

# SEMANTIC FEATURES OF ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE IDIOMS RELATING TO EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *Idioms express concepts and ideas whose meaning is not elicited from the individual words. Idioms make the way of speaking and writing short, concise, visual, and persuasive. They help speakers or writers communicate more successfully and make languages more interesting, but it is not easy to master or use them appropriately. Therefore, it is necessary to do an investigation into idioms in English and Vietnamese. The paper is based on descriptive and comparative methods in contrastive analysis of 400 idioms relating to education to find out semantic features in terms of simile, metaphor, metonymy. At the same time, the findings reveals some similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese idioms relating to education. Hopefully, the paper can help English learners and users with more effective performance in communication.*

**Key words:** *education idioms, semantic features, semantic fields, simile, metaphor, metonymy.*

## 1. Introduction

English becomes more and more important and necessary in the world, Vietnam included; therefore, it becomes universalized at all grades of schooling in Vietnam. Vocabulary is one of the essential aspects of language that all students are required to achieve. Among them is the knowledge of idioms. The number of idioms referring to education, i.e. teaching, learning, and examination, is quite large and they are rather pervasive in daily language.

Students often face difficulties in using idioms when they access to English materials because idioms contain not only literal meanings but also figurative and expressive ones. They are an integral part of a language and they make the language more beautiful and more dynamic. However, students find it really hard to understand idioms because their meanings cannot often be deduced from the individual components, which is a concern of many researchers. In fact, there have so far been several studies of idioms, such as animals idioms by Pham Thi To Nhu (1998), human body parts idioms by Nguyen Thi Hiep (2001), family idioms by Tran Ngoc Que Chau (2010), etc. Yet, a comparison between English and Vietnamese idioms of education has not been carried out. So, I would like to study *semantic features of idioms relating to education in English and Vietnamese* by using descriptive and comparative methods to analyze 400 idioms relating to education from dictionaries of idioms in both languages. It is done in hope of making a small contribution to helping students of English as well as Vietnamese people who learn English and who are interested in idioms improve their vocabulary, especially the knowledge of education idioms.

## 2. Content

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### 2.1. Definition of idioms relating to education

According to Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, an idiom is “a fixed phrase that has its own special meanings and it is impossible to guess the meanings from separated words”. Similarly, Crowder [2] defines an idiom as “a phrase whose meaning is difficult or sometimes impossible to guess by looking at the individual words it contains”. That is, a group of words with set meanings that cannot be calculated by adding up the separate meaning not deducible from those of the separate words [1], or an expression the meaning of which cannot be inferred from the meaning of its parts [3]. In the same vein in Vietnamese, Hoàng Văn Hành [8] defines an idiom as “a stable word group with a solid formation and structure, and a complete and figurative meaning, used in everyday communication, especially in spoken language”. For example

"*cá vượt Vũ Môn*" is used to indicate a student who passes the exams.

"*cần công kiệm học*" is used to refer to a person that both has to study and work hard.

Idioms do not give comments, experiences, a moral lesson, advice that make idioms aesthetic not educated, that is the reason why an idiom does not become a literary work – idioms belong to the language. Therefore, idioms do not bring about the full understanding about lives and any lessons of the people's relationships in the society.

As education is a process of teaching, training and learning, especially in schools and colleges to improve knowledge and develop skills, *Idioms Relating to Education* (IsE) is concerning the process of teaching, training and learning, such as “*burning the midnight oil*” or “*ra rả như cuộc kêu*”.

### 2.2. Semantic features

Lexical meaning of an idiom follows a private rule. Every idiom has a complete meaning as a set block generalized by all its forming elements. Although an idiom is a combination of words, they are not the combination of the meaning of each element forming it. For instance, the idiom “*get a first*” means *to obtain a first-class honor degree on graduation at a university*.

Transference of meaning (those are simile, metaphor, metonymy) is the most important expression of an idiom. Specific image is used to express as the symbol of characters, qualities, activities, etc.

#### 2.2.1. Simile

A simile is a figure of speech that indirectly compares two different things by employing the words “like”, “as”, or “than” [11].

