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ON SOME WAYS OF TEACHING IDIOMS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

As is known, Business English is abundant in phraseological units or idioms. Therefore, it is vital for students majoring in business to study them thoroughly to be able to use them in appropriate business settings to achieve their communication goals. The paper touches upon various theories regarding the classification of idioms based on peculiar characteristics typical of each group, namely semantic and grammatical inseparability, and offers a range of exercises to develop the skills of using business idioms in English.

Key words: *Business English, business idioms, phraseological units, exercises for teaching idioms*

English has long been considered to be an international language for business communication. It enables people all around the world to conduct negotiations, companies to achieve their ultimate goals, etc. Business English is widely used in almost all spheres of activity including science, information technologies, economics, advertising, finance, medicine, etc. It is characterized by formal or informal styles inherent both in written and spoken language and by the use of business words, terms and specific set phrases or idioms which make it more expressive and colourful. That is why, it is very useful for students majoring in business to study business idioms which will help them avoid failures in communication and reach their communication goals.

In linguistics idioms or, as some scholars call them, *set phrases* or *phraseological units* are defined as fixed expressions whose meaning cannot be interpreted as a combination of the meanings of their component parts /Виноградов, 1977: 140-161; Смирницкий, 1998: 206; Cowie, 2009: 47/. However, there are diverging opinions regarding the characteristic features of phrases that can be properly termed as *phraseological units* or *idioms*. Research suggests various definitions of these units and proposes various criteria to support their classification.

Thus, in Smirnitsky's system of classification, *phraseological units* are presented as word combinations which function as 'monolithic' lexical units, which to a greater or lesser extent are word equivalents (e.g. *take care, court of justice, in order to*). The linguist believes they should be regarded as a part of the lexical

system, a feature which allows us to describe their semantic relationships with other lexical units /Смирницкий, 1998: 203/.

As for the central characteristic feature of phraseological units, Smirnitsky defines it as idiomaticity, which, in turn, conveys certain semantic integrity (inseparability) to such units, thus determining their function as that of single units. Another functional feature along with semantic inseparability is grammatical inseparability. It should be borne in mind that the two features are interrelated and determine one another. The components of a phraseological unit should be regarded as words which have been used in accordance with certain structural and grammatical criteria typical of this group. In particular, as prefabricated units, which are reproduced ready-made in speech, such combinations resist grammatical changes in their individual parts, i.e. the possible grammatical changes refer to the unit as a whole. For example, in the phraseological unit *on the other hand* the definite article *the* cannot be replaced by *a*, *that*, *this*, *some* or any other determiner. Nor can the noun *hand* take a plural or possessive form.

Relying on the criterion of functional inseparability (including both semantic and grammatical inseparability + reproducibility), Smirnitsky singles out *phraseological combinations*, *idioms proper* and *traditional phrases*, all of which are regarded as distinct groups.

Traditional phrases, which are characterized by reproducibility, are usual collocations whose inner form is transparent, e.g. *make a report*, *dress*, *tea*, etc, i.e. they lack any idiomaticity. Alternatively, the overall meaning of *idioms proper* cannot be deduced from those of the component members, as can be seen in the following examples: *one for the road* – a drink before a journey or before leaving a bar; *one sandwich short of a picnic* – not very smart, lacking intelligence; *be ahead of the curve* – be more advanced than the competitors, etc.

As far as *phraseological combinations* are concerned (*cut two ways* – to have two different effects at the same time, usually one good and one bad; *fall in love* – to be very attracted to someone and begin to love them), their figurative character – the metaphoric image underlying such units – is not perceived as such by a speaker, although if viewed diachronically, metaphoric transference is revealed here too, with the only reservation that the underlying metaphor is dead /Смирницкий, 1998: 210/.

The renowned Russian linguist Vinogradov, whose hypothesis lends support to many further theoretical developments, discusses the category of *phraseological units*, proceeding from two characteristics: semantic opacity or idiomaticity, and structural stability. By emphasizing these features of phraseological units as distinct from free word-groups, Vinogradov actually considers stability and lack of motivation as definitive. His umbrella term includes *phraseological fusions*, *phraseological unities* and *phraseological collocations*.

In the first group (*phraseological fusions*), the two criteria of classification are expressed most distinctly. These are unmotivated, semantically opaque (hence

idiomatic) and structurally fixed units, in which the overall meaning (combined lexical meaning) cannot be derived from the meaning of constituent elements, and no variability of lexical components is allowed (*break even* – to have expenses equal to profits).

Phraseological unities constitute the second group in Vinogradov's classification. They consist of partially motivated units, including cases of metaphorical extension, and are indicative of some explanation (*the lesser of two evils* – the less unpleasant of two choices, neither of which is good; *back to square one* – back to where one started). As a rule, these units are characterized by a comparatively high degree of stability.

