

**CULTURAL SIGNS BEHIND ENGLISH IDIOMS: TEACHING  
PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS AS SEMIOTIC TOOLS IN THE EFL  
CLASSROOM**

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*Idioms are integral to the lexicon and cultural identity of a language, yet they remain among the most challenging linguistic elements for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). This paper explores English idioms as semiotic and cultural signs, demonstrating how their symbolic references to animals, colors, gestures, and objects encapsulate cultural cognition and worldview. Drawing on semiotic theory) and cultural linguistics, the study proposes that idioms serve as semiotic tools for fostering intercultural competence. A small-scale qualitative analysis of 30 idioms was conducted, categorizing them by cultural origin and semantic field. The findings reveal that idioms are deeply anchored in culturally shared imagery and symbolism, often inaccessible to learners without cultural contextualization. The paper concludes by recommending pedagogical strategies for integrating semiotic awareness into idiom instruction, highlighting the benefits of visual semiotics, metaphor mapping, and intercultural comparison in EFL classrooms.*

## 1. Introduction

Idioms are among the most expressive and culturally charged elements of language. They represent a complex intersection between linguistic form, conceptual metaphor, and cultural worldview. As Danesi (2016) observes, idioms are “miniature cultural models” that condense social experience and shared cultural cognition into figurative linguistic expressions<sup>35</sup>. However, in EFL contexts, idioms often remain opaque, as their meanings are rarely deducible from literal word combinations. Traditional approaches to idiom instruction that rely on rote memorization or translation frequently fail to capture their symbolic and semiotic richness (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008)<sup>36</sup>.

In EFL classrooms, idioms frequently present cognitive and cultural barriers. Learners often interpret them literally, resulting in miscomprehension or pragmatic inappropriateness. Boers and Lindstromberg argue that idioms must be taught within conceptual and cultural frameworks rather than as isolated lexical chunks. Lazar similarly notes that teaching idioms through metaphorical and cultural exploration promotes deeper learning and retention.<sup>37</sup>

The integration of semiotic analysis into idiom pedagogy offers a new pathway for EFL instruction: one that emphasizes the cultural signs encoded in figurative language. By viewing idioms as semiotic artifacts, teachers can facilitate both linguistic proficiency and intercultural awareness, empowering learners to interpret, use, and appreciate idiomatic language as reflections of cultural meaning systems.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design aimed at examining English idioms as semiotic representations of culture. The analysis was exploratory, grounded in semiotic and cultural linguistic frameworks. The research did not involve human participants but analyzed idiomatic expressions as linguistic data.

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<sup>35</sup> Danesi, M. (2016). *The semiotics of language: Teaching and learning English idioms*. Routledge.

<sup>36</sup> Boers, F., & Lindstromberg, S. (2008). *Cognitive linguistic approaches to teaching vocabulary and phraseology*. Mouton de Gruyter

<sup>37</sup> Lazar, G. (2003). *Meaning asnd metaphor: Activities to teach figurative language*. Cambridge University Press.

A corpus of 30 frequently used English idioms was compiled from academic and pedagogical sources, including Lazar and Boers and Lindstromberg. The idioms were selected based on their occurrence in business, social, and educational contexts relevant to EFL learners. Each idiom was analyzed for its cultural origin, symbolic reference (animal, color, gesture, or object), and conceptual metaphor.

Idioms were examined using a three-tiered semiotic model:

1. Denotative layer: the literal lexical meaning of the phrase.
2. Connotative layer: the figurative or metaphorical meaning.
3. Cultural layer: the symbolic and semiotic associations reflecting English-speaking cultural contexts.

Additionally, idioms were grouped by semantic field (e.g., secrecy, behavior, success, morality) and symbolic domain (animal, color, gesture, object). The interpretive analysis sought to identify how idioms encode cultural values and how this understanding can inform EFL pedagogy.