For examples:

- He smokes *like* a chimney.
- This exercise is *as* easy *as* pie.
- He is larger *than* life.

#### 2.2.2. Metaphor

Nguyễn Hòa [6] defines metaphor as the transference of meaning (name) from one thing to another based on similarity between these two things.

Ellis, R. and Barkhuizen, G. state that: "A metaphor consists of a comparison between two dissimilar notions where one notion is to be understood in terms of the other notion." We can see that metaphor is an expression that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered having similar characteristics.

For examples:

- Bob is a couch potato.

### 2.2.3. Metonymy

Metonymy is based on a type of relation between the dictionary and contextual meaning, a relation based on not only on affinity but also on some kinds of association connecting the two concepts which these meaning represent.

Nguyễn Hòa [6] defines "Metonymy is the transference of meaning from one object to another based on contiguity of notions."

For examples:

- I have three mouths to feed. ("mouth" refers to "a person")

## 2.3. Semantic features of English and Vietnamese idioms relating to education

### 2.3.1. Transference of meaning of IsE in English and Vietnamese

#### 2.3.1.1. Simile

Simile is a direct and expressed comparison between two things essentially unlike each other, but resembling each other in at least one way. It is a device used to compare an unfamiliar thing (to be explained) to some familiar things (an object, event, process, etc.) known to the listener and the reader. Simile is the way to express an idea clearly, concretely and lively [10]. It is a very common stylistic device and is frequently used in idioms. We can find out some examples of IsE using simile as a stylistic device such as: *as easy as ABC*, *as easy as pie*, *as easy as falling off a log*, etc.

(1) Learning how to use a computer was *as easy as ABC* for the children.

[*Oxford Idioms Dictionary for learners of English* (2010), Oxford University Press]

By using simile "*as easy as ABC*" in this idiom, the writer wants to refer to something very easy to learn or to do.

In Vietnamese, a simile always employs the word "*như, (chẳng) bằng*", for example: chữ *như* của bò; dốt *như* bò; *như* rồng bay phượng múa; quây *như* quỳ quây nhà chay; ra rả *như* cuộc kê; chữ *như* trâu trát; hay chữ *chẳng bằng* dữ đòn; học *như* gà đá vách; etc.

(2) "... phản đối ăn sống nuốt tươi văn hóa của người, *học* người *như* vẹt hoặc lấp văn hóa của người vào hoàn cảnh nước mình như máy, không đếm xỉa đến đặc điểm và điều kiện đặc biệt của đất nước...." [Nguyễn Lâm (1997), *Từ điển thành ngữ và tục ngữ Việt Nam*, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội]



The idiom "*học như vẹt*" in example (2) is used to describe someone who learns something by heart but he/she doesn't understand it.

### 2.3.1.2. Metaphor

A metaphor is an imaginative way of comparing something to something else which is the same in a particular way. If one thing is a metaphor for another, it is intended or regarded as a symbol of it [5]. Metaphor is seen not just as a linguistic embellishment, but also as a primary means by which people make sense of the world around them. Therefore, it is unsurprising that metaphor is mainly used in the meaning transfer of idioms.

English IsE contain metaphor such as *with flying colours, at home, keep your nose to the grindstone, make a pig's ear (out) of sth, watch your mouth/ tongue, (still) wet behind the ears, hit the books*, etc. Let us analyze some examples of IsE to illustrate their application.

(3) After playing all weekend I had to *hit the books* on Sunday evening.

[<http://www.idiomconnection.com/education.html> (February 03, 2011)]

(4) He's a young teacher, still *wet behind the ears*.

[*Từ điển thành ngữ Anh - Anh - Việt*, NXB Tổng hợp TP HCM]

Seen in (3), the verb "*hit*" which means "*to touch sb/sth with force*" and the noun "*books*" with the literal meaning of "*a set of printed pages that are fastened inside a cover so that you can turn them and read them*" but in the idiom "*hit the books*" implies a learner who begins to study in a serious and determined way. Considering the example (4), the literal meaning of the idiom "*wet behind the ears*" is "*the ears are still wet*" but its metaphorical meaning that "*someone who is young and especially with very little experience in teaching*".

