



ДИГИТАЛНИ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТИ В ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО

DIGITAL COMPETENCES IN EDUCATION

CONSTRUCTION OF ONLINE PRACTICE TESTS TO CHECK THE
ACQUISITION OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS WITH COLOURS

Vanya Ivanova*, Gergana Petkova**

Abstract: *Idioms are metaphorical expressions that cannot be translated literally. They are widely used in English because they make everyday speech more interesting and entertaining for native speakers. It is assumed that there are about twenty-five thousand idiomatic expressions in English and one of the most common thematic areas for idioms is colour. Idiomatic expressions are a fun way to enhance the vocabulary and cultural knowledge of learners of English. However, mastering these expressions cause difficulties for students not only because their meaning is not deductible from the meanings of the words comprising it, but also due to the different meaning of colours in the cultures around the world. For instance, purple is usually connected with aristocracy, affluence, and piety across the globe but in Thailand and Brazil it is the colour of bereavement.*

In this article we have described an approach to check the acquisition of idiomatic expressions and facilitate their long-term retention by using online practice tests. These tests are designed by the teacher and taken by students on their personal computers or mobile phones at their own convenience. Furthermore, specifically developed criteria for test construction are listed together with typical test questions based on them. Examples of test items are presented to illustrate the process of test creation. Finally, an appendix of a selection of the most widely used idiomatic expressions with colours is compiled.

Keywords: *practice tests; online tests; self-study; idioms; colours.*

INTRODUCTION

English is a very colourful language, which offers various ways of expressing the same ideas, so it is important for learners of English to have a diverse vocabulary. People often use colours in expressions to spice up their language and make it more exciting. Colours are used all over the world to convey meaning but they symbolize different things in different countries. For example, the red colour usually represents love and passion in Europe, good fortune in China, and marriage in India because of the red

* **Vanya Ivanova** – Chief assistant professor, PhD, university teacher at the Department of Education in Mathematics, Informatics, and Information Technology, Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics, University of Plovdiv “Paisii Hilendarski”, Bulgaria, e-mail: vantod@uni-plovdiv.bg

** **Gergana Petrova** – Senior Lecturer, PhD, Department of Language and Specialized Training (DESO), Foreign Language Section, Medical University – Plovdiv, Bulgaria, e-mail: Gergana.Petkova@mu-plovdiv.bg

henna that brides apply to their hands. Another instance is black, which is worn by everyone as a manifestation of stylishness and good taste but it also stands for sorrow and bad fortune. Since it symbolizes death, people wear black clothes at funerals, yet in Africa it refers to adulthood. In China, the colour of death and mourning is not black but white. Moreover, purple is usually connected with aristocracy, affluence, and piousness across the globe but in Thailand and Brazil it is the colour of bereavement.

These differences are reflected in the idiomatic expressions with colours. Idiomatic expressions are phrases used in our daily lives that have a specific meaning, which is not deductible from the meanings of the words comprising it. Hence, idioms often pose problems to learners of foreign languages since their literal translations can be rather confusing, vague, or they may make no sense at all.

For example, the expression “*blue-eyed boy*” does not refer to the colour of the eyes of the boy in question but makes a reference to a person who is loved, adored, and often favoured by people in a position of authority. Another illustration is a “*golden handshake*” – it does not mean a greeting but a huge amount of money that is given to a retiring or dismissed worker.

Idioms contain information about the history and culture of a country and they broaden learners’ understanding of the foreign language. It is assumed that there are about 25,000 idioms in the English language and many of them feature colours. Consequently, it is important to raise awareness of them and incorporate exercises based on idioms with colours in the foreign language education.

METHODOLOGY

When students are presented with a large amount of new information, it is necessary to use techniques which help them remember it more easily. There are different ways to reinforce the process of learning as described in (Dunlosky 2013: 13), (Dunlosky et al. 2013), and (Karpicke, Blunt 2011). We would like to emphasize two of these techniques – practice testing, defined as “self-testing or taking practice tests over to-be-learned material” and distributed practice – “implementing a schedule of practice that spreads out study activities over time”.

We have been using online practice tests in English on a regular basis at the University of Plovdiv for seven academic years. These tests are developed by the teacher based on the precise material studied during seminars. The objective of integrating self-study tests in the foreign language education is to improve the knowledge and performance of students by offering opportunities to practice and strengthen what they have learned over time thus combining the two techniques mentioned above. Students can review the progress they have made in locations that they have selected and at a time, which is convenient for them – for example, they can do practice tests on personal computers in their own households, or use mobile devices at bus stops while waiting for transportation, queuing to receive a service, etc. It is important that self-study tests include a comparatively small amount of the learning material and that they are conducted shortly after students have been exposed to the content (Ivanova 2014: 167).

