

EMPOWERING EFL/ESL TEACHING: THE IMPACT OF THE STORYTELLING METHOD IN LEARNING IDIOMS

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Abstract

The acquisition of idiomatic expressions remains one of the most formidable hurdles for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Due to their non-compositional nature where the semantic value of the whole phrase cannot be systematically deduced from the literal definitions of its individual components idioms frequently induce severe cognitive overload and literal misinterpretation. This article comprehensively explores the storytelling method as a transformative pedagogical tool designed to bridge the gap between initial literal confusion and deep idiomatic fluency. By embedding figurative language within structured narrative contexts, students can visualize the surface absurdity of the literal meaning while anchoring the intended conceptual message through emotional resonance, cultural memory, and situational cues. The following multi-layered analysis demonstrates the stark contrast between the "surface" image and the "hidden" historical reality of common idioms, proving that an immersive narrative approach yields superior long-term retention compared to traditional, rote vocabulary drills.

Keywords: ESL/EFL, Idioms, Storytelling, Contextual Fluency, Literal vs. Figurative, Pedagogy, Cognitive Linguistics, Folk Etymology, Language Evolution.

Introduction

Learning English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) is a journey. Every student wants to move past basic textbook rules and finally speak fluently. However, one of the biggest hurdles on this path is idioms. A student can master grammar, build a large vocabulary, and use verbs perfectly. But the moment a native speaker uses an idiom like **Ashurova, M. A.** said (2022) "break a leg" or "spill the beans", the student gets confused, and it feels like all the rules of language have suddenly stopped working.

The main reason for this struggle is that our brains naturally try to understand words literally. Linguists call this the "**Literal Trap**". When a language learner hears an idiom, their mind automatically creates vivid, illogical pictures that have absolutely nothing to do with the actual conversation.

For instance, an advanced English student shares a story from their own experience: "One day in class, our teacher looked outside and said it was *"raining cats and dogs"*. Out of curiosity and confusion, I actually looked out the window, expecting to see animals falling from the sky. Of course, it was just a normal rainstorm". In that exact moment, the student realized that English is not just a system of grammar rules, but a complex code shaped by history.

This article shows teachers and researchers how to crack this “secret code” using the **Storytelling Method**. Forcing students to memorize long, dry lists of idioms and definitions is boring and ineffective. Instead, using stories creates a bridge between what the words say literally and what they actually mean in real life, making it much easier and more fun for students to learn. Questions which are going to be discussed:

Q1: How does the transition from "true etymology" to folk etymology occur in the history of an idiom, and what impact does this shift have on the idiom's current usage?

Q2: Why do scholars describe idioms as "fossils," and how does this perspective link idioms to the study of language change?

Q3: Why should ESL/EFL teachers assimilate using the storytelling method to easily transform knowledge about idioms?

Discussion

Historical transformation from "true etymology" to folk etymology

To fully comprehend how an idiom functions in modern speech, one must conduct a diachronic linguistic analysis of its evolutionary pathway. Every idiomatic expression possesses a distinct historical starting point, legally classified as its true etymology. This foundational origin reveals the exact chronological era, sociocultural environment, and pragmatic communicative necessity that prompted historical speakers to utilize a specific phrase metaphorically. However, language is never static; it operates as a fluid, living organism that continuously evolves across generations. Over centuries, as societies undergo technological, political, and cultural shifts, the original physical contexts that birthed these phrases naturally fade from collective memory, and the archaic words embedded within the idioms lose their currency in daily communication.

Dobrovol'skij, D., & Piirainen, E. (2005) mentioned that when a modern speech community can no longer access the historical meaning of an old word or the structural logic of a dead grammatical rule within an idiom, a socio-cognitive transition occurs, leading to the emergence of folk etymology, which is also referred to as popular etymology. Looking into the mechanics of idiom motivation, it becomes clear that human psychology inherently abhors a semantic vacuum. When modern speakers hear an archaic, phonetically confusing component of an idiom, their brains instinctively attempt to normalize the unfamiliar input. They shape the forgotten or obsolete words into contemporary, phonetically similar lexical items that make intuitive sense to a modern ear. Following this structural modification, the community naturally fabricates an entirely new, imaginative, but historically inaccurate narrative to explain why the phrase exists.

