# BUSINESS ENGLISH IDIOMS, A WAY TO REFINE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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***Abstract*****:** *The paper is aimed at highlighting the relevance of business English idioms to economics students' communication skills. To our way of thinking, approaching business idioms as a diverse lexical chapter, with an undeniable metaphorical touch, can contribute to students' vocabulary awareness, too. Therefore, having more than a nodding acquaintance with business English idioms may help them to make headway in their efforts to enhance business English competence.*

***Keywords:*** *business English idioms; vocabulary awareness; communication skills; idiom-centred exercises; economics students*

1. *Premises*

We believe that, if economics students are intent on honing their business English skills, they will most certainly acknowledge the relevance of business idioms to this aim. We also maintain that, once sparking students' sense of cognitive curiosity about the way business idioms work, i.e. about the lively touch and native-like-sound that business idioms usually lend to the language, students will actively engage in solving batteries of *business idiom-centred* exercises.

Along the same lines, we have every confidence that, if students are better equipped with in-depth knowledge of business idioms, they will readily decode layers and layers of meaning when reading English newspapers and other economic publications.

Furthermore, we can't help wondering how students can be best guided through the realm of business English idioms: its *maze-like* nature, shaped by countless metaphors and sometimes, even tainted as a mere *cliché-ridden style*, epitomizes, after all, a linguistic feat.

*2. Teaching Business English Idioms*

Once economics students are presented with a series of texts and explanatory contexts for business idioms, their understanding of the topic at hand is further cemented through a battery of exercises ranging from *choosing the correct answers* (economics students are handed out an exercise based on the idioms previously studied, and afterwards asked to determine whether the *a)* definition, or the *b)* one fits a particular business idiom) all the way to *rewriting the underlined part of each sentence using the word in brackets* (we believe this kind of exercise is designed to equally test students' analytical and vocabulary skills while on their path to establish the due correspondence between mere English word strings and their business idiom partners).

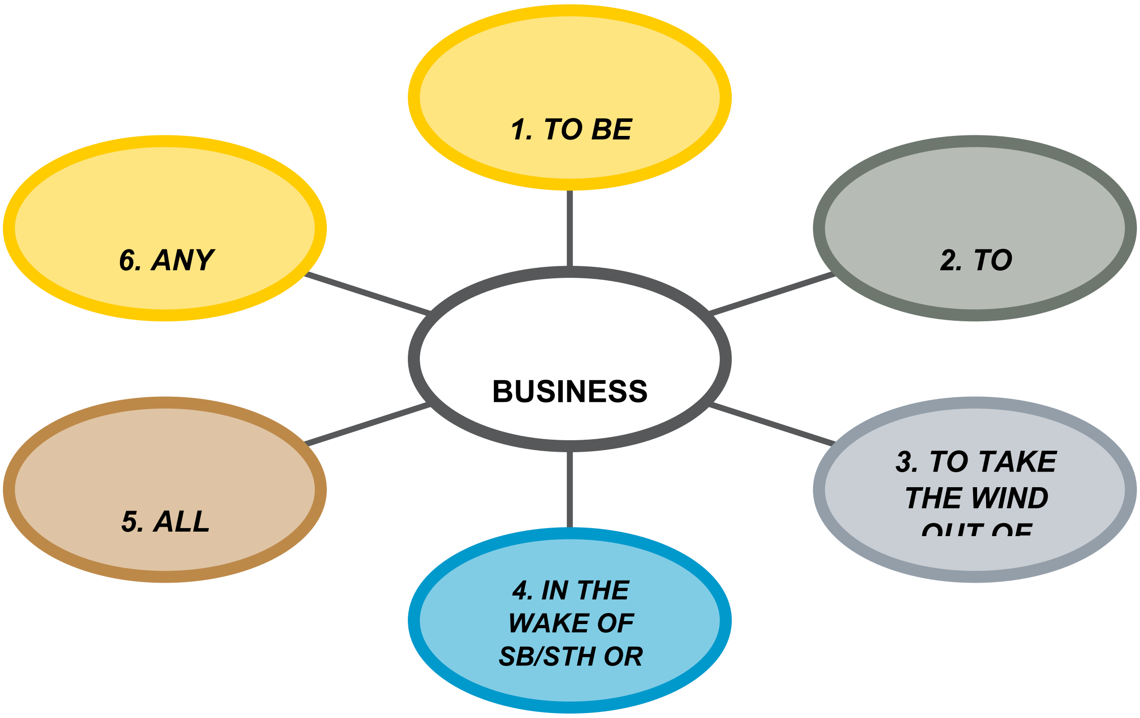
Additionally, delving into the universe of business idioms, alongside the fashion in which economics students are able to come to grips with it, will most likely lead us to uncover other exercises like the following: *a)* students are asked to *complete each idiom* from a list they are provided with, this way having them practise all business idioms, already studied, thanks to more example sentences, or via a context-based approach, which will definitely lighten their task, and *b)* they can also *match the beginning of each sentence with its ending*, an exercise that prompts students to further build up their confidence with regard to incorporating genuine business idioms into their active English vocabulary.