### 3. Results

Analysis revealed that English idioms frequently employ recurring symbolic motifs associated with Western cultural traditions and everyday experience. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Symbolic Domain	Example Idioms	Cultural or Semiotic Meaning
Animals	let the cat out of the bag, black sheep, the early bird catches the worm	Reflect notions of behavior, morality, and industriousness rooted in agrarian and biblical imagery.
Colors	white elephant, black sheep, green with envy, in the red	Express moral and emotional values: white = purity, black = deviance, green = envy, red = danger or debt.
Gestures/Body	keep an eye on, bite your tongue, lend a hand	Encode embodied metaphors linking physical action to social intention.
Objects	hit the nail on the head, spill the beans, burn the midnight oil	Reflect industrial, domestic, and rural life, symbolizing precision, revelation, and diligence.

### Semantic Fields and Conceptual Metaphors

The idioms analyzed were organized around five major semantic fields: secrecy, effort, emotion, social behavior, and morality. Within each field, idioms manifested conceptual metaphors consistent with Anglophone cultural values.

- **Secrecy and Revelation:** Idioms such as *spill the beans* and *let the cat out of the bag* represent information as a tangible substance that can be released. This aligns with the conceptual metaphor **KNOWLEDGE IS A POSSESSION**, central to English thought patterns<sup>38</sup>.
- **Morality and Deviance:** Expressions like *black sheep* or *white lie* map moral categories onto color symbolism. The cultural association of “white” with purity and “black” with wrongdoing originates from Christian moral iconography.
- **Effort and Success:** *Burn the midnight oil* and *the early bird catches the worm* link diligence to reward, echoing Protestant work ethic values prevalent in English-speaking societies<sup>39</sup>.
- **Emotion and Health:** Idioms such as *under the weather* personify physical and emotional states through environmental metaphors, reinforcing the embodied nature of metaphorical thinking<sup>40</sup>.

Approximately 60 % of the idioms analyzed trace their imagery to pre-industrial English life—agriculture, craftsmanship, or Christian morality—demonstrating the persistence of traditional symbolic systems within modern English discourse. The idioms’ meanings are intelligible only within a cultural framework that recognizes these origins. For example, *white elephant*—referring to a burdensome possession—derives from Southeast Asian royal customs but entered English via colonial reinterpretation, highlighting cross-cultural semiotic transfer.

The analysis revealed that idioms grounded in concrete, imageable symbols (animals, colors, and objects) are more easily teachable when their semiotic roots are explicitly explained. Learners benefit from visual and cultural mapping of idiom origins, which aids

<sup>38</sup> Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>39</sup> Weber, M. (2002). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (T. Parsons, Trans.). Routledge.

<sup>40</sup> Littlemore, J. (2009). *Applying cognitive linguistics to second language learning and teaching*. Palgrave Macmillan.

both retention and cultural understanding. Conversely, idioms lacking obvious imagery (in a nutshell, by the book) require more explicit conceptual contextualization to reveal their metaphorical base.

#### 4. Discussion

##### Idioms as Semiotic Constructs

The findings confirm that English idioms function as semiotic systems that encode collective cultural cognition. As Peircean symbols, idioms transcend literal meaning to evoke culturally agreed-upon associations.

From a linguistic perspective, idioms are also sites of conceptual metaphorization. Kövecses explains that conceptual metaphors—such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY or SUCCESS IS A GAME—underpin idiomatic expression. Idioms thus reveal how language users categorize experience through metaphorical and cultural filters<sup>41</sup>.

##### Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding

EFL learners often misinterpret idioms because they lack access to the semiotic frameworks that native speakers take for granted. When learners encounter kick the bucket, for instance, they may visualize a literal act rather than its idiomatic sense of dying. Such misunderstandings arise from differing cultural symbolisms: the English bucket connotes domestic life, while in other cultures it may lack symbolic salience.

Moreover, color symbolism differs dramatically across cultures. The idiom white lie implies harmless deception, based on the positive moral connotations of white in Western contexts. However, in East Asian cultures, white is associated with mourning, potentially reversing the emotional valence. Without explicit semiotic instruction, such idioms may cause pragmatic errors or sociolinguistic misjudgments.

