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Decoding of English Idioms by Tamil ESL Learners

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Abstract:
The frequent and suitable use of idioms is usually a mark of spontaneity, sophistication and command over a language. ESL learners wish to use idiomatic phrases in their discourse as it is an indicator of native or near native mastery of the language. Despite the frequency of idioms, they remain an obstruction to second language learners. The comprehension and interpretation of idiomatic expressions by ESL learners has been the focus of research in recent literature. The present study among a group of ESL learners in Tamilnadu, India, reveals strategies used by them to decode the idioms. Decomposable idioms are easily understood. When the literal meaning fails to give clues, they look for figurative meaning and are successful only if the figurative meaning falls within the metaphorical concepts of their language, culture and custom. Non decomposable idioms are the most difficult ones. The dimension of familiarity has an overriding factor over other dimensions of compositionality, predictability and literality.

Keywords: idiom kinds, ESL learners, idiom decoding strategies, cross-cultural variation, familiarity.

Introduction

In a sharp deviation from traditional reading theories where reading comprehension was mainly considered as an information transfer process, K.Goodman and his colleagues describe a reading process as one in which meaning is produced from the text as well as from what a reader bring to the text (schema theory) while reading the text and his *transactional socio-psycholinguistic theory of reading* speaks about the relationship of language and thought (K. Goodman, 1992). Thus, the reader's prior knowledge shaped by the reader's personal, social and cultural background plays an important role in determining his ability to interpret and comprehend a text. The transaction with the text makes reading an active process. There is always a graphophonic, lexical, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic interplay involved in the reading activity which involves deciphering the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases. Perhaps the most challenging part of the activity is understanding the meaning of idioms in a text.

Teaching or learning idioms has always been a formidable task to non-native speakers of the language. Now, in this age of science, technology and globalization, the prime aim of a language is presumed to be communication. This presumption has an overdriving effect on sidelining the aesthetic aspects of language. In countries, where English is taught as a second language and is associated with knowledge acquisition, English, the target language is taught within the impregnable boundaries of utility and purpose. English for specific purpose is taught to specific category of learners in the form of Business English, Engineering English etc. However, there has always been a desire to speak English as a native speaker does with a generous sprinkle of colourful expressions, idioms and phrases or at least be a part of coffee table talk of globetrotting executives. According to Fernando (1996), "no translator or language teacher can afford to ignore idioms or idiomaticity if a natural use of the target language is an aim" (234). ESL speakers always try to use new ways of expressing themselves. D'Angelo Bromley (1984) favours the use of idioms by stating that "just as idioms are disruptive, ambiguous, and difficult for the language user, so also are they interesting and colorful. Idioms add humor, imagery, and spice to language" (274). But mastering idioms defies logic as an idiom is a lexical chunk and its meaning is not the result of the compositional function of its constituents or lexical units. A literal translation of an idiom does not convey what the idiom is meant to convey. Idioms are expressions that don't mean what they appear to mean. For example, when somebody says 'He's barking up the wrong tree', that person does not speak about his dog standing near a tree in his garden, but about the person who 'is looking in the wrong place or accusing a wrong person'. There are many theories about the composition and comprehension of idioms developed as a result of research done mostly with English speaking groups. Comprehension of idioms of ESL learners hasn't provided homogenous results as ESL learners in various countries are exposed to English culture and custom to varying degrees. Commonwealth countries are more familiar with English culture than the other countries which were not ruled by the British. Yet, people speaking English in India, a commonwealth nation, sparsely use idioms in their discourse and don't understand some idioms. Idiom is "a group of two or more words which are chosen together in order to produce a specific meaning or effect in speech or writing" Sinclair (1991:172) and this specific meaning eludes the grasp of non native speakers like Indians.

Review of Literature

Idioms are specific to a language and they grow among the people who speak the language nourished by the culture of the land. If books are the mirrors held against the society, idioms are the mirrors held against the society's culture, belief system and thought processes of the speakers. Hence we can say that

- an idiom is a lexical chunk that has individual constituents that are literal, though the expression as a whole need not be interpreted literally;

- idioms are found as set expressions in a given language and these set expressions are peculiar to the particular language though we may find similar idioms in other language.
- idioms are institutionalized (specific to culture or land).

