of a tree. Hence the cat bird seat is at the top.

5. “Dressed to a tea” (Well dressed with attention to detail).

*E.g. “Beware any salesman that is dressed to a tea, smiles too much, and talks fast”.*

A short way of saying “dressed for a tea” or “dressed to go to a tea”. In the Victorian era, high tea was a formal affair. All proper people dressed in appropriate attire.

6. “From stem to stern” (Thorough, complete).

*E.g. “I searched the house from stem to stern for that cat, then found him sleeping on a shelf right in front of me”.*

The very front of a ship is called the stem, the rear is called the stern. From stem to stern includes the entire ship.

7. “High on the hog” (Extravagantly).

*E.g. “If you choose to live high on the hog, you will be low in the wallet”.*

The best meat is on the upper portion of the pig. Rich people have always been afforded this luxury while the servants, slaves and poor have always had to eat pig's feet, chitterlings, cracklings, etc. - low on the hog.

8. “Let the cat out of the bag” (To divulge a secret).

*E.g. “Don't let the cat out of the bag about Susan's Christmas present”.*

At medieval markets, unscrupulous traders would display a pig for sale. However, the pig was always given to the customer in a bag, with strict instructions not to open the bag until they were some way away. The trader would hand the customer a bag containing something that wriggled, and it was only later that the buyer would find he'd been conned when he opened the bag to reveal that it contained a cat, not a pig. Therefore, “letting the cat out of the bag” revealed the secret of the con trick.

9. “Long in the tooth” (To be getting old).

*E.g. “Daddy needs a new Porsche. The old one is getting a bit long in the tooth”.*

The age of a horse can be roughly determined by examining its teeth, since a horse's gums recede as they age. The longer the teeth of a horse appear to be, the older the horse.

10. “Mind your Ps and Qs” (Behave properly).

*E.g. “Since his drunk driving arrest, he has been minding his Ps and Qs”.*

Comes from the early pub days when beer and ale was served in pint and quart containers. The tab was kept on a chalkboard used to count the pints and quarts consumed. To watch your Ps and Qs is to control your alcoholic intake and behavior.

11. “Square meal” (A nutritious meal).

*E.g. “I am overweight because my wife's cooking is delicious but full of fat and sugar. The only way to get a good square meal is to eat out”.*

British war ships in the 1700s did not have the best of living conditions. A sailors breakfast and lunch were sparse meals consisting of little more than bread and a beverage. But the third meal of the day included meat and was served on a square tray. Eating a substantial meal onboard a ship required a tray to carry it all. Hence a “square meal” was the most substantial meal served.

12. “Straight and narrow” (To stay out of trouble).

*E.g. “Ever since getting out of jail on bond I have been on the straight and narrow”.*

This phrase comes from the Bible and describes the path to heaven.

13. “Strike while the iron is hot” (Act quickly while the opportunity is still available).

*E.g. “If you want the job, you need to strike while the iron is hot”.*

Blacksmiths working iron by hand heat the iron in a fire to red-hot making it malleable. The Smith removes the iron from the fire and shapes it with blows from a hammer. They need to work quickly before the iron cools. Once the iron is cool, it becomes brittle and the opportunity to hammer it into shape has passed.

14. “Tie the knot” (To get married).

*E.g. “I understand you want a baby, but don't you think you should tie the knot first. In fact maybe you should get a girlfriend first”.*

Some marriage ceremonies actually tie together the wrists of the bride and groom.

15. “Toe the line” (Follow the group, don't disagree, do what others are doing).

*E.g. “Your lifestyle has gone on for too long. It is time for you to toe the line - get a wife, a job, some kids, and be miserable just like everyone else”.*

This term comes from military line-ups for inspection. Soldiers are expected to line up, that is put their toes on a line, and submit to the inspection.

(<http://www.americanidioms.net/>)

16. “Par for the course” (What is normal and acceptable for a particular situation).

*E.g. “Things don't always work out as we want in life, and that's just par for the course; we do our best and go on”.*

“Par” on a golf “course” is the average number of strokes a golfer needs to get the ball in all the holes. “Par for the course” is what is usual and expected.

(<http://www.goenglish.com/ParForTheCourse.asp>)

#### **4. Studying English idioms and proverbs through pictures, songs, games, etc.**

This section provides idioms and proverbs and the graphic illustration of the situation each idiom or proverb mentions. The images created by expression can be felt rather than read and learned as theories.

The cartoons and examples are provided to help illustrate the usage of each idiom or proverb. The illustration will help to convey the meaning of each proverb or idiom.

### 1. “against the clock”:

(You are working against the clock when you are trying to finish your work within a limited amount of time).

You often compare the time on the clock against how much work you have left to do when you are working against the clock. The passing of time (“the clock”) works against you.



*E.g. “We worked against the clock all day to get that report done by five”.*

### 2. “a wolf in sheep's clothing”:

(“A wolf in sheep's clothing” is a dangerous person pretending to be harmless).

In past times wolves had a reputation as wild and dangerous animals that hunted and killed sheep.



*E.g. “I want you to stay away from that boy. He's a wolf in sheep's clothing”.*



### 3. “Don't count your chickens until they've hatched”:

(“Don't count your chickens until they're hatched” means that you can hope certain things happen in the future, but you cannot know for sure that they will happen until they actually do happen).



