Teaching Idioms and Phrasal Verbs Creatively

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Abstract. *The article is dedicated to exploring creative methods for teaching idioms and phrasal verbs in the English lessons. These linguistic units are essential components of authentic communication but they often present difficulties for learners due to their figurative meanings and irregular structure. Theoretically the article outlines the definitions and key characteristics of idioms and phrasal verbs, highlights the main differences between them and explains why these expressions are difficult for students to remember and use. Additionally, it analyzes an overview of commonly used conventional teaching approaches in language structure. Practically the article includes a collection of interactive classroom activities such as role plays, games, visual aids, and personalized tasks designed to help students learn and apply idiomatic expressions in context.*

Key words: *Idioms, phrasal verbs, figurative language, creative teaching methods, storytelling; visualization, communicative competence, Efl instruction, cognitive linguistics, digital learning tools.*

Introduction. In the process of mastering a foreign language, learners often face particular challenges with idioms and phrasal verbs—two essential yet complex components of authentic English communication. These figurative expressions enrich speech, reflecting the cultural and emotional nuances of native speakers, but their meanings cannot always be inferred from individual words. As a result, they frequently present barriers to comprehension and active usage in both spoken and written contexts. In contemporary English language teaching (ELT), the development of communicative competence requires not only grammatical accuracy but also idiomatic fluency, which allows learners to interpret and produce natural, expressive discourse. Traditional teaching methods, such as rote memorization and translation, often fail to capture the figurative and pragmatic nature of idioms and phrasal verbs. In contrast, creative approaches—such as storytelling, visualization, games, and digital integration—enable learners to internalize meaning through context, emotion, and interaction. The cognitive foundation of such methods lies in dual coding and contextual learning theories, which emphasize the interplay between linguistic and visual stimuli in memory formation. Moreover, digital tools such as Quizlet, Wordwall, and Canva have opened new possibilities for individualized and multimodal learning, transforming idiomatic instruction into an engaging, learner-centered process.

This study aims to explore innovative and practical strategies for teaching idioms and phrasal verbs within communicative classrooms. It combines theoretical perspectives on figurative language with pedagogical techniques grounded in creativity and interactivity. By presenting examples of classroom-based tasks—ranging from role plays and storytelling to visual and digital exercises—the article seeks to demonstrate how idiomatic expressions can be taught effectively and memorably, fostering both linguistic competence and cultural awareness.

Main part. Learning English as a foreign language is rather difficult without mastering set expressions, among which idioms and phrasal verbs hold a special place. These units of language are an integral part of everyday communication, literature, media and cultural contexts. However,

students often have difficulty remembering and using them, since the meaning of such expressions cannot always be deduced from the meanings of their individual components. This makes them one of the most challenging aspects of learning English.

The relevance of mastering set expressions is due to the need to develop in students not only grammatical but also communicative competence which includes the ability to understand and use idiomatic expressions in various contexts.

It is not by chance that the English language is considered "idiomatic" – it is richly saturated with set expressions, proverbs, sayings, aphorisms and catchphrases. Speech that lacks phraseological units often appears oversimplified and monotonous. When idioms are used correctly and appropriately, they add expressiveness, vivid imagery and emotional depth to communication.

An idiom is a stable phrase whose overall meaning does not follow logically from the meanings of the individual words it contains. For instance, the English phrase **"to spill the beans"** does not actually refer to beans at all – instead, it is commonly used to mean *"to disclose a secret."* Similarly, in Russian, the idiom *"вешать лапшу на уши"* (literally "*to hang noodles on someone's ears*") is used to describe an act of deception or misleading someone. In English linguistics, an idiom is defined as *"a phrase whose meaning is different from the literal meanings of the individual words"*. In the dictionary of linguistic terms: *"An idiom is a phraseological unit that cannot be translated literally and has semantic integrity".*

Mastering idioms and phrasal verbs is an essential part of language fluency, yet these expressions often pose a serious challenge for learners. Their figurative nature, cultural specificity and irregular structure make them difficult to understand and remember. Therefore, it is important for language teachers to apply creative and engaging teaching techniques that go beyond simple translation or memorization.

One of the most effective ways to make these expressions clearer is to present them in meaningful and engaging contexts. Context helps students infer the figurative meaning of a phrase based on the situation, rather than relying solely on translation or definition.

Storytelling is a powerful technique in this process. When idioms and phrasal verbs are introduced through short stories, conversations or anecdotes, students can see how they function in real communication. For example, in a story about a student who is nervous before giving a speech, the idiom **"break into a cold sweat"** may appear. From the context, learners can understand that it means *to feel very anxious or frightened.*

Teachers can also encourage students to create their own stories using assigned idioms or phrasal verbs. This not only reinforces meaning but also promotes creativity and active usage. Story-based tasks may include: *Completing a story with idioms, retelling a tale using phrasal verbs, making up funny or surprising stories that include target expressions.*

Contextual and story-based learning improves memory retention. Research shows that students remember vocabulary better when it is associated with emotion, imagery or real-life context.