Lewis (1997) said 'language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks'. These chunks include idioms, collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and are also called 'formulaic language'. Schmitt (2000) said that 'Formulaic language occupies a crucial role in facilitating language; it is the key to fluency and motivates the learner'. Crick, Pawley and Syder (1983) cited in Tajali & Tehrani (2009) argued that native speakers' fluency not only depends on vocabulary which is stored as individual words, but also as part of phrases and larger chunks , which can be retrieved from memory as a whole, reducing processing difficulties.

It means that these phrases and larger chunks are stored as a whole in memory duly processed, when learned or heard for the first time. The storing process of idioms is entirely different from the storing process of other words or phrases. The level of idiom storage models is represented by two theories. Following the Separate List Model (Bobrow and Bell 1973), idioms are stored as a separate list of items that has nothing to do with the list of ´single´ literal words out of which idiomatic phrases were made up. According to the Single Lexical Item Model (Swinney and Cutler 1979), idioms are stored in the mind as single lexical items in the lexicon in the same way as ´single´ words.

The four dimensions of familiarity, compositionality, predictability and literality have been shown to influence idiom comprehension in a language. The frequency with which a listener or reader encounters a word in its written or spoken form is defined as familiarity (Gernsbacher, 1984). Familiarity plays a vital role in the comprehension of novel metaphors (Blasko & Connine, 1993). As in the case of novel words and phrases, familiarity plays a positive influence in case of idioms. This aspect was systematically explored in a study by Schweigert (1986). Sentences containing highly familiar idioms were read and understood faster than those containing less familiar idioms. This result was discussed in terms of how models of idiom comprehension would need to be modified in order to account for the effect of familiarity.

Nunberg (1978) proposed that idioms may vary with respect to compositionality. The literal meaning either contribute or do not contribute to the understanding the expression. Gibbs et all (1989) proposed that idioms can be classified as normally decomposable, abnormally decomposable and non decomposable. For example 'to choose one's side' is decomposable while 'to kick the bucket' is non decomposable. In abnormally decomposable idioms like 'to spill the beans' the decomposed expression leads to the figurative interpretation of 'to reveal the secret'. Research by Gibbs and colleagues (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Gibbs, Nayak, Bolton, & Keppel, 1989; Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989) demonstrated that readers are capable of

classifying idioms into these three categories. Further-more, Gibbs, Nayak, and Cutting (1989) found that people read sentences containing normally and abnormally decomposable idioms faster than those that contain semantically non decomposable idioms. Since decomposable idioms are processed more like literal language, their reading times tend to be shorter. The influence of compositionality is consistent with the Configuration hypothesis (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991; Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988), which claims that activation of word meanings takes place while the configuration is perceived or recognized as a phrasal unit.

Predictability is a property of phrases or sentences that can potentially influence lexical access. When applied to idioms, predictability is defined as the probability of completing an incomplete phrase idiomatically. Thus, Cacciari and Tabossi (1988) demonstrated that predictability influences the time course of idiomatic and literal meaning activation during idiom comprehension. The last part of the phrase could be predicted as the first part activates the comprehension process. Again the success in such prediction depends on the strength of the connection between the words in the idiom according to the Configuration hypothesis (Cacciari & Glucksberg, 1991; Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988),

Literality refers to an idiom's potential for a literal interpretation. For example, some idioms such as 'had cold feet' have a well-formed literal meaning, while other idioms such as 'stew in one's own juices' have only a meaningful idiomatic interpretation. The research that has directly examined the role of literality in idiom comprehension, however, has been inconsistent with respect to effects of literality.

The study

A study was conducted in Chennai in the state of Tamilnadu in India by handing out fifty idioms (see appendix) to participants and asking them to pick out the idioms they understand well and can use in a sentence. People in Tamilnadu speak Tamil, the oldest Dravidian language that does not share any similarity with Hindi or any other derivatives of Indo Aryan languages spoken in other states. Tamilnadu is in the southern tip of the peninsula and hence was least affected by foreign influences throughout history. Twenty five clients of a Career Institute in Chennai volunteered to participate in the study. They were engineering graduates and post graduates working in IT companies as software professionals. Their ages were in the 23-26 range. Eighteen clients did their school and college education through the medium of English while seven clients did their school education through the medium of Tamil and college education through the medium of English. After taking back the list from them, they were interviewed individually and asked how could they decode the idioms which were not given in context and why couldn't they decode the other idioms. They were asked to explain each of the fifty idioms as they understood. Questions were asked about their reading habits and hobbies. Some interesting facts emerged through the description of their thought processes. The fifty idioms fell under five topics of weather, custom, food, colour and sports. Each topic had ten idioms under

them of which five were specific to English language, culture and habits and five were general. Sixteen were decomposable, twenty were abnormally decomposable and fourteen were non decomposable. The classification into decomposable, abnormally decomposable and non decomposable was done with the help of a senior English professor working as the Dean of School of Humanities and Social Sciences in a reputed University in Chennai, Tamilnadu, India.

