

Teaching Idioms in Relation to Communicative Contexts

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>Idioms are distinctive linguistic units that embody the cultural values, ways of thinking, and lifestyle of the Vietnamese people. Therefore, teaching idioms should not stop at the level of recognition and comprehension, but should be placed within specific communicative situations. This paper focuses on teaching Vietnamese idioms in relation to communicative contexts—an approach that aims to enhance learners' ability to use the language naturally and effectively. In particular, the paper proposes several methods for teaching idioms in connection with communicative contexts.</i> Keywords: Idioms, context, teaching, methodology
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1. Introduction

In the Vietnamese language system, idioms hold a particularly important position. Idioms are fixed lexical units that are rich in imagery and imbued with profound cultural and social meanings. They not only reflect the way of thinking, lifestyle, and folk experience of the Vietnamese people but also serve as effective means of expressing emotional nuances, attitudes, and communicative values in everyday life. However, in the current practice of teaching Vietnamese to foreign learners, the understanding and use of idioms in communication remain limited. The main reason is that the teaching of idioms often focuses on semantic and structural aspects while paying little attention to context and communicative situations.

From the perspective of functional linguistics and pragmatic teaching methodology, idiom instruction cannot be separated from the communicative context, where the meanings of idioms are activated and flexibly applied. When placed in specific communicative situations—such as conversations, emotional expressions, or opinion exchanges—idioms can fully reveal their expressive value while helping learners develop more natural, effective, and culturally appropriate communicative competence in Vietnamese.

This paper aims to clarify the relationship between idioms and communicative context in Vietnamese language

teaching, thereby proposing several pedagogical directions and methods that can help learners gain a deeper understanding, retain idioms longer, and use them appropriately and effectively in real communicative situations.

2. Content

2.1. The Role of Communicative Context in Teaching Vietnamese Idioms

“Context” refers to the linguistic and situational background in which communication occurs. In Western linguistics, the first scholar to introduce the concept of context was the Polish linguist Malinowski, followed by Firth and the renowned British linguist M.A.K. Halliday. In China, interest in contextual studies emerged in the 1930s, with scholars such as Chen Wangdao, Zhang Zhigong, Feng Guangyi, and Shi Wentun contributing to the field. In Vietnam, many linguists have also studied the theory of context. According to Đỗ Hữu Châu (2002), *situational context* refers to the extralinguistic background of an utterance or the non-linguistic information contributing to the creation of its meaning. Meanwhile, Bùi Minh Toán (2010) defines context as the linguistic environment in which communicative activity takes place.

As previously mentioned, idioms represent the ways of speaking, thinking, and living of a people. In idioms, linguistic, cultural, and customary elements accumulate to form what Cao Huy Đình calls “a special composite form of folk knowledge.” Idioms often carry both literal and figurative meanings, shifting from concrete to abstract expression. Therefore, understanding idioms requires a combination of linguistic and cultural approaches. Context thus becomes the key factor in teaching and learning idioms, as it provides situational and cultural information that clarifies their real meanings. Nguyễn Lân (2000) emphasizes that translating idioms is not merely a matter of word-for-word translation but requires attention to context to determine their accurate meaning in each case.

In determining the meaning of idioms based on context, it is important to distinguish between linguistic context and situational context. The *linguistic context* (or narrow context) refers to the surrounding words, sentences, or discourse elements—such as preceding and following clauses, or collocations within a phrase. It can also refer to the sequence of utterances in a monologue or the exchange between speakers in dialogue. The *situational context* (or broad context), on the other hand, includes factors related to participants, social environment, location, time, and broader socio-cultural or historical elements.

Some idioms are difficult to interpret when isolated from context; hence, context serves as the “linguistic environment” that actualizes their meanings.

Example:

“She did not scold or curse, but at times there were sharp, sarcastic remarks that made others uncomfortable.” (From *Sea Storm* – Chu Văn)

In this context, the idiom “*tiếng bấc tiếng chì*” means “uttering indirect or cutting remarks in irritation.” However, in the sentence “*Đội năm của ông là đội to, lắm ruộng đồng, người quanh năm chả lúc nào hết tiếng bấc tiếng chì*” (From *Đất làng* – Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Tú) (“His fifth team was a large one, with plenty of fields, and the people were never without constant murmuring and gossip all year round.” (From *The Village Land* – Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Tú), the same idiom means “constant murmuring or gossip.”

Furthermore, many idioms embody the cultural and historical values of a community; therefore, without understanding its customs, norms, and social values, one cannot fully grasp the essence of an idiom.