*2.1.* "*Talking about a Business*[1]. 'When we took over the hotel five years ago, the business was *on the rocks*[1]. The economy was doing badly and people were *giving* luxury hotels like ours *a wide berth*[2]. The previous owners had decided to *cut and run*[3], but we loved the place and were sure

[1] Felicity O'Dell and Michael McCarthy, *English Idioms in Use*. Advanced, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press &Assessment, 2017, p. 32

we could make a go of it. We *battened down the hatches*[4] by cutting costs as much as possible and did all we could to *run a tight ship*[5]. Holidays and any other luxuries for our own family *went by the board*[6] for two years. However, we managed to *weather the storm*[7] and are now *making good headway*[8]. We have lots of major bookings *in the offing*[9] and are confident of making excellent profits this year.'

[1] in serious difficulty;
[2] avoiding (*berth* is an old sailing term meaning the distance a ship should leave between itself and a potential danger such as rocks);
[3] avoid a difficult situation by leaving suddenly (the image comes from cutting mooring ropes in order to make a quick departure);
[4] got ready for a difficult situation by preparing in every way possible (the image comes from closing the ship's doors securely when a storm is likely);
[5] control a business or organisation firmly and effectively;
[6] were abandoned (the image comes from something being thrown overboard in to the sea);
[7] survive difficult times;
[8] making good progress;
[9] likely to happen soon (*offing* was a term used to refer to the part of the sea on the horizon)."



| ***Idiom*** | ***Example*** | ***Explanation*** |
|---|---|---|
| *1. be taken aback* | We *were taken aback* when Ben announced his resignation. | were very surprised (If a boat is taken aback, it is suddenly attacked from behind.) |
| *2. leave high and dry* | Many holidaymakers were *left high and dry* when the tour company collapsed. | put in a difficult situation which they could not improve (The image is of a boat stuck on a sandbank and unable to move.) |
| *3. take the wind out of sb's sails* | Amelia was keen to become an actor, but her teacher's criticism of her performance *took the wind out of her sails*. | Made her feel less confident, by saying or doing something unexpected (If there is no wind in a boat's sails, then it is unable to move.) |
| *4.in the wake of sb/sth or in sb's/ sth's wake* | Thousands of people lost their jobs *in the wake of* the recession. The consultant strode through the hospital, several students *in his wake.* | Following closely behind (The wake is the trail of foam left by a boat as it moves.) |
| *5.all hands on deck* | We'll need *all hands on deck* if we're going to be ready for the party on time. | Everyone must help (A *hand* is a sailing term for a sailor and *deck* is the area you walk on outside on a boat.) |
| *6. any port in a storm* | I really don't like staying there, but I had no choice but to accept Jan's offer. *Any port in a storm*, I'm afraid! | You must accept any help you're offered when you're in a difficult situation. (when there is a storm at sea, a boat has to go to the nearest port.)[2] |

*3. Business News Idioms*

Economics students can also be introduced to a variety of business idioms, peppered with 'metaphors from the weather, religion, horse riding, the natural world and the sea', which are embedded in the economic journalism. Furthermore, if business English idioms add colour to business communication as a well-shaped vocabulary chapter, permeated with a plethora of metaphors, then economics students will considerably benefit from gaining more than a nodding acquaintance with the topic.

