

Slow English Listening Practice 20 Idioms for Natural Conversations

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

431 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Welcome to Your English Toolbox, where we train your ears step by step.

And today... we have something really special for you.

I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

Want to take your learning even further?

Find "Your English Toolbox" on YouTube to watch every episode with subtitles.

It is the best way to support this project, and we truly appreciate it.

Today... we are going to work on twenty idioms.

Twenty expressions that native speakers use every single day.

Not in textbooks.

In real conversations.

At work... with friends... at home.

And before we start... we want to recommend a book.

A book we genuinely love.

We use it in our in-person English classes.

Martin uses it with his students every single week.

It is called...

English Vocabulary in Use.

Upper Intermediate.

By Michael McCarthy.

If you do not have it... get it.

It is one of the best vocabulary books ever written for learners at this level.

Today's twenty idioms come directly from that book.

Units 78 and 82.



Here is what you will learn today.

Twenty idioms... with their meaning... their usage... and their cultural nuance.

A full story... using all twenty of them in natural context.

A role play where you get to choose the right idiom yourself.

And three practice questions at the end.

The answers are in the episode description.

Let's go.

PART ONE.

THE STORY.

I want to tell you about Daniel.

Daniel moved to London... from Madrid... three years ago.

He had a new job at a small tech startup.

He was nervous.

Very nervous.

Back home in Spain...

Daniel was a big fish in a small pond.

He had been the best developer in his company.

Everyone knew him.

Everyone respected him.

But London was different.

London was a very... very big pond.

On his first day...

Daniel was quiet.

Too quiet.

His new colleagues thought he was a cold fish.

Distant.

Unfriendly.

Hard to talk to.

But that was not the truth.

Daniel was just... adjusting.



He was actually a rough diamond.

Talented, genuine, full of potential.

Just... unpolished.

Just finding his feet.

His manager, Sarah, saw something in him immediately.

She told her colleague...

"Daniel is a dark horse.

Watch him."

And she was right.

But first... things had to get a lot worse... before they got better.

In his second week, Daniel volunteered to lead the company's biggest project of the year.

His colleague Marcus — who was, to be honest, a real pain in the neck — laughed out loud.

"He just arrived," Marcus said.

"He has no idea what he is getting into."

And honestly?

Marcus was not entirely wrong.

Daniel had bitten off more than he could chew.

The project was enormous.

Three teams, six clients, four different platforms.

Within two weeks... things were getting out of hand.

Deadlines were missed.

Budgets exploded.

The whole thing cost the company an arm and a leg to fix.

And Daniel... was in hot water.

Sarah called him into her office.

Daniel walked in... expecting the worst.

But then... something unexpected happened.

Marcus — the pain in the neck — had been talking.

He had told the whole team that Daniel's original plan was actually brilliant.

He had let the cat out of the bag... about a secret presentation Daniel had prepared.



A presentation that solved every single problem the project had created.

Daniel had never planned to show it.

But now... everyone knew.

Marcus had also spilled the beans to the CEO.

Daniel was furious.

At first.

"You had no right," he told Marcus.

He was on thin ice... with the whole team.

He nearly burned his bridges completely.

He was about to send a very angry email.

But Julia... can I just say something here?

Of course.

This is the moment where Daniel had a choice.

Exactly.

And he made the right one.

He took a breath.

He went back to square one.

He looked at everything... calmly.

And he realised...

Marcus had actually helped him.

The presentation was a hit.

The CEO stood up and said...

"Daniel... you have hit the nail on the head."

"This is exactly what we needed."

The room applauded.

Marcus leaned over and said...

"I told you he was a dark horse."

Even the CEO laughed and said...

"Were you pulling my leg this whole time, Daniel?"

"You made yourself look like a beginner for two weeks..."



"...and then you walked in with this?"

Daniel smiled.

He said...

"The budget disaster... that was just the tip of the iceberg."

"There are ten more ideas where this came from."

The CEO nodded... slowly.

"I think," she said, "that we have been looking at a very big fish in a very small pond."

"It is time to give you a bigger one."

That evening... the team had a small celebration.

Marcus — the pain in the neck — turned out to be the life and soul of the party.

He danced on a table.

He told terrible jokes.

He made everyone laugh until they cried.

Daniel looked at him and thought...

"I almost burned my bridges with this man."

"I almost lost everything... over one angry email."

There was one person in the corner, though.

There is always one.

Carol... from accounting.

Oh, Carol.

Carol was a wet blanket.

She stood there saying the celebration was premature.

"The project is not finished," she said.

"We should not be celebrating yet."

Everyone smiled politely.

And then... everyone ignored her completely.

PART TWO.

THE DEEP DIVE.

Twenty idioms. Let us go through them one by one.

Meaning... usage... and one cultural note for each.



Listen carefully.

We will go slowly.

Number one.

A big fish in a small pond.

Someone who is very important... or very successful...

...but only in a small or limited environment.

You might hear this about someone who was the best student in a small town...

...and then moved to a big city.

Cultural note: British and American English use this equally.

It is never an insult.

It is just an observation.

Number two.

A cold fish.

Someone who seems unfriendly... distant... and emotionally unavailable.

"He never smiles, never says hello.

He is a bit of a cold fish."

Cultural note: this is more common in British English.

Americans might say "he is hard to read" instead.

Number three.

A rough diamond.

Someone who has great qualities — honesty, talent, kindness —

...but lacks social polish.

They may not speak perfectly in formal situations.

They may not dress the part.

But their character is genuine... and valuable.

Cultural note: in British English you might also hear "diamond in the rough."

Same meaning.

Both are warm expressions — never negative.

Number four.

A dark horse.



Someone who surprises people... with unexpected talent or ability.

In politics, a dark horse candidate is someone nobody expected to win... who wins.

In everyday life... it is that quiet colleague who suddenly produces brilliant work.

Cultural note: it comes from horse racing.

An unknown horse that wins unexpectedly.

Number five.

A pain in the neck.

An annoying person.

Or an annoying situation.

"This traffic is a real pain in the neck."

"My neighbour plays loud music every night."

He is such a pain in the neck."

Cultural note: this is the polite version.

There is a much more direct version... that uses a different part of the body.

You will hear that one in informal conversation.

Number six.

Bite off more than you can chew.

To take on more responsibility... or more work... than you can handle.

"She agreed to manage three projects at the same time."

I think she has bitten off more than she can chew."

Cultural note: this idiom is a warning.

A gentle one.

Native speakers use it with kindness — not to criticise... but to show concern.

Number seven.

Get out of hand.

When a situation becomes difficult to control.

"The party got out of hand."

Twenty people became two hundred."

"The argument got out of hand."

What started as a small disagreement became a serious fight."



Cultural note: you can also use it for children.

"The kids are getting out of hand."

Every parent in the world knows this sentence.

Number eight.

Cost an arm and a leg.

Something... extremely expensive.

"Have you seen the prices in that restaurant?"

It costs an arm and a leg."

Cultural note: this is informal and very common in everyday speech.

You would not use it in a formal business report.

But in conversation?

You will hear it constantly.

Number nine.

In hot water.

In a difficult situation.

In trouble.

"He forgot his wedding anniversary.

He is in hot water now."

"She missed the deadline again.

She is seriously in hot water with the manager."

Cultural note: the water can get hotter.

You can be "in hot water"...

...or "in very hot water"...

...or "in seriously hot water."

The temperature tells you... exactly how bad the situation is.

Number ten.

On thin ice.

In a risky situation... where one wrong move could cause disaster.

"He has already been late three times this month.

He is on very thin ice."



Cultural note: the image is physical — walking on ice that could break.

It creates real tension when native speakers use it.

It is a quiet warning.

Number eleven.

Let the cat out of the bag.

To accidentally reveal a secret.

"I let the cat out of the bag about the surprise party.

She knows now."

Cultural note: the origin is fascinating.

In medieval markets... merchants would sometimes put a cat in a bag... instead of a pig.

When the buyer opened the bag... the secret was out.

Today it always means accidental disclosure.

Never intentional.

Number twelve.

Spill the beans.

To reveal secret or private information.

"Come on.

Spill the beans.

What did they say about me?"

Cultural note: unlike "let the cat out of the bag"... spilling the beans can be intentional or accidental.

And it is often used in a lighter... more gossipy way.

Number thirteen.

Hit the nail on the head.

To say or do... exactly the right thing.

"You hit the nail on the head.

That is exactly the problem."

Cultural note: it is a compliment.

A strong one.

When someone says this to you in a meeting... you have won the room.

Number fourteen.



Burn your bridges.

To permanently damage a relationship or situation... so you cannot return to it.

"He quit by shouting at his boss in front of everyone.

He really burned his bridges there."

Cultural note: this is a serious idiom.

It implies... there is no going back.

Use it carefully — it carries real weight.

Number fifteen.

Pull someone's leg.

To tease someone.

To joke with them.

To say something untrue... in a playful way.

"Are you serious?

Or are you pulling my leg?"

Cultural note: this is always lighthearted.

It is never used for serious deception.

If someone says "I'm only pulling your leg"... relax.

They are joking.

Number sixteen.

The tip of the iceberg.

The small visible part... of a much larger problem or situation.

