

Greetings, everyone! My name is Laurence, and this is *English in Practice*!

MUSIC

Welcome to this bonus episode of *English in Practice*, in which I shall explain the meanings of five sayings related to tools. These are common phrases, so I'll do my best to explain them nice and clearly.

I haven't heard from any of you for a while, so please do get in touch to let me know a bit yourself and what you think of the podcast. You can send me an email at the following address: englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com or contact me through the Facebook page, 'English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.' A 'like' there would also be fabulous, as would a rating on whatever podcasting platform you use.

For those who wish to download the transcript, simply visit my website: www.jamesfable.com. James Fable is my penname – a pseudonym that I use for writing.

Without further ado, let's move on to today's sayings!

MUSIC

English has several sayings related to tools, though not all the ones I have picked out include the word 'tool'. They are, however, thematically connected, as you shall see.

The first saying is *a bad workman blames his tools*. People say this about those who blame their equipment for their poor results rather than their lack of skill. Imagine you have a friend who is a photography enthusiast, but they aren't actually very good at taking photos. They say, 'My pictures would be so much better if I had a decent camera.' You might reply, 'A bad workman blames his tools.'

Another example: you're playing tennis, but keep making mistakes. Frustrated, you say, 'My racket is terrible. I need a new one.' Then your playing partner replies, 'A bad workman blames his tools. What you really need is to improve your technique.'

Here comes saying number two!

SOUND EFFECT

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Very well. As you might be able to tell from the words *ain't broke*, this saying is mostly used in a colloquial context. *Ain't* means 'is not' in the Cockney dialect of London, which I'll probably do an episode on at some point, and *broke* stands in here for 'broken'. In formal English, this saying would read: *if it isn't broken, don't fix it.* However, no one says that – they use the original, Cockney version.

In short, this saying means: 'if something is working fine, don't change it.' Let me give you a couple of examples. Imagine you are sharing a flat with a few other people. Your flat is always clean and tidy, but one of your flatmates would like to introduce a cleaning rota anyway. You might ask them, 'But why? If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' In other words: 'The flat is always clean – we don't need a cleaning rota. Let's not make an unnecessary change.'

One more example: you work as a chef in a restaurant which is highly acclaimed and makes excellent money. One day the owner says, 'I would like to change the menu completely.' You and your colleagues might reply, 'But boss, everyone loves our food. Why do you want to change the menu? If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' That means: 'Everything is going great. Why risk jeopardising the restaurant's success with a needless change?'

Sometimes I like to add the following phrase to this saying, so it becomes: *if it ain't broke, don't fix it. And if you can't fix it, don't try.* However, this last part isn't an established saying – it's just something I tell myself on occasion.

Anyway, let's move on to the third saying!

SOUND EFFECT

To hit the nail on the head. This saying is very common and means ‘to describe the situation exactly’, ‘to identify the most important aspect of the situation’. *Nail*, in this instance, does not refer to your finger- or toenail, but to the thin, pointed piece of metal that you hammer into a piece of wood, for example, to keep it in place. The round, flat part of the nail is called the ‘head’, so to hit the nail on the head is to strike it precisely where you mean to – and that’s where the figurative meaning of this saying comes from.

Perhaps a couple of examples will help. Imagine you are talking with two friends about Covid-19. One of them says, ‘I don’t understand why we have to wear face masks. Corona isn’t actually very dangerous.’ Your other friend might reply, ‘That’s true, but if lots of people catch the virus at the same time, then the hospitals will become overburdened and our entire health system could collapse.’ To this you might say: ‘You’ve hit the nail on the head there. The problem is not so much Covid-19 itself, but that our hospitals cannot cope with too many patients at once. That’s why face masks are necessary – to stop the spread.’

One more example: you’re travelling with two friends in Thailand, but none of you speak Thai. One of your friends says, ‘I don’t see the point in even trying to ask the locals something in Thai, since none of us can actually speak the language.’ And your friend answers, ‘But it’s making the effort that counts, not whether you can speak the language fluently.’ Then you might say, ‘You’ve hit the nail on the head there. The Thais don’t expect us to speak their language, but they like it when we try and say at least a few words.’

I hope that’s clear. Time for our fourth saying.

SOUND EFFECT

You sometimes hear people speak of the *tools of the trade*, which is a way of referring to the essential equipment or techniques of a particular profession.

For example, the tools of the trade in painting are brushes, canvasses, water colours, etc. In writing, the tools of the trade are plot, characterisation, language, suspense, etc. I think you get the idea.

SOUND EFFECT

Our fifth and final saying for today is *not the sharpest tool in the shed*. We often use the adjective *sharp* as a synonym for ‘smart’, ‘intelligent’. For example, ‘Some of the girls in my chemistry class are very sharp. They can solve complex equations in a matter of seconds.’

Therefore, if someone is *not the sharpest tool in the shed*, then they are not very clever, they are dim-witted, stupid. Let me give you an example: ‘Jake doesn’t seem to be the sharpest tool in the shed. He believes the earth is flat.’

Another example: ‘I don’t think Elliot is going to pass his General Studies exam. He isn’t exactly the sharpest tool in the shed.’

SOUND EFFECT

Splendid. That was our final saying related to tools. Let’s quickly recap the ones we have covered today:

A bad workman blames his tools = you can say this about a person who blames their failure on their equipment rather than on their lack of skill, such as a poor tennis player blaming their racket for the mistakes they make.

If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it = this means, ‘don’t change something if it is working fine’.

To hit the nail on the head = this means, ‘to describe the situation exactly’, ‘to identify the most important aspect of a situation’.

Tools of the trade = these are the most important techniques or pieces of equipment in a particular profession.

Not the sharpest tool in the shed = this is a way of saying that someone is not very smart, that they are stupid.

Good. I hope that was of some help. As mentioned at the beginning, please do get in contact to let me know a bit about yourself and to leave any feedback. Once again, the email address is englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com, and the Facebook page is called, 'English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.' Don't be afraid of making mistakes in your message; it would simply be nice to hear from you. And of course, it's by making mistakes that we learn. If you have enjoyed the podcast or found it helpful, please do tell your friends about it, share the Facebook page on social media, subscribe, etc.

That's all from me for today. I hope you have enjoyed this episode of *English in Practice*. I'm afraid I'm away next week, so look out for the next episode in a fortnight. All the best. Over and out.

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