“Chickens” start out as eggs, and you can count the eggs, but not all of the eggs will hatch to become chickens. “Don't count your chickens until they've hatched” means that you should not count on something happening until you are sure that it will happen.

*E.g.*

- *Next Friday I will finally be able to pay you back that money I owe you.*
- *I won't count my chickens until they have hatched.*

### 4. “Burning the candle at both ends”:

(You are burning the candle at both ends when you are working long hours without resting).



Your energy is burning down, and you are growing more and more tired, when you are burning the candle at both ends. Burning the candle at both ends is not a healthy life because you are working from early to late and not getting enough rest.

*E.g. “Ever since this new project started I have been burning the candle at both ends. I can't take much more of it”.*

5. “Burning the midnight oil”:

(You are “burning the midnight oil” when you are working hard late into the night”.

Before people had electric lamps, they used oil-burning lamps to read or work in the darkness at night. Thus, when you are working very hard until late at night you are “burning the midnight oil”.



*E.g. “I could see the light in your window last night. It looks like you have been burning the midnight oil”.*

6. “A drop in the bucket”:

(“A drop in the bucket” is something that is not important because it is very small).

There are so many “drops” in a “bucket” of water that we could not count them all, so any one drop is really not that important. “A drop” is very small amount when compared with all there is “in the bucket”. “A drop in the bucket” is not important because it is a tiny amount when compared to the larger whole.



*E.g.*

*- I'm sorry I scratched your car.*

*- Don't worry about it. It's just a drop in the bucket. That car has more scratches on it than I can count.*

#### 7. "A piece of cake":

(Something that is very easy to do is "a piece of cake").

You say "piece of cake" to show how very easy it is for you to do something. It is easy like eating a piece of cake.



*E.g. "I've always had a hard time studying history, but math is a piece of cake".*

#### 8. "A shot in the dark":

(A shot in the dark is a guess at the answer to a question when you do not feel that you know the facts).

To take a shot is to guess at the answer. You are in the dark when you are not clear about the facts. You take a shot in the dark when you try to guess the answer to a question but you are not sure of the facts.



*E.g.*

- *How did you know I was from America?*
- *Just a shot in the dark*

When people do not know how to answer a question, you can encourage them to guess anyway, taking a shot in the dark.

*E.g.*

- *How old do you think I am?*
- *I have no idea.*
- *Really, come on. Take a shot in the dark.*



#### 9. “An about face”:

(You do “an about face” when you begin facing one direction, then you turn completely to face in the opposite direction).

You “do an about face” when you stand facing north, for example, then turn your body in one step until you face south. The term “About face!” is used in the military: The drill sergeant shouts “About face!” and all of the soldiers turn in one step to face the opposite direction. To “do an about face” is also to change your position on something and take the opposite position.

*E.g. “I want you to do an about face, get back in that bathroom, and brush your teeth!”*

10. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder”:

(“Absence makes the heart grow fonder” means that the time you spend away from one you love makes you love that person even more).

The word “absence” means to be away. To “grow fonder” is to care more. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” means the time you spend away from someone you love (“absence”) makes you love that person even more (“the heart grows fonder”).



*E.g.*

- *Does it bother you that your husband goes away on long business trips?*  
- *No. The time we have spent apart has been good for us. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.*

11. “Going against the grain”:

(You go against the grain when you make life more difficult by acting against the wishes of others).



Wood grows in a way that makes it easy to cut in one direction (with the grain) and hard to cut in the other direction (against the grain). To go against the grain is to do things in a way that is different from what is normal and accepted.

*E.g. “You can't always follow other people in life. Sometimes you need to go against the grain to do the right thing”.*

12. “All bark and no bite”:

(People who are all bark and no bite threaten to do things that they are not really willing or able to do).



They are like dogs that bark to make you afraid, but they will not bite you. Some people are not strong enough or brave enough to actually hurt you, but they still use words to try to make you afraid.

*E.g. “That new manager threatened to fire me again, but I know he won't do it. He's all bark and no bite”.*

13. “All in the same boat”:

(People who are all in the same boat must work as a team because they face the same challenges together).



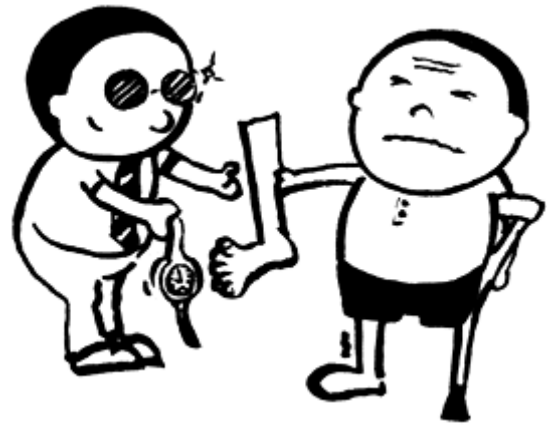
When people forget that they are part of a team, we can remind them by saying “We are all in the same boat”. We are all in the same boat means that we are all like people who are in the same boat so we need to cooperate in order to succeed.

*E.g. “We can't fight against each other. We need to work together. We're all in the same boat!”*

14. “An arm and a leg”:

(An arm and a leg is a high price to pay).

Something that is costing you an arm and a leg costs too much. If it cost you an arm and a leg, it was very expensive.



*E.g. “I have to move out of this hotel. It is costing me an arm and a leg”.*

15. “At the drop of a hat”:

(If you would do something quickly and easily, without thinking about it, you would do it at the drop of a hat).

When a hat drops off your head, it falls quickly and suddenly, and that is how fast you would do it at the drop of a hat.



*E.g.*

- *Would you travel around the world if you had the money?*
- *At the drop of a hat.*

#### 16. “Beating a dead horse”:

(You are beating a dead horse when you insist on talking about something that cannot be changed).



Beating a dead horse is an action that has no purpose, because no matter how hard or how long you beat a dead horse, it is not going to get up and run.

*E.g.*

- *Let's not talk about it any more. Okay?*
- *You're right. We're just beating a dead horse.*

#### 17. “Better late than never”:

(Better late than never means that it is better to do something late than to never do it at all).



Better late than never means that even if you are going to be late, you should still go ahead and do the thing, because it is better to do it late than to never do it at all.

Better late than never is often used as a polite way to respond when a person says “sorry” for being late.

*E.g.*

- *The movie has already started. Do you still want to go in?*
- *Sure. Better late than never!*



18. “Birds of a feather flock together”:

(Birds of a feather flock together means that people who are similar to each other often spend time together).



We know that birds are of the same type when they have the same feathers; they are of a feather. Birds flock when they join together in groups with other birds. Just as birds of a feather often flock with other birds of the same “feather”, so do people who are like each other spend time together.

*E.g.*

- *Are Timmy and his friends going to that same bar again?*
- *Sure they are. Birds of a feather flock together.*

19. “Biting off more than you can chew”:

(To take on a responsibility which is too large for you to manage is biting off more than you can chew).



When eating food, you first bite off a piece, then chew it, and swallow it. If you bite off more than you can chew, you have taken a bite so large that you are not able to chew it. To bite off more than you can chew is to take on a challenge that is too big for you to accomplish.

*E.g. “I went skiing last weekend and I went down the most difficult hill first. I bit off more than I could chew”.*

20. “Cross your fingers”:

(An old superstition says that if you cross your fingers (usually two fingers of the same hand) it will bring good luck).

You cross your fingers when you try to make something happen by wishing that it will happen.

*E.g.*

- *Good luck on your test tomorrow. We'll be crossing our fingers for you!*
- *Thanks!*



21. “Crying wolf”:

(To cry wolf is to call for help when you are not really in danger).



There is a story about a boy who liked to cry “Wolf!” pretending that he was going to be eaten by a wolf. When people came running to help him, they found the boy laughing because he was not really in danger. This happened a number of times until people stopped believing him when he cried, “Wolf!” Finally, the boy was attacked by a real wolf and no one came to save him because they all thought he was just crying wolf.

To cry wolf is to call others for help when you do not really need help. Crying wolf results in other people not believing you when you really do need their help.

*E.g.*

*- Mom, Dad! Can you come to my room? I think there is something under my bed!*

*- Son, you just go back to bed, and stop crying wolf!*

## 22. “Every cloud has a silver lining”:

(Every cloud has a silver lining means that you should never feel hopeless because difficult times always lead to better days).



Difficult times are like dark clouds that pass overhead and block the sun. When we look more closely at the edges of every cloud we can see the sun shining there like a silver lining. Every cloud has a silver lining means that the sun shining at the edges of every cloud reminds us that every difficult situation has a bright side.

*E.g.*

*- This really is a tough situation. Do you think things will work out for the best?*

*- I'm sure they will. Every cloud has a silver lining.*

23. “Great minds think alike”:

(“Great minds think alike” means that great people think about things in similar ways).

*E.g.*

*- I was just thinking to call you, then the phone rang and it was you calling me.*

*- Great minds think alike!*



24. “Icing on the cake”:

(When one great thing happens, then another great thing happens on top of it, the second thing is the icing on the cake).

*E.g.*

*- I've been accepted by the university, and they've offered me a position on the basketball team!*

*- That's wonderful! Icing on the cake!*



25. “In(s) and out(s)”:

(In and out is the way you know something when you know it very well).

*E.g. “I’ve been in this business for 30 years. I know it in and out”.*

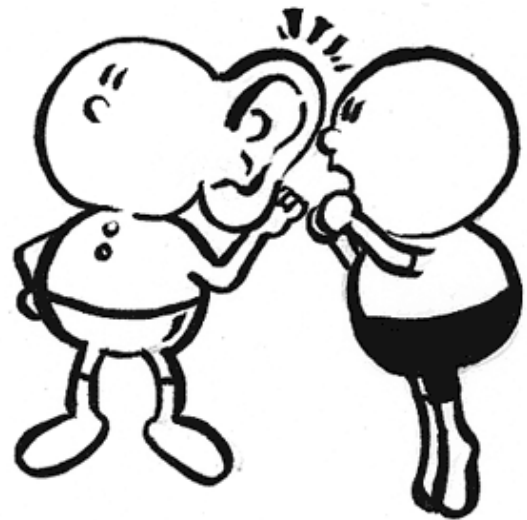


26. “Lend me your ear”:

(Lend me your ear is a polite way of asking for a person's full attention to listen to what you will say).

Lend me your ear requests a closeness between the speaker and the listener that allows them to think together. You

say lend me your ear when you want to speak directly to people about things that are important.



*E.g. “Could you lend me your ear for a minute? I need to talk with you about something”.*

27. “Over my dead body”:

(When you absolutely will not allow a person to do something you might say “over my dead body”).

The literal meaning is that you will stand in the way of that person and only if they kill you and walk over your dead body will they be able to do what they want.

*E.g.*

- *All of my friends are going out to the lake tonight and I'm going too!*

- *Over my dead body!*



28. “Practice makes perfect”:

(Practice makes perfect means that the more you practice, the better you will become. If you want to become great, then you should practice as much as possible).

To practice is to do something regularly.

Perfect is the best you can be. Practice makes perfect means that the way to become the best is to practice often. Practice makes perfect is said to encourage people to keep practicing so they will become better at what they are doing.



*E.g. “See how fast you are getting better at the piano? Practice makes perfect”.*

29. “Put your best foot forward”:

(Putting your best foot forward is stepping forward and doing your very best).

*E.g. “This week the division manager will be in town. I want each of you to putting your best foot forward”.*



30. “Rock the boat”:

(To rock the boat is to risk upsetting a group situation).

People in a group on a small boat need to work together. If one person moves suddenly, the whole boat could rock dangerously.



*E.g. “Everyone wants to go except for you. Why do you have to rock the boat?”*

31. “As sick as a dog”:

(You are as sick as a dog when you are very sick with a cold, flu, or stomach problem).



As sick as a dog emphasizes how very sick you are. You are much too sick to do the things a normal person does when you are as sick as a dog.

*E.g. “Sorry, but I am not going to be able to come in to work today. I’m as sick as a dog”.*

32. “Sink or swim”:

(“Sink or swim” is a situation where you will either fail or you will find a way to succeed).



“Sink or swim” means that you will either succeed, or you will fail completely, at what you are trying to do.

*E.g. “Sales is not an easy job here. We give you two weeks training, then it’s sink or swim”.*



33. “The apple of your eye”:

(The apple of your eye is that person (or thing) that you care for the most).

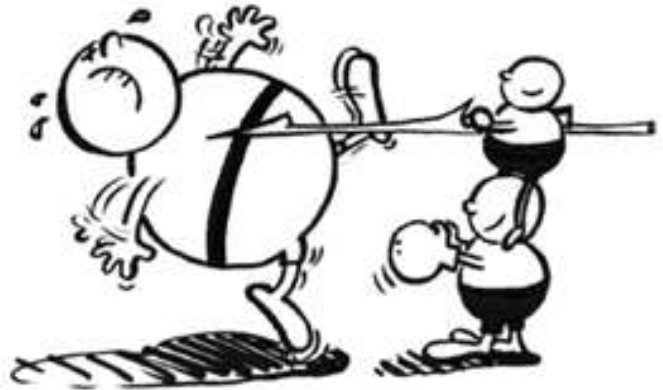
The original meaning of the apple of your eye is the pupil, or the round black spot in the middle of the eye. It is as if that person's reflection can be seen in the pupil ("apple") of your eye. It makes you feel good to look at the person who is the apple of your eye.



*E.g. “Everyone knew they would get married someday. She was always the apple of his eye”.*

34. “The bigger they are, the harder they fall”:

(The bigger they are, the harder they fall means that it is more difficult to beat stronger opponents, but we can beat them, and when they lose they suffer a bigger loss).

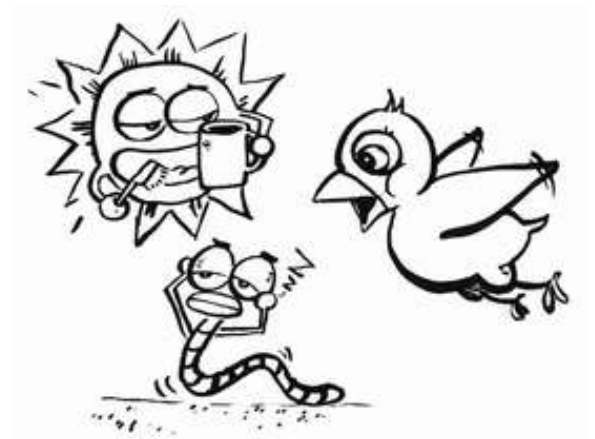


The word harder has two meanings here. First, it is harder (more difficult) to beat them; and second, when they lose they go down harder (more painfully). The bigger they are, the harder they fall means that bigger people are harder to knock down, but when they go down they hit the ground harder. You can say this to encourage a smaller competitor.

*E.g. “Good luck! And remember: The bigger they are, the harder they fall!”*

35. “The early bird catches the worm”:

(The early bird catches the worm means that the person who arrives early will be successful).



When birds are competing to catch one worm, the bird that arrives early will catch the worm. At times there is only one "worm" and only one "bird" can catch it, so the bird to arrive early catches the worm.

*E.g. “From now on, I am waking up at six. The early bird catches the worm”.*

36. “The pot calling the kettle black”:

(You are the pot calling the kettle black when you point to another person and accuse that person of doing something that you are guilty of doing yourself).



“The pot” (for cooking) and “the kettle” (for boiling water) sit on the stove over the fire and become black from the flames but the pot only sees the blackness which is on the kettle without seeing the black on himself.

*E.g. “You are accusing me of being lazy? That's the pot calling the kettle black!”*

37. "Tie the knot":

(When two people get married, they "tie the knot").

When you tie a knot you wrap two pieces of rope around each other in a certain way so that they will not come apart. When you tie the knot you make a promise that you will stay together with one person whom you love.



*E.g. "After dating for five years, we finally decided to tie the knot".*

38. "Turn over a new leaf":

(When you decide to do something different to change your life for the better, you are turning over a new leaf).



Turning over a new leaf is like turning over a new page ("leaf") in your life and seeing what is on the other side. You turn over a new leaf when you commit to changing your life for the better.

*E.g. "I'm turning over a new leaf: I've decided to quit smoking".*

39. “Two's company, three's a crowd”:

(We say “two's company; three's a crowd” because sometimes two people are having fun together and would not have as much fun if a third person joined them).



“Company” here means people who have been invited; they are relaxed and comfortable together. A “crowd” is an uncomfortably large group who's size cannot be controlled. “Two's company; three's a crowd” says that a group of two people is more comfortable than a group of three.

*E.g. “I was hoping just you and I would see the movie. Why did you have to bring your sister? Two's company; three's a crowd!”*

40. “Under the gun”:

(You are under the gun when you are working under tremendous pressure).

You are forced to work extra hard when you are under the gun. Working under the gun is working hard under pressure to meet deadlines.



*E.g. “Everyone at the office has been under the gun since this new manager arrived”.*

41. “Variety is the spice of life”:

(Variety is the spice of life expresses the idea that it is good to try and do different things).

Variety is the spice of life means that life is more interesting when you try to do things in different ways. Variety is like the spice which adds flavor to life. Just as a cook uses different spices to create the flavors in a great meal, a person who tries different experiences will have a great life.



*E.g. “I don't think I would be able to do yoga.” Reply: “Why not? Give it a try. Variety is the spice of life”.*

42. “Wear your heart on your sleeve”:

(People who wear their heart on their sleeve express their emotions freely and openly, for all to see).

*E.g. “She's a shy person. She's never been one to wear her heart on her sleeve.”*



43. “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”:

(When in Rome, do as the Romans do means that when you are visiting a new place, you should try to do as the people do who are from the place).

People from different places have different ways of acting, so it is important to try to do things the way people do who are from the place that you are visiting.



*E.g.*

- *Are you sure we can eat this with our hands?*
- *Why not? All of these people are. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*

44. “When pigs fly”:

(When pigs fly is an informal way to joke that you will never do something).

Pigs are heavy animals that stay close to the ground and do not fly, so when pigs fly is a time that will never come.

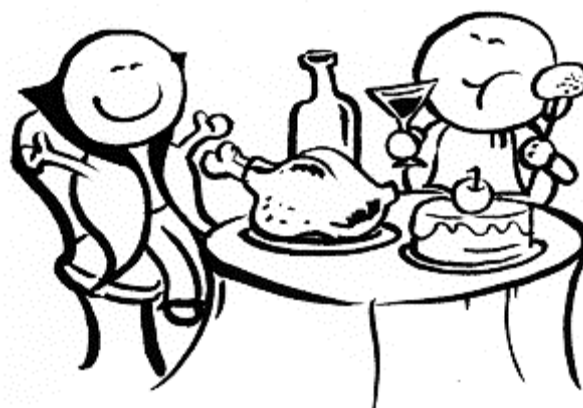


*E.g.*

- *Do you think you will ever work at that company again?*
- *When pigs fly!*

45. “Wine and dine”:

(You “wine and dine” someone when you take them out to nice restaurants and treat them to expensive food and drink).



*E.g. “That man is really crazy about my sister. He has been wining and dining her all month”.*

*(The above pictures, explanations and examples are extracted from <http://www.goenglish.com/Idioms.asp>)*

Besides, in the studying process, students should do everything possible to create for themselves a language environment to strengthen the enthusiasm in order to be in a relaxed atmosphere to learn effectively: learning and updating new idioms through listening English songs, playing idiomatic games on the Internet and study from other sources such as books, newspapers, magazines, television shows, advertisements and film dialogues where many idioms and proverbs are commonly used, stick the notes in locations where they will be seen often, think up conversations which allow to use an idiom or proverb and practice it with the classmates, etc. Finally, practising to use idioms and proverbs a number of times will help learners master them well.

## CHAPTER III: IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

### **1. Some problems when learning English idioms and proverbs of Vietnamese people**

English is a language particularly rich in idiomatic expressions. Without idioms and proverbs, English would lose much of its variety and humor both in speech and writing. Understanding the meaning and the context of the idiomatic expressions will help students develop their English ability. Using idioms appropriately in oral and written discourse also generates confidence in the student and respect in those with whom he or she communicates for the rich vocabulary, concise expressions and philosophical sayings form idioms and proverbs.

Idiomatic expressions adds colour to every language in general and in English in particular. Idioms brings us so many benefits but what challenges or problems do non-native English learners have to face as they try to master the English language?

#### **1. The richness and diversity of the English idioms and proverbs requires a sufficient cultural background knowledge to fully comprehend and master.**

English native speakers use idiomatic expressions all the time. However, they can often be very difficult to comprehend. Thus, students often feel embarrassed and frustrated if they can not understand.

English idioms derived from the culture of the nation and from day-to-day life. Learning idioms present a host of difficulties to English learners, primarily because they don't know the culture and history behind English idioms.