In Vietnamese, metaphor is also used in many IsE such as *đem chuông đi đấm nước người, nấu sủ sôi kinh, bán cháo phôi, giãm vô chuối, soi kính bóng quế, gõ đầu trẻ*, etc.

Let us look at some examples.

(5) Như Tự, Như Thuật phải hàng mười năm *nấu sủ sôi kinh* ở bậc phổ thông và ba bốn năm mài đũng quần ở trường Đại Học.

[Ma Văn Kháng (2000), *Đám cưới không có giấy giá thú*, Nxb. Văn học]

"*Nấu*" and "*sủ*" are action and process of cooking, however, this meaning of the idiom in (5) does not express these processes. They show the transferring of its metaphorical meanings to lead this idiom to an abstract meaning as someone who is laborious and studious in their learning.

### 2.3.1.3. Metonymy

Metonymy is defined as a "figure in which one word is substituted for another on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relation [6]. For Nunberg (1978, 1979), metonymy is a case of "deferred reference", in which a speaker uses a description

of A and succeeds in referring B. The following are some expressions of metonymy in Vietnamese as *hội Long Vân, Cửa Khổng sân Trình, áo gấm về làng*.

(6) "Sau bấy nhiêu năm đèn sách, bây giờ được *áo gấm về làng*, kể cũng bõ."

[Nguyễn Trọng Khánh (2008), *Sổ tay thành ngữ, tục ngữ Tiếng Việt*, Nxb. Giáo dục]

In (6) "*áo gấm*" refers to learners who pass the exams with flying colours.

In English we also have some idioms forming by the means of metonymy such as *cow* in *cow college*.

(7) "The closet approximation to a *cow college* in the UC (University of California) system, University of California- Davis' agricultural programs are rated second in the world in U.S. News Global Universities Rankings.

[<https://prep.vn/blog/thanh-ngu-tieng-anh-ve-hoc-tap>(February 03, 2011)]

Seen in (7), idiom "*cow college*" indicates colleges and universities that train fields in agriculture or refers to schools located in remote and isolated areas.

#### 2.4. Semantic fields of English and Vietnamese idioms relating to education

##### 2.4.1. School and Class

In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the noun "*school*" has some following meanings: a place where children go to be educated; the process of learning in a school; the time during your life when you go to a school; the time during the day when children are working in a school; all the children or students and the teachers in a school, etc. Due to the lexical nature of IsE, the idioms of expressing School and Class is much bigger in number in English than in Vietnamese. We can find out many idioms expressing School and Class as follows.

(8) Several of the company executives had gone to an *Ivy League* school. [<http://www.idiomconnection.com/education.html> (February 03, 2011)]

The idiom "*Ivy League*" denotes a small group of older and famous eastern United States colleges and universities such as Harvard, Yale and Princeton.

(9) "Trí thức của nước ta cũng có một số lớn được đào tạo ở *cửa Khổng sân Trình*." [Nguyễn Lực, (2001), *Thành ngữ tiếng Việt*, Nxb. Thanh niên]

As in (9) "*Khổng*" refers to Khổng Tử, "*Trình*" refers to Trình Tử (Trình Di) who are typical people of confucianism. The idiom "*cửa Khổng sân Trình*" is a place that instructs confucianism and forms Confucian scholars in the old day.

##### 2.4.2. Examinations

As we know examination is an act of examining, or state of being examined; a careful search, investigation, or inquiry; scrutiny by study or experiment. In other words, that is a process prescribed or assigned for test qualification; as, the examination of a learner, or of a candidate for admission to the ministry. Therefore, there is always success or failure in the examination. We can find some English idioms expressing examination such as *make the grade, pit your wits (against sb/sth), (earn/ get) straight A's (AmE)*,

*put sb/sth to the test, come unstuck (BrE), below average, flunk out*, etc. The examples below manifest these idioms.

(10) She *got straight A's* in all her exams. [*Oxford Idioms Dictionary for learners of English* (2010), Oxford University Press]

The idiom "*got straight A's*" means that learners get the best marks or grades in all their classes. In (10) the idiom is about success in studying as well as in examination.

