



INSPIRING LANGUAGE WITH PROVERBS

A proverb is a short saying in widespread use, stating a general truth or piece of advice. This contribution presents research-informed best practices, activities, and resources for teaching language with proverbs.

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In teaching others, we teach ourselves. A proverb is a short saying in widespread use, stating a general truth or piece of advice. Looking for interesting lead-in activities that are expressive, fun, and playful? Consider using proverbs to engage students in learning, improve critical thinking, hone speaking skills, and enhance cultural understanding. Here below are research-informed best practices, activities, and resources for teaching language with proverbs.

A review of the literature (Hatipoğlu & Daşkın, 2020) showed that “proverbs can be an umbrella” under which any number of language competencies can be addressed including vocabulary, grammar, phonology, and culture. Sidorova and Klyuchnikova (2022) recommended teachers differentiate instruction with proverbs by providing simple to complex proverbs. Karagiorgos’s (2017) multilingual proverb dictionary is a great resource that con-

tains three hundred Greek maxims and proverbs accompanied by their counterparts in eight European languages with the history, origin, and importance of proverbs. I have always loved weaving proverbs into my language lessons with students. Proverbs are fun to use and can be a great attention-getter.

Bellringers and lesson starters

What flowers are to gardens, spices to food, gems to a garment, and stars to heaven; such are proverbs interwoven in speech. (Hebrew).

Begin each lesson with a proverb as a bellringer so that learners think about a specific topic to stimulate discussion. For example, ask “Why do you think people say proverbs are full of wit and wisdom? Do you know any proverbs that speak to you?” Learners can copy the proverbs into their notebooks and then break into pairs to discuss them.

Online translation tools

Using online translation software allows users to translate text from one language to another. The web-based tool <https://about.imtranslator.net/proverbs-and-sayings/> allows learners to practice translating, listening, reading aloud, discussing, and writing their proverbs. With this tool, you can read the English translation of, for example “A friend in need is a friend indeed” and then discuss the proverb's meaning which is presented (A true friend is one who helps you when you are in need. Someone who needs your help is likely to be more friendly towards you). After one example, learners can practice reading and writing more. Alternatively, have learners translate in several tools and see what the differences are, for example:

- **Spanish** : En las malas se conocen los amigos.
- **French** : C'est dans le besoin qu'on reconnaît ses vrais amis.
- **German**: Freunde in der Not gehen tausend auf ein Lot.
- **Italian**: I veri amici si riconoscono nel momento del bisogno.

Differentiated instruction

Differentiate instruction for learners by providing a variety of simple to complex proverbs. Help learners memorize these proverbs by accommodating their diverse learning styles. For auditory or speech, have learners repeat proverbs over and over again, by listening to them and then saying them themselves, each time erasing a word. For visual learners, have them write them down in different scripts. Learners can create concrete Proverb Sculptures by making them out of play-dough. Then they can have an exhibit and the viewers can guess what the sculpture was expressing!

Some beginner proverbs are:

- Easy come, easy go.
- Live and learn.
- Never too old to learn.
- There's no place like home.

Intermediate-level proverbs may challenge students with vocabulary that is less

common. Students will need to interpret these sayings, but the idioms used are less culturally bound. For example:

- Don't count your chickens before they hatch.
- The early bird catches the worm.
- History repeats itself.
- Many are called, but few are chosen.

Advanced

Advanced-level proverbs often use archaic language and meanings that require detailed discussions of cultural context, such as:

- Discretion is the better part of valor.
- A fool and his money are soon parted.
- All that glitters is not gold.
- United we stand, divided we fall.

Multisensory approaches

Use game-based language teaching strategies. Divide the class into several groups, give each group one proverb, and ask them to role-play the situation which shows the meaning of the proverb. The viewers guess what it could be!

You can also ask students to draft a short story for a proverb they have chosen. The activity can start as a class discussion of the meaning of a few appropriate proverbs. Once it's clear students understand, ask students to pair up and create a story that will illustrate a proverb such as with “A merry heart doeth good like medicine” (Proverbs 17:22).

Finally, use humorous twists of words so students will enjoy language learning. Have students create an anti-proverb which is the transformation of a standard proverb for humorous effect. Begin with a known proverb such as “If at first you don't succeed, try, try again”. Have students read and discuss the proverb's meaning. Next, transform the proverb into an anti-proverb by adding a novel word or phrase that creates an opposite, humorous meaning: “If at first you don't succeed, ask AI (artificial intelligence)” or “If at first you don't succeed, don't try skydiving!” Playing with words and speaking satire are advanced communication skills that combine wit with wisdom.

References

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