

Cross-cultural differences on language learners



Introduction

In this article the authors tried to measure the impact of cross-cultural differences on language learners' interpretation of imageable idioms. The definition of imageable idioms: ' idioms that have associated conventional images' (Lakoff 1987: 447). The study reported in this article investigated whether these imageable idioms call up the same scene in the language learner's mind as in the native speaker's mind. Guessing the meaning of the figurative expressions such as Pass the hat around or Hang on someone's sleeve appears not to be beyond the capacities of many language learners, even at lower-intermediate levels of proficiency. The authors hypothesize that idioms relating to a metaphoric theme (conceptual metaphors or source domains) that is more salient in the target culture will tend to be less easily ' guessable' to language learners than those relating to a metaphoric theme that is more or equally salient in the L1 culture.

In the experiment 78 French-speaking university students were presented with the range of unfamiliar English imageable idioms and asked to ' guess' their meaning. Despite the absence of any contextual clues, about 35% of the participants' responses overall were correct. The authors consider these data to offer (tentative) support to the hypothesis. Taking into account the conjectural results of the experiment I think the research should be more elaborated and improved to achieve cogent and convincing outcome of the project.

Awareness of idioms extremely facilitates reading both printed media and fiction. Reasonable application of idioms makes speech more vivid, emotional, and significant. Behind these locutions there is a whole world,
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historical epoch, the mode of life, beliefs of the ancestors, and real events of the remote past. I chose this topic because I have always been interested in the idioms and phraseology as they reflect the culture and history of the language itself. It is a language through which we can connect to the mentality and lifestyle of the people of the target language, moreover, nature of thinking, universe, and perception of the world can be transferred. To know a language means to be able to feel value and depth of the culture and nation of the native speakers.

SLA background to the article

The problem of native language interference while learning a second language is one of the central issues of linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and SLA. During the process of learning a foreign language a learner can arbitrarily use earlier acquired languages as support, comparing and contrasting the phonetic, lexical, grammatical aspects of the mother and target language.

In psychology interference is defined as transfer of skills, presenting as complex human psyche phenomenon, a process which allows a man to use in his acquired intellect and motoric activity upon absolutely new or relatively new circumstances. Psychologists established that formation of a separate skill is never independent; isolated process, it is influenced by and collaborated with the whole previous experience of a man. In other words, interference is interaction of skills where earlier acquired skills impact on establishment of new ones (Vereschyagin, 1976, 131).

Basing on the stated above it is clear that during the process of second language acquisition the transfer of skills is founded on the usage of the past linguistic experience which is acquired command of a native language. Thus, communication skills formed at early childhood in certain way influence on second language acquisition.

Communication skills transfer from the native language to a foreign language is spontaneous, unconscious process, hidden from direct observation and taking place independently from a speaker's will or wish.

From linguistic point of view the term 'interference' is used according to study an issue of languages contacting for notifying modifications which is observed in the learners' speech as result of different language systems interaction. However, among linguists there is no total unanimity regarding language interference. However, today most linguists are convinced that the mother tongue can affect foreign-language learners. Linguists call this process of influence from the mother tongue transfer, which is also known as cross-linguistic influence. This process can occur in all aspects of language including the vocabulary, grammar and spelling. When transfer results in something correct because the rules of the first and the second language overlap, this is referred to as positive transfer. By contrast, when transfer results in something incorrect this is referred to as negative transfer, also known as interference (Dulay et al 1982: 101).

In this background section I will offer a more detailed discussion of the terms mentioned and present different researchers' views concerning native

language interference. I will also show how linguistic studies of interference have developed over time.

Contrastive Analysis

During the 1940s and 1950s most errors were ascribed to interference and consequently a major part of applied linguistic research was devoted to comparing the mother tongue and the target language in order to predict or explain the errors made by learners with particular linguistic backgrounds (Corder 1981: 1). This approach was the first to elucidate the problems of interference and was referred to as contrastive analysis. Contrastive analysis influenced the field of applied linguistics and second language learning for over two decades. But eventually, many linguists abandoned contrastive analysis and adopted a more positive view of the role of the first language in second language acquisition (Dulay et al 1982: 97). Yet, it is still important to understand this approach because it shaped so much early linguistic research and therefore underlies much current second language teaching methodology and material (Dulay et al 1982: 97).

