



Building Competency with Figurative Language One Idiom at a Time

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Background on the Use of Idioms

Have you recently explained any idiomatic phrases to a preschooler? To a friend from another country? Or, to a person with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)? If not, you may want to consider a new role for yourself. This article has a dual purpose. First of all, it is intended to help adults understand issues related to idiomatic use. More important, it is designed to provide simple informal suggestions on how to help individuals, such as children with ASD, learn about idiom usage while in natural settings.

The English language is rich because of the breath of vocabulary available to speakers and because of abundant usage of figurative language. Idioms are only one component of figurative or nonliteral language. Idioms, unlike metaphors and similes, usually have fixed or common meanings across a variety of situations. With idioms such as "horsing around," for example, the intended meaning is not conveyed by conventional or literal use of the words involved. Typically "horsing around" does not involve any activity with a horse. "Horsing around" could refer to a rough and tumble tickle game with a toddler, to teens laughing while skipping stones in a stream, or to adults playfully teasing one another as they watch a sporting event on TV. The common element of meaning is a playful, informal interaction. One does not need to be sensitive, creative, or poetic in order to use idioms. Idioms are part of our everyday language and most people have a large repertoire upon which to draw for daily interactions.

Idioms are the first component of figurative language that is understood and used by children as they mature. Although there may be some understanding or usage of a few easy to understand or transparent idioms by children under the age of six, significant progressive growth usually occurs in typical children (i.e., individuals without language disabilities) when they are between six to 10 years of age (Wallach and Miller, 1988). With those individuals who do have language learning disabilities, especially people with autism spectrum disorders, the difficulties may continue even into adulthood.

Idioms, even in typical children, may be acquired one at a time, although there are some patterns to the acquisition process. There appears to be a receptive component to idiomatic competency (recognition of non-literal usage and understanding of the intended meaning) and an expressive component (appropriate usage of the idiom in conventional communication). Students and adults with ASD may have difficulty with all three components because one component hinges on another in a sequential fashion. Individuals with ASD may have particular difficulty with the first component, that of recognizing non-literal use of an utterance. Typically developing children may be more inclined to immediately proceed to the second stage, that is, getting clarification of meaning. In other words, these children may ask questions if they are unable to figure out the intended meaning from context. This is an important behavior because idioms vary along a continuum from those that are somewhat transparent or easy to understand following an explanation to those that are opaque or more difficult. Following a simple explanation, idioms such as "walking on thin ice" could be easily associated with meaning something "dangerous" just by employing visual imagery and background knowledge about ice. The idiom "swept off one's feet," however, is opaque. Extensive explanation might be needed before one understands that this idiom means someone had sudden strong feelings for something or someone. In a study published in 1985, Brinton, Fujiki, and Mackey reported differences between grade level groups regarding their understanding of various idioms. The meaning of "hit the ceiling" (an opaque idiom) was understood by zero kindergartners and only 35% of sixth graders. The idiom "lend me a hand" (a more transparent idiom) was understood by 65% of kindergartners and 75% of sixth graders. In the past decade, schools have put more emphasis on explicitly teaching figurative language so percentage results may be different today. Regardless of those potential differences, the data is illustrative of several points regarding age and differences between types of idioms.

When children or adults don't recognize instances of non-literal language, when they have difficulty figuring out intended meaning from context and when they don't ask for clarification, they may be missing the meaning of a significant portion of the dialogue that occurs in our daily lives whether it be from instruction, conversation, TV or movie scripts, advertising,



or printed text. In a study reported in 1989, Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson, and Johnson noted that 36% of all utterances produced by teachers in grades K-8 contained at least one multi-meaning statement. Idiom usage occurred on an average of one out of every ten utterances and idiom usage by teachers increased with grade level. The problem with this situation is not that teachers are using idioms with a high degree of frequency and that this practice should be stopped. Rather, the problem is that if teachers do not recognize their usage of idioms, they may fail to check for comprehension and neglect explicitly or informally to explain the meaning. The solution is not to eliminate the use of figurative language which would be a formidable task and would further compromise student preparation for the adult world, but to look for multiple opportunities for increasing students' idiomatic knowledge base.

