Relation between Perception of Sound Symbolism and Effects of a Cognitive Linguistics-based Approach to Vocabulary Learning by Taiwanese EFL Learners

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The purpose of the present study is three-fold: (1) to evaluate Chinese-speaking EFL learners' sensitivity to sound symbolism, (2) to investigate the effectiveness of a cognitive linguistics-based approach triggering form-meaning mapping elaborations (Deconinck, Boers, and Eyckmans, 2107) during vocabulary learning, and (3) to explore if the learning effect works as a function of learners' sensitivity to sound symbolism. Experiment 1, with a mixed method of rating and image- and description-matching tasks, tests whether Chinese EFL college students at the intermediate level ($N = 27$) could perceive sound symbolism in non-sense words designed to carry four different types of sound-meaning relations: (1) between vowels of different features (height & backness) and the image of size, (2) between consonants of different features (sonorant vs. strident) and the image of shape (curvy round vs. spiky angular), (3) between acoustic qualities (sonority & frication) and manners of walking (fast/light vs. slow/heavy), and (4) between English word-initial consonant clusters and phonaesthemic meanings (e.g., *gl-* 'light'). The results suggest that Chinese-speaking EFL learners could track the semantic distinctions of concrete concepts like size and shape flowing from the auditory-acoustic perceptual differences of both vowel and consonant qualities, but not those of less-concrete ones like manners of actions. The learners' matching responses also show evidence that some English phonaesthemes (e.g., sn-, gl-, sw-, tr-, cl-) are more naturally motivated, hence being more iconic, while some others are more conventionalized. Experiment 2 tests whether the same group of EFL learners in Experiment 1 (Experimental Group: $N = 20$) receiving an approach triggering the form-meaning association of 8 pairs of English phonaesthemeic obsolete words would generate mapping elaborations that facilitate better vocabulary learning than the Control Group ($N = 19$) receiving the traditional vocabulary learning approach. The results of an unannounced vocabulary test indicate that the Experimental Group significantly outperforms the Control Group in both form and meaning recall, and the learning outcome under the cognitive-linguistics based approach does not correlate with learners' sensitivity to sound symbolism, suggesting that the EFL learners could in general benefit from the sound symbolism-based learning protocol of the form-meaning mapping elaborations.

Reference

Deconinck, J., Boers, F., & Eyckmans, J. (2017). 'Does the form of this word fit its meaning?' The effect of learner-generated mapping elaborations on L2 word recall. *Language Teaching Research*, *21*(1), 31-53.