Analysis of the result

The scores ranged from thirty four to fifteen out of fifty. In each case the number of General idioms marked was greater than the number of English culture specific idioms. In both English and General categories, decomposable idioms were the easiest to understand followed by abnormally decomposable idioms and then the non decomposable idioms except in two cases where abnormally decomposable idioms scored one more than decomposable idioms. In topic wise analysis, sports idioms scored the most and idioms based on custom scored the least.

Response of 25 participants to fifty idioms in English

S.No.	English			General			Known	Topics				
	D	AD	ND	D	AD	ND	(E+G)	W	CU	F	CO	S
1	6	5	3	10	7	3	34	6	4	8	7	9
2	7	4	3	9	9	3	32	6	4	7	7	8
3	5	5	3	7	6	4	30	5	6	5	7	7
4	5	4	2	6	6	4	27	4	5	5	7	6
5	4	4	2	6	5	4	25	5	5	5	5	5
6	5	4	2	5	5	4	25	5	5	5	5	5
7	5	3	2	6	6	3	25	4	4	5	5	7
8	5	3	3	6	5	3	25	4	5	4	6	6
9	5	4	4	4	4	4	25	5	5	5	3	7
10	4	3	2	6	5	3	24	6	4	4	4	6
11	4	4	2	6	5	3	24	4	6	5	3	6
12	3	3	4	7	6	3	24	6	3	5	4	6
13	4	5	3	4	4	4	24	5	3	6	4	6
14	3	3	3	5	5	3	22	4	5	4	3	6
15	3	3	3	5	4	3	21	4	4	4	3	6
16	4	2	2	4	5	3	21	3	4	4	5	5
17	3	3	3	4	4	4	21	5	4	4	3	5
18	4	2	2	5	4	3	21	4	4	4	4	5
19	4	3	3	4	4	3	21	5	4	4	3	5
20	4	3	3	4	3	3	20	4	3	4	4	5
21	3	3	3	3	3	3	18	3	3	4	4	4

22	4	2	2	3	3	3	17	4	3	4	3	4
23	3	3	2	3	3	2	16	3	3	3	3	4
24	2	3	2	3	3	2	15	3	2	3	3	4
25	3	2	2	3	2	3	15	3	2	3	3	4

