

A Formal Literature Review: The Roles of Cross-language Similarity and Context in Adults' Idiom Learning of a Second Language

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Abstract:

This essay reviews some existing papers to understand how the similarities between a person's native language and the new language they are learning, and the context affects adult learners' ability to acquire idioms in a second language. Idioms are a common form of communication in any language. Therefore, it is essential for truly mastering a new language. However, due to their rich cultural connotations and the need for communicative contexts, learning these idiomatic expressions can be quite difficult. Previous studies have shown that in the process of learning a second language, idioms in the new language are easier to master when they are very similar in meaning or structure to those in the learner's first language. In addition, the rich context can also help learners better understand and use them. Future studies should delve into the influential mechanisms and create more effective strategies to help adults become proficient in using idioms of a second language.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, idiom learning, cross-language similarity, context.

1. Introduction

As for idioms is an important component in the research of multiword learning, they have been more and more discussed in the study of language acquisition. Apart from being used as a tool for enhancing expressiveness, idioms also act as a carrier of culture for different languages. In recent years, the learning of idioms in a second language has developed into one of the most popular areas of study in linguistics. It is not easy to comprehend and acquire idioms because the process involves not only the vast accumulation of vocabulary but also obtaining extensive contextual knowledge. Given that idiom learning is a difficult process, it is even more important to consider factors that influence it.

The roles of cross-language similarity and context in adults' idiom learning of their second language remain relatively unstudied. This essay tends to offer a critical review of the existing literature on this topic and proposes some feasible guidance.

2. Research Significance

Previous studies on idiom learning mainly focus on some related cognitive processes, such as memory and comprehension, making us to know how learners acquire and process idiomatic expressions. However, few studies have examined how some key factors affect idiom learning. It is well known that context, cross-language similarity, se-

mantic transparency, familiarity, etc. are some key factors affecting idiom learning, among which cross-language similarity and context are two prominent factors. Although these factors have been explored, the mechanisms by which they influence idiom learning are not yet fully understood, especially as studies across different time periods have shown varying focuses and conclusions.

So, investigating the roles of cross-language similarity and context in adults' L2 idiom learning has practical meaning. First of all, it can foster our understanding of the influencing mechanism behind idiom learning, which is conducive to develop more effective teaching methods. Moreover, it can provide insights into how these factors contribute to successful idiom learning and enhance learners' overall language proficiency through some effective strategies. Thus, it is necessary to review and analyze these factors to better understand their roles in idiom learning.

3. Previous Research

This section will review some important literature on both of these two factors respectively.

3.1 The Role of Cross-language Similarity

In the preliminary stage, studies have shown that comprehension can be improved when two languages have similar meanings or linguistic structures. Deignan et al. [1] discovered that idioms would be simpler to acquire if

they had the same or comparable metaphorical meaning in two different languages. Besides that, Charteris-Black [2] found that metaphorical statements with similar language forms helped learners understand them as well as produce more easily in a trial with Malay English learners.

In another study conducted by Türker [3], he further analyzed the influence of cross-linguistic similarity on idiom acquisition of second language learners. Based on similarities and differences in first language and second language, he categorized the selected idioms into three types: same L1-L2, different L1-L2, and L2 only. The pretest revealed that the L1 similarity had an early effect since participants did best on tasks that involved the same L1-L2 idioms. On the other hand, learners were less likely to rely on verbal and semantic knowledge of their first language after receiving the treatment of rich context. One of the weaknesses was that this study lacked a control group to rule out probably additional variables.

A more accurate definition of cross-language similarity was provided by Soto-Sierra et al. [4] based on earlier research: "Cross-language similarity or overlap refers to the degree of similarity that idioms have in an L1 and L2. It has typically been operationalized in categories dealing with varying levels of similarity. Idioms that share exact or similar linguistic form and metaphorical meaning are considered similar" (p. 2). In her study, the researchers conducted an online L2 idiom knowledge test that presented the idioms and inquired about their metaphorical meanings to examine the impact of various idiom characteristics on L2 idiom knowledge. Among them, cross-language similarity was included as a predictor variable. The findings demonstrated that L2 idiom knowledge was significantly predicted by cross-language similarity, indicating that learners comprehended L2 idioms better when they were more similar to their first language. However, the results emphasized L2 idiom knowledge only, therefore they might not be adequate for drawing precise conclusions about idiom processing.

