

# TEACHING ENGLISH IDIOMS OF HAPPINESS AND SADNESS THROUGH CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

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## ABSTRACT

Idioms have long been regarded as a big challenge for EFL learners. With recent developments in cognitive linguistics, the method of teaching idioms has shifted from rote learning to raising the learner's awareness of conceptual metaphors (CM). This paper provides support for the adoption of CM in teaching idioms thanks to its effectiveness in enhancing the comprehension and retention of idioms. Because specific techniques of this approach have not been thoroughly explored, the paper attempts to provide and analyze CM-related activities for teaching idioms in EFL classrooms, more specifically teaching English idioms of happiness and sadness in Vietnamese context.

**Keywords:** Conceptual metaphors; Idioms; Mapping.

## 1. Introduction

Idioms are usually defined as groups of words whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meanings of their individual words (Kövecses, 2002). They include metaphors, metonymies, similes, phrasal verbs, and others. These expressions have been extensively used in all spoken and written genres of discourse (O'Dell and McCarthy, 2010); it was estimated that an English native speaker may use approximately 20 million idioms throughout his or her lifetime of 60 years (Cooper, 1998). Due to the substantial number of idioms and their pervasive use, lack of idiomatic knowledge can be a great hindrance to EFL learners' communication with native speakers.

However, learning English idioms is not an easy task. As Liu (2003) stated, idioms are "notoriously difficult" to the learners of English due to their "rather rigid structure, quite unpredictable meaning and fairly extensive use" (p.671). Moreover, idioms are not only cross-linguistic but also cross-cultural phenomena (Kövecses, 2002). According to Cooper (1998), even students

with profound knowledge of grammar and vocabulary still feel difficult to understand and use idiomatic language if they are not aware of the cultural diversity underlying idioms.

Despite the importance of learning English idioms and learners' increasing difficulties in comprehending and using them, this area of language teaching is often ignored in EFL classrooms and textbooks. Among contemporary English textbooks used in Vietnamese high schools, there are only 24 idioms presented in three textbooks, i.e. *English 10*, *English 11* and *English 12* without any further practice or consolidation (Tran, 2013). Many Vietnamese teachers even tend to avoid using or teaching idioms in classrooms because they believe that idioms are too difficult for learners, which leads to Vietnamese students' poor idiomatic competence (Tran, 2012).

Due to the alleged arbitrary nature of idioms and their fixed structures, it was believed that rote memorization is the only way for learners to acquire these expressions (Kövecses, 2002). However, this learning

method seems too time-and effort-consuming for the students as they have to acquire a great number of idioms by learning them separately and passively. Thus, adopting an effective method for idiom teaching has attracted great concerns among researchers and teachers. In recent years, with the significant development of cognitive linguistics, educators have shifted from traditional methods of idiom teaching to raising learner's awareness of conceptual metaphor, the underlying motivation behind idioms (Boers and Lindstromberg, 2008). This article supports the cognitive-oriented method for teaching idiomatic language and also attempts to demonstrate how to teach idioms, specifically idioms of happiness and sadness, comprehensively via conceptual metaphors in Vietnamese context.

## **2. Traditional and Cognitive Views of Idioms and Idiom Teaching**

### ***2.1. Traditional view of idioms and idiom teaching***

Idioms are traditionally considered as linguistic expressions that are "isolated from each other" and "independent of any conceptual system" (Kövecses, 2002, p.200). In other words, they are simply a matter of language that has arbitrary nature with certain syntactic properties and meanings. In this view, teaching idioms is simply providing a list of idioms without systematic arrangements, with their meanings and examples. As a result, learners learn the targeted expressions by attempting to memorize these discrete and isolated entities. This type of rote learning may result in short retention of the target idiomatic expressions (Chen and Lai, 2013; Vasiljevic, 2011).

### ***2.2. Cognitive view of idioms and idiom teaching***

Contrary to the traditional view of idioms, cognitive linguists argue that the nature of figurative language, including idiomatic expressions, is not arbitrary; it is, in fact, systematized by the underlying principles of human language, thought, and perception,

which are called conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Specifically, conceptual metaphors (CM) refer to the understanding of one concept in terms of another, typically a more abstract concept (i.e. the target domain) in terms of a more concrete or physical concept (i.e. the source domain) (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2002). According to the cognitive view, the occurrence of particular words in an idiomatic expression is to some extent semantically motivated (Kövecses, 2002; Boers and Lindstromberg, 2008). In fact, a considerable number of idioms can be traced back to a limited number of conceptual metaphors, forming a coherent system of metaphorical concepts. For instance, expressions such as *to brim over with joy*, *to overflow with joy*, and *to burst with happiness*, all relate to one single conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER, in which the intensity of happiness is understood in terms of the intensity of the fluid.