Contrastive analysis assumed that a learner's first language interferes with his or her acquisition of a second language, and that it therefore constitutes the major obstacle to successful mastery of the new language (Dulay et al 1982: 97). Lightbown & Spada give a similar explanation:

Contrastive analysis hypothesis predicts that where there are similarities between the first and the second languages, the learner will acquire second language structures with ease; where there are differences, the learner will have difficulty (Lightbown & Spada 1997: 23).

Comparing the mother tongue and the target language was considered useful for teachers, who could predict learner errors beforehand, and thus prevent them (Heny 1994: 162). However, contrastive analysis was also criticised by those who considered it impossible to predict when the errors would be made. Furthermore, the errors which learners commonly made in class were not necessarily the ones predicted by contrastive analysis. There were errors that could not be explained simply by noting the differences between the languages involved, and sometimes the errors that a contrastive analysis did predict were not found in practice (Allwright & Bailey 1991: 83). Contrastive analysis was considered misleading as a basis for teaching, since it encouraged the idea that first language influence was the only thing that caused learners' errors (Heny 1994: 165).

Further questioning of the relevance of contrastive analysis was the result of the classification of learners' errors in studies that became known as error analyses (Odlin 1989: 18). These kinds of studies were developed during the 1970's and involved a detailed description and analysis of the kinds of errors second language learners make. The goal of this research was to discover what learners really know about the language (Lightbown & Spada 1997: 55). The difference between these two methods was that error analysis did not set out to predict errors on the basis of interference from the native language. Rather, it sought to discover and describe the different kinds of errors in an effort to understand how learners acquire the foreign language. One of the main challenges for error analysts was to decide what category to assign a particular error to. For example, omitting an article in English may possibly be a case of simplification (see section 2. 3) with a Spanish speaker

but a case of transfer with a Korean speaker (Odlin 1989: 19). Lightbown & Spada (1997: 55) also point out that error analysis was based on the theory that the speech of second language learners is a system in its own right, one which is rule governed and predictable and very much like the system of young first language learners.

Transfer

The concept of transfer is based on the idea that previous learning influences on subsequent learning. In language learning, this denotes that the patterns and forms of the native language are imposed on the second language (Gass, 1979). When these are identical of the two languages and the learner uses the first language in producing the second, positive transfer takes place. The result is a correct target language pattern or form. When they are different, using those of the mother tongue to produce the equivalent form or pattern in the target language causes negative transfer. The errors that result are called interference errors.

During the 1950s and 1960s, interlingual transfer was considered to be the most significant factor in learning foreign language (Politzer, 1965).

However, the paradigm shift that occurred in linguistics and psychology in the 1960s established a change of focus. The emergence of generative grammar and cognitive psychology created the new discipline of psycholinguistics. Language acquisition was no longer considered as a process of forming correct habits through repetition and reinforcement, but as the result of an innate language acquisition device which operates through a process of hypothesis testing (Chomsky, 1959). Due to transfer had been associated with the habit formation theory of language acquisition,

the shift to generative grammar brought with it much less stress on interference and more stress on developmental processes, learning strategies, and the structure of the target language as sources of error (Richards, 1974). Second language acquisition came to be considered as a “creative construction” process rather than the transfer of habits from the native language to the target (Dulay & Burt, 1975).

Kellerman (1983) addressed the relationship between L1 knowledge and interpretation of the figurative use of the L2. His studies showed that the L1 plays a role in L2 idiom processing even though L2 learners are less likely to transfer L1 knowledge when they perceive the meaning as figurative.

There is a large number of terms used in discussions of the influence of the native language on a second language. One of these terms is transfer, which is also known as cross-linguistic influence. Some researchers virtually denied the existence of language transfer and others have been sceptical about its importance. Yet there are also researchers who have argued for the importance of transfer and have gone so far as to consider it the paramount fact of second language acquisition (Odlin 1989: 3). However, a more balanced perspective has emerged by now, in which the role of transfer is acknowledged and in which transfer is seen to interact with a host of other factors not yet fully understood (Odlin 1989: 9).