This socio-cognitive transition occurs through a multistage historical process. First, the idiom begins at its authentic historical root, heavily tied to a specific ancient practice, trade, or cultural event. Second, a major sociocultural shift occurs over generations, causing the public to completely lose touch with that original context. Third, modern speakers encounter a phonetic or semantic disconnection where the old words inside the phrase no longer make sense in daily life. Fourth, to heal this logical gap, folk etymology takes over, leading speakers to create logic-healing myths and replace old words with modern, similar sounding ones. Finally, the phrase settles into modern usage, achieving pragmatic fluency independent of its history.

This structural transition exerts a profound, dual faceted impact on how idioms are deployed in current usage. The first major impact is the absolute primacy of synchrony over diachronic in daily communication. The overwhelming majority of modern native speakers remain entirely oblivious to the true historical origins of the idioms they use daily. For example, a speaker may

frequently use an expression without knowing its maritime, agricultural, or medieval roots, yet they execute the idiom with perfect pragmatic accuracy. This proves that within living language systems, the shared, synchronized modern agreement regarding meaning completely supersedes historical facts.

The second major impact involves semantic drift and the freedom from etymological anchors. Once an idiom transitions into the realm of folk etymology, it is liberated from its original historical restrictions. It becomes an abstract conceptual tool. Its meaning is no longer tied to the specific physical objects or ancient practices that generated it, allowing it to morph seamlessly to fit contemporary digital, professional, and emotional realities.

Idioms and its fossilization process

Within the domain of historical lexicology and philology, scholars frequently employ a powerful geological metaphor, classifying idioms as linguistic fossils. To understand the validity of this academic description, one must look at how physical fossils function in nature. A physical fossil is an organic remnant of an ancient creature, trapped and preserved within layers of sedimentary rock for millions of years, offering modern geologists an immutable blueprint of an era long gone. In an identical fashion, idioms serve as lexical preservation chambers, permanently trapping and safeguarding ancient vocabulary, obsolete morphological forms, and dead syntactic structures that completely vanished from standard modern English long ago.

This fossilization process operates through a distinct linguistic mechanism. The idiom acts as a protective container where ancient layers of vocabulary and dead syntactic rules are sealed off from the rest of the changing language. While the outer prose of the language continuously evolves, the idiom encapsulates words that are otherwise entirely defunct. This results in a frozen formula on the modern surface that contemporary speakers use fluently without realizing they are speaking medieval grammar.

Consider the structural mechanics of how this fossilization process operates and how it directly illuminates the broader dynamics of language change. First, idioms preserve defunct morphosyntax. Idioms frequently contain grammatical configurations that violate every rule of modern English syntax. Phrases like "Be that as it may" retain subjunctive modes and obsolete lexical couplings that would be deemed entirely ungrammatical if a speaker attempted to tear them apart and use them in standard descriptive prose. Secondly, idioms are characterized by lexical invariance and frozen morphemes. **Fernando, C.** (1996) emphasized that certain words have lost their independent semantic meaning entirely and exist solely within the protective boundaries of a specific idiom. For instance, it is worth noting that words like "kith" are utterly dead in modern English conversation on their own; it survives exclusively as a fossilized element within the idiomatic phrase "kith and kin".

This direct link to language change turns idioms into an invaluable archival resource for historical linguists. By conducting an etymological excavation of idiomatic frameworks, researchers can trace the structural migration of human society. **Crystal, D.** (2004) said the internal architecture of English idioms reflects historical transitions from agrarian lifestyles to the industrial revolution, and finally to modern maritime and military conflicts. **Grzega, J., & Schöner, M.** (2007) told that idioms act as a living, speaking historical bridge, providing a vivid record of how human habits, moral values, and grammatical systems have transformed over centuries of cultural shift.