"The missing files were just the tip of the iceberg.

The whole system was broken."

Cultural note: this always implies something bigger is hidden beneath the surface.

And usually... that bigger thing... is not good news.

Number seventeen.

Go back to square one.

To start again from the beginning... after a failure.

"The client rejected everything.

We have to go back to square one."



Cultural note: this comes from board games.

Landing on square one... meant starting over.

Today it is used in business, relationships, and everyday problem-solving.

Number eighteen.

Once in a blue moon.

Very rarely.

Almost never.

"He calls me once in a blue moon.

I never know when to expect it."

Cultural note: a blue moon is a second full moon in a single calendar month.

It happens roughly every two and a half years.

So "once in a blue moon" means... almost never.

Number nineteen.

The life and soul of the party.

The person who makes a social event... fun and energetic.

"You have to invite Daniel.

He is the life and soul of the party."

Cultural note: this is always a compliment.

But it can carry a hint of irony in British English.

Sometimes "the life and soul of the party" is also... exhausting.

Just a little.

Number twenty.

A wet blanket.

Someone who spoils the fun... or the enthusiasm... of others.

"Don't invite Carol.

She is such a wet blanket."

Cultural note: the image is perfect.

A wet blanket on a fire... puts it out.

A wet blanket in a social situation... does exactly the same thing.

PART THREE.



THE ROLE PLAY.

Now it is your turn.

I will describe a situation.

Julia will give you three idioms to choose from.

You choose the right one.

We will pause... so you have time to think.

Ready?

Situation one.

Your colleague has just agreed to manage six different projects at the same time.

You are worried about him.

Which idiom do you use?

Option A... he is on thin ice.

Option B... he has bitten off more than he can chew.

Option C... he is a dark horse.

The answer is B.

He has bitten off more than he can chew.

"On thin ice" means the situation is risky — but it implies his behaviour might get him in trouble.

"A dark horse" means he has hidden talent.

But "bitten off more than he can chew" is exactly right here.

He has taken on too much.

You are concerned.

That is the idiom.

Situation two.

You are at a party.

One person in the corner has been complaining all evening.

The food is wrong.

The music is too loud.

It is too crowded.

Which idiom describes this person?

Option A... a cold fish.



Option B... the life and soul of the party.

Option C... a wet blanket.

The answer is C.

A wet blanket.

"A cold fish" means unfriendly and distant — but this person is not distant.

They are actively... ruining the atmosphere.

"The life and soul of the party" is the opposite.

A wet blanket puts out the energy.

That is exactly what this person is doing.

Situation three.

Your friend was supposed to keep a secret.

She told everyone.

Which TWO idioms could you use here?

Option A... she let the cat out of the bag.

Option B... she hit the nail on the head.

Option C... she spilled the beans.

The answers are A and C.

Both work here.

She let the cat out of the bag — she revealed the secret, probably accidentally.

She spilled the beans — she revealed private information.

"Hit the nail on the head" means saying exactly the right thing.

It has nothing to do with secrets.

Two correct answers.

Did you get both?

Situation four.

You are at a meeting.

Your manager has just described the exact problem your team has been struggling to name for three months.

He found the words.

He got it exactly right.

Which idiom do you use?



Option A... he pulled our leg.

Option B... he hit the nail on the head.

Option C... he went back to square one.

The answer is B.

He hit the nail on the head.

"Pulled our leg" means he was joking — the opposite of what happened.

"Went back to square one" means starting again — also not relevant.

"Hit the nail on the head" is the compliment you give when someone gets it exactly right.

Use it.

It will make you sound very natural.

PART FOUR.

THREE PRACTICE QUESTIONS.

Before we close... three questions.

We will read them out loud.

Think about your answer.

Then check the episode description for the answers.

You can also write your answers in the comments section on YouTube.

We love reading them.

Question one.

Your friend says...

"Don't worry — I'm only pulling your leg."

Is your friend being serious...

...or joking?

Question two.

Your manager says...

"The budget problem is just the tip of the iceberg."

Does that mean the problem is small...

...or that it is much bigger than it appears?

Question three.

Which TWO idioms from today... both mean "to reveal a secret"?



Think carefully.

You heard both of them in the story.

The answers are waiting for you in the description.

Go and check.

And if you want to practise more... you know what to do.

If you made it this far, you are truly committed to your English.

Please head over to YouTube, search for "Your English Toolbox", and subscribe.

Your support there means the world to us and keeps this podcast growing.

Thank you for being here today.

Keep listening.

Keep practising.

And remember...

...every idiom you learn today...

...is one more reason a native speaker will say...

"You speak really natural English."

See you next time.

See you next time.