##### Semiotics and EFL Pedagogy

Teaching idioms through a semiotic lens repositions the learner as a cultural interpreter rather than a passive memorizer. Danesi advocates for “semiotic competence,” the ability to decode and encode culturally meaningful signs<sup>42</sup>. In the EFL classroom, this competence

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<sup>41</sup> Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>42</sup> Danesi, M. (2016). *The semiotics of language: Teaching and learning English idioms*. Routledge.

can be cultivated through activities that make idioms' symbolic roots visible and discussable.

Teachers can introduce idioms alongside visual representations of their symbolic domains. For example, when teaching black sheep, an image of a flock with a single black animal can be used to prompt discussion of cultural connotations of color, difference, and morality. This aligns with Lazar's (2003) recommendation to connect idioms to vivid imagery that reinforces meaning.

As indicated by Nasirova (2023), integrating cultural elements into language instruction enhances communicative competence and intercultural awareness, as learners engage with authentic materials and culturally grounded language use. This reinforces the present study's argument that idioms, as semiotic carriers of cultural symbolism, are not merely lexical items but conduits of cultural understanding that prepare learners for authentic communication in real-world contexts.

Encouraging learners to compare English idioms with equivalents in their own languages fosters intercultural reflection. For instance, the English spill the beans may be compared with the Spanish irse de la lengua ("to let one's tongue slip"), revealing universal cognitive metaphors but differing semiotic vehicles.

Embedding idioms in short stories or dialogues that reflect authentic cultural contexts supports comprehension. Boers and Lindstromberg suggest that narrative grounding allows learners to infer meaning from pragmatic cues rather than direct explanation, enhancing retention and transferability.

#### **4.4. Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence**

Teaching idioms semiotically helps learners not only master figurative language but also internalize the cultural schemata that govern its use. Understanding why to bite the bullet symbolizes endurance or under the weather denotes illness reveals how English speakers conceptualize experience metaphorically and bodily. Thus, idiomatic competence becomes synonymous with cultural insight.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that English idioms function as semiotic artifacts that encode cultural symbols and values through figurative expression. The analysis revealed consistent symbolic domains—animals, colors, gestures, and objects—that carry deeply rooted cultural meanings. Idioms derive their intelligibility from shared semiotic systems, and their comprehension requires awareness of these systems.

This aligns with Nasirova's (2023) findings that the inclusion of English cultural content—through authentic materials, role-playing, and technology—enriches both linguistic proficiency and intercultural understanding<sup>43</sup>. Teaching idioms through their semiotic and cultural dimensions thus extends this pedagogical vision by connecting linguistic form, cultural sign, and communicative competence.

For EFL practitioners, integrating semiotic and cultural analysis into idiom teaching offers significant pedagogical advantages:

1. **Adopt a semiotic framework:** Present idioms as signs with cultural stories, rather than opaque lexical units.
2. **Employ visual and multimodal aids:** Use images, gestures, and color associations to anchor idioms in perceptual experience.
3. **Encourage cross-cultural reflection:** Compare idioms across languages to highlight differing symbolic interpretations.
4. **Contextualize idioms pragmatically:** Embed idioms in communicative tasks that simulate authentic discourse.
5. **Promote cultural storytelling:** Explore the historical or cultural origins of idioms to enhance memorability and intercultural understanding.

Further research might expand this qualitative study through empirical classroom implementation, assessing how semiotic-based instruction impacts learners' idiom retention and cultural awareness. Quantitative studies could measure the relationship between semiotic competence and overall communicative effectiveness in multilingual contexts.

Idioms represent not only linguistic creativity but also cultural semiotics in action. Teaching them through their symbolic and cultural foundations bridges the gap between language and meaning, fostering learners who are not merely fluent in English but literate in its culture.

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<sup>43</sup> Nasirova, M. (2025). *Integration of English culture into language teaching: An in-depth analysis*. *LinguoSpectrum*, 4, 185–189.

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