**Cloud on the horizon**[1] for local firm

Time to stop **worshipping at the altar of**[2] consumerism

Bank **throws** small companies **a lifeline**[3]

Smith opts to be **a big fish in a small pond**[4]

Axco **saddled with**[5] debt

[1] problem likely to happen in the future;
[2] being totally dedicated to (You can also say 'worship at the shrine/temple of'.)
[3] gives help to someone in a very difficult situation;
[4] an important person in a not very important organisation;
[5] given a problem which will cause them a lot of difficulty.[3]

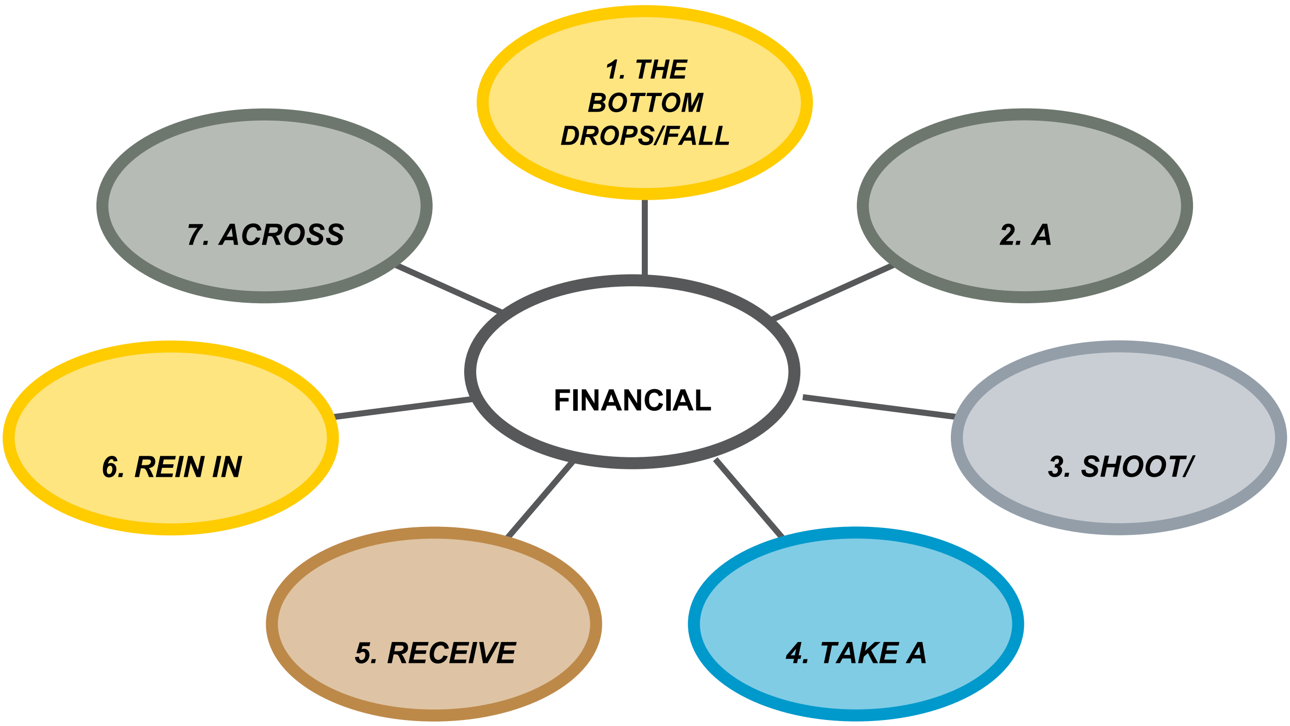
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Id.*, p.64

*4. Practising Business English Idioms*

In our view, students' awareness of business idioms relevancy to the area of international business communication can be raised by equipping them with the appropriate linguistic toolkit to readily spot these lexical patterns whenever engulfed in reading English newspapers and other economic publications. In addition to this, we firmly believe that, if economics students grow into the habit of looking for new business idioms whenever presented with the chance to do so and they also make notes of such examples, they will sooner rather than later manage to broaden their business English vocabulary and be able to catch subtler language nuances.

