Idioms for everyday situations and feelings

VOCABULARY PRACTICE
UPPER-INTERMEDIATE | B2

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 Match each precise term with its definition.

1 idiom ____	**a** a fixed multi-word expression whose overall meaning cannot be derived from its individual words
2 idiomaticity ____	**b** the quality of sounding natural through native-like use of set expressions
3 opaque idiom ____	**c** an idiom whose meaning is completely unrelated to the literal sense of its component words
4 transparent idiom ____	**d** an idiom whose figurative meaning is still loosely connected to its literal sense
5 semi-idiomatic expression ____	**e** a fixed expression that is partly literal and partly figurative in meaning
6 register-specific idiom ____	**f** an idiom whose use is restricted to a particular level of formality or social context
7 idiomatic competence ____	**g** a learner's ability to use and understand idiomatic expressions appropriately in context
8 literal translation trap ____	**h** the common learner error of translating an idiom word for word into another language
9 pragmatic function ____	**i** the practical communicative purpose an idiom serves beyond its literal content
10 cultural specificity ____	**j** the degree to which an idiom's meaning or imagery is tied to a particular culture's shared knowledge

2 Choose the word with the most suitable connotation.

1 For an idiom whose meaning is unrelated to its literal words: opaque idiom / transparent idiom.

2 For an idiom whose figurative meaning is loosely connected to the literal: transparent idiom / opaque idiom.

3 For sounding natural through native-like set expressions: idiomaticity / stilted, literal phrasing.

4 For a learner's ability to use idioms appropriately: idiomatic competence / vocabulary size alone.

5 For the common error of word-for-word idiom translation: the literal translation trap / accurate rendering.

6 For an idiom's use restricted to a particular formality level: register-specific / universally appropriate.

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7 For the practical communicative purpose an idiom serves: pragmatic function / decorative flourish.

8 For the degree an idiom ties to shared cultural knowledge: cultural specificity / universal transparency.

3 Complete the idiom-studies collocations with one word.

1 an _____ idiom (= meaning unrelated to literal words)

2 a _____ idiom (= loosely connected to literal sense)

3 achieve _____ (= sounding natural through idioms)

4 develop idiomatic _____ (= a learner's appropriate use of idioms)

5 fall into the literal translation _____ (= word-for-word error)

6 a _____-specific idiom (= tied to a formality level)

7 serve a _____ function (= a practical communicative purpose)

8 high cultural _____ (= tied to shared cultural knowledge)

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4 Complete the case notes with words and phrases from the box.

cultural specificity | idiom | idiomatic competence | idiomaticity | literal translation trap | opaque idiom | pragmatic function | register-specific idiom | semi-idiomatic expression | transparent idiom

Case A: 'Kick the bucket' is a genuinely 1 _____, since nothing in the literal words suggests death.
Case B: 'Break the ice' counts as a 2 _____, since the literal image of breaking something rigid loosely connects to easing initial social tension.
Case C: A learner fell into the 3 _____, translating an idiom word for word into their target language, producing a phrase native speakers found baffling.
Case D: 'Kick the bucket' functions as a 4 _____, appropriate only in very casual conversation rather than formal writing.
Case E: Teachers noted that developing genuine 5 _____ takes years of exposure, well beyond simply memorising a list of expressions.
Case F: 'Spill the beans' shows high 6 _____, its origin tied closely to a specific cultural or historical practice not obviously accessible to outsiders.
Case G: Beyond literal meaning, the idiom served a clear 7 _____, signalling solidarity between speakers rather than conveying new factual information.
Case H: Mastering 8 _____ more broadly, sounding genuinely native-like through set expressions, remains one of the hardest markers of near-native fluency to achieve, and 'catch someone's eye' offers a useful example of a 9 _____.
10 _____, since the literal image straightforwardly evokes the figurative meaning.

5 Read the text and answer the questions briefly.

Idioms as markers of near-native fluency

Applied linguists studying second-language acquisition frequently identify idiomatic competence as among the very last skills advanced learners fully master, well after achieving grammatical accuracy and a substantial vocabulary. This delay reflects the fact that idioms rarely follow predictable rules; each must be individually learned, together with its precise register restrictions and appropriate pragmatic function, since even grammatically fluent, semantically accurate paraphrases sound noticeably foreign if a native speaker would have reached instead for a familiar set expression in that exact context. Native speakers, having absorbed thousands of such expressions through years of implicit exposure, deploy them largely without conscious effort, creating a fluency gap that formal instruction alone struggles to close.

1 What do applied linguists frequently identify as among the last skills advanced learners master? ___

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2 What does this delay reflect, according to the text? _____

3 What must be individually learned for each idiom? _____

4 Why do grammatically fluent paraphrases sometimes sound foreign? _____

5 How have native speakers absorbed thousands of such expressions? _____

6 What does this create, according to the text? _____

6 Rewrite each sentence using the word in capitals. Do not change the meaning.

1 The idiom's meaning had nothing to do with its literal words. OPAQUE IDIOM _____

2 He translated the idiom word for word into the other language, and it sounded odd. LITERAL TRANSLATION TRAP _____

3 The expression was only appropriate in very informal conversation. REGISTER-SPECIFIC IDIOM _____

4 The idiom's meaning was closely tied to a specific cultural practice. CULTURAL SPECIFICITY _____

OVER TO YOU

Write a 120-150 word account analysing why idiomatic competence is one of the hardest skills for language learners to master, distinguishing observation from pedagogical recommendation.

[ ] Use at least twelve target expressions. [ ] Control connotation carefully. [ ] Avoid unsupported assumptions.

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ANSWER KEY

1 Precise terms

1 a 2 b 3 c 4 d 5 e 6 f 7 g 8 h 9 i 10 j

2 Connotation

1 opaque idiom 2 transparent idiom 3 idiomaticity 4 idiomatic competence 5 the literal translation trap 6 register-specific 7 pragmatic function 8 cultural specificity

3 Collocations

1 opaque 2 transparent 3 idiomaticity 4 competence 5 trap 6 register 7 pragmatic 8 specificity

4 Case notes

1 opaque idiom 2 semi-idiomatic expression 3 literal translation trap 4 register-specific idiom
5 idiomatic competence 6 cultural specificity 7 pragmatic function 8 idiomaticity 9 transparent idiom 10 transparent idiom... note adjust

5 Reading - suggested answers

1 Idiomatic competence.
2 That idioms rarely follow predictable rules; each must be individually learned.
3 Its precise register restrictions and appropriate pragmatic function.
4 Because a native speaker would have reached instead for a familiar set expression in that exact context.
5 Through years of implicit exposure.
6 A fluency gap that formal instruction alone struggles to close.

6 Rewriting - possible answers

1 It was an opaque idiom. 2 He fell into the literal translation trap.
3 It was a register-specific idiom. 4 The idiom showed cultural specificity.

Over to you

Answers will vary. Check lexical precision, appropriate connotation and separation of fact from inference.