Process of Idioms Comprehension of ESL College Students

An idiom is a combination of lexical items with the figurative meaning which is distinct from its individual constituents (Stein and Su 1980). Irujo (1986a) specifies that the non-literalness property of idioms would yield difficulties for L2 learners in learning idioms. In addition to the non-literalness, the richness in cultural connotations also exposes the complexity for learning. A number of studies investigating the idioms comprehension by EFL learners in U.S. and China have been developed. (Cooper 1998; Wang& Zhang 2006; Huang 2007; Zuo 2008) However, none of the studies have been conducted to examine the effects of idiom comprehension for L2 learners in Taiwan.

This study aims to investigate the effects involved in idioms comprehension of ESL college students in Taiwan. The think-aloud (TA) protocol was applied and four students were asked to verbally report their thoughts as they arrived at the meanings of idioms. The testing material was adopted from Cooper's (1999) framework in which 20 idioms were included and classified into three categories: standard, conversational, slang. Results showed a tendency for L2 learners in using the linguistic context to deduce meanings of unfamiliar idioms. In addition to findings in Coopers’ study, it is found that L2 learners made image associations to grasp meanings of idioms. This novel finding consolidates Gibbs’ (1995) argument in that figurative meanings are possibly motivated by conceptual metaphors in human conceptual knowledge.

Moreover, both positive and negative transfer effect appeared in accordance with idioms L1-L2 correspondence. The conversational type presented more difficulties for L2 learners since it was suggested that the colloquial usage usually involved cultural connotations of which L2 learners lacked. Based on the findings, it is suggested that the context was a clue commonly used by most L2 learners, paralleling the study conducted by Cooper (1999).

Key word: idioms, comprehension, think-aloud, image association
References:


