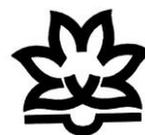




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## Teaching Idiomatic Expressions and Phrases: Insights and Techniques

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### ABSTRACT

Currently, a relatively large number of spoken and written conventionalized expressions have been collected, catalogued, and systematized. In language pedagogy, a clear implication is that teaching grammar and vocabulary is likely to be more complicated than working with syntactic rules and single-word items. Old and new insights associated with the sheer ubiquity of idiomatic constructions can present both challenges and opportunities, but it seems vital for teachers to be aware of and become familiar with these language units. This paper takes a look at a few historical perspectives and classifications of idiomatic phrases and expressions in English, as well as their uses in conversations, speaking, writing, and teaching. To extend this discussion, a few teaching activities and ideas can be further designed for learning and using idiomatic phrases in the classroom and beyond it. Because practically all idiomatic and conventionalized phrases are language and culture-specific, their instructional applications can contribute to learners' strategic fluency development. In general terms, teaching idiomatic language components can lead to improvements in learners' receptive and productive skills in various contexts.

**Keywords:** idioms; teaching; speaking; writing; vocabulary

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### Introduction: Idioms and Phraseology in English

What represents an idiom, a proverb, a conventionalized expression, or a grammatically irregular unit of language is notoriously—famously—difficult to define and hence to identify. Significant and ongoing lexicographic efforts to do so have been undertaken at least since the 1940s. Not surprisingly, such phrases and expressions can be challenging to explain in teaching, systematize for making and using learners' dictionaries, or thematically develop in textbooks. With the emergence of computer technology and the proliferation of large and analyzable language corpora in a range of texts and genres, broad expectations arose that the conundrum of defining and identifying idiomatic and phrasal expressions could potentially be accorded a measure of systematicity. However, perhaps counter-intuitively, analyses of language corpora have further added to the typological and terminological stew: computerized examinations of both spoken and written language data have shed light on the enormity, variability, and complexity of idiomatic and recurrent expressions.

In the 1970s and 1980s, studies in phraseology and lexicology allowed for far-reaching insights into lexicon-grammar interconnectedness (Cowie, 1988; Cowie & Mackin, 1975). Unlike traditional grammars, analyses of idiomatic constructions do not assume that a clear-cut division between lexicon and grammar exists. All conventionalized expressions and phrases can be as small as single words or short phrases (e.g., *forwards*, *backwards*, *silence!*, *bling*, *whatever*, *in the bag*, *not on your life*, *a piece of cake*) or as long as complete sentences (e.g., *a fool and his money are soon parted; you don't say; actions speak louder than words; or every cloud has silver lining*). Depending on their meanings and syntactic length, idiomatic phrases can form lexico-grammatical continua that can be treated as whole-unit structures (Cowie, 1998; Fillmore, Kay, & O'Connor, 1988; Kay & Fillmore 1999; Horwath, 1998).

Language research and analyses have long established that a great number of linguistic combinations simply sound “right” to proficient users of English and that collocations are very common in both speaking and writing (Wilkins, 1972; Yorio, 1989). More importantly, however, combinations that are infrequent or hardly ever found may sound unnatural and wrong, even when they are grammatically correct (e.g., *?collect all your chickens in one basket*, *?speed down*, *?quick food*, or *?be upset over spilled milk*).

A formal and relatively early definition of idioms was advanced by Adam Makkai (1972, p. 23), and was later adopted in several editions of the Oxford English Dictionary in the 1970s and 1980s:

A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of language, often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one.

In English language textbooks and dictionaries, this classical definition is still widely adopted, although usually not stated. Numerous examples of idioms and phrasal expressions that are typically provided tend to present them as “peculiarities” and often include such items as *to take the bull by the horns*, *a hot potato*, *bring up*, *get away with*, *a penny for your thoughts*, *at the drop of a bat*, *back to the drawing board*, *barking up the wrong tree*, *beat around the bush*, *best of both worlds*, *burn the midnight oil*, *cost an arm and a leg*, or *can't judge a book by its cover*. In many contexts, learners enjoy English proverbs and sayings due to their oddity and cultural flavor regardless of whether these examples are actually useful in language comprehension or production or whether they are frequent or rare.

In examinations of lexicalized phrases and sentences, it has now been established that conventionalized expressions (e.g., *can I come in?*, *need any help?*, *what's for dinner?*, *call me later*, or *do*

*not block intersection*) are deployed to convey a possibly infinite array of meanings. Another complication is that these language stretches cannot be assembled in the process of communication (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1994; Pawley & Syder, 1983). A defining characteristic of idioms and formulaic sentence stems is that their meanings and discourse functions cannot be predicted from the meanings of their components, such as words or parts of words (Hinkel, 2004, 2009, 2015).

More importantly, the methodological approach to analyzing language and discourse in terms of lexical sentence stems and idiomatic phrases cannot explain the structure and meanings of conventional and social formulas, idioms, and collocations (sequences of two or more words that are often used together in speech or writing), e.g., *feel free, express bus/train, give an example, give a hand, do homework, break the rules/law, take action, take a chance, take an exam, make a difference/mess/mistake/noise, make an effort, hard left/right, hard rain, heavy coat/sweater/breakfast, or light suitcase/meal/ workload*. According to some counts, idiomatic phrases, formulaic expressions, collocations, lexical sentence stems, and multiword units number in hundreds of thousands (Shin & Nation, 2008; Stubbs, 2004).

For second language (L2) learners, idiomatic phrases and constructions have almost always presented an area of difficulty. For instance, L2 users may misinterpret non-literal meanings of words and phrases, as well as misuse them in various contexts—often due to limitations or shortfalls in their L2 vocabulary. In addition, research has demonstrated that most L2 learners employ constructions that are error-prone and are hardly ever encountered in English spoken or written discourse (Hinkel, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2009). To be sure, in any language, there are probably different ways to say something or convey a thought, but quite often even when the meanings of phrases can be transparent, “the problem is that native speakers do not say it in that way” (Shin & Nation, 2008, p. 340), for example, *\*fast wind* or *\*fall into sleep/love*, instead of *strong wind* or *fall asleep/in love*. In English speech and writing, phrases and expressions are typically culture-specific with implicit references to abstract or metaphorical constructs that may or may not exist in learners’ natal cultures or first languages (L1s) (Hinkel, 2014).

By and large, phrases, expressions, and collocations are learned by hearing them being used frequently enough by other speakers or by reading them in various written texts. Idiomatic structures are usually encountered in everyday language and acquired in the process of communication, be it oral or written. Specifically, regular, frequent, and common word combinations that occur repeatedly can help learners identify and establish linguistic patterns that can be then stored and accessed in both language reception and production (Arnon & Snider, 2010; Cowie, 1988, 1998).

This paper takes a look at a few historical perspectives and classifications of idiomatic phrases and expressions in English, as well as their uses in conversations, speaking, writing, and teaching. To extend this discussion, a few teaching activities and ideas can be further designed for learning and using idiomatic phrases in the classroom and beyond it. Because practically all idiomatic and conventionalized phrases are language and culture-specific, their instructional applications can contribute to learners’ strategic fluency development. In general terms, teaching idiomatic language components can lead to improvements in learners’ receptive and productive skills in various contexts.

### Classifications and Definitions

As with practically all complex linguistic phenomena, various types of classifications and organizing schemes have been devised and debated to account for an extremely large body of idioms and conventionalized expressions. In the 1920s, Harold Palmer first addressed the utility of employing ubiquitous phrases and even whole sentences in learning English and developing conversational fluency (Palmer, 1925). According to Palmer's early findings, one of the fastest ways—if not the fastest way—to acquire facility in speaking was to memorize recurrent conversational expressions that could be useful recurrently. For a beginner, Palmer stated, learning to speak in another language required the essential guiding principle: “Memorize perfectly the largest number of common and useful word groups!” (p. 187).

In his subsequent work, Palmer (1933) identified and classified an enormous number of commonly occurring lexical phrases and phraseological units into content- and function-based groups that he called *clusters*. For the purposes of his pedagogical focus on practical language teaching and learning, Palmer also coined the term *collocation*, which, however, did not receive much notice until the 1950s. His definition of expressions and collocations for teaching was later adopted in many works on idiomatic phrases and has remained foundational to this day: “successions of words [that] must or should be learnt ... as an integral whole or independent entity, rather than by the process of piecing together their component parts” (p. 4).

A seminal and groundbreaking work on idiom structure and meanings was further advanced by Adam Makkai (1972). Makkai divides idioms into two major classes: idioms of encoding (or phrasal/lexemic idioms) when their meanings are transparent and deducible, and idioms of decoding (i.e., semantic idioms, with unpredictable meanings). In this taxonomy, polymorphemic words are categorized as idioms only when at least two free morphemes are present (e.g., *free+way*, *sea+horse*, or *car+port*), thus making the meanings opaque. On the other hand, the words that consist of free and bound morphemes together are not considered to be idiomatic because they require morphological knowledge and rules to decode their meanings, thus make their meaning more or less componential and deducible. For example, the meanings of such words as *pre+view*, *im+possible*, or *bi+cycle* that include one free and one bound morpheme can be decoded, even if approximately, based on the meanings of their components. Therefore, these cannot be classified as idiomatic.

One of Makkai's (1972, p. 120) primary classificatory concerns is whether the compound meanings of words and/or their constituents can “potentially mislead” or “misinform” the language user. For instance, in the case of free morpheme compounds, as in *hot+dog*, *ball+ park*, or *straw+berry*, the meanings of the entire words are not deducible. Such frequent and commonly-used idioms and phrases are generally not subject to much variability and are considered to be stable expressions “peculiar to a language” (p. 122). In addition, in Makkai's classification, many semantic idioms can be partial or complete sentences with a great number of social and cultural functions such as requests (*would you/do you mind*), warnings (*watch your step*), invitations (*drop by any time*), promises (*I swear!*), and apologies (*so sorry, never again*). These are referred to as cultural idioms with pragmatic meanings.

The rigidity of form is a characteristic of only some, but certainly not all, idiomatic expressions. In fact, Cowie and Mackin's (1975) definition of idioms is probably one of the simplest and most comprehensive: “an idiom is a combination of two or more words which function as a unit of meaning” (pp. viii-ix). Unlike other definitions, Cowie and Mackin do not consider single-word entities idiomatic largely because individual words can be identified, taught, and learned as vocabulary items. When it comes to teaching and learning idiomatic expressions, however, the first order of priority is to figure out their meanings and then to determine whether they are rigid

or flexible in their forms (e.g., *take the bull by the horns* or *see you later/tomorrow/next week/next time*). According to Cowie and Mackin, teaching and learning vocabulary extend beyond single words to longer units of language, from short phrases to complete sentences. To date, dozens of corpus analyses have largely established that, in fact, most idiomatic expressions and multiword units are variable in their forms and, to some extent, in their meanings.

In idiom classifications, phrasal verbs have a prominent place and have deservedly gained much attention. First of all, their numbers are so large that their exact or even proximate counts are unknown. The protracted debates of whether these units should be considered idioms, phrases, or merely extended vocabulary entities have not been resolved, and possibly, will never be (Fernando, 1996; Makkai, 1973; Nation & Webb, 2011). An excellent case in point is that two highly-regarded and classical dictionaries published by Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press, since the 1980s and to this day, have chosen to release dictionary compendia of phrasal verbs as separate volumes to supplement their main dictionaries of English. A key feature of phrasal verb examinations and categorizations is that they have traditionally presented a great deal of difficulty for language learners and, by extension, for teachers and material writers (Boers, 2000; Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers, 2007; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008, 2009).

In their pioneering research in the uses of idiomatic phrases, Pawley and Syder (1983) were among the first to draw on large computerized databases of real-life language uses. The goal of the Pawley and Syder study is to solve what they call the “puzzle of native-speaker fluency” (p. 191). The puzzle is that native-speakers can produce and understand language with remarkable fluency and speed in a vast number of contexts and settings without pausing or slowing down. According to these researchers, proficient language users thus demonstrate their “ability to produce fluent stretches of spontaneous connected discourse; there is a puzzle here in that human capacities for encoding novel speech in advance or while speaking appear to be severely limited, yet speakers commonly produce fluent multi-clause utterances which exceed these limits.” Based on the findings of their studies, Pawley and Syder conclude that “fluent and idiomatic control of language rests to a considerable extent on knowledge of a body of ‘sentence stems’ which are ‘institutionalized’ or ‘lexicalized.’” Sentence stems are idiomatic and phraseological units of language in which grammatical form and meaning are largely fixed. The fixed elements in fact represent culturally or pragmatically recognized idiomatic expressions, concepts, and phrases.

Investigative reports on the uses of recurrent and frequent idiomatic phrases and units emerged in force in the 1990s and 2000s. In this body of research, such units are variously called idioms, idiomatic expressions, collocations, fixed phrases/strings, lexicalized sentence stems, chunks, prefabricated (or prefab) constructions (Cowie, 1988, 1992; Coxhead, 2008; Howarth, 1996, 1998). The main reason for the increased attention to these phrases and expressions has to do primarily with the proliferations of electronic language corpora that have allowed for identifying and quantifying recurrent combinations of words and phrases that occur in real language production.

Although there is probably no single encompassing definition of idioms, idiomatic expressions, collocations, phrases and lexicalized stems typically include:

- frequently recurring and culture-specific expressions with opaque meanings (e.g., *cost an arm and a leg; call it a day; better late than never; or in this light...*)
- collocations, that is, words that often occur together but with flexible and variable components (e.g., *take place/part/a test/a break; ready to go/start/close [verb]; easy to learn; give advice/suggestion(s); at a discount/receive a discount; hard-earned money/hard-won success/victory*)

- fixed phrases with specific and well-defined meanings, as well as phrasal verbs (e.g., *break in/out/down/up/into; in the lurch; out of place; back door; price increase/ decrease; high/low price; a full plate*)
- figurative expressions (such as metaphors) (e.g., *The world is my oyster; couch potato; heart of gold; heart of stone; melting pot; you are my sunshine; the more, the merrier; not on your life; stand out like a sore thumb*)
- conversational routines and pre-patterned speech (e.g., - *Excuse me, could you tell me where xxx is?*  
- *Up the stairs on your left.*  
- *I am sorry I am late. - No problem/No worries.*  
- *What a beautiful day! Finally, some sunshine. We've had a lot of rain lately.*)
- set and rigidly ordered phrases (in which components are fixed in a certain order) (e.g., *here we go; will that be all?; is there something else? by car/train/bus; by mail; washing machine, table cloth; silver spoon; stay/be out of sight; be at one's wits' end; ahead of time; what in the world*)
- proverbs (e.g., *two wrongs don't make a right; the squeaky wheel gets the grease; better late than never; no man is an island*)
- culturally-bound sayings (e.g., *a fish out of water; right as rain; count chickens before they hatch; not my cup of tea; the pen is mightier than the sword; Rome wasn't built in a day*)

Without question, the definitions of idioms, collocations, and phrasal expressions vary in different schools of thought. However, the accepted basic concept is that they are multiword units of language—words that are connected to other words—that are remembered and used as single lexical [vocabulary] items (Peters, 1983).

### Idiomatic Expressions in Speaking and Conversations

Learning to understand and produce spoken language means being able to understand how language components combine and interact to produce meaning and discourse (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). L2 learners need to become skilled users of vocabulary, phrases, and syntactic constructions. They need to build their spoken discourse repertoire in order to participate in conversations, formal and casual alike.

Participating in conversations requires engaging in a range of complex cognitive and linguistic tasks. In social settings, uses of language convey personal views and attitudes, as well as social values and relationships, and communicative goals (Carbaugh, 1989, 2007; Hinkel, 2014; Nation 2008, 2009). Conversations are highly structured exchanges that progress along predictable and routine patterns, with participants adapting, adjusting and readjusting, and tailoring what they are saying—or going to say—depending on the social setting and flow of discourse. In the course of a conversation, participants' speech has to remain reasonably grammatically and phonetically intelligible, culturally structured and organized (e.g., turn-taking), cohesive, well-paced (e.g., openings, pauses, and closings), socially and contextually pertinent, and appropriately worded (e.g., politeness) (Carbaugh, 2005; Carter & McCarthy, 1995, 2006; Durrant, 2014).

In idiom classifications going as far back as back the 1920s, various sets of recurrent and conventionalized phrases are typically classified by their communicative functions, such as greetings, requests, apologies, or invitations. Most proficient and fluent language users know that conversational exchanges are conventionalized and routinized, and they are able to employ idiomatic expressions at particular junctures in the speech flow to achieve their communicative goals (Coulmas, 1981). Spoken routines and idiomatic sequences can be utilized in an extraordinary range of functional contexts and for a practically unlimited variety of communicative and social purposes (Swan, 2006; Ur, 2014). However, in addition to being able to deploy conversational expressions appropriately and in context, language users need to be able to grasp the speaker's purpose. If the conversational function is not identified correctly, then the communicative goal may not be achieved (Cowie, 1992; Fernando, 1996).

Based on extensive analyses of social interactions, many analysts have definitively concluded that it is not just conversational idioms, expressions, and responses to them that are highly conventionalized, but also, by their very nature, social interactions “employ a number of standardized and stereotyped procedures” that mark and characterize them (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. 114).

A vast body of research on interactional language uses has demonstrated unambiguously that conversational language and discourse are highly routinized and formulaic. Some studies have found, for example, that in casual conversations most exchanges are prefabricated and extremely stereotyped (Ajmer, 1996; Coulmas, 1981; Levinson, 1983). For example, in their investigation of spoken and conversational interactions, Carter and McCarthy (1995, 2006) identified an enormous array of conversational and pragmatic formulas and phrases that are continually adjusted to suite specific discourse and social contexts.

Numerous research reports have determined that much language acquisition, be it first or second, entails the acquisition of conventionalized expressions and repeated routines. In the short-term, repetition and rehearsal serve to promote the development of longer-term sequence retention and eventual language acquisition (Milton, 1998, 1989; Yorio, 1986). Teaching and learning spoken and conversational sequences and idiomatic formula requires frequent opportunities for repeated practice. This is especially true with regard to most phrases and combinations that tend to present areas of difficulty for learners (e.g., phrasal verbs, *make*-collocations and *get*-passives, as in *get married/it done*).

### **Idiomatic and Conventionalized Expressions in Writing**

In English, what is appropriate and inappropriate in writing and written discourse is similarly highly conventionalized (Swales, 1990). In much language teaching, a great deal of attention, time, and resources are devoted to fostering learners' facility with various types of writing, and particularly so academic writing. Typically, academic writing instruction focuses on such fundamental features of written academic discourse as the idea organization and information flow (e.g., introduction, body, and conclusion), the presence and the placement of the thesis statement, and the structure of the paragraph (e.g., the topic sentence). In research on academic writing, many conventional and highly predictable phrases that mark discourse junctures are called “institutionalized” because they occur more frequently in certain types of texts than in others (Horwath, 1998; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Swales, 1990).

In the production of written academic prose, using conventionalized expressions and portions of sentences is not a language skill that is innate in L1 users and writers. Nor is academic writing a universal ability that most (or even many) L1 writers come by in the course of their daily life. Learning to write academic texts comes about in the process of schooling and education. Both L1 and L2 academic writers have to acquire an extensive repertoire of language skills, such as idea structuring, grammar, and vocabulary (Cowie, 1988, 1998; Ferris, 2004; James, 1998). It is widely recognized in language research and pedagogy that developing academic writing abilities takes many years—and sometimes longer than a decade (Hinkel, 2002, 2003, 2009, 2011). A vast amount of evidence has shown that L2 academic writers have a great deal of difficulty becoming proficient users of idioms and institutionalized phrases, without which formal written prose probably cannot be produced (Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers, 2007; Coxhead, 2008).

At present, much is known about idiomatic constructions essential in L1 and L2 academic writing, such as noun phrases (e.g., *recent discussions/debates/reports/publications...*, *an important fact/issue/consideration is...*, *a close/detailed examination/study...*) or impersonal *it*-constructions (e.g., *it is well-known/likely/possible/unclear*). Additionally, considerable experience has been accumulated in how to teach various idiomatic sentence stems, conventionalized expressions, “long chunks” of text (Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 2012). These attributes of academic writing need to be explicitly and persistently taught because they represent requisite (and prescribed) characteristics of the Anglo-American academic genre (Fernando, 1996; Milton, 1999). For example, even educated L2 learners who do not have many opportunities to produce formal English prose may not be aware of formulaic expressions that usually mark explicit thesis statements, such as *this paper addresses/examines/focuses on...* or *the main points/questions/issues are ...*.

In writing instruction, working with conventionalized written expressions can take the form of text and paragraph models and examples of paragraphs and essays to demonstrate their idiomatic elements (Hinkel, 2013a). For instance, academic phrases can be useful in instruction on such discourse functions as to express a point of view, support a position, develop an argument, or present a research finding. The stereotypical language of academic and other types of writing represents a relatively well-covered set of discourse moves and their attendant phrasing (Swales, 1990; Widdowson, 2003; Ur, 2011, 2014).

When teaching linguistic patterns for L2 writing, teachers may draw on many examples from speaking and establish parallels to help learners increase their awareness of frequent phrasal occurrences. As learners expand their stock of essential expressions expected in L2 writing, writing instruction can co-occur with supplemental work on grammar and vocabulary. Using stock expressions and short sentences in academic writing is probably one of the most efficient ways of expanding L2 writers’ repertoire of word combinations and formulas. Conventionalized expressions can be particularly profitable when they include variations of their discrete elements in flexible constructions. It is safe to say that even advanced L2 learners continue to make grammar and vocabulary errors in their writing (Ferris, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; James, 1998; Rifkin & Roberts, 1995). An important advantage of using formulaic expressions in academic writing is that these units are likely to be more grammatically and lexically accurate than those that have to be assembled based on a myriad of rules.

### **Idiomatic Expressions and Language Teaching**

Despite the attention that idiomatic expressions and phrases have received in research, in teaching materials, these units of language are still relatively less commonplace than, say, vocabulary and grammar. Due to their frequency in both spoken and written language, idiomatic formulas and

repeated word-combinations can be of great value to learners at practically any level of proficiency (Aijmer, 1996; Nation & Webb, 2011). One essential feature of expressions and phrases is that they include more than one word or a meaningful unit, and for this reason alone, they require more work and practice. Over time, however, explicit teaching can help learners to address matters of lexical retention and to expand their language repertoire. As Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) state,

it is our ability to use lexical phrases that helps us to speak with fluency. This prefabricated speech has both the advantages of more efficient retrieval and of permitting speakers (and learners) to direct their attention to the larger structure of the discourse, rather than keeping it narrowly focused on individual words as they are produced. (p. 32)

Numerous idiomatic phrases can be accessible to beginning or intermediate learners. As has been mentioned, most idioms and conventionalized phrases have non-compositional meanings that cannot be derived from those of their constituent parts (Boers, 2000; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2009; Boers, Lindstromberg, & Eyckmans, 2014). However, frequent and common expressions can be somewhat transparent. When it comes to formulas and collocations, a reliable rule of thumb is that the shorter the phrase is, the more likely it is to be easy to remember and use (Nation, 2011, 2013). The best example of transparent and memorable units are those that consist of two words. This principle applies to formulaic phrases of practically any kind, including those that consist of a function word and a content word or two content words.

Another important consideration for teaching is that short collocations and phrases are encountered far more frequently than longer ones, and thus, can be easier to practice. Examples of frequent phrases and expressions can be located anywhere: *go fishing/ shopping/ biking, take turns, have breakfast/ lunch/ dinner, pay attention, good day, make/ spend money, catch a bus/train/flight, once a week, once in a while, day and night, all day long, every time, well said, right on the mark, hard work, (right) on time, make a mistake, find/take a seat, do a favor, help out, a little help, do you mind, good luck, bar of soap/ chocolate, candy bar, and hit or miss.*

An example of student practice or a quiz on common collocations and expressions is presented below. A pivot word is the main/focal word in the collocation and its accompanying word(s) (one or more), for example, *give advice, give time, give a chance, give an impression, or give a hand.* The pivot words can be as basic as *make, take, come, call, carry, go, eat, or live* for beginners, and more advanced, such as *assume, achieve, conclude, define, denote, follow, increase, introduce, presume, provide, reach, refer, or support*, for more proficient learners. A pivot word is presented in the left column, and learners have to come up with as many collocates (accompanying words) as they can during a particular amount of time, say, 5-10 minutes. This practice can also be enjoyable and useful when assigned to small groups of 2-5, and then see which group has come up with more phrases than the other.