When cognitive linguists talk about metaphors, they do not refer to the linguistic expressions as traditional views do, but to the cognitive mappings they represent. In other words, conceptual metaphors are mental categories and thus do not necessarily occur in a language, but conceptually underlie all their metaphorical expressions. According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, a conceptual metaphor is a cross-domain mapping, i.e. "a fixed set of ontological correspondences between entities in a source domain and entities in a target domain" and is expressed as TARGET-DOMAIN IS SOURCE-DOMAIN or alternatively, TARGET-DOMAIN AS SOURCE-DOMAIN, in which capital letters is used as mnemonics to name mappings (Lakoff, 1993, p.245). These cognitive mappings of metaphors are tightly structured and asymmetric. The following table shows an example of the mapping of HAPPINESS AS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER.

**Table 1**

Ontological correspondences of HAPPINESS AS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER

Conceptual metaphor		Metaphorical expressions
HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER		
Source: A FLUID IN A CONTAINER	Target: HAPPINESS	
The container	The body	a. I was <i>full of</i> joy at the prospect of meeting Agnes the next day. b. Joy <i>welled up</i> inside her. c. I <i>brimmed over</i> with joy when I saw her. d. He was <i>overflowing with</i> joy. e. The sight <i>filled them with</i> joy. f. Then, forgetting her disappointment, she too <i>burst into laughter</i> . g. The good news made him want to <i>burst with</i> joy.
The fluid	The happiness	
The intensity of the fluid	The intensity of happiness	
The inability to control a large quantity of the fluid	The inability to control great happiness	

Here, the mapping is tightly structured. It includes ontological correspondences, according to which constituent elements in the domain of a fluid in a container (e.g. the container, the fluid, the quantity of the fluid, etc.) correspond systematically to constituent elements in the domain of happiness (the body, the happiness, the level of happiness, etc.). Such correspondences permit native speakers to reason about happiness by using the knowledge they use to reason about a fluid in a container. This process usually takes place unconsciously and the speaker and the listener produce and understand the metaphorical expressions without any effort. However, EFL learners are generally unaware of these underlying principles, resulting in their incomprehension or misunderstanding of English metaphors in general and idioms in particular.

The discovery of conceptual metaphors has great significance to idiom teaching and learning. Several studies have proved that the awareness of these underlying metaphors can

greatly facilitate the learner's comprehension, retention and use of idioms in oral and written contexts (Boers and Lindstromberg, 2008; Vasiljevic, 2011; Chen and Lai, 2013). There are two possible reasons for the success of this approach. First, thanks to the teaching of conceptual metaphors, learners are aware of the semantic motivation behind the target expressions and they view these expressions as meaningful parts of certain structured networks rather than rigid and isolated pieces of language (ibid.). Second, the CM-oriented approach in teaching idioms could assist learners in creating mental images and, as a result, allowing dual coding of information – “the processing of imagery and linguistic information” (Clark and Paivio, 1991, p. 150). Since conceptual metaphors are grounded in bodily experience and in cultural and social practices (Kövecses, 2002), the explicit instruction of these metaphors could possibly stimulate learners' visualization of the input and improve their comprehension and memory.

In the light of cognitive view and its achievement in idiom acquisition, this article was written as a further support for this cognitive approach to the teaching and learning of idiomatic language.

### **3. Teaching English Idioms of Happiness and Sadness through Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnam**

In recent years, there has been growing interest in contrastive analysis of conceptual metaphors in English and Vietnamese idiomatic expressions (Nguyen, 2012; Huynh, 2013; Nguyen, 2016; Pham, 2016); however, far too little attention has been paid to the employment of conceptual metaphors in teaching English idioms to Vietnamese students. According to Tran (2012), none of the teachers and students in Vietnam showed any evidence in using conceptual metaphors in idiom teaching and learning activities. Considering this situation, this article attempts to fill in the literature gap in idiom teaching and learning in Vietnam.

In the following sections, a series of CM-related activities are presented to help Vietnamese learners understand and remember a large number of English idioms. Prior to the elaboration of these activities, it is worthwhile to highlight the essential principles of employing conceptual metaphors to teaching idioms and the selection of the English idioms used in the activities.