By embedding idioms and phrasal verbs into short stories, teachers can provide students with emotional and cultural cues that enhance memory and comprehension.

Visualization can take the form of illustrations, mind maps, comic strips or even classroom dramatization. Creating visual connections between the literal and figurative meanings of expressions makes abstract phrases more accessible, especially for visual learners and younger audiences.

These methods not only make learning more engaging, but also foster deeper understanding by activating students' imagination, emotions, and personal experiences. As a result, idioms and phrasal verbs become memorable language tools rather than obscure grammar points.

Recent studies highlight the effectiveness of storytelling and visualization in idiom learning. According to Yu and Boers (2024), learners exposed to idioms in illustrated narrative contexts showed significantly higher retention than those learning them in isolation. The authors explain this by increased emotional engagement and dual coding effects [7].

Similarly, Bakhriddinova (2024) found that EFL students better remembered idioms when images representing figurative meanings were used. These findings confirm the benefits of integrating visual and contextual techniques in idiom instruction [8]. Example: Storytelling + Visualization. The idiom *"hit the roof"* (meaning: to become extremely angry):

*Alex had been secretly using his dad's credit card to buy games online. One day, the bill arrived. His father looked at the total and **hit the roof.** He yelled so loud the neighbors could hear. Alex promised never to do it again.*

In this story, the idiom is placed in a relatable and humorous context. To visualize this in class, the teacher can:

Show a cartoon image of a man literally flying through the roof in anger.

Ask students to act out the moment using facial expressions.

Have them draw comic strips showing the literal and actual meanings of "hit the roof".

Students will remember the emotional context (anger), the exaggerated image, and the situation. This multi-sensory approach activates both the logical and creative sides of the brain. Integrating creative storytelling and visual techniques aligns with cognitive learning theories and offers a practical, learner-friendly way to teach phraseological units.

Games and role-play activities are powerful tools in language classrooms, especially when teaching idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs. These techniques create a relaxed, interactive environment that encourages active participation and reduces the fear of making mistakes.

Games such as idiom bingo, matching cards, charades or memory games help students practice fixed expressions in a fun and meaningful way. For example, in *"Idiom Bingo",* students must listen for idioms in context and mark them on their cards. In "Charades", learners act out idioms like *"let the cat out of the bag"* or *"blow off steam",* promoting kinesthetic learning.

Role-play allows learners to use idioms and phrasal verbs in realistic scenarios. A dialogue at a travel agency might include expressions like *"check in," "take off,"* or *"run into problems".* Acting out these situations enhances fluency and boosts confidence in a natural context.

Games stimulate language development by engaging the whole learner – intellectually, emotionally and socially. They create memorable situations in which idiomatic expressions are used meaningfully and repeatedly.

Additionally, communicative methods based on real-life interaction, such as drama and simulation, have proven effective in internalizing complex language structures, including idioms and phrasal verbs. By integrating games and role-play into lessons, teachers make learning idiomatic language more accessible, engaging, and memorable.

Bottle cap idiom game. One engaging and low-cost classroom activity involves the use of recycled plastic bottle caps. Teachers attach images or phrasal verbs to the tops of the caps and place them on a table. Two "goals" made of tape are marked on opposite ends of the table. Students use a small stick to hit a bottle cap across the table, attempting to score a goal. Each goal is labeled – one with idioms and the other with phrasal verbs. When a bottle cap enters a goal, the student must say the correct meaning and create a sentence using the expression on the cap. For example, if the cap says *"break down"* and it lands in the *"phrasal verb"* goal, the student could say: "*Break down means to stop working. My car broke down on the way to school."*

This kind of *kinesthetic game* helps learners internalize vocabulary through movement, competition and repetition. It's especially effective for younger students and tactile learners as it combines language input with physical interaction, making the learning process fun and memorable.

Idiom spinner wheel. Another creative classroom game involves a DIY spinner that resembles a clock face. Instead of numbers, the teacher places pictures in each section of the *"clock"* – for example, animals, emotions or actions. A movable arrow (spinner) is placed in the centre and can be spun by the student. Depending on the focus of the lesson, there are two ways to play:

Idiom version. Each picture is associated with an idiom. For instance, if the arrow lands on a bird, the student might say: ***"kill two birds with one stone** – to achieve two things with one action"*.

Phrasal verb version. Each section contains a common verb (e.g., *"look," "get," "take"*). The student must say a phrasal verb with that verb and use it in a sentence. For example, if the spinner lands on *"take,"* the student may say: *"Take off – The plane took off at 7 p.m"*.

This game enhances vocabulary through movement, chance and visual association. It is especially effective for young learners and encourages spontaneous speaking, creativity and collaboration in group settings. Such spinner-based games help demystify idioms and phrasal verbs, making them more accessible and less intimidating through fun and repeated use in a relaxed environment.