Since each practice test has the same structure and method of scoring and it is done on a regular weekly basis, students get used to the types of activities. In addition, students obtain their scores immediately after submitting their tests except for the open question(s) score, which is added after the teacher has assessed the texts. This allows tests to be used not only to evaluate knowledge and skills but also to reinforce them.

To construct self-study tests, 5 criteria have been formulated and followed in accordance with Bloom’s taxonomy (Ivanova, Terzieva 2016: 58):

Criterion I. Reproduction of information.

Criterion II. Understanding the meaning of a word, expression, or a phraseological unit and finding a match.

Criterion III. Detection of errors in various contexts.

Criterion IV. Analysis of the lexical and grammatical items of a sentence.

Criterion V. Text creation.

We will illustrate test construction by applying these criteria to different types of test questions, which are based on idioms with colours collected from a number of sources (Wyatt 2006: 11–12), (Rakadzhiev, Ilieva 1995), (Ilyas 2014). The purpose of creating test items through implementing those

five criteria is to make sure that students remember the structure of the idioms correctly, recognize their meanings and can use them in various contexts.

RESULTS

Since Criterion I is the lowest level in the cognitive domain, the usual type of test questions used for it are multiple choice questions (MCQ) to find out if students accurately remember the form of the idiomatic expressions.

Examples (the correct answers are underlined):

Choose the appropriate word to complete the idiomatic expressions in the sentences.

1. Nobody likes the new student – she’s always – nosing her teachers!

a) red

b) brown

c) white

d) yellow

2. His parents asked him to finish his studies at university until they were in the face but he ignored them.

a) red

b) brown

c) blue

d) black

3. After the children broke the vase, their behavior was the of perfection.

a) white

b) red

c) green

d) pink

Criterion II. usually incorporates multiple choice questions to match idioms with their definitions, and, wherever possible, synonyms and antonyms; True or False items and cloze questions.

I. Definitions: Match the idioms to their meanings.

1. a white elephant

a) a symbol of purity and innocence

b) something useless and expensive that you can’t get rid of

c) a little lie that you tell in order not to hurt other people’s feelings

d) an important day that is pleasant to remember

2. the air is turning blue

a) the weather is getting cold

b) to walk when the sun is going down

c) to use bad language, to curse and swear

d) to be unable to fall asleep

3. in the pink

a) to be in good health

b) not to have enough money

c) to be very quiet and shy

d) to have great admiration for oneself

II. Definitions: Select the most appropriate idiom to substitute the expression in the brackets:

1. The husband (was very angry) when his wife told him she had scratched his car.

a) rolled out the red carpet

b) saw red

c) was tickled pink

d) looked at the world through rose-coloured glasses

2. Congratulations! I hear that you took your exam (effortlessly and with huge success)!

a) white as a ghost

- b) yellow-bellied
- c) out of the blue
- d) with flying colours

3. What's wrong with you? You've been (bad-tempered) all evening.

- a) in a black mood
- b) in the red
- c) black and blue
- d) green

III. Synonyms: *Select the idiom which has a similar meaning to the specified one.*

1. He was given the carte blanche to travel to India. He was

- a) shown the red card
- b) browned off
- c) whitewashed
- d) given the green light

2. He was red in the face because of the mistakes he had made. He was

- a) tickled pink
- b) beet red
- c) red hot
- d) in the red

3. She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth. She

- a) looks through rose-tinted spectacles
- b) is a white-collar worker
- c) has a yellow streak
- d) was cradled in purple

IV. Antonyms: *Select the idiom with the reverse meaning.*

1. She worked hard to keep her business *in the black*.

- a) in the dark
- b) in the red
- c) blue
- d) black and blue

2. The boy's relatives consider him a *black sheep* because he left the family business.

- a) boy in blue
- b) white elephant
- c) red herring
- d) golden boy

3. What has happened? You look *green around the gills*.

- a) in the pink
- b) black and blue
- c) yellow-bellied
- d) browned off

The test questions referring to Criterion III. are usually MCQ to choose the part of a sentence with a spelling or a grammar mistake and True or False items to decide if there are lexical or grammatical errors in the sentences or not.

Choose the part of the sentence which contains a spelling or a grammar mistake.