#### **3.1. Key principles for applying CM to teaching idioms**

There are at least six essential principles to remember when preparing activities to teach idioms through the cognitive-oriented method. Firstly, since idioms are multi-word and, in most cases, non-literal fixed expressions, these idiom-focused activities require students to have a good command of English, i.e. at intermediate level or above, to interpret their figurative meanings (Liu, 2003; Boers and Lindstromberg, 2008). Secondly, the idioms presented to learners should be

systematically categorized with conceptual metaphors to enhance their retention and recollection. Thirdly, the teacher needs to provide learners with various examples where the underlying metaphors can be observed so that the learners can discover the mappings and apply this knowledge to guess the meaning of other idioms with the same conceptual metaphors. Fourthly, after students have understood idiom meaning, form-focused activities are a prerequisite for them to develop a productive knowledge of idiomatic language. Then, the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison of conceptual metaphors should be highlighted as it can contribute to the learner's appropriate production of idioms in different contexts. Finally, the dual coding of information should be further stimulated through the use of images, pictorial elucidation and mime to commit the target idiomatic expressions to their long-term memory. These six principles underline the content as well as the order of the five activities presented in this article.

#### **3.2. A selection of idiomatic expressions and examples**

Since happiness and sadness comprise a large proportion of idioms of feelings (Huynh, 2013), they were selected as the topics of the idioms taught in the five following activities. The English idioms, examples and their conceptual metaphors were collected from a variety of sources by established authors and publishers such as *Metaphor we live by* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphor: A practical introduction* by Zoltán Kövecses, *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary (8<sup>th</sup> edition)* published by Oxford University Press, and British National Corpus at [www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk](http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk). Likewise, the Vietnamese idiomatic expressions and their examples could be found in published and literary sources such as poems, folk songs, articles in newspapers, many of which can be found in Huynh (2013).

### 3.3. Classroom activities

The following activities are designed using inductive approach, in which students are guided by the teacher to discover the target language. Since conceptual metaphor is a new and complex concept to the learners, it would be difficult for them to acquire the knowledge without the teacher's careful guidance and instruction. However, the teacher only gives hints and tells the students what to focus on. It is the students who actively make use of their background knowledge and available sources to learn new things by themselves. In other words, this method focuses on learners' autonomy, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Their active involvement in these activities makes the target language more meaningful, memorable, and serviceable. In these CM-related activities, the teacher plays the roles of an organizer, a monitor, and a resource.

#### *Activity one: "Warm-up"*

The teacher sticks nine pictures, including five pictures of happiness and four pictures of sadness on the board. These pictures illustrate nine idioms of happiness and sadness that will be taught in other activities; in this activity, they are used only to arouse students' interest in the topic. They are asked to look at the pictures, guess the topic of the lesson, i.e. happiness and sadness, and share some expressions describing these feelings that they know. Then, the teacher asks them to work in pairs and share with their partner about an extremely happy or unhappy experience. They are encouraged to use all their language resource and are free to express their ideas. This activity aims to attract students' interest, energize them and make them feel the need to explore the target language that will be taught later.

#### *Activity two: "Grouping"*

Handouts are administered to the students who are then instructed to do the first task. Twenty idioms are provided in clear contexts

and categorized into three themes, namely UP/DOWN, A FLUID IN A CONTAINER, A (NATURAL/PHYSICAL) FORCE. The students read the contexts in which the idioms are used, guess the meanings, discuss with their partners and write the idioms down in the right categories. After ten minutes, the teacher elicits the answers from the students and provides correction and explanation when necessary. The teacher can also ask the students to find out suitable idioms for nine pictures on the board to facilitate their dual coding of information and enhance their retention.

These tasks aim to develop students' guessing skill and enhance their retention of idioms. Categorizing idioms based on metaphor themes or source domain and recalling them via pictures are seen as beneficial learning techniques because they seem congruent to learners' preferred vocabulary learning style (Vasiljevic, 2011; Boers and Lindstromberg, 2008). These tasks also encourage students to guess the meanings of idioms from context, which involves deeper processing and can therefore lead to better comprehension and retention.

The teacher uses "Grouping" activity to introduce the concept of conceptual metaphor to the students. The idiomatic expressions categorized according to their themes are the surface realization of a particular conceptual metaphor. For example, "Her heart was *brimming over* with happiness", and "Joy *welled up* inside her" are both motivated by the conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER. The definition of conceptual metaphor is provided. To motivate students to learn the new concept, the teacher should explain briefly why students' comprehension of conceptual metaphors can facilitate their learning of idioms and vocabulary in general.

