

BOOK SECTION

IDIOMS IN ACTION

George Reeves.
Rowley, Massachusetts:
Newbury House Publishers,
Inc., 1975. Pp. xiii, 100

George Reeves, in his workbook, Idioms in Action, seeks to overcome the problem of effectively teaching idiomatic expressions without boring students with lengthy idiom lists, irrelevant and sometimes inaccurate definitions or equivalents, and meaningless drills. The rationale he follows in his technique is that in order to provide the student with an understanding of idioms and the ability to produce them in speech and writing, these must be introduced and then practiced extensively in contexts which not only reinforce understanding, but which inform and even amuse the student as well as relate to their interests. His approach is to present idioms embedded in social and linguistic contexts and then to provide various speaking and writing exercises so that the student uses them repeatedly in meaningful contexts.

This workbook is intended for advanced beginning or intermediate students whose recognition vocabulary is about 2,000 words. It is divided into two parts. In the first, it is assumed that the student can manipulate the simple and progressive present, past, and future tenses. In the second part, he must be able to use the simple and progressive past and perfect tenses. The content and style of conversation in the dialogues make this book appropriate for young adults, whether young professional, housewife, or university student.

Idioms in Action treats 150 idioms frequently used in American English, each of the two parts contains fifteen exercises. Five idioms are introduced in each exercise in a dialogue between a French girl, Mimi, and a Japanese youth, Sam. These thirty dialogues represent a running commentary on modern American life as they see it.

Each of the 30 exercises consists, then, of the dialogue which introduces the five idioms in context, followed by six writing activities for the student. These activities do not vary in type from exercise to exercise, and they require responses ranging from highly structured to nearly free composition. The first activity emphasizes practice in spelling the idioms; the second requires the student to substitute each of the five idioms for their equivalents within sentential contexts. The third and fourth activities require the student to choose and use the idioms in a paragraph context, and the choice is made more difficult

because the number of options has been broadened to include idioms from the previous exercise. In the fifth activity, the student is asked to substitute the idioms for their given equivalents which are embedded in incomplete sentences, and then to complete the sentences with his own words. The last activity of each exercise requires the student to write a paragraph on a given topic in which he must use the five idioms presented in the exercise.

After every third exercise, there is a test which contains three parts. Part A consists of rearranging letters to form idioms, and then of identifying their definitions from a given list. In Part B, the student is required to complete sentences with the most appropriate idioms from a list provided using the correct tense and person. Part C of the test requires that the teacher dictate incomplete sentences using equivalents of certain idioms presented in the preceding three exercises. The student must take the dictation, change the equivalents for the appropriate idioms, and then complete the sentences with his own words. The format of each of the ten tests in the workbook is exactly the same.

The exercises and tests are laid out in such a way that each occupies both sides of one page, with spaces provided to write the answers. The pages may be detached from the book to be turned in to the teacher, or perforated and kept in a loose leaf notebook. It is this feature of Idioms in Action which makes it more like a workbook than a text book. Its semi-programmed nature makes it largely self-correctable, so that it could conceivably be used by students without much help from a teacher. There is a sample exercise at the beginning, with examples and the answers filled in so that the student has a clear idea of how to use the book before he begins it. No keys are provided for the tests or for the exercises, but the student who is working alone should be able to check his answers with his work done in the preceding exercises, with the dialogues, or with the Index at the back, without much difficulty.

One very positive feature of this workbook is the Index, which is really a sort of glossary of the idioms presented in the exercises. Each entry has the page number where it was introduced, a phrase of equivalent meaning, and a sentence in which it is used. Although it is often difficult to find appropriate equivalents for idiomatic expressions, Reeves was quite successful in doing this. His glossary would be valuable to the student as a reference even after he has finished using the workbook.

The topics of conversation treated in the commentaries between Mimi and Sam mostly concern their impressions of American life and customs. This discussion may be considered one of the salient features of this work, since many of the dialogues are really miniature culture capsules, and provide the student with glimpses into American life style. For example, topics such as the use of first names, punctuality, eating habits, finding a job, shopping

habits, religion, home construction, and dinner invitations are treated in interesting and sometimes humorous contexts. Many of these dialogues could be valuable tools for the teaching of culture, and they may be expanded and developed by the teacher into entire units on cultural characteristics of American society.

It would be appropriate to mention that many of the remarks made by Sam and Mimi, especially the latter, are quite critical of American life style; for example, about American food: "It's always the same... it's bad for the stomach;" about manners: "Americans aren't polite. On the whole, they're even impolite;" about interests: "Sex! Sex! Sex! That's all Americans talk or read about. "; about TV: "I make a point of avoiding American TV. It's for kids and idiots;" about women: "Up to now I've only suspected American women were stupid. Now I know it;" about personal habits: "... Americans eat like pigs and smoke like chimneys;" about racial equality: "Isn't the U.S. terribly racist?" Mimi especially is very critical, and at one point Sam asks her, "Why do you find fault with Americans?"

Whether or not this aspect of the dialogues is interpreted as a negative characteristic of the workbook depends largely on the teacher and how he uses the material, on the students, and on their particular learning situation. This type of commentary would certainly be more effective with mature learners. These criticisms, often in quite humorous contexts, may very well serve to heighten interest, and open discussion and enquiry into the topics at hand.

Although Reeves emphasizes the need for both extensive written and oral practice in order to make an idiom a living part of a student's new language, he offers very few suggestions for oral work. Among the suggestions he does offer to the teacher are reading the dialogues aloud, a couple of oral fill-in-the-blank-type activities, and an oral reproduction of the dialogues in role-playing activities. Whether or not this lack of ready-made oral practice exercises represents a disadvantage of the teacher who wishes to use Idioms in Action depends again on the teacher, the students, and their particular learning situation and objectives.

For those teachers and intermediate students who consider the learning of idioms important, Idioms in Action could be an excellent auxiliary workbook. Since the students can do much of the work on their own, it could be assigned as homework, and once every week or two, class time could be spent on oral practice of the idioms and discussion of the cultural content. Because it effectively combines the teaching of idioms with aspects of culture, both of which are so often ignored in basic EFL textbooks, this workbook might be just the complement needed.

Constance Holcomb
Escuela Nacional de Estudios Profesionales Aragon
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México