According to Vinogradov, the boundary between the first and the second groups is not clear-cut and their differentiation often depends on speakers' linguistic and cultural experience. That is to say, for some speakers an expression might have a figurative sense which is not yet completely fossilized, for others it is entirely opaque and lacks any motivation /Виноградов, 1977/. That is why, when teaching idioms teachers should take into account all the features of *set expressions*.

The third group is that of *phraseological collocations*, which are made up of habitual collocations and have strictly limited variability. One component member of the word-group is used in its literal meaning. The sense of the figuratively used component is phraseologically bound (i.e. it is habitually collocated with another word): for example, in *catch twenty two* – a situation in which any move that a person can make will lead to a trouble – the sense of *catch* is phraseologically bound. Cf.: *catch a mouse/cold/* etc. /Виноградов, 1977: 147/.

It should be mentioned that in spite of controversies over terminology, scholars recognize the basic subdivision between *set phrases* and *set sentences*. *Set phrases* are divided into collocations and idioms, while *set sentences* include a number of traditional categories such as proverbs, catchphrases and slogans. The difference between *set phrases* and *set sentences* is not only that the latter are longer and more complex but also that they have diverse uses and involve various kinds of meanings. *Set phrases* are word-combinations which are more or less fixed in form and function as parts of simple sentences. Thus *red tape* is a noun phrase that can function as a subject or object. *Set sentences*, in contrast, have meanings that mostly express the way they function as wholes both in spoken and written communication. For instance, the slogan *all we do is driven by you* conveys two meanings: *we make the car you drive* and *we are always motivated by our customers' wishes*. There are sentences which reflect the speaker's reactions to the other people and their messages, for example, "Are you with me?", "You know what I mean", "How do you do?" "I beg your pardon", etc. Such expressions are called 'speech formulae' or 'gambits' /Cowie, 2009: 47-52/.

From this short overview of the classification of *phraseological units*, it is obvious that idioms are ready-made linguistic units characterized by the stability of use (as such units are elements of language and not occasional combinations),

lexical stability (with the prefabricated wholes being replaced in their parts only partially) and semantic stability (the invariant lexical meaning of the set expression being preserved despite the occasional changes). It follows that for gaining insight into the meanings of idioms students should be aware of these peculiarities. They should try to analyze the meanings of their separate components to reveal the partially transferred meanings in case of *phraseological unities* and *collocations* (*blow a deal* – to ruin a business deal with someone; *push a product* – to promote a product) as well as memorize the definitions of *phraseological fusions* (*bean counter* – an accountant; *across the board* – including everyone or everything).

There is a wide range of techniques and activities for teaching business idioms in English. One of the most entertaining ways is teaching them with the help of visuals explaining the context in which they are used. The pictures can illustrate the literal meaning of idioms and, consequently, students can guess their meanings. The internet is rich in learning resources that can be easily adapted for classroom use. For instance, *fluentu.com* website offers a lot of interesting illustrations of idioms followed by the instances of their usage. Let us consider the following picture, which when followed by a dialogue, illustrates the meaning of the idiom and the context in which it can be used:

Activity 1

Get the ball rolling (to get started)



Sam: Have you started the English class project yet?

Sarah: No, not yet. I need to ask the teacher a few more questions first.

Sam: You'd better *get the ball rolling*! The project is due next week!

By teaching idioms in this way, the teacher should first provide the picture and have the students guess the meaning behind the idiom. Then the teacher can illustrate the idiom in the context of a dialogue and ask the learners to think of further contextual uses of this idiom.

Quite often the meaning of an idiom can be easily guessed from the context, as shown in the following assignment:

Activity 2

Read the following sentences and guess the meaning of idioms from the given context:

1. She *knows this business inside out*. We should definitely hire her for this position.
2. We must get it done immediately. We don't have enough time. We're *running behind schedule*.
3. Let's not waste time! *Get straight to the point* and discuss the main issues related to the business.
4. Since you have been away for a long period of time, many changes occurred in the company. Let me *put you in the picture* and tell what exactly has happened.

My teaching experience shows that students find it hard to memorize a long list of idioms with their explanations out of context. That is why, an alternative way to teach business idioms can be practising targeted texts that provide information on a certain topic and explaining the meanings of the idioms right on the spot. For example, the passage in the following activity is about maintaining sound relationships in business and thus making one's business successful.

Activity 3

Read the following text and underline idiomatic expressions with their meanings. Decide which one you like best:

Communication is one of the keys to success in business. It helps to get the ball rolling (get started) and to keep you on the right track (to continue on the right path or process). When everyone is in the office loop (understands what is happening), the business has more of a chance to be ahead of the curve (doing better than expected).