For example:

<b>Come</b>	<u>possible collocates</u> : about, after, around, alone, along, a long way, back, close, complete, daily/weekly, directly, early, first, here/there, home, last, late, through,
(pivot word)	on time, over, prepared, right back, second/third, together, to an end, to a decision, to a total of, up
<b>Give</b>	<u>possible collocates</u> : an answer, advice, attention, a chance, a moment, a choice/choices, an example, an explanation, a headache, a gift/present/lift/tip, a lecture/speech, a class, an exam, an opinion, (someone's) regards/best wishes, a promise, information, priority, time, up, in, away, a smile, an impression, an opportunity, a phone call, a hand, a push, some/any thought
(pivot word)	

**life**                    possible collocates: real, family, everyday, whole, private, normal, personal, public, early, daily, form, cycle, in, during, style, happy, good, easy, active, busy, exciting, long, full, peaceful, quiet, future, working, time, new, sheltered

(pivot word)

**A side note**: Collocates can come before and after the pivot words. Productive pivot words can be found in any collocation dictionary. Some examples: *advice, fight, influence, issue, plan, relate, relationship, or role*.

Another useful type of practice can take the form of identifying suitable responses to conventionalized conversational expressions with other appropriate conventionalized expressions. For instance, a teacher can create a worksheet (or several worksheets) with practical and common suitable responses. Learners can practice matching routine questions or statements to possible responses.

For example:

What classes are you planning to take next term?	Thanks for asking. Not bad! How about your classes? Are the tests over yet?
Excuse me. Could you tell me where the bookstore is?	A bus may be better. It takes a long time to go by taxi during the rush hour.
I need to get to the airport/the (xxx) office. Should I take a bus or a taxi?	Yes, it's right that way. At the corner, then turn left, and then go straight two blocks.
Hey, so how did your math/English/ history exam go?	Of course! Glad to be able to help. Hopefully, I can help you figure it out.
Thank you for meeting me on such a short notice. I appreciate it.	Not quite sure yet. Haven't had a chance to think about that. How about you?

Further activities for learning common formulaic expressions can be requesting students to create lists of such functional conversational devices as greetings, introductions, or requests. Then these formulas can be arranged from, say, more to less formal, or more polite to less polite, depending on their linguistic features. In teaching writing, to notice various types of written phrases, students can be asked to examine samples of different texts to include, for example, a personal letter, an email message, a blog posting, a popular magazine article, an excerpt from an introductory textbook, or a formal essay/ academic paper. The focus of this activity can be to identify culturally-prescribed conventions common in personal, expressive, or formal academic writing.

For L2 learners and users, the cognitive load (the total amount of mental effort, including the working memory, required to perform a task) and the amount of attention that are needed simply to produce spoken language can be occasionally overwhelming. Having a stock of grammatically accurate and socially suitable expressions and formulae can greatly ease the task.

### A Final Comment

Teaching idiomatic and routine expressions can be profitable for learners at any level of proficiency. For beginners, a small number of fixed or minimally variable expressions could be a good place to start because they can be taught and learned as whole language units. In teaching speaking, frequently occurring conversational sequences can be useful and enjoyable to learn. In writing classes, conventionalized constructions can be practiced with or without variable components (e.g., *The next issue/question to address/ consider/discuss is...*).

A fundamental fact in regard to idioms, collocations, phrases, expressions, multi-word units, formulas, formulaic language, sentence stems, lexicalized constructions, chunks, lexical bundles, prefabricated routines, or clusters by any other name is that they are ubiquitous, pervasive, and astoundingly frequent. In language teaching and learning, they are essential. For most learners, the meanings of these constructions are usually impossible to figure out from the meanings of their component parts. The grammar features of most idiomatic phrases are irregular and un-derivable, and their logical analyses defy linguistic reason. Without learning, using, and being able to understand these language units, neither spoken nor written communication can be effective or even successful in accomplishing its goals.

Teaching materials should incorporate these expressions whenever and wherever possible in any language skill. In language teaching, idiomatic expressions are far more important and prevalent than mere cultural peculiarities. For many L2 learners, these numerous, variable, and relatively long constructions can be difficult and work-consuming to learn and use. A great deal of exposure to and practice with naturally occurring formulaic phrases in speaking and writing would be to learners' best advantage, as it is likely to promote language analysis and acquisition. Currently, a relatively large number of spoken and written conventionalized expressions have been collected, catalogued, and systematized. In language pedagogy, a clear implication is that teaching grammar and vocabulary is likely to be more complicated than working with syntactic rules and single-word items. Old and new insights associated with the sheer ubiquity of idiomatic constructions can present both challenges and opportunities, but it seems vital for teachers to be aware of and become familiar with these language units. This may be as good a place to start as any.

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