One of the most difficult things for people learning any other language is understanding that the new language does not work exactly like their first language. Ideas are not expressed with the same words and languages have different structural ways of expressing themselves. Dictionaries that give a lot of examples help a bit, but students with little experience with dictionaries sometimes make things worse by translating word-for-word. This is called literal translation and usually comes out sounding at least a bit odd, if not downright incomprehensible, depending on the structure of the sentence. Online machine translators aren’t a whole lot better since they are just “dumb, but fast, machines” that can only deal with what they’re given and can’t deal with many but the most common non-literal differences. What happens is that you think in terms of your first language (English) and think that communicating in the other language means “plugging in the new vocabulary words.” Although some sentences with simple ideas can match up like that at times (particularly between European languages), that’s more the exception than the rule. A big part of learning to understand and express yourself in another language is to understand the particular (some say peculiar) way a language puts words together to express ideas. This is called idiomatic. Idiomatic phrases are called idioms. Idiomatic expressions are somewhat different than “figurative” language. Figurative language contrasts with things said literally within the same language. These would be “figures of speech” or “literary symbols” that are not to be taken literally. Idiomatic differences are between different languages.

OK, you’re probably saying, “Dang, learning this new pronunciation and new vocabulary are hard enough. You’re telling me the words don’t match up either.” Yes, that’s right. So you ask, “How the heck am I supposed to learn all of these idiomatic expressions?” Well, that’s part of the work of learning a new language. You learn it bit by bit. Though most things I say and write in the classroom language of study are idiomatic, I fairly often draw attention to idiomatic differences between English and your language of study. I have developed a formula for expressing these differences. I will put up a phrase or sentence in “quotes,” which will be the “correct” or “idiomatic” way that people really talk and write. Underneath that, I will put in (parenthesis) a literal word-for-word translation. To the right I will put a equal sign (=) to indicate that these are equivalent ideas, but the words aren’t literally the same. I also hyphenate words not usually hyphenated to show that the two (or three) hyphenated words correspond to just ONE in the other language. NOTE: It is very important that you WRITE these down in your NOTES! This is how you learn these – one at a time. Careful! The literal (English) is bad English. You will not have to be told this. Just know that it works the other way too!

Here are two examples of a similar idea, the first in Spanish and the next in German:

“Me divierto.” = “I have fun.” „Es macht mir Spaß.” = “It is fun for me.”  
(myself I-divert) (it makes to-me fun)