(11) She *came unstuck* in the last part of the exam. [*Oxford Idioms Dictionary for learners of English* (2010), Oxford University Press]

Beside success in the exams, there is also fail. The idiom "*come unstuck*" in (11) denotes being unsuccessful or failure of learners in the examination.

In Vietnam, examination plays a very important role in the society. Vietnamese idioms also show success or failure of the learners in the examination, such as *học tài thi phận, học thành danh lập, bằng vàng bia đá, đua đại tranh khôn, vinh quy bái tổ, có công đền sách, cá chép hóa rồng, cá vượt Vũ Môn, trượt vô chuỗi, kẻ thế dăng khoa, lận đà lận đận*, etc. Let us consider these following examples.

(12) "Ông nhận về xướng, hứa lúc vinh quy sẽ đổi, và rước nàng về luôn, đại *dăng khoa* và tiêu dăng khoa một thể." [Trần Quốc Thịnh (2004), *Danh nhân lịch sử kinh Bắc*, Nxb. Lao động Hà Nội]

(13) "Đến ngày *vinh quy bái tổ*, ông vào chùa làm lễ tạ ơn sư thầy đã có công rèn dạy ông thành người đức hạnh, tài giỏi đề giúp nước."

[Tú Anh (2010), *101 truyện kể giáo dục bé*, Nxb. Văn hóa thông tin]

The idiom "*dăng khoa*" in (12) expresses getting a pass in the exam. The next example also conveys the same meaning. Additionally, the idiom "*vinh quy bái tổ*" as in (13) tells about learners in the old day passing the exam and became Doctors to whom the King gave commendation with flags when they returned to their homeland to worship their ancestors and were welcomed by their villagers.

Although learners try their best and work hard, they still fail the examination. Therefore, the learners need to have lucky destiny to pass the exam. Let us see the following example.

(14) "Tôi lại lo cho Hương: Em có đảm bảo chắc chắn đỗ không? *Học tài thi phận* biết thế nào. Nhưng nếu có 10% số người dự thi đỗ, chắc là có em." [Nguyễn Lực, (2001), *Thành ngữ tiếng Việt*, Nxb. Thanh niên]

The idiom "*học tài thi phận*" in (14) shows the good learners taking part in an exam but not passing it because they were unlucky in spite of working hard.

#### 2.4.3. Learners' personalities/ appearance

Learners' personality can be defined as a dynamic and organized set of characteristics possessed by a person that uniquely influences his or her cognitions, motivations, and behaviors in various situations. IsE in English and Vietnamese are used to express good or bad personality of learners. Let us consider the following examples.



(15) I **sweated blood** to get that essay finished on time. [*Oxford Idioms Dictionary for learners of English* (2010), Oxford University Press]

In the idiom "sweet blood", the word "blood" indicates to be hard working or learning. The idiom "**sweat blood**" in (15) expresses that if learners make a great effort in learning, they will get good marks. In other words, they must be diligent students.

Apart from diligence and intelligence of learners, there are also students who study both ignorantly and very lazily. English idioms have expressions like that in the following examples:

(16) Is she off school because she's ill, or is she **play truant**? [*Từ điển thành ngữ Anh - Anh - Việt*, NXB Tổng hợp TP HCM]

Some typical idioms of learners' personality in Vietnamese are **học hay cày giỏi, học trước quên sau, chữ nhất bẻ làm đôi, chữ tác đánh chữ tội, chữ tốt văn hay, dùi mài kinh sử, khổ học khổ luyện, học một biết mười, thùng rỗng kêu to**, etc. Some examples below illustrate these idioms.

(17) "Kính xin bệ hạ rộng lòng cho thần được lui về một thời gian nữa để thần dụng công **dùi mài kinh sử** văn chương đặng tinh tiến hơn nữa về sở học." [Kiều Văn (2002), *Giai thoại lịch sử Việt Nam*, Nxb. Văn hóa thông tin]

By using the idiom "**dùi mài kinh sử**", the author evokes the image of a learner who is very industrious and hard in learning in order to become a well-versed person.

