Title
Comparison of the Comprehension of Three Types of Chinese Colloquial Idioms by Advanced Chinese L2 Learners

Abstract
The complexity and quantity of idioms poses a great challenge to second language (L2) learners (e.g., Irujo, 1986a; Cooper, 1999; Cieślicka, 2006). Even though a full mastery of idioms in an L2 is almost unachievable, L2 learners still have to face the challenge, because idioms are so widely used in spoken and written language and a grasp of them “can be a great asset to learners in acquiring a new language” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 39).

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), in what way L2 idioms are comprehended and acquired is clearly an area worthy of investigation. In sharp contrast to the abundance of research on L2 idiom comprehension in general, however, studies on how L2 learners comprehend Chinese colloquial idioms are regrettably scant. In spite of a small number of studies, many questions remain to be addressed such as whether L2 learners comprehend different kinds of Chinese colloquial idioms in the same manner, and whether L1-L2 degrees of similarity play a role, what cognitive processing features exhibit in this process of comprehension, to what extent L2 idiom comprehension resembles L1 idiom comprehension, as well as what strategies are employed, and in what circumstances these strategies are used in the comprehension of L2 idioms.

The present study serves to address these questions and attempts to contribute to the existing understanding of how Chinese colloquial idioms are comprehended among L2 learners.
This study aims to investigate how English-speaking learners of Chinese L2 at advanced level of proficiency comprehend and interpret three types of colloquial idioms in and out of context.

Thirty students enrolled in the advanced Chinese class in the Chinese Program at a Midwest university participated in this study. All the participants – 15 males and 15 females – were native speakers of English. The target items were 15 Chinese colloquial idioms, which were unfamiliar to the 30 participants. The 15 items were divided in three types: LL (lexical level or matching idioms between L1 & L2), SLL (semi-lexical level or partially matching idioms between L1 & L2), and PLL (post-lexical level or non-matching idioms between L1 & L2). The three types differed in terms of the L1-L2 degree of similarity. The participants were asked to complete one decontextualized comprehension task followed by one contextualized task. In the decontextualized task, the participants were required to verbally report their thoughts as they analyzed the 15 target items out of context. In the contextualized task, the participants were asked to verbalize their thoughts as they derived the meanings of the target items in short paragraph context. The whole process of verbal reporting was audiotaped for later data analysis. The findings indicate that 1) the participants utilized multiple strategies to comprehend the target Chinese colloquial idioms in and out of context; 2) among the three types of Chinese colloquial idioms, context significantly affects the comprehension of the SLL and the PLL types, however, not the LL type; and 3) the L1-L2 degree of similarity significantly influences the comprehension and interpretation of the Chinese colloquial idioms in the decontextualized task.
Selected References