Many idioms, for instance, come from favourite traditional British activities such as fighting, sailing, hunting and playing games. As well as being quite specialist in meaning, some of the words in idioms were used two or three hundred years ago, or longer, and can be a little obscure. Here are some examples:

1. Now that the Prime Minister has been elected there will be a lot of **jockeying for position** to get the key posts in his administration.
2. I finally **ran** the book **to earth** in a second-hand bookshop in Wales. I had been searching for it for three years.
3. They **took** her ideas **on board** and decided to increase the budget.
4. You should **fall in with** our arrangements; we can't make alternative plans for you.
5. We saw the boss at the bar but we **gave** him a **wide berth**. We did not want to talk to him then.

(<http://www.linguarama.com/ps/295-6.htm>)

Even the majority of native language speakers can not always know the origin of idioms they use, though as long as they utilize them in every day communication, they know its meaning and feel where it is appropriate to use this or that idiom. That is why students often use idioms incongruous with the situation. They find idioms very problematic to both understand and memorize.

## 2. English idioms can not easily be understood by defining their components

Idiom is defined as an expression that does not mean what it literally says. Hence, its meaning is often quite different from the word-for-word translation.

The meaning idioms convey is non-compositional. It implies that we cannot understand the meaning of the whole phrase putting the meanings of each word together. If we look at the individual words, it may not even make sense grammatically. Idioms have the meaning only as a unit.

They can not be understood by defining the separate words. We cannot deduce the meaning of the idiom from the individual words.

For example, if someone says: “I think it's time to hit the hay”, he or she means: “I think it's bed-time!” We would not be able to understand her by looking up the words “hit” and “hay”.

We may be able to guess the meaning from context but if not, it is not easy to know the meaning. In real context idioms explain themselves: 9 times out of 10 times, idioms carry their own explanation.

## 3. Most of English idioms need to be understood basing on their figurative meanings.

Most of English idioms need to be understood basing on their figurative meanings rather than their literal meanings.

Take “go down memory lane” for an example, this idiom means “think about the past” (the metaphorical meaning), not “walk down a street called “Memory Lane” (the literal meaning).

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/flatmates/episode68/languagepoint.shtml>)

#### 4. English idioms are fixed in their form, both grammar and vocabulary

Idioms have lexical and grammatical stability. It implies that they are fixed in their form, hence any substitutions and rearranging in their structure can lead to complete loss of their idiomatic meaning.

Both the grammar and the vocabulary of an idiom are fixed, and if we change it, we lose the meaning of that idiom. For instance, the idiom “pull your socks up” means “improve the way you are behaving”. If we change it grammatically to “pull up your sock” or we change its vocabulary to “pull your stockings up”, then we must interpret the phrase literally for it has lost its idiomatic meaning.

## **2. Suggested solutions to learn English idioms and proverbs well**

### 1. Studying English idioms and proverbs basing on classifying them into categories

After students have some idioms in their memory, it's time they classified them into categories so that if you are not sure enough of any, you will find its track easily.

For example: color idioms, part of the body idioms, animal idioms, etc.

Group the sayings by topic and introduce in conjunction with other activities around the topic. For example, teach several ‘body idioms’ together.

E.g. to be head and shoulders above the rest, to be long in the tooth, to shoot yourself in the foot, etc.

It will be easier for students to remember some of them if they are classified in groups.

## 2. Studying English idioms and proverbs through their origins

Most idioms don't seem to make any sense because their origins are so old. There are many idiomatic expressions used today originated long long ago.

Behind each idiom or proverb, there is a story or an incident preceding it helping students easily remember to use in their daily communication.

Understanding the origins of the idioms, students may clearly understand the background of some idiomatic expressions in order to apply to the suitable situations in life.

## 3. Studying English idioms and proverbs through pictures

One of the most effective ways to learn and remember English idioms and proverbs are studying them through pictures.

They will help illustrate the usage and convey the meaning of each proverb or idiom. Then the meaning never escape their mind.



#### 4. Comparing English idioms and proverbs and their Vietnamese equivalents

Searching and comparing between English and Vietnamese idiomatic expressions is really an effective and attractive way to learn, to remember and to strengthen the translating ability as well.

Because we have some similarities between English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs, we can combine these things, idioms and proverbs can become very easy to remember.

For example, we have the idiom: “in the same boat”. Of course, at the first time we can not figure out what its meaning is. But we know all the meaning of the words that combine the phrase, so with the figurative meaning, we can conclude that the idiom refers to “in the same situation” ...

When facing an idiomatic expression, students should ask themselves if they know any of the idioms or proverbs translated directly into their own language. If they know a similar expression in their mother-tongue language, it can help them to remember very well.

#### 5. Five to ten idioms or proverbs each day

Students should not be impatient and overload themselves with too many idioms or proverbs at a time. “Rome wasn’t built in a day”. Five to ten is probably a good number for each day.

#### 6. Making a guess at the meaning of idioms or proverbs before checking in the dictionaries

Of course the meaning of the idioms should contribute to the meaning of the whole sentence, to emphasize and to clarify the meaning... We should guess that idioms into the context of a sentence and the paragraph so as to

understand the general idea of that sentence, guess the meaning of the idioms and then, check again in the dictionary.. If students learn idioms in this way, they can remember quickly and easily.

#### 7. Making sentences when learning a new idiom or proverbs.

First, understand new idioms and proverbs into contexts. Then try to imagine the situations when people actually use the idiomatic expressions you are studying and make sentences or create dialogues to reinforce the meaning of each idiom or proverb.