When your business begins to take off (move ahead and do well) and get in the black (become profitable opposed to being "in the red"), you can kickback (rest and enjoy your time) a little. You must always be on the ball (to be alert and aware), but some time can be spent shooting the breeze (talking casually without purpose). You still need to stay on your toes (pay attention and be aware) but having a little less pressure and a little more freedom will remind you of why you got in the business in the first place. You'll know the ropes (have knowledge of) and be able to troubleshoot (solve problems) with confidence to get the bugs out (find the mistakes or prevent problems) and not get so bummed out (tired out or stressed out). /Retrieved from <http://www.talktocanada.com/>

Sometimes non-motivated idioms are best taught and memorized by students when the equivalents in their mother tongue are provided. This practice again can be followed by examples of contextual use and their adequate translation. The following activity serves to illustrate the point:

Activity 4

1. to be on the same wavelength – быть на одной волне

We are on the same wavelength about this issue. – Мы на одной волне насчет этого дела.

2. in the red – в долгах

The company has been operating in the red for many years. – Компания пребывает в долгах уже много лет.

3. to give the green light – дать добро

We have been given the green light to launch this business. – Нам дали добро на то, чтобы начать этот бизнес.

4. to sell ice to Eskimos – продать снег чукче зимой

She is so persuasive, she could sell ice to Eskimos. – Она так убедительно говорит, что может продать снег чукче зимой.

5. at a premium – по высокой цене

When tabs first came out, they were selling at a premium. – Когда планшеты впервые появились на рынке, они продавались по очень высокой цене.

6. to push the envelope – поднять планку

The company decided to push the envelope and to boost the sales of its products abroad. – Компания решила поднять планку и повысить уровень продаж за рубежом.

Students can further practise the vocabulary of business idioms through matching or multiple choice exercises:

Activity 5

Match the words in column A with those in Column B to make correct idioms:

Column A

1. budget

2. buy (something)

3. call

4. circulate

Column B

on credit

a loan

the agenda

crunch

Another version of this exercise is matching idioms with their adequate definitions to be chosen from multiple variants:

Activity 6

1. to break the ice

a) to promote a product

b) to pave the way

c) to pass a law

2. *at a loss*

- a) at a premium
- b) beyond understanding
- c) below cost

Finally, students can be assigned a gap-filling task, as shown in the example below:

Activity 7

Complete the gaps with the following expressions in appropriate forms:

Cut back, fair play, gain ground, in black and white, carve out a niche

1. The company was able to _____ for their product among university students.
2. The company has been _____ on entertainment expenses recently.
3. The company has a reputation for _____ when they are bargaining with their employees.
4. Our company is _____ in its attempt to be the best in the industry.
5. The company refused to deal with the customer's complaints until they were _____.

To conclude, idioms are ready-made linguistic units whose overall meaning is not restricted to the total sum of meanings of their constituents. Business English is rich in such specific units, and in order to understand them properly students should know their correct definitions and equivalents in their mother tongue to successfully achieve their communication goals and demonstrate a good command of English. By applying a range of useful exercises teachers can enable students to gain insight into the meanings of idioms and use them accurately in respective communication settings.

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L. ՏԵՐ-ՍԱՐԳՍՅԱՆ - Գործարար անգլերենում դարձվածքների ուսուցման եղանակների շուրջ. – Գործարար անգլերենի բառապաշարը բնութագրվում է դարձվածքների առկայությամբ: Այս առումով, գործարար անգլերենն ուսումնասիրողների համար կարևոր է այս միավորների նշանակությունների և վերջիններիս կիրառման կանոնների իմացությունը: Սույն

հողվածում ներկայացվում են մի շարք վարժություններ, որոնք կարող են նպաստել դարձվածքների ուսուցմանը և գործարար անգլերենում դրանց օգտագործման հմտությունների զարգացմանը:

Բանալի բառեր. գործարար անգլերեն, գործարար անգլերենի դարձվածքներ, դարձվածքային միավորներ, դարձվածքների ուսուցմանը նպաստող վարժություններ

Л. ТЕР-САРГСЯН – О некоторых способах обучения идиомам в деловом английском. – Фразеологические единицы, или идиомы, являются неотъемлемой частью делового английского языка. В связи с этим, для студентов, изучающих деловой английский, важно знание как значений таких идиоматических единиц, так и особенностей их употребления. В статье предлагается ряд упражнений, способствующих обучению идиоматических выражений, а также развитию навыков их употребления в деловом английском.

Ключевые слова: деловой английский, идиомы делового английского, фразеологические единицы, упражнения для обучения идиомам