Various publications available to educators and speech language pathologists present information and strategies for teaching figurative language. Learning figurative language may best take place in context. If formal and informal instruction about idioms only takes place in school, however, many natural informal teaching opportunities may be missed. Since individuals with ASD need more assistance, family members should be included in the teaching process.

The following strategies may be used by anyone who has an interest in helping a person with an autism spectrum disorder learn about idioms. At what age one begins this assistance is very dependent on the language skills the person has. In the case of children, it might be wise to check with the speech language pathologist about language comprehension so that one does not further frustrate a child by informal instruction that is, to use an idiom, "above his or her head" or level of interest. An additional advisory is that any informal teaching should be structured so that it is viewed within a positive framework by the person receiving the instruction. The adult who is trying to be helpful will need to evaluate responses and modify or abandon an approach if it is not successful.

Strategy Options

Setting for the strategy examples:

For purposes of this article, it will be easier to compare strategies if the same natural setting is used for each. Therefore, the following scenario is the basis for all five strategies.

Mom is watching TV with her son who has ASD and who loves to watch the Weather Channel. The TV weatherman uses the term "mixed bag" to describe the possibility of ice, snow, or rain in the viewing area. At commercial time Mom decides to informally teach the idiom "mixed bag" to her son Adam who is sitting next to her. Dad is sitting nearby.

Strategy #1 (Self talk; use only if you think the person with ASD is listening):

Mom: "The weatherman said the weather will be a mixed bag. Some cities may get rain, some may get ice, and some may get snow. The weatherman doesn't know which will happen. It's like all three of these types of weather are possible. It's like all three are mixed up in a bag and we're not sure which one we would touch if we stuck our hand into the bag."

Strategy #2 (Self talk and model how to get clarification):

Mom: "The weatherman said the weather will be a mixed bag. I wonder what that means. What is a mixed bag? He's talking about rain, ice, and snow. Dad, what do you think he means by talking about a mixed bag?"

Strategy #3 (Self talk, reject literal meaning and model how to use context to decide on a better meaning):

Mom: "The weather will be a mixed bag. Will someone deliver us a bag of mixed up things? No, that doesn't make sense. It must mean something else. He's talking about the weather and rain, ice, and snow. I guess he's saying these cities could get some of this or some of that. The cities might get rain, ice, or snow tonight or maybe all three depending on the temperature."



Strategy #4 (Check child's interpretation, offer multiple choices, reinforce his or her responses, or instruct on meaning):

Mom: The weatherman said the weather was a mixed bag. What did he mean? Did he mean the weather outside is in a bag? Did he mean a city might get rain, ice, or snow? You're right. I think he means a city might get rain, ice, or snow.

Strategy #5 (Check child's interpretation and reinforce his or her responses or instruct on meaning):

Mom: The weatherman said the weather was a mixed bag? What do you think he meant when he said that? (Continue with discussion and praise child for his interest and the store of information that he brings to the discussion.)

Expansion Beyond the Initial Setting

As a follow-up to the discussion of any idiom, look for other instances and other contexts in which that idiom might be used. The natural sequence of informal instruction might include:

- Introduction to an instance of figurative language and elaboration of the meaning of the idiom.
- Frequent adult usage of the idiom over a brief time period, while maintaining the original meaning, or meaning and setting.
- Generalization of meaning by using the idiom in other settings and beyond the original context. (With the idiom a "mixed bag" extend the meaning beyond a weather context of cities receiving rain, snow, or ice.)
- Suggestion of when a specific idiom might have been appropriate in the preceding dialogue.
- Praise for the person with ASD for his or her usage of the idiomatic statement in an appropriate context.

Some individuals may not require all of the instructional support listed above.

Typical children build their knowledge base of idioms one idiom at a time. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder are no different BUT they may need more help both inside and outside of the school setting. Many of us can play a role in helping a person with ASD gain additional access to the richness of the English language.



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