#### 8. Studying idiomatic expressions through English songs, poems, funny stories, media communication, idiom games and quizzes, etc.

Students should do everything possible to create for themselves a linguistic environment to strengthen the enthusiasm in order to be in a relaxed atmosphere to learn effectively: learning and updating new idioms through listening English songs and poems, playing idiomatic games on the Internet and study from other sources such as English books, newspapers, magazines, television shows, advertisements and film dialogues where many idioms and proverbs are commonly used, sticking the idiom and proverb notes in locations where they will be seen often, use computer softwares to learn and check the knowledge of idioms and proverbs, etc. With this method, students can feel relaxed and excited during the studying process.

The following poem of simile idioms is a typical example helping students create inspiration for them to study idiomatic expressions well:

*Clever*

*As poor as a church mouse*

*As strong as an ox*

*As cute as a button*

*As smart as a fox*

*As thin as a toothpick*

*As white as a ghost*

*As fit as a fiddle*

*As dumb as a post*

*As bald as an eagle*

*As neat as a pin*

*As proud as a peacock*

*As ugly as sin*

*Use fresh similes when  
you speak and you write,  
so your friends will think you are  
quite clever and bright.*

(<http://www.poetryteachers.com/poetclass/lessons/teachsimiles.html>)

Idioms are a “piece of cake” or a “hard nut to crack”, it is up to our determination. So let’s “roll up our sleeves” (get ready to start work), then “get our noses to the grindstone” (start working hard) and learn idioms and proverbs “until the cows come home” (for a long time).



### **PART III: CONCLUSION**

The treasure of idiomatic expressions in each language in general and in English in particular brings students so many benefits. Studying and applying creatively English idioms and proverbs help students reach the flexibility in using this language and the creativity of simple but vivid sentences in daily speech. With my experience and knowledge learned at Haiphong Private University, I have tried to provide students with some techniques to learn English idioms and proverbs well.

In the study, the rationale, aims, methods, scope and design of the study are mentioned in part one in hope that readers can have an overview of my study.

Part two includes three chapters.

Chapter one introduces the theoretical background including an overview on idioms and proverbs, the characteristics of English idioms and proverbs and the influence of British culture on their idioms and proverbs.

In chapter two, I present the study on techniques to learn English idioms and proverbs so that learners can collect some methods to learn effectively.

And then, some problems when learning English idioms and proverbs of Vietnamese people and some suggested solutions are given in chapter three, which helps learners avoid such mistakes and perfect their ability of using English idiomatic expressions. Chapter two and three are considered the most important parts of my study.

I am fully aware that shortcomings and mistakes are unavoidable. I wish to receive any comments and contributing ideas from others. I also hope that my Graduation paper will be a very useful for those who learn English.

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## APPENDIX

### EXERCISES

Exercise 1: Complete the following proverbs by choosing an ending from those marked a-p:

1. Absence ...
2. Beauty ...
3. First come, ...
4. When the cat's away, ...
5. No news ...
6. A miss ...
7. One good turn ...
8. A bird in the hand ...
9. A bad workman ...
10. Charity ...
11. Practice ...
12. Necessity ...
13. A new broom ...
14. One man's meat ...
15. Too many cooks ...
16. Where there's a will,

- a. ... is worth two in the bush.
- b. ... begins at home.
- c. ... is as good as a mile.
- d. ... spoil the broth.
- e. ... is the mother of invention.
- f. ... makes the heart grow fonder.

- g. ... always blames his tools.
- h. ... sweeps clean.
- i. ... there's a way.
- j. ... is only skin deep.
- k. ... the mice will play.
- l. ... deserves another.
- m. ... first served.
- n. ... makes perfect.
- o. ... is good news.
- p. ... is another man's poison.

Exercise 2: Fill in the missing words from the sentences below. Choose from the following, using plural forms where necessary:

*Bird, bull, cat, cow, crocodile, dog, donkey, fish, goat, goose, horse, kitten, lion, pig, rat, stag.*

1. Turning up half an hour late for the interview really cooked his ... .
2. We were hoping to keep the wedding a secret, but my mother soon let the ... out of the bag.
3. You're flogging a dead ... trying to get Harry to change his mind!
4. I don't think I'd recognise her now. It's ...'s years since I last saw her.
5. Harold has really gone to the ... since his wife died. Looking at him now, it's hard to believe he was once a successful barrister.
6. It's not that I mind giving her a lift home every Tuesday, but what gets my ... is the fact that she's never once offered to pay for the petrol.
7. As I had to go to Swansea on business, I decided to kill two ... with one stone and visit my old school as well.
8. Although he had only known her for two weeks he decided to take the ... by the horns and ask her to marry him.
9. She loved tennis and could watch it until ... came home.
10. You're upset now, I know. But you'll soon forget her – after all, there are plenty more ... in the sea.
11. That's the last time I invite Steve for a meal. He really made a ... of himself last night.
12. Don't be fooled! She's not a bit sad. They're just ... tears.
13. When their grandfather died, Robert and his sister got the ...'s share of his money.
14. After years of commuting from Brighton to London, he decided to get out of the ... race and buy a small farm in Wales.

15. When I tell my parents that Paul and I have decided to call off the wedding they're going to have ... .

16. We're off to a ... party tonight. David's getting married on Saturday.

Exercise 3: Look at the pictures, read the clue, then try to guess the idioms:

1.