1. Nobody knew who had been stealing money from the office, until the new salesman was caught red-handing opening the safe.

- a) nobody knew
- b) had been stealing
- c) was caught red-handing (red-handed)
- d) opening

2. He keeps saying that the grass is always more green on the other side.

- a) keeps saying
- b) the grass
- c) more green (greener)
- d) on the other side

3. I hadn't heard from Peter for almost three years, so when an email from him came out of the blue, I was very surprised.

- a) hadn't heard (hadn't heard)
- b) an email from
- c) came out of the blue
- d) was

Mark the sentences as True if they are free of lexical or grammatical errors, or False if you have found a mistake.

1. He has filled in a lot of job applications since he got a pink slip.

- a. True
- b. False

2. My parents eat out ones in a blue moon.

- a. True
- b. False (once)

3. I don't think he was using his gray matter when he refused to work overtime although he needed the money.

- a. True
- b. False

Criterion IV. refers to the application of idioms in context. Besides multiple choice items, short-answer test tasks are designed to write down the most appropriate word(s)/expression(s) or a grammatical form in a sentence.

Select the option which describes the meaning of the sentence as closely as possible.

1. My niece has green fingers.

- a) She is always dropping things and breaking them.
- b) She is very young and inexperienced.
- c) Se is a very jealous girl.
- d) She is good at gardening.

2. My neighbour is screaming blue murder.

- a) He is shouting because someone is trying to kill him.
- b) He is sad and feels like crying.
- c) He is so angry that he wants to kill someone.
- d) He is protesting noisily.

3. He blacked out during the office party.

- a) He was excluded socially by his colleagues at the event.
- b) He fainted at the party.
- c) He was wearing a black bow tie and a dinner jacket at the celebration.
- d) He tried very hard to please everyone at the party.

Choose the most appropriate way to conclude the sentences.

1. The project we've been working on for a few months

- a) rolled out the red carpet
- b) has raised a red flag
- c) has raised a white flag
- d) has been given the green light

2. You never get up before midday and you are calling me lazy? That's

- a) the pot calling the kettle black
- b) a red-letter day
- c) a white elephant

d) screaming blue murder

3. I feel tired this morning because I was last night and didn't go to bed until 4 o'clock.

a) in the red

b) rolling the red carpet

c) painting the town red

d) given a black look

Write down the most appropriate idiomatic expression to complete the sentence.

1. The crowded café was like the of Calcutta. (Black Hole)

2. I couldn't ask her any questions because she was streak all through breakfast. (talking a blue)

3. When you are telling me such nonsense, do you see green? (in my eye)

Finally, the test questions with reference to Criterion V. (text creation) usually require students to compose a text with a limited number of words to explain the meaning of a selection of idioms and/or give examples illustrating their meaning and use.

Explain the meaning of the idiomatic expression and describe a situation from your own experience in about 100-150 words to illustrate its use.

1. If something comes as a bolt from the blue, it means that

.....

2. If you admit that you have told a white lie, you mean that

.....

3. If you tell someone that two blacks do not make a white, you mean that

.....

DISCUSSION

It is important for learners to remember idiomatic expressions correctly since constituents of an idiom cannot be substituted with synonymous words – that would completely change the meaning of the expression. For example, we cannot say “see pink hippos” instead of “see pink elephants”, or “delighted pink” instead of “tickled pink”. For this reason, practice tests can be very valuable because they offer an opportunity to consider and exercise the form and the meaning of idioms as well as use them in relevant personal examples.

Additionally, practice tests can be designed to test exclusively idioms with colours or they can incorporate these idioms with other relevant learning material. As can be seen from the examples in this article, test items can check not only vocabulary and spelling but also grammar, for example use of grammatical tenses, prepositions, etc.

CONCLUSION

Based on feedback from undergraduates at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics at the University of Plovdiv, online practice tests are helpful and beneficial. Students most often do the tests on their smart phones in time and place that is convenient for them. Learners claim that they like the variety of questions and that practice tests help them to remember idioms.

We are planning to continue incorporating self-study tests in the process of teaching English and enriching our database of test questions with idiomatic expressions with other components such as clothes, parts of the body, food and drink, etc.

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Appendix – A list of some commonly used idioms and expressions with colours.

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APPENDIX

A list of some commonly used idioms and expressions with colours has been compiled and uploaded (**Appendix**) to assist both students in their foreign language studies and teachers in their work when developing test questions to check the acquisition of idiomatic expressions with colour.