A definition of the term transfer is given by Gass & Selinker (2001: 66): “It is a term that was used extensively in the first half of the century and refers to the psychological process whereby prior knowledge is carried over into a new learning situation.” Odlin (1989: 27) offers another definition of transfer

for the context of applied linguistics: “ Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired.”

However, Odlin (1989: 28) also says that it is difficult to give a precise and correct definition of transfer as long as there is no existing adequate definition of language.

While there are many definitions of transfer, the concept can be divided into positive and negative transfer. Both types of transfer refer to the automatic and subconscious use of old behaviour in new learning situations (Dulay et al 1982: 101). Positive transfer results in correct performance because the new behaviour is the same, and as appropriate as, the old (Dulay et al 1982: 101). According to Odlin (1989: 36), the effects of positive transfer are only determinable through comparison of the success of groups with different native languages. Such comparison often shows that cross-linguistic similarities can produce positive transfer in several ways. Similarities between native language and target language vocabulary can reduce the time needed to develop good reading comprehension. Similarities between vowel systems can make the identification of vowel sounds easier. Similarities between writing systems can give learners a head start in reading and writing the target language. And similarities in syntactic structures can facilitate the acquisition of grammar. Learners speaking a language with a syntax similar to that of the target language tend to have less difficulty with, for example, articles, word order, and relative clauses (Odlin 1989: 36).

In contrast, negative transfer refers to those instances of transfer which result in errors because old, habitual behaviour is different from that to be learned (Dulay et al 1982: 101). Negative transfer involves divergences from norms in the target language and it is often relatively easy to identify.

Although negative transfer tends to be associated with production errors, there are other ways in which an individual's second language performance may differ from the behaviour of native speakers. Some examples of these are underproduction, overproduction and misinterpretation (Odlin 1989: 37).

The native language can influence the interpretation of target language messages, and sometimes that influence leads to learners inferring something very different from what speakers of the target language would infer. Misinterpretation may occur, for example, when native and target language word-order patterns or cultural assumptions differ (Odlin 1989: 37).

Gass & Selinker (2001: 68) consider the terms positive and negative transfer debatable. The question is whether transfer can be positive or negative at all: " The terms refer to the product, although the use implies a process.

There is a process of transfer; there is not a negative or positive transfer."

Both Dulay et al (1982: 101) and Heny (1994: 164) are instead questioning how one can know exactly what is being transferred. Is it principles, word-patterns or sound? However, while it appears to be difficult to determine exactly what is being transferred, most linguists do agree that the mother tongue can affect learners' English in several ways (Swan & Smith 2001: 11).

Interlanguage

The term interlanguage, introduced by Larry Selinker (1972), was coined in the belief that the language learner's language was a sort of hybrid between his or her first language and the target language. The evidence of this was the large number of errors which could be ascribed to the process of transfer. But when second language acquisition researchers began to collect data from learners not receiving formal instruction, particularly children, the production of transfer errors was generally found to be quite small. Clearly interlanguage was not simply a hybrid language but had a developmental history of its own (Corder 1981: 2). Some of the structures produced by the learners are to be found neither in their first language nor in the language they are learning, i. e. no native speaker of either language ever produces them (Malmkjær 2004: 83). Lightbown & Spada (1997: 122) explain that interlanguage is systematic, but also dynamic and continually evolving as learners receive more input and revise their hypotheses about the second language.

Culture and language

Interconnection of languages and cultures, the necessity of their co-learning makes no doubts. Learning foreign languages as means of communication between representatives of different people and cultures must be inseparable with the world and culture of people, speaking these languages.

In his sociocultural cognitive theory of development Leo Vygotsky, a great Russian psychologist, put culture and social factors into the central chain. The driving force of development, according to him, is external factors. It differs from most other social approaches in considering interaction as an

essential power rather than as just a helpful condition for learning. In the foundation of his theory there three principles: the importance of culture, pivotal role of a language and interaction of a learner with an environment.