Mean   22.88
MAX   34
MIN   15

English –Specific to English culture and custom   General – General / Universal
D – Decomposable   AD – Abnormally Decomposable   ND – Non Decomposable
Known (E+G) – Total number of English culture specific and General idioms known to each of the participants   W – Weather CU – Custom F – Food   CO – Colour   S – Sports
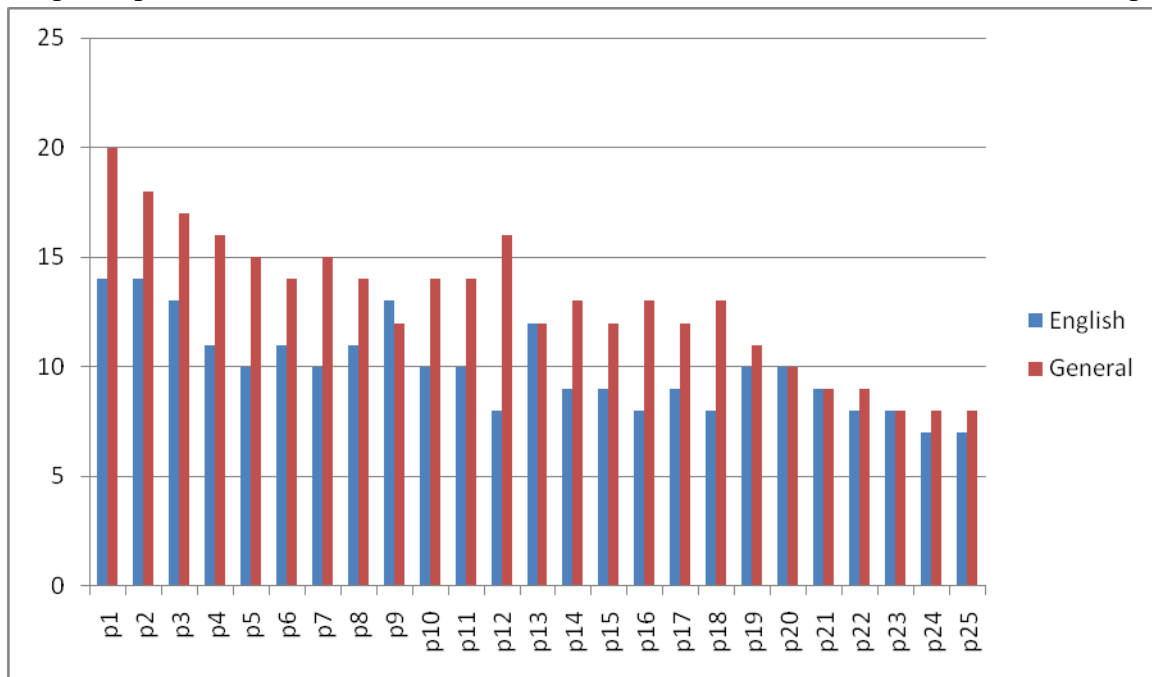
In all but one case (p9), the number of English specific idioms known to the participants is less than the number of non English specific idioms.
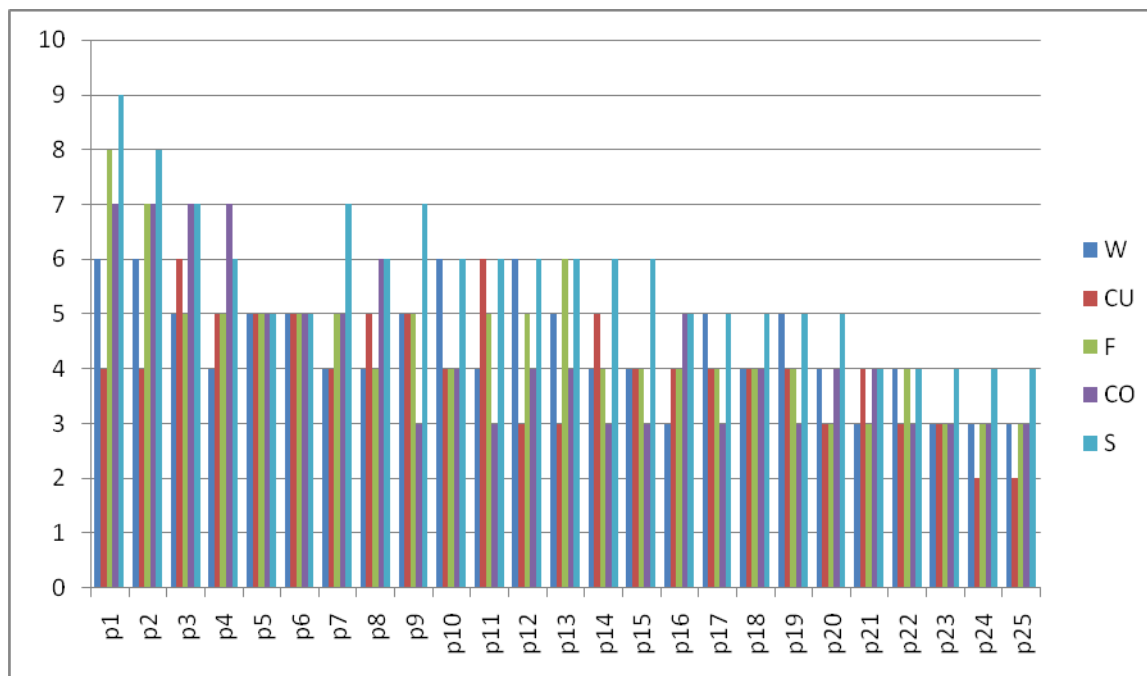
Each participant's topic wise score is presented in the above graph. In all but one case (p4), the score of sports idioms is the highest.

The scores were a bit surprising as India, unlike some other countries where English is L2, was under the British rule for two hundred years and when the British left, they left behind traces of their culture and custom. One can still feel the British influence in the works of Indian writers, whether they write in English or any other vernacular language. Moreover twenty of the clients are employees of Multi National Companies and they regularly contact foreign clients. In the interview, they told that their communication with foreign nationals was purely technical, business like and brief. Except two participants, others did not have a regular reading habit. They read only Tamil magazines and in English newspaper they read only the topics that interested them; mostly those topics were sports related. None of them said that they watched English serials or films. They watched English news channels only to know current national affairs. All these pointed to their limited exposure to English language. They had only been exposed to limited language which enabled them to succeed academically and perform everyday official work effectively.