“Storytelling” approach assimilation

The traditional pedagogical approach to teaching often called the “**Dictionary**” or “**List Method**” presents idioms to language learners as linear, dry equivalences, such as teaching that **Ashurova, M. A.** emphasized (2022) that “*to kick the bucket*” simply means “*to die*.” This mechanical strategy repeatedly fails because it does not take into account the cognitive architecture of the human mind. To transform passive theoretical knowledge into active, fluent linguistic performance, ESL/EFL educators should systematically integrate storytelling into their curricula. In the traditional dictionary method, attention is directed straight from the idiom to a dry definition, creating a high memory-related cognitive load that quickly leads to forgetting. In contrast, the more advanced storytelling method uses narrative texts with contextual clues to create emotional anchors, which directly facilitate deeper linguistic integration.

There are four major cognitive, psychological, and pedagogical advantages that demonstrate the effectiveness of this methodological shift in the classroom environment:

1. Optimizing the Brain’s Structural Memory Systems

The human brain is naturally and evolutionarily adapted to process, organize, and recall structured stories rather than fragmented lists of abstract words. When an idiom is presented as an isolated item on a worksheet, it forces the brain to rely entirely on short-term working memory and rote memorization, both of which are highly susceptible to breakdown under stress or cognitive fatigue.

By contrast, when an idiom is introduced as the climax or turning point of an engaging story, it activates the learner’s episodic memory system. The narrative structure provides a natural environment in which the sequence of events automatically preserves the meaning of the expression, making retrieval easier and retention more durable.

2. Providing Contextual Anchors and Dramatically Reducing Pragmatic Errors

One of the most dangerous weaknesses of the traditional list method is that while a student may memorize what an idiom means, they often remain completely unaware of its subtle pragmatic implications, emotional tone, and appropriate register. This frequently leads to serious communication errors, such as using highly informal or sensitive idioms in formal academic or corporate settings. Storytelling naturally solves this problem by providing a realistic context. A well-crafted narrative clearly demonstrates the social hierarchy between characters, the emotional weight of the situation, and the specific conversational tone required for appropriate idiom use.

3. Developing Contextual Decoding Skills and Learner Independence

When educators use stories, they transform students from passive, disengaged recipients of definitions into active and enthusiastic linguistic investigators. By strategically surrounding an unfamiliar idiom with contextual “breadcrumbs,” teachers enable learners to infer and discover figurative meanings independently. For example, a story might describe a character named Arthur who spends all of his savings to open a small bakery, mortgages his family home, and agrees to work three consecutive night shifts. By the second month of operation, he is exhausted from sleep deprivation and standing on the verge of bankruptcy. At that point, the statement that he has “*bitten off more than he could chew*” becomes an undeniable reality. Even if a student has never encountered the expression before, the preceding details vividly portray someone overwhelmed by

responsibilities. The learner independently uncovers the meaning, transforming from a passive recipient into an active detective. This process activates the brain's intellectual reward mechanisms and contributes to genuine communicative fluency.

Narrative case studies of three idioms

To illustrate the practical application of the storytelling method in educational settings, this section presents extended narrative analyses of three culturally significant idioms. Each case compares the modern figurative meaning, the literal visualization, and the historical narrative framework.

“Kick the Bucket”

Modern Semantic Definition:

To die; to pass away.

Literal Trap Illusion:

The learner imagines a person standing in a room and kicking an ordinary household bucket.

Historical Narrative Paradigm

The true origin of this expression is often traced to sixteenth-century European slaughterhouses. During this period, a heavy wooden frame used to suspend livestock for slaughter was reportedly called a “*bucket*,” a term believed to derive from the Old French *buquet*, meaning a beam, balance, or wooden frame. As animals were hung from this structure and slaughtered, involuntary muscular contractions and reflexive movements caused them to kick violently against the wooden frame—the “*bucket*”. Thus, the phrase originally described the physical actions occurring during an animal's final moments. Over time, the expression evolved into a euphemism for human death and was formally recorded in **Francis Grose's** Francis Grose 1785 work, *A Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, where the phrase was defined as “to die”.