#### 2.4.4. *Methods/ Ways of teaching and learning*

In this semantic field, a teaching- learning method is very necessary for both teachers and learners. It comprises the principles and methods used for instruction. Commonly used teaching-learning methods may include class participation, demonstration, recitation, memorization, or combinations of these. The choice of an appropriate teaching-learning method depends largely on the information or skill that is being taught, and it may also be influenced by the attitude and enthusiasm of the students. We can consider the following examples.

(18) He was brought up in **a hard school** which stood him in good stead later when he explored the Antarctic. [Gulland, D. M. (1994), *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms*, Penguin Group]

The idiom "**a hard school**" in this semantic field refers to a person who has a strict training.

(19) Don't listen to him. Remember that he only **learns** something **in parrot-fashion**. [*Từ điển thành ngữ Anh - Anh - Việt*, NXB Tổng hợp TP HCM]

As we know "**parrot**" is an animal which says what he says, but does not know what he says. By using this idiom, the writer wants to denote if people who learn or remember something without thinking about it or understanding what it means.

Besides the above idioms, some Vietnamese ones from this field can be found out in the corpus such as **học như vẹt/ học vẹt, đa thư loạn mục, miệng nói tay làm, ôn cố**

*tri tân, ra rả như cuộc kê, tầm chương trích cú, ê à ê à, học như cuộc kê mùa hè, như rót vào tai*, etc. We have some examples below.

(20) "Chi học thuộc lòng bài vở mà không chịu suy nghĩ vận dụng vào thực tiễn cũng bằng *học như vẹt*." [Nguyễn Lực, (2001), *Thành ngữ tiếng Việt*, Nxb. Thanh niên]

Similar to English, Vietnamese idioms express learning ways with disparaging attitude in such idiom as "*học như vẹt*", that is a learning way in which learners learn by heart mechanically what others have said without understanding.

(21) "Các cụ đã có cái quan niệm như vậy thì học là chủ đề thực dụng cốt là trau dồi cái nhân cách mình thế nào cho thể *hi thánh hi hiền* được, chứ không phải cốt lập ra học thuyết để truyền cho đời vậy..." [Nguyễn Đông Chí, Trần Văn Giáp (1970), *Việt Nam cổ văn học sử*]

In Vietnam, according to the idea of Vietnamese people in the old days, when learners' parents took their children to school, they often hoped that their children would follow the sages' example such as Khổng Tử and his disciples.

(22) "Chiêu Vũ chỉ là hạng bạch diện thư sinh *tầm chương trích cú*, chỉ giỏi ăn nói kiểu cách khéo léo nên được Chúa thượng thân thương, ông ta do vậy coi triều đình như chỗ không người..." [Gia Khánh Định (2000), *Hội đồng Biên tập Tổng Hợp Văn học Việt Nam*, Chương 9]

In the idiom, the verb "*tầm*" refers to *find out* or *collect*, "*chương*" indicates *an essay*, "*cú*" refers *a sentence*. The idiom "*tầm chương trích cú*" expresses the way of learning by Confucians in the old days. They do not pay attention to finding or collecting the content, they only pick up old clichés.

## 2.5. Similarities and differences in semantic features of English and Vietnamese idioms relating to education

### 2.5.1. Similarities

Idioms beautify the language and establish the characteristic style of each individual language. Although the culture of two nations is different, both Vietnamese and English express ideas and concepts in the same way. The idioms *earn parrot-fashion/ learn by rote* and *the blind leading the blind* in English, for example, have their equivalent in Vietnamese *học như vẹt* and *thằng mù dẫn dắt thằng mù* respectively.

Besides both English and Vietnamese idioms referring to education have the common semantic fields and sub-fields such as *School and Class, Examination, Methods/ Ways of Teaching and Learning*.

What is more, both languages use some stylistic devices such as simile, metaphor, metonymy to make a colorful and interesting picture in idioms referring to education.

### 2.5.2. Differences

Language is part of culture and vice versa, so the ways of expressing ideas and thoughts, which is usually influenced by culture and custom, through idioms in English and Vietnamese are different.



