

# ‘Taking the Bull by the Horns’ with English Business Idioms

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## Abstract

*This study looks at the recognition of written idioms by Romanian business students learning English as a second language. An experiment has been conducted, in which 114 students of economic sciences were given definitions of idioms, with the task of finding the idiom that best fits the definition. They were also asked to rate the degree of familiarity with the idiom (1 – Familiar, 2 – Less familiar, 3 – Unfamiliar).*

*The analysis of the students’ matches reveals that less than half of the students involved in the study were able to make a clear connection between the idiom and the proposed definition. Upon further evaluation, we are confident in our assessment that students in the field of business are in need of a more detailed course presentation on idioms and colloquial language commonly found in a corporate office building.*

**Keywords:** idiom, business, ESL, ambiguity, literal interpretation

**J.E.L. classification:** A22

## 1. Introduction

The aim of the study is to analyse the familiarity of Romanian business students with some common English idiomatic expressions in the field of economic studies. As studies have shown, “[t]he contact between business people and their interrelationships generally leads to some kind of linguistic inter-influencing [...] While being closely related to general language, the language of economics is also a sublanguage used both by specialists [...] and by law people. The importance of economics is obvious it determines much of our everyday life since we all are involved in an economic context by being employers, employees, customers / clients, suppliers etc.” (Buzarna-Tihenea (Galbeaza) & Nadrag, 2013, p. 134).

Our assumption was that Romanian students have a tendency to focus more on the literal meaning of words, rather than taking into consideration the possibility of a metaphorical or figurative aspect. This study may contribute to the development of the curricula of business English courses in order to include the more in-depth study of relevant idioms.

## 2. Materials and methods

The research method used was the application of a mixed matching series of 21 definitions of English business idioms. Half of the idioms can be decomposed to understand the figurative meaning, while half cannot. Moreover, half of the idioms have a Romanian equivalent very close to the structure of the English idiom, while half do not.

114 students of economic sciences (finance and banks – 35 1<sup>st</sup> year students, accounting – 52 1<sup>st</sup> year students, international business – 7 3<sup>rd</sup> year students, management – 9 1<sup>st</sup> year students and marketing – 11 3<sup>rd</sup> year students) were presented with definitions for 21 idioms, with the task of finding the idiom that best fits the definition. They were also asked to rate the degree of familiarity

with the idiom (1 – Familiar, 2 – Less familiar, 3 – Unfamiliar). The students' answers were then cross-referenced with the types of the idioms in terms of familiarity and compositionality, in order to identify any false friends which could appear based on their literal translation and interpretation in conjunction with Romanian idioms. Students were given the possibility not to make all the matches in case they could not establish a connection between a certain idiom and a definition, in order to avoid mechanical matches which are not based on a logical process from the part of the student.

Similar research has been conducted by Wendy A. Schweigert (1986), Robert Timothy Reagan (1987), Gregory Schraw et al. (1988), Stephen J. Popiel and Ken McRae (1988), Alison Ai Ching Lim et al. (2009), Zahra Fotovatnia and Mehdi Goudarzi (2014) etc.

### **3. What are idioms?**

Idioms have been defined as “common figurative expressions used in colloquial speech [...] characterized by a figurative or idiomatic meaning that cannot be derived from the meanings of the individual words in the phrase” (Schweigert, 1986, pp. 33, see also Reagan, 1987, pp. 417). However, several idiom-processing models have been advanced, some of them admitting to the compositionality of idioms, i.e. the possibility to draw the meaning by considering the constituting lexemes of the idiom. For instance, the Idiomatic Processing Model (proposed by Gibbs, 1980 and Schweigert and Moates, 1988) states that the figurative meaning is activated first, while the Idiom Decomposition Hypothesis (of Gibbs and Nayak, 1989) admits that in the case of some idioms the meaning can be drawn by analyzing its constituent words (Ai Ching Lim, et al., 2009, p. 1779). Similarly, Bobrow and Bell's (1973) Idiom List Hypothesis proposes that idioms are stored separately from the rest of the lexicon, while Cronk et al., 1993 and Swinney and Cutler, 1979 propose the Lexical Representation Hypothesis supporting the opposite, that idioms are stored and retrieved like all the other words (Ai Ching Lim, et al., 2009, p. 1779).

There are several idiom characteristics to take into account, such as familiarity (how well known the idiom is), literality (idioms may have both literal and figurative meanings), compositionality (the possibility of decomposing the idiom in order to understand the figurative meaning) and predictability. This study dwells on the final two, trying to establish the degree in which Romanian business students studying English are able to draw the meaning of an idiom based on the analysis of its constituent words and on its predictability in terms of its similarity to Romanian idioms.

### **4. Results and discussions**

The first idiom the students were faced with was ‘writing on the wall’, which refers to the evidence and clues that something (usually negative) is going to happen. Out of 87 students to give a response to this item, only 14 managed to correctly identify the meaning of the idiom. Quite a large number of students, namely 11 students, identified the idiom as a means of expressing excessive rules, procedures, and regulations that make it difficult to accomplish something. We might attribute this interpretation of the idiom to a more literal translation of sorts and therefore see it represent the actual writing on the wall (or blackboard) of a project or writing of any sort. Given that most Romanian students used to having rules and regulations present on the walls of a classroom, the association of this idiom with the chosen definition of these students is understandable.