*4.1. Financial News Idioms*

To sail through business idioms tests, economics students should thoroughly study them via extensive lists of exercises, primarily designed to sharpen their business English skills. That said, the exercises they may come across vary from *matching the beginning of each sentence with its ending* (in this case, students are referenced to the previously studied business idioms thanks to a series of sentences containing incomplete idioms, which they are expected to match with the appropriate missing words) to *asking* students whether *the idioms* in a certain list of sentences *are used correctly,* and *if not,* they have to *correct them* (this exercise is aimed at testing both students' ability of rote learning and their overall understanding of particular business idioms they've studied, as economics students are mainly asked to puzzle out the right business idioms from a string of slightly altered examples.)



| *Idiom* | *Example* | *Meaning* |
|---|---|---|
| *1. the bottom drops/ falls out of the market* | *The bottom has dropped/ fallen out of the* housing *market.* | people have stopped buying something |
| *2. a ballpark figure* | What's *a ballpark figure* for replacing the office furniture? | an estimated price |
| *3. shoot /soar sky-high* | Oil prices *shot sky-high* last month. | rose dramatically |
| *4.take a nosedive* | The company's shares *took a nosedive* yesterday. | fell suddenly and quickly |
| *5. receive a windfall* | Investors will each *receive a windfall* of $10,000. | get some unexpected money |
| *6. rein in spending* | Many firms try to *rein in spending* during times of financial difficulty. | spend less |
| *7. across the board* | The impact of the reorganisation will be felt *across the board*. | by people at every level[4] |

*4.2. Money Idioms*

Students' understanding and knowledge of all *money idioms* that they have studied are further assessed through a battery of exercises like: *a) complete each idiom* (the exercise provides students with some context for every idiom, facilitating their task to match the sentence given with the *money idiom* that fits it); *b) correct the mistakes in these idioms* (this exercise challenges economics students to navigate a tricky list of synonyms in their quest for the right *money idioms*; students' focus and rote learning ability are thus being tested); *c) rewrite each sentence using the word in brackets* (students' degree of understanding, in terms of *money idioms*, is checked again by having them engaged in rephrasing a series of sentences with the suitable idioms); *d) answer these questions* (students are presented with *money idiom*-related questions, and their answers considerably depend on the ability to quickly decipher the respective idioms.)

*4.3. 'How People Use Money.* Enter our *rags to riches*[1] competition!'[5]

Are you tired of *scrimping and saving*[2] in order to *make ends meet*[3]? Fed up with *paying over the odds*[4] for things and *penny-pinching*[5] all the time? Are you always on the lookout for *cheap and cheerful*[6] things that *won't break the bank*[7]? Would you like to feel you had *money to burn*[8]? Then enter our competition for a chance to win £10,000 and a *no-expense-spared*[9] weekend in Paris.

All you have to do is…

[1] from poverty to wealth;
[2] living very economically;
[3] have just enough money to pay for the things you need;
[4] paying more than something is worth;
[5] spending as little money as possible;
[6] cheap but good or enjoyable;
[7] don't cost a lot;
[8] excess money;
[9] luxury; a lot of money is spent to make it good.

[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Id.*, p.68

*5. Common Business Idioms in Context*

When embarking on this linguistic journey, to keep a record of all business idioms studied, alongside straightforward example sentences and a crystal clear explanation will greatly serve the ultimate goal of enhancing economics students' business English skills in a rather incremental, yet consistent fashion. Also, 'the benefits of a multifarious lexis, which empowers any speaker to engage in the process of decoding the world around to an increasingly greater extent, are unquestionable. Speakers' linguistic accuracy would increase if they took more interest in interspersing their daily speech sequences with new lexical items.' (Iliescu, 2019: 379)

By way of illustration, the following idiom list comprises common business English idioms, which we have deemed appropriate to both explain and contextualize in order to enable students to better grasp the way these lexical phrases work:

1) *to live on a shoestring*: to live on very little money; *e.g.* They are not rich; nonetheless, they have become regular globetrotters by *living on a shoestring.*
2) *to bring home the bacon*: to earn the money the family lives on; *e.g.* He had to work two jobs in order *to bring home the bacon.*
3) *to corner a market*: to dominate an area of business and leave no room for competition; *e.g.* The investors hoped *to corner the market* in organic food by buying up all the available farmland.
4) *to take stock of a situation*: to assess all the aspects in order to form an opinion; *e.g.* Given that the company was debt-ridden, the CEO called a meeting in a desperate bid *to take stock of the situation* and brainstorm rescue plans.
5) *golden handshake*: a generous sum of money given to a person when they leave the company; *e.g.* Upon his retirement, the executive was given a *golden handshake* including a substantial severance pay as well as stock options.
6) *going concern*: a business or activity that is dynamic and successful; *e.g.* The auditors have confirmed that the steel plant is still a *going concern* and not at risk of imminent closure in spite of a few rocky months.
7) *all hands on deck*: everyone must help, especially when there's a lot of work to be done in a short amount of time; *e.g.* If we want to get everything ready in time and meet tomorrow's deadline, despite the unexpected system glitches, experienced today, we have to acknowledge that it's a case of *all hands on deck*.
8) *the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing*: this expression means that communication within a group or organization is so bad that people don't know what the others are doing; *e.g.* Here we go again: another of those blamestorming sessions over the budget since the branches across the country keep wasting money because *the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing.*
9) *monkey business*: an activity which is organized in a deceitful or dishonest way is called *monkey business*; *e.g.* The teacher realized that some *monkey business* was distracting pupils at the back of the class when he heard them giggling and saw them passing around notes, too.
10) *to knuckle down to something*: start to work on it seriously; *e.g.* Procrastination won't get you anywhere; you had better *knuckle down to* your studies in order to pass all your exams next week.
11) *keep your nose to the grindstone*: sb who concentrates on working hard at his job; *e.g. Keep your nose to the grindstone* for as long as it takes if you are determined to deliver top-notch results.
12) *do the spadework*: to do the preparatory work or the preliminary research for sth; *e.g.* Although it was Helen who made the final presentation, several junior employees in her department had to *do the spadework*, meaning to collect the raw data and conduct a series of interviews, too.
13) *an eager beaver*: sb who is hardworking and enthusiastic, sometimes considered overzealous; *e.g.* Such an *eager beaver* you, Neil: the first to arrive at the office, the last to leave it!

14) *fiddling while Rome burns*: to do unimportant things, while there are serious problems to be dealt with; *e.g.* Oblivious to the lack of a sound strategy to counter the consequences of the drop in sales, the management seems to have a vested interest in giving this office a complete facelift: aren't they *fiddling while Rome burns*?
15) *a finger in every pie*: to be involved in many activities; *e.g.* Everybody knew that the self-made millionaire had *a finger in every pie*, with investments in tech industry, real estate, and green energy.
16) *to be ahead of the pack*: to be better or more successful than their rivals; *e.g.* Don't rest on your laurels after a first win; if you aim *to be ahead of the pack* in this line of work, straightforward goals, drive alongside sustained efforts are pivotal.
17) *from rags to riches*: if you go from rags to riches, you start off being very poor and become very rich and successful; *e.g.* Guided in life by the firm belief that *where there is a will, there is a way*, he eventually took everyone by surprise going *from rags to riches* after setting up his own trading company.
18) *to make a comeback*: to manage to return to their former successful career; *e.g.* Eyebrows were raised when, after several years away from the hustle and bustle of a senior position in management, Hope decided *to make a comeback*, being quite sure others would follow suit.

*6. Conclusion*

To our mind, having students engaged in the study of business English idioms, helping them to get the hang of their use definitely amounts to a worthwhile endeavour.

We maintain that, though at times, learning business English idioms is perceived as a rather intricate path to follow, this process most likely gives students the chance to tap into business communication from new angles and exude ever more linguistic confidence, too.

Since practice makes perfect, the more students revise all business English idioms learnt, the better they will be at actually integrating them into their active vocabulary, not merely identifying them in different texts.

In the same vein, we are of the opinion that, by encouraging students to cultivate their intellectual curiosity and, to the best of their ability, to take in as many business English idioms as possible, economics students will eventually become more prepared *to live up to the* professional *challenges* ahead, that is *to rise to the occasion*, or *deliver the goods* once they have graduated and they set out to attend dozens of job interviews.

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