The critique

Thus, the authors of the reviewing article, Boers and Demecheleer, tried to gauge the impact of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences on language learners' interpretation of imageable idioms, concluding with a set of guidelines to anticipate and remedy the comprehension problems of figurative expressions.

First, the authors presented only brief classification of idioms regarding the determination the degree of semantic transparency of an idiom, different factors can influence, such as whether the idioms are non-decomposable, or reflect a common metaphoric theme, or are closely associated with a given metaphoric theme; there are idioms with a clear etymological origin as well as culture-specific grounding.

Besides, idioms have certain specific features, such as:

- idioms are used as a one meaning unit in discourse;
- having holistic meaning, idioms are not created all over again in the discourse, but are retained and retrieved from the memory as ready word combinations;
- idioms have permanent content of their components.

Moreover, idioms can be classified according to whether they contain a noun phrase denoting a person, subject or phenomenon: better half, chip of the old block, copy cat; or a verbal phrase, designating an action or a process: to <https://assignbuster.com/cross-cultural-differences-on-language-learners/>

keep the ball rolling, to catch someone's eye, to hit the ceiling; attributive phrases, denoting features, qualities of a person or object: all thumbs, blue blood, proud as a peacock, armed to the teeth; adverbial phrases, specifying characteristics of an action or process: with flying colours, till Kingdom come, till the cows come home; modal phrases, denoting various attitude of a speaker towards a situation: it's another pair of shoes, it's not my cup of tea.

Second, in the article there is lack of SLA theory considered. The authors do not specify any second language acquisition theory in particular, limiting with some remarks

Further, for the experiment only 24 idioms were selected involving the imagery of hat, sleeves, ship and food. I subject that this amount of idioms is enough for the experiment as well as the imagery unlikely reflect the culture and traditions of the English people and their language. I would suggest including the following imagery that inherent to the English culture: bird, fish, horse, pig, such as: like a bird, a bird in the bush; a fish out of water, a loose fish; beat a dead horse, horse and horse; when pigs fly, buy a pig in a poke.

Moreover, the selected idioms such as Hang up one's hat, Keep something under one's hat are old-fashioned and less used now.

The authors included only idioms which did not have one-to-one equivalents in French. In order to assess the possible impact of cross-cultural differences on the 'guessability' of these idioms to French speakers, the authors called in the help five 'blind' judges, who were native speakers of English, and experienced EFL teachers. However, I suppose, to be confident that they

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have no one-to-one equivalent in the French language; these idioms have to be considered by French native speakers as well.

However, the transferability of the idioms appears to be the major factor in learning a second language, as a learner can connect the knowledge of his native figurative language with the foreign one. The problem is cross-cultural differences. For example, it is very difficult to find one-to-one equivalent.

During the experiment the participants were given about 20 minutes to try to guess the meaning of the selected idioms without contextual clues. I'd like to point out that in real life we meet idioms in all forms of discourse: in conversations, lectures, movies, radio broadcasts, and television programmes. Thereby, I assume that the context will facilitate the comprehension, and giving idioms without any context is not natural.

The results of the experiment were the following: almost 35% of the respondents' answers were at least partially correct. The researchers concluded that the semantics of many idioms need not be tackled as arbitrary in language-learning contexts. Students can be encouraged to first try to decode imageable idioms independently. i. e. as a problem-solving task requiring a deeper level of cognitive processing, before resorting to the teacher or the dictionary for corroboration or falsification (Lennon 1998). A deep level of cognitive processing is known to be beneficial for long-term memory storage (Ellis 1994). Moreover, in common learning conditions idioms are given in a context, which facilitates comprehension considerably (Cooper 1999).

The analysis of research methodology

In their experiment the authors applied questionnaires. This type of data collection is the most widespread, first, because it is self-administered and can be given to a large groups of subjects at the same time, besides it is less expensive to administer than other procedures such as interviews. Second, since the same questionnaire is given to all subjects, the data are more uniform and standard, as well as since they are usually given to all subjects of the research at exactly the same time, the data are more accurate. And one more is not the least of the factors is anonymity; subjects tend to share information of a sensitive nature more easily.