The second given idiom, ‘upper hand’, makes reference to a situation in which someone has an advantage over someone else. This item received a number of 20 correct answers out of 103. A number of 10 students considered the idiom as referring to a situation in which someone has no money. This particular choice might be explained by an association with the raising of the hands when someone gives up or surrenders after a defeat. An addition number of 7 students considered this idiom to be representative of a small amount of money, perhaps following the thinking of the 10 previously mentioned students.

The third idiom under discussion was ‘uphill battle’, usually associated with the idea of something that is difficult to achieve because of obstacles and difficulties. This particular item

scored only 30 correct answers out of a total of 95 given answers. A number of 9 students considered this idiom to represent excessive rules, procedures, and regulations that make it difficult to accomplish something. The response is quite similar in meaning and easy to justify if we take into consideration the legislative background of the students and their contact with regulations and procedures which will make their future work even harder. A number of 6 students understood the idiom as representative of the evidence and clues that something (usually negative) is going to happen. This could be explained by a literal interpretation of the idiom in seeing the battle as something negative and given that it is uphill one can see it from a clear distance.

The fourth idiom the students were presented with was 'under the table', which represents something done secretly (and usually illegally). This item received a number of 37 correct answers out of 90. A number of 5 students identified the idiom to represent learning the basics of something. This might be explained by a literal translation of the idiom and an interpretation in which people need to learn all that is beneath the table before they can rise and sit at the table.

The fifth idiom given was 'up in the air', which stands for something which is undecided. This item received a number of 29 correct answers out of 89. 7 students believed the idiom to represent the evidence and clues that something (usually negative) is going to happen. This might be explained by an association with a similar Romanian idiom similar to 'there is something fishy in the air'. Another 6 students considered the idiom to mean being alert and aware of things. This also might be explained by a literal translation of the idiom, and the representation of the human body in an upward position of alertness and given the high position of awareness.

The sixth idiom from the list was 'to twist someone's arm', which means to persuade or convince someone to do something that he or she does not want to do. For this particular item, 45 out of 95 students were able to correctly identify the idiom. A number of 7 students identified the idiom as representing something done secretly (and usually illegally). And this might be explained if we are to translate the idiom and take it literally, namely getting someone to do something by using force, which is illegal. Another 6 students matched the idiom to the idea of having an advantage over someone else, which might have been confused with the similar idiom of 'having the upper hand'.

The seventh given idiom on the list was 'on the ball', which means to be alert and aware of things. The item received 21 correct answers out of the 83 given answers. A number of 11 students understood the idiom as meaning to be in control of a situation and aware of changes, which can be explained if we take into consideration the popular saying of 'keep your eyes on the ball', similar to a Romanian saying meaning to pay attention to changes and be in control of a situation. Another 7 students identified the idiom as meaning to start something (a project, for example), which might be explained if we take into consideration the idea of starting something new, of beginning a game which involves a ball.

The eighth idiom given was 'smooth or clear sailing', representing a situation where success is achieved without difficulties. This idiom received 19 correct matches out of 93. A number of 9 students identified the idiom as a really obvious or really easy to make decision. The choice is one easy to make if we are to translate the idiom into Romanian, as smooth and clear indicate something easy and sailing can be associated to a decision or a path to be taken. Another 7 students identified the idiom with something which occurs if a law is unclear or omits information, which might be explained by a literal translation and rather wishful thinking on the part of the students.

The ninth given idiom was 'no brainer', which refers to a really obvious or really easy to make decision. The idiom received 24 correct answers out of 84 given answers. A number of 5 students matched this particular idiom with the idea of something which is undecided, which might be explained by a literal translation and the idea of not having a brain and therefore not being able to decide on a certain matter.

The tenth idiom on the list was 'loophole', expressing a situation which occurs if a law is unclear or omits information. This item received 24 correct answers out of the 81 answers given. A number of 7 students identified the idiom as meaning modern and technologically advanced (admitting they hadn't heard the expression before), while 6 others considered it to represent a situation in which someone has no money. The second definition might be explained by the presence of the 'hole' inside the word, acting as a false friend to the students and tricking them into thinking it might mean a lack of wealth.

The eleventh idiom given was 'learn the ropes', which refers to learning the basics of something. Out of 94 answers given, 40 students were able to correctly identify the idiom. A number of 11 students identified the idiom as representing something which occurs if a law is unclear or omits information. If we are to take under consideration the Romanian background, we understand students are familiar with the expression of 'pulling the ropes' and altering or manipulating the law in order to achieve a desired effect. Another 7 students understood the idiom as representing something which is undecided, which we might attribute to the students' instinct of translating their idioms into Romanian and identifying this particular idiom with a Romanian expression similar to 'people pulling the strings', which might be interpreted as things are undecided or not certain.