2.2 Some Teaching Approaches to Vietnamese Idioms in Relation to Communicative Context

2.2.1. Teaching Idioms Through Real Communicative Situations

Objective:

To help learners understand the literal and figurative meanings, expressive nuances, and conditions of idiom use in real-life communication, thereby applying them flexibly in speaking, writing, and responding appropriately to different contexts.

Procedure:

Step 1. Create a realistic communicative situation. Teachers design familiar life scenarios (e.g., classroom, workplace, friendly conversation) where idioms naturally occur, allowing learners to infer meaning from context rather than direct translation.

Step 2. Explore and explain the idiom in context.

Learners analyze the literal meaning, figurative meaning, emotional tone, and suitable usage situations.

Step 3. Practice and reinforcement.

Learners role-play or complete communicative tasks, while teachers observe and correct misuse or contextual errors.

Example: Teaching the idiom “*nước đến chân mới nhảy*” (“to act only at the last moment”).

-Step 1: Scenario: A student is hurriedly preparing a presentation just before class.

-Teacher: “Tuấn, have you finished your presentation?”

-Tuấn: “Almost done! I’ve been rushing since morning.”

-Mai: “You really are *nước đến chân mới nhảy*!”

-Step 2: Explanation:

-*Literal meaning*: jumping only when water rises to one’s feet — acting in reaction.

-*Figurative meaning*: procrastinating or acting only when forced.

-*Tone*: mildly critical, used informally.

-Step 3: Practice: learners act out or write about similar experiences, and learn related expressions such as “*chạy nước rút*” (“final sprint”).

Teaching idioms through real communicative situations helps learners of Vietnamese as a foreign language understand not only meaning but also pragmatic use. Through dialogue, role play, and problem-solving, learners enhance their linguistic reflexes, grasp emotional subtleties, and internalize cultural values embedded in idioms. Although this approach demands creativity and preparation time from teachers, it remains one of the most effective ways to connect language – culture – communication and foster natural, authentic Vietnamese usage.

2.2.2. Teaching Idioms Through Audiovisual Materials

Objective:

To help learners identify the meanings, emotional tones, and contextual uses of idioms through audiovisual materials (films, commercials, TV programs, social media clips, etc.) that reflect real cultural communication.

Procedure:

Step 1. Select appropriate audiovisual materials. Teachers choose short videos or film clips containing idioms used naturally and expressively.

Step 2. Watch/listen, identify idioms, and analyze meaning. After introducing the scene and characters, learners infer idiomatic meaning from context, then analyze literal and figurative meanings and emotional tones.

Step 3. Practice and extension.

Learners discuss new situations where the idiom applies, or create their own dialogues or short videos using it.

Example: Teaching the idiom “*đứng núi này trông núi nọ*” (“the grass is greener on the other side”).

Step 1: Show a video where a character complains about their job and dreams of another. Another character responds: “You’re always *đứng núi này trông núi nọ*! No job is perfect.”

Step 2: Explanation:

Literal meaning: standing on one mountain looking at another.

Figurative meaning: always dissatisfied, longing for something else.

Tone: critical, disapproving of greed or restlessness.

- **Step 3:** Practice: learners create dialogues in new contexts (friends, colleagues, couples) and find synonymous idioms.

Using audiovisual materials makes idioms more vivid and memorable, helping learners visualize context, understand emotional and cultural nuances, and experience idioms as full communicative acts rather than static linguistic forms.

2.2.3. Teaching Idioms by Communicative Themes

Objective:

To help learners understand idioms as part of a network of related meanings within communicative themes, making them easier to remember and apply naturally.

Procedure:

Step 1: Select communicative themes appropriate to learners’ proficiency levels.

Each theme should include 3–5 idioms sharing similar or contrasting emotional tones.