“Bite the Bullet”

Modern Semantic Definition:

To endure an extremely painful, unavoidable, or unpleasant situation with courage and determination.

Literal Trap Illusion:

The learner imagines someone literally placing a modern bullet between their teeth and biting down on it.

Historical Narrative Paradigm

This deeply emotional expression is commonly associated with the harsh realities of nineteenth-century warfare, particularly the era of the **American Civil War**. At that time, modern anesthesia and sterile operating rooms were not yet widely available. Emergency surgeries and amputations often had to be performed directly on battlefields with little or no effective pain relief. To prevent wounded soldiers from screaming uncontrollably, breaking their teeth, or biting through their tongues during agonizing procedures, military surgeons were said to place a soft lead bullet in the patient's mouth and instruct them to bite down on it. Soldiers would clench the bullet between

their teeth as a means of enduring unbearable pain. Over time, this battlefield practice evolved into a metaphor for facing unavoidable emotional, financial, or professional hardships with stoic determination and resilience.

“Spill the Beans”

Modern Semantic Definition:

To reveal a secret or accidentally disclose confidential information.

Literal Trap Illusion:

The learner imagines a frustrated cook accidentally knocking over a container full of beans and scattering them across the floor. Historical narrative paradigmThe structural origin of this idiom is often linked to voting practices in ancient Greek city-states. Ancient GreeceIn certain aristocratic societies, political groups, and governing councils, colored beans were allegedly used in secret voting systems. Members would approach a container and discreetly deposit a bean: a white bean represented a positive vote, while a dark bean represented a negative vote. The integrity of this democratic process depended on maintaining secrecy until the votes were officially counted. If a careless voter or a disloyal official accidentally or deliberately overturned the container before the designated time, the beans would spill onto the floor. As a result, the voting outcome and everyone’s private choices would be revealed prematurely. This historical scenario helps explain how *“spill the beans”* evolved from a literal act involving voting materials into a modern metaphor for exposing confidential information or revealing secrets before the appropriate time.

Detailed Methodological Analysis

When we compare the traditional list method with the storytelling method, clear differences can be seen. In the traditional method, students have to memorize many separate words and expressions. This can make learning difficult and mentally tiring. In contrast, the storytelling method presents idioms in meaningful situations, making them easier to understand and remember.

There is also a difference in long-term memory. Information learned through word lists is often forgotten within a few days. However, idioms learned through stories are connected to events, images, and emotions, which helps students remember them for a longer time. The storytelling method is also more effective for using idioms correctly. Simple memorization does not always teach students when and where an idiom should be used. As a result, learners may use idioms in inappropriate situations. Stories provide context and show how idioms are used in real-life communication.

Student interest and participation are also influenced by the teaching method. The list method can be boring and often makes students passive learners. The storytelling method encourages active participation, increases motivation, and helps students think more deeply about language. In addition, memorization alone provides little cultural understanding. Storytelling helps students learn about the history, background, and cultural meaning of idioms. As a result, learners not only improve their vocabulary but also gain a better understanding of English-speaking cultures.

Conclusion

For students learning English as a foreign language, idioms are an important part of becoming fluent. Many learners try to understand idioms by translating each word directly. However, this

often causes confusion because the meaning of an idiom is usually different from the meanings of its individual words. In fact, idioms are not random expressions. They are connected to a country's history, culture, and everyday life. For this reason, learners need to understand the meaning and background of idioms, not just memorize them. To solve this problem, teachers should not rely only on memorization. A better method is to teach idioms through stories. Stories show how idioms are used in real situations and help students understand them more easily. This approach improves memory, reduces communication mistakes, and gives learners more confidence to use English on their own. Most importantly, learning English becomes more interesting and meaningful. As a result, students begin to see English not as a difficult system to memorize, but as a useful tool for communicating with people around the world.

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