The twelfth idiom on the list was 'to get the ball rolling', which means to start something (a project, for example). A number of 33 out of 86 students managed to correctly identify the idiom. A number of 6 students understood this idiom to mean learning the basics of something, which might make sense if we are to translate it into Romanian, as it implies to begin or to initiate something, therefore prompting the students to think of the basics. The same number of students believed the idiom means to be in control of a situation and aware of changes.

The thirteenth idiom the students encountered was 'on top of something', which refers to being in control of a situation and aware of changes. From the 91 students to give an answer to this item, only 31 managed to give the correct one. A staggering number of 22 students believed this idiom is representative for a situation in which someone has an advantage over someone else. We might attribute this to the language barrier and the 'false friends' of students of a foreign language, as a Romanian translation of the idiom can mislead students to think that this particular idiom means to be above someone else and on top of the ranking order, therefore to have an advantage over someone else. Another number of 9 students believed this idiom refers to a situation where success is achieved without difficulties, which can be easily explained if we are to translate it into Romanian, with the sense of being in control of the situation and, therefore, achieving success without difficulty.

The fourteenth idiom in the list was 'to put the cart before the horse', meaning doing or thinking about things in the wrong order. While 92 students answered this item, only 39 managed to give the correct answer. An additional number of 6 students identified the idiom as meaning a really obvious or really easy to make decision, most likely because of a poor literal translation or understanding of the idiom, considering the order of importance, placing the cart first and only then the horse.

The fifteenth given idiom was 'red tape', which refers to excessive rules, procedures, and regulations that make it difficult to accomplish something. A number of 21 students gave the correct answer out of a total of 84 given answers. A number of 11 students believed the idiom means something that is difficult to achieve because of obstacles and difficulties. The two definitions are not actually that far apart if we come to their simple translation in Romanian a reason why some of the students might in fact have been confused and missed the correct answer.

The sixteenth idiom given was 'state of the art', used in connection with something which is modern and technologically advanced. A number of 84 students gave an answer to this item but only 30 of them managed to correctly associate the definition to the idiom. A number of 8 students considered the idiom to be representative of a situation where success is achieved without difficulties.

The seventeenth idiom given was 'to take the bull by the horns', which means to directly confront a difficult situation. From the 97 given answers only 44 students gave the correct answer. A number of 6 students considered this particular idiom to be representative of something done secretly (and usually illegally), an additional 6 believed it to mean to be alert and aware of things, while another 6 considered it was representative for doing or thinking about things in the wrong order.

The eighteenth idiom on the list was 'to throw in the towel', which means to quit. This item received a number of 95 answers out of which only 31 were correct. A number of 8 students considered this idiom means to be alert and aware of things, while a number of 7 students associated it with being modern and technologically advanced and to earning the family living.

The nineteenth idiom on the list was 'to bring home the bacon' meaning earning the family's

living. This particular idiom seems to be the most popular and well-known so far, with a number of 55 correct answers out of 99 given answers. A number of 9 students considered the idiom is representative for a situation where success is achieved without difficulties. This might be explained if we are to translate the idiom literally.

The second to last idiom of the list was ‘chicken feed’, which refers to a small amount of money. Out of the 89 given answers only 39 students managed to choose the correct definition. A number of 6 students considered this idiom to mean a really obvious or really easy to make decision, maybe associating the word chicken with something rather common or not that complex.

The last idiom of the questionnaire was ‘down and out’, referring to having no money. While 93 students made an association with this definition, only 23 students managed to correctly identify the appropriate definition. A rather large number of students, namely 23, believed the idiom to mean to quit. If we are to take the literal translation, it is quite obvious why the students chose this particular definition, as we might see it as a representation of failing at something and then exiting the scene therefore being understood as quitting.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of the students’ matches reveals that less than half of the students involved in the study were able to make a clear connection between the idiom and the proposed definition. Upon further evaluation, we are confident in our assessment that students in the field of business are in need of a more detailed course presentation on idioms and colloquial language, commonly found in a corporate office building. When asking the students where they learnt the idioms from, in the case of those idioms which they marked as Familiar, among the most prominent answers were from school, the internet, movies, TV series, TV shows and games. Thus, the increase of Internet access and use, which consequently brought with it a series of TV shows with a business theme, as well as business articles which include colloquial language and idiomatic expressions, largely complement the learning process of business students.

However, despite the fact that, due to globalization, “economic, social, technological and political activities are becoming increasingly international” (Nadrag, et al., 2013, p. 111), there is an obvious deficit in knowledge, which represents an opportunity to introduce new and relevant vocabulary, useful in future interactions with foreign companies. It is our assessment that students are unfamiliar with a great majority of idiomatic expressions, having a clear tendency to translate the expressions verbatim and ignore the possibility of a hidden meaning. Our analysis has shown that the strengths of the students rest in their previous contact with the idioms and their sense of familiarity to some of them which are more common. Given that they are familiar with some of the given idioms, we may consider here the opportunity to introduce more idiomatic expressions in a future course.

Nevertheless, there are some students who seem to be ignorant of the very nature of idioms and therefore find it difficult to understand them or even attribute them any credit. The biggest threats we might encounter in our future endeavour is the reluctance of students to attribute more than the literal meaning to these expressions.

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