#### *Activity three: "CM Motivation Discovery"*

To familiarize students with conceptual

metaphors, the teacher can clarify that these metaphors are, in fact, grounded, or motivated by, human experience (Kövecses, 2002). Take the pair of HAPPY IS UP and SAD IS DOWN as an example, students are asked to look at nine pictures on the board again, examine differences between postures and facial expressions of happy and sad people, and discover how it is related to the conceptual metaphors. They can find some clues to this question by examining the pictures on the board and doing the gap-filling exercise. These metaphors arise from the fact that as humans we have upright bodies. Thus, the erect posture typically goes with positive physical states which may lead to positive emotional states, whereas the opposite is true with a drooping posture (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Likewise, smiles in most cultures involve an upward turning of the lips, while frowning causes the edges of the mouth to descend.

*Activity four: "Mapping Discovery"*

In an EFL context, students tend to fail to perceive the conceptual metaphors and the underlying structures between a source domain and a target one. An insufficient knowledge of metaphoric mappings also prevents learners from guessing the meaning of unfamiliar idioms correctly though these idioms share the same conceptual metaphor with those they have already learned. Hence, teaching students about metaphoric mappings and how to associate a more concrete or physical concept with a more abstract and unfamiliar concept are a prerequisite for learners' acquisition of idioms (Chen and Lai, 2013). As for teaching idioms of happiness and sadness, the teacher should explain to students about metaphorical mappings and then instruct them how to discover the

metaphoric mappings of the conceptual metaphors underlying the target idioms.

*Activity five: "Discovering What's Missing"*

While previous activities focus on the meaning of idiomatic expressions through awareness of their semantic motivation, this activity emphasizes the form or the lexical composition by noticing their phonological motivation. According to Boers and Lindstromberg (2008), students' awareness of alliteration and rhyme used in idioms to produce catchy sound patterns can increase their form retention.

To prepare for this activity, the teacher chooses those expressions that show alliteration or assonance from the list of previously-taught idioms and add some more. Some examples include *jump for joy*, *heavy heart*, *down in the dumps*, *down in the mouth*, *doom and gloom*, *as happy as Larry*, *as happy as a clam (at high tide)*, *as snug as a bug in a rug*, *as happy as a horse in hay*<sup>1</sup>, and so on. These idioms with one deleted keyword are presented in clear, brief and meaningful sentences. The teacher can make this gap-filling exercise easier by revealing the first letter of the missing word. For example:

*Rowena j\_\_\_\_\_ for joy when she heard that she's won first prize.*

*Steve was down in the d\_\_\_\_\_ for the longest time after his breakup with Eve.*

*I was as happy as a c\_\_\_\_\_ living in Hawaii; the beaches were beautiful, I played lots of outdoor sports, and the people were so nice.*

*Despite several setbacks, it is not all doom and g\_\_\_\_\_ for the England team.*

Each sentence has two versions which are written on two separate cards so that different versions display different keywords. For example:

*Rowena jumped for j\_\_\_\_\_ when she heard that she's won first prize.*

*Rowena j\_\_\_\_\_ for joy when she heard that she's won first prize.*

The students are asked to work in pairs to find out the missing words in each sentence as soon as possible to become the winner. Each pair has a set of cards which are placed upside down on their desk. The students turn over one card at a time and attempt to fill the gap. If they are uncertain of their answer, they turn the card face down again and they will have the answer later when the corresponding version of that expression (with the key word they want to know and the other word is missing) is turned over. After the students finish this game, the teacher can ask them whether they notice any special feature of the target idioms presented in the game to raise their awareness of alliteration and rhyme used in these idioms.

Since the understanding of conceptual metaphors only helps students comprehend and recall the meaning of idioms but does not guarantee their retention of form (Vasiljevic, 2011), this form-focused activity is important to develop productive knowledge of idiomatic language, which involves retrieving and producing appropriate spoken or written form. Besides, this activity helps recall the idiomatic expressions in the previous activities, and offers students a chance to practice them and learn new ones in a relaxing environment. The high rate of success also gives students a sense of achievement and satisfaction.

The two following activities are designed to raise learners' awareness of the universality and variations of conceptual metaphors by examining the idiomatic expressions cross-linguistically and cross-culturally. As Deignan, Gabrys, and Solska (1997) states, this is a useful approach to increasing learners' reception and production of idioms.