In the normally decomposable idiomatic expressions, the idiom constituents semantically sometimes even literally correspond to the idiomatic references. For example in the idioms 'speak out of turn' and 'save for a rainy day', the meaning is predictable from constituent words. In some idioms, the semantic or literal meaning offers a metaphorical cue to reveal their meaning. In the idioms, 'a ray of hope' and 'break one's heart', the idiomatic reference is understood on a metaphorical plane. If meaning is not predictable from idioms' constituent parts, such idioms are non-decomposable idioms. "Go bananas' and 'take French leave' are examples of non decomposable idioms which could not be decoded by the participants. In idioms about

weather, the participants very well understood the phrases 'save for a rainy day', 'calm before storm' and 'ray of hope'. Similar idioms exist in Tamil also. They could decode 'break the ice', as something that breaks rigidity or hardness, but not 'put on ice'. Living in a tropical country, they have seen 'ice' only inside a refrigerator and they thought that 'put on ice' meant 'to preserve'. They had scored the least in English custom related idioms. Some thought that 'black tie event' was related to mourning. It shows awareness of the English or Western custom of wearing black for mourning, whereas the Indian custom is to wear white for mourning. Even this awareness of the custom did not help in idiom comprehension. 'Go bananas' was totally unfamiliar to them, though some participants had heard about 'banana republic'. The idioms 'blue blood' and 'green eyed monster' posed a challenge to them and they could not decode them. Their equivalents don't exist in Tamil and any literal translation would be absurd. When it was mentioned to them about the non decomposable and non translatable idioms, one participant told that in a popular Tamil magazine the phrase 'couch potatoes' was literally translated and it was condemned by a Tamil scholar who had pointed out that the Tamil word for a huge stone mortar, (*kundhāni*) was the idiomatic equivalent of 'couch potatoes.' The participants were able to differentiate between decomposable and non decomposable idioms. Maalei (2005) identifies idioms and metaphors as culture-specific aspects of a particular language, i.e., the non-existence of a direct one to one correspondence between a target language and a source language is the result of culture-specific metaphors and states:

> Culture-specific metaphors are best represented in phraseology. Native language idioms and set phrases can blend together ethno-specific concepts pertaining to the world view of it speakers, to their national character, as well as their traditional social relations, thus becoming an embodiment of national dispositions and spiritual values. They are presented metaphorically indirectly and figuratively, which is why culture-specific metaphors produce idioms that have no corresponding counterparts in another language. (Maalej 2005:215).

Given their age and interest in the game of cricket, idioms about sports were easier for them, the exception being 'to toss one's hat into the ring'. When they were asked what they would do if they came across idioms while reading, they said that they normally skipped the idioms and as they pointed out idioms are not common in newspaper reports which they read. On being asked whether they wanted to use idioms in their communication, almost everyone expressed their desire to use colourful phrases and idioms in their conversation as it would make their speeches sound spontaneous and sophisticated. Perhaps this 'sophistication' is what a non native speaker secretly yearns for.

The results of this study also suggest that idiom semantic analyzability was used as a strategy by the participants and the semantic transparency aided comprehension of idiomatic expressions. Even while they were decoding the expressions semantically, first they thought of literal interpretation and then they proceeded to explain the metaphorical or figurative meaning. For

