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Presenter : Seung-Wan

Hand-out for KWCCDLP graduate seminar

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Processing of Idioms in L2 Learners of English

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Thomas C. Cooper
University of Georgia

PREVIEW

The purpose of my presentation is to investigate what kinds of idioms are the most difficult for L2 learners to interpret, what kinds of strategies L2 learners employ to comprehend the idioms, and whether second language learners use knowledge of their first language to comprehend and produce idioms in the second language.

Even though understanding and producing L2 idioms is very difficult, every language learner must be prepared to meet the challenge because idiom occurs so frequently in spoken and written English. Because of a lower level of linguistic competence in the target language, **L2 learners are at a distinct disadvantage in understanding L2 figurative expressions**, yet they will meet idioms in all forms of discourse: in conversations, lectures, movies, radio broadcasts, and television programs, etc. In other words, **learning English idioms is essential to ESL and EFL learners**.

Before we talk about how English idiom should be taught, I think we have to look over processing of idioms by L2 learners, first.

I made some preview questions pertaining to this topic, and I will try to discuss them during my presentation.

- **What is an idiom, by the way?**
- **To what extent did the idioms chosen for the study vary in difficulty?**
- **What kinds of strategies did the participant employ to comprehend the idioms?**
- **Does language transfer occur in the acquisition of idioms in a second language?**

1. What is an idiom, by the way?

According to Irujo(1986)¹, An idiom is a conventionalized expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts. For example, the idiomatic meaning of *I was pulling your leg* cannot be derived from the meanings of *pull* and *leg*. **Idioms differ from other figurative expressions, such as similes and metaphors**, in that they have conventionalized meanings. Native speakers of English know immediately that *I was pulling your leg* means "*I was teasing you*", whereas they have to deduce their own meaning from a metaphor such as *I was greasing your mind*. The distinction between idiom and metaphor is not always precise because many idioms are dead or frozen metaphor-figurative expressions which have acquired conventionalized meanings. For example, *He's nothing but skin and bones* could be understood as an idiom through knowledge of its conventionalized meaning, "He is very thin." If that conventionalized meaning were unknown, however, it could be interpreted metaphorically with the same meaning.

Idioms can also be distinguished from other kinds of conventionalized language. Certain fixed, literal expressions are commonly used in particular situations but are not idiomatic. For example, *just between you and me* indicates confidentiality, *I beg you pardon* is a formulaic apology, and *see you later* is a common farewell. These expressions are not idioms because their meanings can be determined from the meanings of the words which comprise them. But idioms and routine formulae are not mutually exclusive categories; some routine formulae, such as *take five* or *let's call it a day*, are also idiomatic.

Cooper (1999)'s experiment:

Participants : 18 NNSs of English, ranged in age from 17 to 44 years, who had lived in the U.S. for 5.1 years on average. (see Table 1)

Materials : 20 frequently used idioms - 8 from standard, 8 from conversational, and the other 4 from slang expressions. (see Table 2)

Think aloud protocols were used.

Data analysis : 3-point scale

- one point : for "I don't know", or for a wrong definition
- two points : for a partially correct answer
- three points : for a correct answer

The idiom comprehension strategies (see Table 3)

¹) Irujo, Susanne, 1986, "Don't put your leg in your mouth: transfer in the acquisition of idioms in a second language." *Tesol Quarterly*, 20, pp. 287 - 301

2. To what extent did the idioms chosen for the study vary in difficulty?

The result shows us as follows: (see also Table 4)

- Three idioms: Item 3, 11, and 12 were **the most difficult** to understand

Why?

: Because of the lack of a clear and close relationship between the literal and figurative meanings of the idiom.

- **The easiest** expressions to interpret were Items 5, 6, 7, 15.

Why?

: Irujo(1986) said, factors that might affect the level of difficulty of an idiom could include **salience, frequency of exposure, and ease of production**. Most of Cooper's participants indicated that they had heard these idioms often during their stay in the U.S.