Phrasal verb bicycle game. This unique classroom activity involves a visual model of a bicycle. On the front wheel, the teacher attaches cards or labels with common verbs (such as *get, take, put, run*). On the back wheel, there are prepositions or adverbs (like *up, off, down, over, away*). The wheels can be rotated independently. The student spins both wheels. When the wheels stop, the student must form a phrasal verb from the combination and say its meaning and a sentence using it.

Example: The front wheel stops on "*take*", and the back wheel stops on "*off*".

The student says: "*Take off means to leave the ground (about planes) or to remove something", "My plane took off at 10 a.m."*

This method adds an element of surprise and movement to the learning process. It helps learners discover and memorize phrasal verbs in a playful, visual and physical way, which is especially beneficial for kinesthetic learners.

*Find and free the **phrase-puzzle game** for idioms and phrasal verbs*. This creative puzzle-style activity is designed to make learning idioms and phrasal verbs exciting, hands-on and memorable. The teacher prepares small cards with idioms or phrasal verbs and wraps them in paper or fabric, tying them with strings or ribbons. Each phrase is connected to strings that stretch in different directions, sometimes tangled or crossed.

Students work individually or in pairs to: Choose a thread and carefully follow or untie it. Reach the hidden phrase at the end of the string. Read the idiom or phrasal verb aloud, explain its meaning and use it in a sentence.

Example: A student follows a string and finds: **"Let sleeping dogs lie".** They explain: "*It means to avoid restarting an old conflict or problem".* Example sentence: *"I didn't bring up the argument again – **better to let sleeping dogs lie**."*

This physical and interactive game fosters both language skills and student engagement, turning abstract phrases into something students can discover, decode, and remember.

Digital tools have become essential in modern language teaching, especially when working with idioms and phrasal verbs, which are often hard to understand due to their figurative meanings. These tools help visualize expressions, provide context, and make learning more engaging. Platforms like **Quizlet *(flashcards),* Wordwall *(games),*** and **Kahoot! *(quizzes)*** support repetition and active recall. Tools like *Canva* and *Make Beliefs Comics* allow students to create comics and stories using idioms. *YouTube* and *You Glish* show real-life usage, while *Animaker* and *Pictory* enable students to produce short animated or AI generated videos, making idiomatic expressions more memorable and engaging.

While creative activities and digital tools are essential, the personal role of the teacher remains a key factor in mastering idioms and phrasal verbs. Many students feel frustrated when they cannot grasp the figurative meaning of an idiom or recall the correct particle in a phrasal verb. In such cases, the teacher's encouragement, patience, and ability to rephrase or simplify explanations play a vital role.

Teachers can also adapt materials according to learners' language levels, provide personalized examples, and link expressions to students' native language or cultural background. Humor, storytelling and empathy help reduce anxiety and build trust, especially when students are hesitant to use unfamiliar expressions in speech.

Moreover, the teacher's consistent modeling of idioms and phrasal verbs in their own language serves as a natural form of input, allowing students to internalize usage patterns over time.

The analysis demonstrated that idioms and phrasal verbs are not only linguistically complex but also culturally loaded, which often makes them challenging for learners to grasp and use correctly.

It was shown that traditional methods are not always sufficient for helping learners internalize figurative language. Therefore, using context-based learning, storytelling, visual tools, drama, games, and digital platforms can significantly improve learners' motivation, memory retention, and ability to use idiomatic expressions in real-life situations. Several examples of activities and original classroom tasks were presented, demonstrating how even complex expressions can be taught in playful and meaningful ways.

Combining theoretical insight with classroom creativity offers a balanced approach that benefits both teachers and students. Idioms and phrasal verbs, once seen as a barrier, can become a bridge to natural, fluent, and culturally rich communication when taught with clarity, context and imagination. Thus, this article underscores the importance of not only understanding these expressions but also making them accessible and enjoyable to learn.

Conclusion. The study highlights that idioms and phrasal verbs, while challenging, are indispensable for achieving fluency and cultural depth in English language proficiency. Their figurative meanings and structural irregularities demand a pedagogical approach that extends beyond memorization. Creative and contextualized methods—such as storytelling, visualization, games, and digital learning tools—significantly enhance learners' motivation, retention, and communicative performance. These approaches engage multiple senses and cognitive processes, transforming abstract expressions into vivid, memorable linguistic experiences. The findings suggest that the most effective instruction integrates linguistic theory with interactive practice. Teachers play a crucial mediating role by adapting materials to learners' levels, linking idioms to familiar cultural references, and providing consistent, meaningful input. Through such methods, idioms and phrasal verbs become not a source of confusion, but a bridge to authentic, expressive, and culturally enriched communication. Consequently, this article advocates for the inclusion of creative, multimodal, and digital strategies in the teaching of figurative language, ensuring that learners not only understand but also confidently use these expressions in real-world contexts.

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