

Talk a Lot

Getting a Job

Role Play with Non-Literal English

1. Practise the role play with a partner. Find and underline **nine** examples of non-literal English* and match each one to a category below:

1. allusion	2. metaphor	3. phrasal verbs
4. sarcasm	5. slang	6. flights of fancy
7. in-jokes	8. idioms	9. euphemism

* For more information about each category, please see pp.36-38.

Colin Bradley is having a job interview at Moore's Toothpaste Factory. He is being interviewed by Richard and Henry – two senior employees. After twenty minutes, the interview is not going well:

Richard: [Bored] After driving a taxi for a year, you sold electric lighting. What happened there?
Colin: Well, I had to hand in my notice after eight months. [Pause] I was... I had to take a bit of time away from work for, er, for... personal reasons, y'know?
Richard: Are you a friend of Jack, Mr. Bradley?
Colin: I don't get what you mean?
Henry: Jack Daniels, Mr. Bradley. Richard means – were you drinking at work?
Colin: Oh no, no. Er, well maybe just a little bit. But, you see, I loved my job. Electric lighting was my whole life. [Sadly] I lived and breathed it.
Henry: What did you do after that?
Colin: I was unemployed for a while, until, er, I got a job delivering flowers, which went really well, until one day, when I got chased by an enormous sheepdog, which was, I swear, it was as big as a house! With enormous, great big teeth as sharp as broken glass – fangs is a better word to describe them – and two horrible big yellow eyes glowing like hot coals...
Richard: [To Henry:] This guy is clearly two squirts short of a tube. [Henry laughs]
Colin: I'm sorry? What was that? Look, I can't stay much longer. Have I got the job, or not?
Richard: [As if speaking to a child:] Yes, Mr. Bradley. You've got the job. You'll be a big asset to us!
Colin: [Overjoyed] Great! When can I start?
Henry: Mr. Bradley, er, let me explain. How can I put this? No, I'll just say it. You are by far the worst candidate we've seen. So, for that reason, I'm afraid we'll have to turn down your application.
Richard: To put it bluntly, Mr. Bradley, please do one!
Colin: [Angrily] Well! Don't worry – I'm leaving! Can I have my CV back? No? OK. Thanks. Bye.

2. Replace each example of non-literal English with one of the literal words or phrases below. Practise the role play using only literal English, then using non-literal English. What differences do you notice? Which version sounds more natural? Why? Which do you prefer?

a) resign	b) reject	c) No, you haven't got the job
d) Do you drink a lot of alcohol?	e) leave immediately!	f) I was pursued by a frightening dog
g) because I had problems with alcohol addiction	h) it gave me an enormous sense of purpose and self-worth	i) not very clever

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Answers:

Feature of Non-Literal English:	Example in this Text:	Literal Translation:
1. allusion*	for, er, for... personal reasons	g) because I had problems with alcohol addiction
2. metaphor	Electric lighting was my whole life. I lived and breathed it	h) my job gave me an enormous sense of purpose and self-worth
3. phrasal verbs	turn down	b) reject
4. sarcasm	Yes, Mr. Bradley. You've <i>got</i> the <i>job</i> . You'll be a <i>big</i> asset to us!	c) No, you haven't got the job
5. slang	do one!	e) leave immediately!
6. flights of fancy	I got chased by an enormous sheepdog... coals...	f) I was pursued by a frightening dog
7. in-jokes	two squirts short of a tube	i) not very clever
8. idioms	hand in my notice	a) resign
9. euphemism	Are you a friend of Jack...?	d) Do you drink a lot of alcohol?

** Allusion and euphemism are closely related in that both are words or phrases that deliberately hide the literal meaning of what is being said, although the speaker and listener both understand the true meaning. Allusion is used as a general term for this, while euphemism is more specifically related to talking about taboo subjects, including sex, bodily functions, addiction, money, etc.*

Note: in general, using non-literal English will help students' spoken English to sound more natural, because native speakers of English often favour non-literal forms – such as idioms, phrasal verbs, and slang – over the more literal, “dictionary definition” words and phrases that they replace.