Discussion point here:

What if the same set is given to NNSs who have never been to English spoken countries? Do you think Korean EFL learners or Japanese EFL learners can have the same results? These questions led me to do a pilot study in the section five.

3. What kinds of strategies did the NNSs employ to comprehend the idioms?

The result shows us as follows: (see also Figure 1)

Strategies by Frequency of use

Guessing from context (28%) > Discussing and analyzing the idiom (24%) > Using the literal meaning (19%) > Repeating or paraphrasing the idiom(7%) > Using background knowledge (7%) > Referring to an L1 idiom (5%) > Others (2%)

Successful strategies

GC, leading to a correct answer 57% of the time > LM > BK > L1

4. Does language transfer occur in the acquisition of idioms in a second lan

guage?

According to Irujo (1986)' s study of 12 advanced learners of English from Venezuela, her results tell us three very important points:

- Subjects were able to generalize from the meaning of the idiom in Spanish to its meaning in English, even when the form was slightly different. In other words, **Identical idioms** which caused L2 learners to use **positive transfer** are **the easiest to comprehend and to produce correctly**.

- Similar idioms were comprehended as well as identical idioms, but **production of similar idioms showed interference from the first language²** That is, **negative transfer occurred**.

Discussion point: Why is the discrepancy occurring between comprehension and production?

- Fewer different idioms were comprehended and produced correctly, and **there was little evidence of interference for different idioms**.

5. Pilot study of Korean English learners of English

Participants : 5 Korean EFL learners, who have never been to English spoken countries. Their ages are ranged from 21 to 23

Materials : See the Appendix at the end of this handout

Think aloud protocols were used.

Data analysis : the same as Cooper's

Results :

Item No #.	Mean	Item No #	Mean
1	2.2	6	1
2	1.2	7	1.4
3	1	8	2.2
4	1.4	9	1.4
5	2.8	10	2.8

The easiest Items: No. # 5, 10

The most difficult Items : No. # 3, 6

²⁾ Authors like Jordens and Kellerman have different views on this:

"... Learners tended to judge those idioms which had first language equivalents as ungrammatical, indicating a reluctance to transfer language-specific items. . ."

Strategies by frequency of use

Participant mostly used GC, LM, and DA in order, which is very similar with Cooper's experiment.

Discussion

I should have given the same set of Cooper's to the participants in order to compare processing of L2 idioms by ESL learners with EFL learners. Even if the participants of this pilot study were very few, it gives me think of some points:

- Referring to L1 idioms may not influence the comprehension of L2 idioms to Korean EFL learners (Items # 1, 4), or it is dependent on the levels of Foreign language learners
- Since subjects of both Cooper and me mostly used strategy GC, L2 idioms should be taught by extensive reading. Teachers can develop activities for teaching comprehension of idioms that provides students with skills in guessing meaning from context. As we have already discussed incidental vocabulary acquisition, I think idiom can be learned in the same process.
- I wonder what types of idioms(formal, conversational, slang) L2 learners feel more easier or more difficult

PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

Irujo(1986) suggested several implications for teaching:

- Infrequent, highly colloquial idioms with difficult vocabulary should be avoided.
- Activities which compare literal and figurative meanings of idioms help students to realize the absurdity of the literal meanings and provide a link from the literal words to the nonliteral meaning.

ex) matching pictures showing literal and idiomatic meanings of an idiom, drawing or acting out literal meanings, making up stories or dialogues in which the literal use of an idiom creates a misunderstanding or a humorous situations. Activity of this type would be particularly useful with idioms which have no first language equivalent or a totally different one

8. cream of the crop()

ex: As I mentioned, things are going good with me all my life. And I think I can be the cream of the crop at this company

9. call it quits()

ex: I hate to break the news to you, but I have to call it quits at this point

10. a pain in my neck()

ex: My job doesn't go well with me. I am always in a rush for something, and that drives me into the doghouse from time to time. I guess my job is a pain in my neck.