The research involved 78 French-speaking students of University of Brussels. The group was quite heterogeneous, and in general their level of English proficiency was intermediate. The participants were given twenty minutes to try to guess the meaning of the selected twelve idioms without contextual clues. In order to avoid a common problem of questionnaires as misunderstanding of questions themselves as well as the proper replies to the questions relevant to research in second language, as subjects very often have obstacles in reading and providing answers in L2, the participants were allowed to use the French language to present their ideas.

Discussion

The authors propose practical guidelines for the teachers whose learners encounter an unfamiliar idiom in a text, i. e. a strategy, involving six stages, to anticipate and remedy comprehension problems. Therewith it is pointed out that all six stages will always need to be passed through in practice, but

can be taken as a checklist to remind teachers of the variables involved in idiom comprehension.

Above all these stages the crucial point to my mind is resorting to contextual clues to infer the meaning of an idiom. It is necessary to persuade learners to comparison and correlation of language devices of contacting languages all the time when it can prevent the interference and make positive transfer.

Linguistic competence suggests mastering of certain amount of formal knowledge connected with various language aspects: phonetic system, vocabulary, grammatical structure – during their historical development and at the modern stage, as well as certain skills of application of these language means for different linguistic purposes, such as language analysis, including forms and meanings; analysis of special features of language units application separately and in context; comparison of various language phenomena at different periods of language development; consolidation or differentiation of language phenomena by a certain factor (factors); etymological analysis of a language unit, existing in a modern language system. The achievement of these goals facilitates the development of linguistically oriented thinking of the learners, namely ability to carry out linguistic analysis of various language phenomena and factors, single out the principal and secondary, draw a conclusion out of the analysis results, generalize the received data, compare linguistic facts, classify them.

Besides, taking into account “ zone of proximal development” of L. S. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, which implies solving a problem with the assistance of an “ expert”, who provides ‘ scaffolding’, and then internalizes

the solution, the authors suggest to corroborate or falsify the learners' hypotheses. If learners are on the right track, then offer further guidance towards the full interpretation. If they stay in the dark, then clarify the meaning of the idiom.

Once the meaning of the idiom is established Boers and Demecheleer offer to invite the learners to 'motivate' it. This stage is meant to show the non-arbitrary nature of many figurative expressions. Various approaches can be tried. One can associate the idiom with a more vivid or concrete scene. For instance, Passing the hat around can be associated with the scene of someone collecting money for a street musician, Having something up one's sleeve can be linked with the scene of a magician performing tricks, which is a common source of verbal humour, can be a fruitful technique to paint more vivid pictures in the learners' mind (Irujo 1986). On the whole, concreteness and vivid imagery facilitate the retention of novel vocabulary (Sokmen 1997). One can also try to lay bare 'logic' of a given idiom. For example, Kill two birds with one stone obviously means to take more advantages doing one thing. Evidently, not all imageable idioms lend themselves easily to such explanations, but the cognitive effort put into the brainstorming activity may nevertheless be beneficial for retention and language awareness. A complementary approach to 'motivating' idioms is to look for their possible etymological origin. The lion's mouth, for example, has biblical origin, meaning a dangerous place; to carry coals to Newcastle implies to do useless things as Newcastle is the centre of the English coal industry.

Finally, if the idiom exemplifies a metaphoric theme that is more salient in the target culture than in the learner's culture, then raise the learner's awareness of the cross-cultural variation.

Though this particular article has not been responded, cited, or used in any research or writing, having looked through the recent studies, I can find that Boers and Demecheleer's scope of work has developed into Another prominent approach of

Conclusion

Interaction of languages is all possible varieties of mutual influence, interpenetration of two or more languages and their dialects. Borrowing of different linguistic factors by a language from another, as well as results of language interaction I consider as an enrichment process. However, dominance and subjection cannot be avoided and in linguistic contacts there is no language equity, one of the languages always subdues another.

Thus, learning a foreign language a man profits to look at the world from other, not usual, point of view. It is not without reason there is a proverb: "How many languages you know, so many times you are a man".