

Bi-directional Transfer in Second Language Idiom Comprehension

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Studies on second language (L2) idiom comprehension have shown that learners are sensitive to the influences of factors such as idiom decomposability (Libben & Titone, 2008), context of use (Liontas, 2002), and cross-linguistic variations (Irujo, 1986). A number of these studies have attempted to examine whether and to what extent the similarities and differences between learners' L1 and L2 facilitate or impede their idiom comprehension in the L2. The current study approaches this question by investigating whether there is a bi-directional transfer in L2 idiom comprehension. Mandarin Chinese and English were selected as the target languages.

Forty-six advanced learners of English (EFL) and twelve advanced learners of Chinese (CFL) participated in the study. A short version of the Language History Background Questionnaire (Li, Sepanski, & Zhao, 2006) was administered to both groups. We adopted a 3 (cross-language similarity) x 2 (decomposability level) design in the current study. The main instrument of the study was a multiple-choice idiom comprehension test modeled on Irujo (1986). 30 idioms were sampled from both English and Chinese, and were grouped into three types: (1) Type-1 idioms that are identical in form and meaning in English and Chinese (E.g., 'Skating on thin ice' & '如履薄冰'); (2) Type-2 idioms that are similar in form and meaning in English and Chinese (E.g., 'Make no bones about' & '直言不諱'); and (3) Type-3 idioms that are different in form and meaning in English and Chinese (E.g., 'chew the fat' & '樂不思蜀').

English idioms were selected with reference to the idiom database (e.g. Becker & Weber (2016)) and dictionary. All the Chinese idioms adopted were fixed formulated expressions named "chengyu". Based on the English idioms, corresponding partially and fully matched Chinese idioms were selected after meaning verification with Chinese idiom dictionaries (Lin & Leonard, 2012). The test sentences were extracted from English and Chinese corpora respectively (e.g., Corpus of Contemporary American English, the UCLA Corpus of Written Chinese). Each test item had three multiple choices: the correct paraphrase of the idiom and two other choices that provided the wrong paraphrases of the idiom but were semantically plausible in the given sentence context.

Results have shown a near symmetrical trend of accuracy level across the three types of idioms in both groups, with highest accuracy in fully matching idioms. This shows the influence of cross-language similarity in L2 idiom comprehension. The results from two-way ANOVA showed no significant interaction effects but significance difference was detected between type 1 idioms and type 2 & 3 idioms in the ESL group. The current results provide some initial evidence of bi-directional transfer with the debatable role of decomposability. It is hoped that findings from the contrastive group setting in this study could expand our understanding of bilingual idiom processing as well as shedding light to the pedagogy of L2 idioms.

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