Spill the tea: Explaining idioms

Task 1

Read the text. Are the sentences true (T) or false (F)?

1. You can always guess the meaning of an idiom if you understand the individual words.
2. The idiom 'burn the midnight oil' comes from a time when we didn't have electric lights.
3. The idiom 'kill two birds with one stone' originally comes from a video game.

What are idioms?

Have you ever heard an expression that made no sense – until someone explained it? That expression may well have been an idiom.

An idiom is a phrase where the meaning isn't obvious from the individual words. For example, 'break the ice' means to start a conversation in a way that makes people feel more comfortable – not actually breaking ice!

Idioms change over time. Your parents or grandparents may sometimes use expressions that sound strange to you. For instance, 'burn the midnight oil' means to stay up late working or studying. This idiom comes from a time when people used oil lamps for light. It made sense to previous generations, but now that we have electric lights, the meaning isn't as obvious!

On the other hand, you might use idioms that confuse your parents. Take 'no cap', for example. This phrase, often used on social media, means you're telling the truth or being completely honest. If someone says 'That concert was amazing, no cap!', they mean they're not exaggerating. Your parents might not understand this at all!

Some idioms stand the test of time (which, by the way, is also an idiom, meaning that something is still popular after a long time). For example, 'kill two birds with one stone' means to achieve two things at once. The phrase comes from ancient stories about hunters using a single stone to hit two birds, making it an efficient way to get food. It's still a common way to talk about solving two problems with one action.

With social media, streaming and global communication, new idioms spread faster than ever. Understanding them helps us understand people from other generations and cultures. What's your favourite idiom?

Task 2

Read the text again. Underline all the idioms you notice. Check with your partner.

Task 3

Discuss with your partner.

1. Do any of these idioms exist in your language?
2. What other idioms do you know?

Task 4

Match the idiom to its meaning.

1. it is what it is	a. to achieve two things at the same time
2. to spill the tea	b. to change in a positive way, often in appearance or confidence
3. to break the ice	c. to start to deal with an unpleasant or difficult situation
4. to kill two birds with one stone	d. to tell a secret or share gossip
5. to glow up	e. a big problem that people avoid talking about
6. from the horse's mouth	f. said to wish someone good luck, especially before a performance
7. to bite the bullet	g. to start a conversation and make people feel more comfortable
8. break a leg	h. something that can't be changed, so you just accept it
9. no cap	i. information from the person who has direct personal knowledge of it
10. an elephant in the room	j. a way to say 'I'm not lying' or 'I'm being honest'

Task 5

Choose the correct answer.

1. Your friend is about to perform in the school play. They're really nervous. What do you say to them?
   a. Spill the tea!
   b. Break a leg!
   c. There's an elephant in the room.

2. Your maths teacher told you there's going to be a big exam next week. Your friend doesn't believe you. What do you say?
   a. Let's kill two birds with one stone.
   b. We have to break the ice.
   c. I heard it from the horse's mouth.

3. Two of your friends have had a huge argument, but no one is mentioning it directly. What do you say?
   a. There's an elephant in the room.
   b. No cap!
   c. It is what it is.

4. You see a friend again after the school holidays and they look amazing. What do you say?
   a. It is what it is.
   b. You've had a glow up!
   c. Break a leg.

5. Your friend lent you their favourite jacket, but you've lost it. You're scared, but you decide to tell the truth. What do you say to yourself?
   a. It's time to bite the bullet.
   b. It's time to break a leg.
   c. It's time to break the ice.

Task 6

Create a short dialogue with your partner(s) using one of the idioms you've learned today.

- Choose an idiom.
- Invent a situation for your idiom.
- Decide who the characters are and invent the dialogue.
- A says the idiom.
- B doesn't understand the idiom – they just understand the individual words.
- A (or C) explains the meaning of the idiom.