Teacher's Notes

Maritime idioms

Introduction and aim
English has numerous idioms whose origin is connected with ships, boats, the sea and sailing. In the following activities, learners use their dictionaries to help them increase their understanding and ability to use a selection of these idioms.

The lexis contained in the worksheet can all be found in the Macmillan English Dictionary (MED), and the definitions are based on those in MED.

Time Allow five minutes each for Activities 1 to 4, and 10 minutes for Activity 5 i.e. 30 minutes in total.

Materials Learners need a copy of the worksheet, and access to a copy of MED for checking purposes.

Procedures

▶ Activity 1
1 Ask learners to complete the sentences with idioms connected with ships, boats, the sea and sailing, using their own knowledge at first, and then using the dictionary to check and/or help.
2 Go through the answers as a class.

Answers

a (Example) If you miss the boat, you miss a good opportunity by acting too slowly.
b If you sail through something, you deal with it easily.
c If you hit the deck, you throw yourself to the ground.
d If you take the wind out of somebody's sails, you make them less confident by saying or doing something unexpected.
e If something is on an even keel, it is functioning without any problems.
f If you go overboard, you say more than is necessary or reasonable, perhaps because you get angry or excited.
g If you give somebody or something a wide berth, it means that you deliberately avoid somebody or something.
h If you learn the ropes, you learn to do something new, especially a new job.
i If a number of people are in the same difficult or unpleasant situation, they are all in the same boat.
j If you say 'any port in a storm', you mean that you will accept help from anyone in a difficult situation, even though ideally you might prefer not to.

Notes
The keel of a boat helps it to balance in the water, so someone or something on an even keel is balanced.
The origin of the idiom 'go overboard' is to jump or fall over the side of a boat into the water.
There were many types of ropes that were important in handling a ship, and learning the ropes was an important part of becoming a sailor. There are other variations on this idiom. When you teach someone to do something, you can say that you teach them the ropes, or show them the ropes. When you know how to do something, you can say that you know the ropes.
The expression 'any port in a storm' is not usually built into the structure of a sentence. People don’t usually say, for
example: ‘I was looking for any port in a storm’. They say, for example: ‘It wasn’t really ideal, but I thought, well, any port in a storm, you know’.

► Activity 2
1 Ask learners to complete the sentences with idioms from Activity 1.
2 Go through the answers as a class.

Answers
a (Example) We’re both in the same boat now, so we’ve got to work together and make the best of it.
b Don’t worry – I’m sure you’ll sail through your exams!
c There was an explosion, and everyone hit the deck.
d Calm down – that’s enough! You’re right to criticise them, but there’s no need to go overboard.
e It looks complicated, but it isn’t really – you’ll soon learn the ropes.
f She’s had a lot of problems with drink and drugs but now she’s really trying to get her life back on an even keel.
g I’d rather not borrow money from my parents, but any port in a storm, I suppose.
h The latest batch of unfavourable poll results have really taken the wind out of the government’s sails.
i Hurry, and send your application in by the end of the month – don’t miss the boat!
j He’s the world’s most boring man – I’d give him a wide berth, if I were you.

► Activity 3
1 Ask learners to match the idioms in A with the definitions in B. These ‘tide’ idioms, of course, are specific examples of maritime idioms.
2 Go through the answers as a class.

Answers
1 f 2 e 3 h 4 c 5 g 6 a 7 b 8 d

► Activity 4
1 Ask learners to complete the sentences with idioms from Activity 3.
2 Go through the answers as a class.

Answers
1 (Example) Do you really disagree strongly with the company’s policy, or are you willing to just swim with the tide?
2 For a long time, smoking has been accepted in public places, but now the tide is turning.
3 The two governments are working together to try to stem the tide of smuggling across the border.
4 Unemployment in the region has been rising for years, but we’re confident that we can turn the tide.
5 The tide of opinion among the electorate is running in the government’s favour.
Teacher's Notes

6 All around the world there are groups of people involved in local small-scale development projects swimming against the tide of globalisation.

7 The days of small corner shops are over. You can’t turn back the tide of history.

8 We’re deeply concerned about the rising tide of urban violence.

➤ Activity 5
The purpose of this activity is to give learners an opportunity to use the idioms which have appeared in the previous activities. Ask learners to form pairs, and to ask and answer the questions and develop the conversations which arise. If time permits, they can change partners and repeat the activity, perhaps several times.

Follow-up
Ask learners to notice and record other English idioms connected with ships, boats, the sea and sailing. You could also ask them to consider whether their L1 has similar idioms.