*Activity six: "Discovering the Universality of CM"*

This activity highlights the fact that some conceptual metaphors can be shared across several cultures and languages thanks to certain similarities in experiences and

perceptions. Firstly, the students are asked to work in groups and find out the equivalents of the idiomatic expressions. Then, the teacher distributes another handout and asks the students to compare idiomatic expressions that have similar meanings in English and Vietnamese. After placing the Vietnamese expressions in the right groups according to their conceptual metaphors, the students discover the similarity between the two languages, and then add more equivalents of their own.

*Activity seven: "Discovering Cultural Variations in CM"*

In addition to universality, there are cultural variations in metaphors. English and Vietnamese can have different conceptual metaphors. For example, whereas the English consider the heart as a seat of emotion, as in *fill her heart with happiness*, *heartsick*, and *heartbroken*, Vietnamese people use the belly and its organs such as stomach, liver, and intestine as a center of feelings, for example, *lòng đau như cắt*, *vừa lòng*, *thấy ung cái bụng*, *nở từng khúc ruột*. Besides, one language may have a conceptual metaphor that does not exist in the other language. For instance, whereas the metaphor SAD IS BLUE is common in English, as in *feeling blue*, *baby blues*, and *Monday morning blues*, it does not exist in Vietnamese language. EFL learners usually find it hard to understand and recollect those idiomatic expressions, whose conceptual metaphors are distinct from their native language. Thus, this is the teacher's responsibility to foster students' awareness of such differences and help them apply conceptual metaphors to understand the target idioms.

With this activity, the teacher can explain to the students the reason why there are such variations in the two languages and cultures. Knowledge of etymology, as well as different lifestyle and ideologies of medicine in each country is necessary for an adequate

explanation (Nguyen, 2012).

*Activity eight: "Picture this!"*

Students play this game in groups of five. Each member receives two cards and is told to keep their cards to themselves. There is one previously encountered idiom on each card. The Students take turns to mime or draw to elucidate literal meaning of the idioms so that their partners can guess what they are. The image in each selected idiom must be easy to be depicted by drawing or miming. For instance, *as happy as a clam at high tide* can be depicted by drawing a clam with a smiley or using two hands to mime the two shells of a clam. The group finishing the game first is the winner.

This activity is based on the findings of an empirical research by Boers, Lindstromberg, Littlemore, Stengers, and Eyckmans (2008). Pictorial elucidation and mime are proved to enhance the retention of meaning. To complete the task, each student has to make a cognitive effort to think of a suitable drawing or mime to illustrate the meaning of the idioms. Using pictures and body gestures explicitly to illustrate meaning can help stimulate dual coding of information, especially for those whose learning style does not help them create sufficient mental images from the previous activities. This conscious attempt is deemed beneficial to learners' comprehension and retention.

At the end of the lesson, the teacher can ask the students to work in pairs and 'retell' the story about an extremely happy or unhappy experience shared at the beginning. However, this time they should try to integrate as many idiomatic expressions as possible. Finally, they compare the first version (before learning metaphors and idioms) with the second one (after learning metaphors and idioms) and evaluate the effectiveness of applying such

idiomatic language.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper aims to support the adoption of cognitive approach to teaching English idioms in Vietnamese context by applying the Conceptual Metaphor Theory to design various idiom-focused activities for the classroom. These activities require students to play an active role in their language acquisition with conceptual metaphors as an organizer and motivator of English idioms. By clarifying the motivation behind several idiomatic expressions, these activities help to relieve students' burden of rote learning, facilitate systematic and insightful learning, enhance their comprehension and retention of English idioms, and heighten their awareness of cultural universality and variations in English and Vietnamese idioms.

Importantly, this paper does not recommend using conceptual metaphors as a substitute for other methods of teaching idioms. In fact, these CM-related activities should be considered as part of a learning program and integrated with other approaches to teach vocabulary in general and idioms in particular. Rather than adopting a single method in teaching idioms, EFL teachers can use various techniques to enhance their students' idiomatic knowledge and inspire them with innovative activities. Then, the use of conceptual metaphors should be seen as an additional channel for idiom acquisition.

Despite the potential benefits of this cognitive approach in idiom teaching and learning, few studies about this topic have been conducted in Vietnam. Hence, further practical implementations and empirical evidence are needed to validate the impacts of conceptual metaphors on Vietnamese learners' acquisition of English idioms in particular and vocabulary in general ■

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**Note**

<sup>1</sup> The expressions such as *as happy as a clam (at high tide)*, *as snug as a bug in a rug*, and *as happy as a horse in hay* are surface realization of the conceptual metaphor A HAPPY PERSON IS AN ANIMAL (THAT LIVES WELL). (Kövecses, 2002).

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