If you forget that a person has been doing something to help you, and you harm the relationship, you are “.....”.

2.



..... describes a world in which people fight for themselves only and will hurt other people.

3.



To go ..... is to get out of one difficult situation only to end up jumping into another that is even worse.



4.



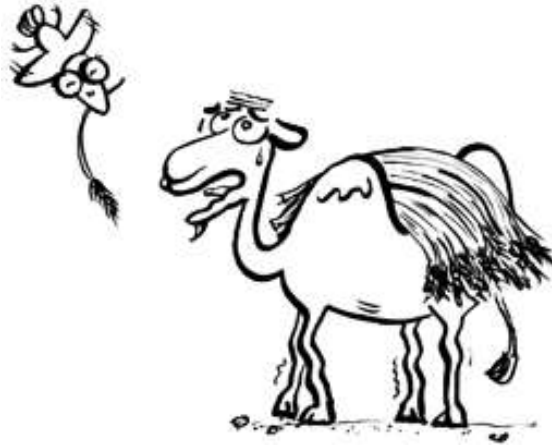
When you say something which makes someone feel embarrassed or causes an embarrassing situation, you have “.....”.

5.



(You are ..... when you receive a gift and then you question the value of that gift).

6.



..... is the last thing you are willing to accept after which you will not put up with any more.

Exercise 4: Find the English equivalent for the following Vietnamese idiomatic expressions:

Cái khó ló cái khôn.

Chín người, mười ý.

Có chí thì nên.

Đàn ông xây nhà, đàn bà xây tổ ấm.

Gieo gió gặt bão.

Kén cá chọn canh.

Một giọt máu đào hơn ao nước lã.

Mưu sự tại nhân, thành sự tại thiên.

Nhập gia tùy tục.

Vắng chủ nhà, gà vọc niêu tôm.

Vỏ quýt dày có móng tay nhọn.

Xa mặt, cách lòng.

Exercise 5: Choose correct answer for each sentence in the following dialogue:

1. You want to know why I've got **a bee in my bonnet**?

- (a) a headache
- (b) a fly in my head
- (c) a problem on my mind
- (d) a difficulty with my hair

2. Yes, tell me about it. I'm **all ears**.

- (a) listening carefully
- (b) listening quietly
- (c) listening quickly
- (d) listening completely

3. You remember I told you about that car that cost me **an arm and a leg**?

- (a) a fair amount of money
- (b) a small amount of money
- (c) a good amount of money
- (d) a huge amount of money

4. The one you bought from the man you called **the big cheese**?

- (a) the man with big ears
- (b) the man with the important job
- (c) the man with the yellow teeth
- (d) the man with the big smile

5. Well, he's not that at all. He's **a bird brain**.

- (a) a fool
- (b) a criminal
- (c) a conman
- (d) a devil

6. You mean he's **a bad egg**?

- (a) a disgusting person
- (b) a dirty person
- (c) a stupid person
- (d) a dishonest person

7. Yes, exactly because the car is rubbish and I went round to his garage **like a bull in a china shop** in the show room.

- (a) shouting at him
- (b) knocking everything over
- (c) running up to him
- (d) hitting everybody

8. And when I reached his office I saw he was not really awake because he'd been having **a cat nap**.

- (a) a deep sleep
- (b) a long sleep
- (c) a short sleep
- (d) a big sleep

9. And really the only reason you were there was because **you had a bone to pick with him**?

- (a) you wanted to have a discussion with him
- (b) you wanted to have a chat with him
- (c) you wanted to have a talk with him
- (d) you wanted to have an argument with him

10. Yes, that's right. I got my money back and as a result I **opened up a whole new can of worms** because other people got their money back, too.

- (a) made a complete mess of his office
- (b) exposed a lot of serious problems
- (c) discovered some creatures on the carpet
- (d) revealed a lot of new paper work

## **KEYS TO EXERCISES**

*Exercise 1:*

1-f ; 2-j ; 3-m ; 4-k ; 5-o ; 6-c ; 7-l ; 8-a ; 9-g ; 10-b ; 11-n ; 12-e ; 13-h ; 14-p ;  
15-d ; 16-i.

*Exercise 2:*

1. goose
2. cat
3. horse
4. donkey
5. dogs
6. goat
7. birds
8. bull
9. cows
10. fish
11. pig
12. crocodile
13. lion
14. rat
15. kittens
16. stag

*Exercise 3:*

1. Biting the hand that feeds you.
2. Dog-eat-dog.
3. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.
4. Put your foot in your mouth.
5. Looking a gift horse in the mouth.
6. The last straw broke the camel's back.

*Exercise 4:*

1. Necessity is the mother of invention.
2. So many men, so many minds.
3. Where there's a will, there's a way.
4. Men make houses, women make homes.
5. You will reap what you sow.
6. Pick and choose.
7. Blood is thicker than water.
8. Man proposes, God disposes.
9. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.
10. When the cat is away, the mice will play.
11. Diamond cut diamond.
12. Out of sight, out of mind / Long absent, soon forgotten.



*Exercise 5:*

1. (c) a problem on my mind
2. (a) listening carefully
3. (d) a huge amount of money
4. (b) the man with the important job
5. (a) a fool
6. (d) a dishonest person
7. (b) knocking everything over
8. (c) a short sleep
9. (d) you wanted to have an argument with him
10. (b) exposed a lot of serious problems