example, they literally translated 'reach for the moon' and arrived at the figurative meaning 'aiming to achieve something great'. Cieślicka (2006) refers to this category as analogies between literal referent and idiomatic referent. Participants were able to grasp the figurative meaning of decomposable expressions, only when they were general like 'ray of hope' and 'tie the knot' or found in their native culture. Idioms like 'greener on the other side', 'choose one's side, and 'break one's heart' have equivalents in Tamil and hence were easier to interpret. 'Handed over on a silver platter' is available in Tamil as 'handed over on a golden platter.' These results confirm those of earlier studies (Gibbs, 1987, 1991; Levorato & Cacciari, 1999). It shows that learners can understand the figurative meaning from decomposable expressions by drawing an inference based on the meaning of constituent words, whereas it is difficult to extract figurative meaning from unfamiliar, non decomposable expressions. Non decomposable idioms can be learned and lexicalized; their comprehension depends on the frequency of exposure. The contribution of verbal and academic competence to the comprehension of figurative language depends on what constitutes the academic language course.   In the current scenario of Communicative Language Teaching and English for Special Purpose courses, there seems to be hardly any scope of learning or getting exposed to literary passages or poems or stories. With poor reading habits added to the picture, the ability to go beyond the literary translation and capture the figurative meaning is hampered. Word awareness along with culture awareness provides the competence necessary to understand figurative language. Pragmatic ability involves a language theory- knowing that an object can be linguistically represented in different ways - and the understanding of what speakers actually intend to communicate (Gibbs, 2002). It can be assumed that such pragmatic ability is required to understand idiomatic expressions. Kamawar and Olson (1999) suggested that learners need a representational theory of language to be able to hold distinct representations of an object separately from a representation of the object itself. Figurative competence depends on pragmatic ability and hence academic courses need to address this issue.

The four dimensions of familiarity, compositionality, predictability and literality were not measured in scales,   but the study threw some light on the graded importance of these four dimensions. Literality did not help in decoding the non decomposable idioms like 'green horn'. In the idiom 'put on ice', the literal meaning led to the figurative meaning of 'preserve' and not the actual meaning of 'postpone' or 'delay'. The compositionality of idioms like 'take a rain check' did not shed any light on the meaning. The dimension of predictability worked only when the phrases are heard and already in the subconscious mind ready to be retrieved with stimulation. 'As cool as' was instantaneously followed by 'cucumber'; here the alliteration did the work because in Tamil it is 'as cool as the Himalayas'. So, the dimension of familiarity played a major role in helping the participants interpret the given idioms.

Conclusion

The purpose of the sample study is to measure the knowledge of idioms among academically successful and employed adults in Chennai, a metropolitan city in India and to know from their

mouth what strategies they used to decode the meanings of idiomatic expressions. Johnson-Laird (1993) said that if natural language had been designed by a logician, idioms would not exist. Glucksberg (2001) talked about the "non logical nature of idioms" (2001:68). Teaching of idioms requires a skill and a strategy different from teaching of languages. Social, cultural, religious and psychological factors interplay in fixing the meaning of an idiom; naturally the comprehension of the meaning by someone from a different social, cultural and religious group demands something more than mere word recognition. In this study idioms related religion were intentionally avoided because the preliminary profile screening showed that no participant was a Christian. Hence, the idioms like 'am I my brother's keeper?' or 'baptism by fire' would not mean anything to them. This study reveals that learners first look for L1 equivalent to understand idioms. If L1 equivalent is not available, they try to get the meaning literally and if literality fails, try to get figurative meaning. But they look for the figurative interpretation only within the metaphorical concepts stored in their mind. As they mentioned in their interview, they don't feel the necessity to learn or use idioms in their everyday affairs, but they agree that the use of idioms would add sophistication and spontaneity to their conversation. Idioms can be made an integral part of learning by including them in dialogues and stories which are created to supplement regular materials (Nation, 2001) and encouraging the learners to read or listen to the works of native English writers and speakers.

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Appendix

IDIOMS IN ENGLISH

WEATHER

1. As right as rain
2. Calm before the storm
3. Break the ice
4. Ray of hope
5. Put on ice
6. Save for a rainy day
7. Steal my thunder
8. Reach for the moon
9. Take a rain check
10. Bolt from the blue

CUSTOM

11. Black tie event
12. Speak out of turn
13. Pardon my French
14. Time-honoured practice
15. Gatecrash
16. Overstep the mark
17. Take French leave
18. Tie the knot
19. Bow and scrape
20. Break someone's heart

FOOD

21. Go bananas
22. As sweet as honey
23. Know which side your bread is buttered
24. Bear fruit
25. Piece of cake
26. Hand on a silver platter
27. As cool as cucumber

28. Out of the frying pan into the fire
29. As slow as molasses in January
30. Acquire a taste for something

COLOUR

31. As red as a cherry
32. As black as coal
33. Beat black and blue
34. Black out
35. Blue blood
36. Get gray hair
37. Green horn
38. Red in the face
39. Green-eyed monster
40. Greener on the other side

SPORTS

41. Ball in one's court
42. Choose sides
43. Beat the gun
44. Dive in headfirst
45. Call the shots
46. In deep water
47. To bat for someone
48. Shoulder to shoulder
49. Toss one's hat into the ring
50. Arrow in one's quiver