Table 2.1. Classification of Idioms by Communicative Themes

Theme	Subtopic
Theme 1: Work and Study	
1. Work attitude	<i>Nước đến chân mới nhảy</i> (Act only at the last moment); <i>Làm chơi ăn thật</i> (Work lightly but gain much); <i>Làm đâu bỏ đó</i> (Work carelessly and leave things unfinished)...
2. Success and failure	<i>Ăn nên làm ra</i> (Be prosperous and successful); <i>Có chí thì nên</i> (Where there’s a will, there’s a way); <i>Học tài thi phận</i> (Talent does not always ensure success)...
3. Study spirit	<i>Học một biết mười</i> (Learn one thing, understand ten); <i>Học hay càng biết</i> (Study diligently and skillfully); <i>Ăn vóc học hay</i> (Good health supports good learning)...
Theme 2: Social Communication and Behavior	
4. Trustworthiness, keeping one’s word	<i>Nói là làm</i> (Do what one says); <i>Lời nói gói vàng</i> (Words are as precious as gold); <i>Lời nói dối máu</i> (Words can have serious consequences)...
5. Skillfulness in communication	<i>Dĩ hòa vi quý</i> (Value harmony above all); <i>Biết người biết ta</i> (Know others and know yourself); <i>Biết nhiều nói ít</i> (Know much, speak little); <i>Kính trên nhường dưới</i> (Respect elders, yield to juniors)...
6. Friendship relations	<i>Chén chú chén anh</i> (Close and convivial friendship); <i>Tình như thủ túc</i> (Affection as close as one’s own limbs)...
7. Handling conflicts	<i>Chín bỏ làm mười</i> (Overlook others’ faults for the sake of peace); <i>Lạt mềm buộc chặt</i> (Gentleness binds more strongly)...
Theme 3: Family Affection	
8. Marital relationship	<i>Đầu gối tay ấp</i> (Close and loving couple); <i>Thuận vợ thuận chồng</i> (Harmony between husband and wife brings success); <i>Của chồng công vợ</i> (Husband’s wealth, wife’s effort)...
9. Parental love	<i>Mẹ tròn con vuông</i> (Safe delivery for both mother and child); <i>Con dại cái mang</i> (A mother bears her child’s faults); <i>Phúc đức tại mẫu</i> (A mother is the source of virtue and blessing)...

10. Sibling and kinship relations	<i>Máu chảy ruột mềm</i> (Blood is thicker than water); <i>Chị ngã em nâng</i> (Siblings support each other); <i>Trên thuận dưới hòa</i> (Harmony between elders and juniors); <i>Chung lưng đấu cật</i> (Stand shoulder to shoulder in unity)...
Theme 4: Personality and Character	
11. Honest person	<i>Thẳng như ruột ngựa</i> (Straightforward and honest); <i>Ăn ngay nói thật</i> (Eat honestly, speak truthfully)...
12. Wise, clever person	<i>Đa mưu túc trí</i> (Resourceful and full of strategies)...
13. Greedy, selfish person	<i>Tham thì thâm</i> (Greed brings harm); <i>Ăn cháo đá bát</i> (Bite the hand that feeds you)...
14. Hard-working, diligent person	<i>Một nắng hai sương</i> (Work hard under sun and dew); <i>Thức khuya dậy sớm</i> (Stay up late and rise early)...

Step 2: Introducing the Communicative Theme and “Activating” Idioms within that Theme

The teacher introduces the communicative theme and poses open-ended questions to activate idioms related to that theme.

For example, when teaching the theme “*Work and Study*”, the teacher may elicit the idiom “*nước đến chân mới nhảy*” (“to act only at the last moment”) by asking: “*When someone only starts working when the deadline is near, what do Vietnamese people usually say?*” This helps learners associate the meaning and context before learning the idiom in detail.

Step 3: Explaining the Idioms within the Theme

The teacher presents each idiom under the following aspects:

- Literal meaning
- Figurative meaning
- Typical communicative context
- Expressive nuance

Step 4: Practicing Communication by Theme and Reinforcement

Learners engage in various communicative activities such as role-plays, constructing short dialogues using idioms, group discussions about real-life situations where the idioms can be used, and collecting additional idioms belonging to the same theme.

Teaching idioms through communicative themes helps learners grasp the semantic and cultural relationships among idioms in the same group, leading to better retention

and more accurate usage. This approach also offers learners deeper insight into Vietnamese communication culture in various aspects of life. However, it requires teachers to be skilled in selecting appropriate themes and designing diverse activities, so as to avoid mere listing that would make the lesson dry and unengaging.

3. Conclusion

Teaching idioms in relation to communicative contexts is a practical and effective approach in teaching Vietnamese as a second language. When placed within specific communicative situations, idioms are not only understood at the linguistic level but also perceived through the cultural and psychological dimensions of Vietnamese communication. This approach helps learners gain a deeper understanding of expressive value, semantic nuances, and the flexible use of idioms in real-life contexts.

However, to achieve high effectiveness, teachers need the ability to select appropriate themes, design interactive activities, and connect them with learners’ actual communicative needs. At the same time, combining linguistic theory with communicative teaching methods is essential to ensure both scientific validity and practical applicability.

In conclusion, teaching idioms in relation to communicative contexts not only enriches learners’ linguistic competence but also helps them gain a deeper understanding of Vietnamese cultural identity, mindset, and way of life—key components that shape intercultural communicative competence.

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