The first difference lies in the fact that English civilization is mainly originated from the civilization of ancient Greece and Rome in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, Vietnam is a nation which spends a long and hard history. Especially, the feudalism has a great influence on the development of the country as well as on the Vietnamese language. Living in such a society, Vietnamese people are impacted by Confucianism education. This feature is expressed in a majority of Vietnamese idioms in general and idioms of education in particular. For examples, *nấu sủ sôi kinh, hi thánh hi hiền, cửa Không sân Trình, tâm chương trích cú, vinh quy bái tổ, áo gấm về làng*, which are not found in English.

The second difference is that there are some Vietnamese idioms of which origins come from folk stories such as *ăn vóc học hay, cá vượt Vũ Môn, dốt có đuôi (dốt có chuôi)*, etc while no idioms of this case can be discovered in English. Idiom “*dốt có đuôi*” appeared in exams under the feudalism. At first, the idiom only decried few people who were not so ignorant. They were also people who passed the exams, but after exams, they were gathered and had a formal interview with the King. They were arranged from the highest score to the lowest and wore clothes which the King rewarded. The person who had the lowest position wore long band hat (*mũ có đai dài*) like “tail”, so “*có đuôi*” was stuck for them. Nowadays, idiom “*dốt có đuôi*” is widely used in Vietnamese daily conversations to denote anyone who is ignorant.

One more difference is that Vietnam has the cultural tradition of the wet rice production. Therefore, animals have strong attachment to Vietnamese daily life, not existing in English IsE. For examples, *chữ như trâu trát, chữ như gà bơi, học như gà đá vách, nước đổ đầu vịt, giã/vỏ chuối*.

### 3. Conclusion

The paper has investigated semantics features of IsE in English and Vietnamese as well as showed the similarities and differences between them. As we have analyzed, there is a wide variety of meanings of IsE in English and Vietnamese. Semantically, English and Vietnamese idioms referring to education express their meanings via means of semantic transfer such as simile, metaphor, and metonymy. Metaphor is used as the main stylistic device in most of idioms in English as well as in Vietnamese such as *with flying colours, hit the books, (still) wet behind the ears* and also *nấu sủ sôi kinh, bán cháo phôi, giã vỏ chuối*, etc in Vietnamese. Metonymy is used in some idioms such as *cow college* in English and we have *áo gấm về làng* in Vietnamese. Simile is used in some idioms such as *as easy as ABC* in English and *học như vẹt* in Vietnamese. Besides, the figurative and concrete characteristics of English and Vietnamese IsE are also presented in four fields, including *school and class, examinations, learners' personalities/ appearance and methods/ ways of teaching and learning*. It is hoped that the findings may be implied in learning and teaching English and Vietnamese as second or foreign languages, helping language learners achieve their goals of communication.

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## NHỮNG ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGỮ NGHĨA CỦA THÀNH NGỮ TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT LIÊN QUAN ĐẾN GIÁO DỤC

NGUYỄN THỊ KIM PHƯƠNG

Trường Đại học Quảng Nam

**Tóm tắt:** Thành ngữ thể hiện các khái niệm và ý tưởng mà ý nghĩa của nó không được gọi ra từ các từ riêng lẻ. Thành ngữ giúp cho cách nói và cách viết vừa ngắn gọn, súc tích, vừa gợi hình và có sức thuyết phục. Chúng giúp người nói hoặc người viết giao tiếp thành công hơn và làm cho ngôn ngữ trở nên thú vị hơn, nhưng không dễ để nắm vững và sử dụng chúng một cách hợp lý. Vì vậy, cần phải thực hiện một cuộc điều tra về các thành ngữ trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt. Bài báo dựa trên các phương pháp mô tả và so sánh trong phân tích đối chiếu với khoảng 400 thành ngữ liên quan đến giáo dục để tìm ra những nét đặc trưng về ngữ nghĩa trong các phép so sánh, ẩn dụ, hoán dụ. Đồng thời, kết quả cho thấy một số điểm giống và khác nhau giữa những thành ngữ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt liên quan đến giáo dục. Hy vọng bài báo có thể giúp người học và người sử dụng tiếng Anh hiệu quả hơn trong giao tiếp.

**Từ khóa:** thành ngữ giáo dục, đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa, phạm vi ngữ nghĩa, so sánh, ẩn dụ, hoán dụ.