3.2 The Role of Context

Rohani et al. [5] conducted an empirical study to explore the impact of idiom-processing mechanisms on foreign language learners. The hypothesis raised by the researchers stated that L2 learners' choice of idiom-processing strategies can be influenced by context. They looked into the idiom learning mechanisms of Iranian intermediate EFL students in both written and animated cartoon contexts. In written context, unfamiliar idioms were given in written sentences or paragraphs, forcing students to deduce meaning from linguistic signals including keywords, grammar, and surrounding details. While for another group, idiom expressions were presented in an animated

context together with scenarios, characters' actions, and other visual elements. The results revealed that referring to context was yet another strategy that both groups frequently employed, demonstrating the importance of contextual details in idiom comprehension. This research, however, only examined how learners' tactics differed in terms of type and frequency, without taking into account whether the answers were correct, which is a deficiency.

Asl [6] probed into the impact of different context levels on the idiom acquisition of a second language. The study made an effort to look at the distinctions between context and non-context as well as the differences between context types. The participants, who were upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners of both sexes, were split into three groups: the extended-context group (which learned vocabulary through context, particularly short stories), the limited-context group (which learned vocabulary through individual sentences), and the control group (which learned through straightforward definitions). Using a one-way Analysis of Variance to compare the treatment groups' immediate and delayed posttest scores, the researchers found that the extended context group acquired much higher scores than the limited context group and the control group. It strongly implicated that context had a positive influence on idiom learning. To be more specific, compared to limited context, extended context could effectively support the learners' understanding and acquisition of idioms. However, this study's reliance on multiple-choice and gap-fill exercises as assessment methods might not allow for a thorough evaluation of students' idiomatic competence in comparison to output exercises like writing, translation, and oral expression. Furthermore, the study ignores the possible advantages of alternative instructional strategies like task-based learning or collaborative learning due to its narrow focus on contextual and non-contextual teaching techniques.

As we mentioned in the earlier section, Türker [3] tested the effects of context and cross-linguistic similarities on idiomatic learning. In this study, he discovered that context also exerted a strong input influence on participants' acquisition of idioms, especially after receiving steadily enhanced input and task-essential practice. Participants performed better on L2 Only idioms and Different L1-L2 idioms in the posttest stage, indicating that the L1 effect was overridden by the structured input treatment with rich context, which helped learners acquire idioms even in the absence of L1 equivalents. The results of the study challenged the idea that L1-L2 similarity was the only factor that determined whether or not idioms were acquired successfully; they revealed that contextual support could override the L1 effect and facilitate inferential learning to acquire L2 idioms.

4. Discussion

After identifying the role of cross-language similarity and context in learning the idioms of a second language, we can learn some educational practices from it, which provide profound implications to educators. And analyzing the deficiencies of previous research can enlighten future research.

4.1 Educational Implications

A review of earlier studies on second language idiom learning reveals some key implications for education.

First of all, the importance of contextualization in teaching idioms cannot be overstated. Merely presenting learners with isolated idiom definitions is insufficient; instead, it would be better if educators could combine idioms with meaningful contexts like dialogues, stories, or movies. In an immersed context, learners can pick up how to use idioms and understand their meanings. Audio and visual aids can help by showing the relationship between idioms and their context, enriching the learning process.

Besides, utilizing cross-linguistic similarity can be a useful teaching tool in language classes. As Cieřlicka [7] points out that “L2 learners are likely to resort to their native language when interpreting and learning novel idiomatic expressions”, teachers can help students to understand idioms in the target language by linking them to comparable or similar expressions in their native language. This method not only makes full use of students’ prior knowledge but also fosters metalinguistic awareness, enabling them to identify, analyze, and delve into similarities and differences between languages.

Apart from that, there are some suggestions for teaching methods and teaching focus. To guarantee idiom proficiency, educators are supposed to incorporate a wide range of teaching methods. For instance, task-based teaching, collaborative activities, and effective feedback can encourage learners’ active participation and meaningful interaction with idiom material. Such approaches facilitate the practical application of idiom knowledge within realistic communicative settings, thereby enhancing their fluency and confidence in effective expression.

Meanwhile, concentrating on output skills is equally essential for successful idiom learning. Educators are suggested to provide more opportunities for learners to practice employing idioms in writing, speaking, and translation tasks. The practical application not only reinforces understanding but also improves the ability to select and use suitable idioms in various contexts.

4.2 Limitations

Even if earlier studies on the impact of context and cross-linguistic similarity on idiom learning of a second

language have provided valuable insights, there are still several deficiencies and potential gaps for improvement.

It is clear that the majority of former studies did not control some potential variables and ignore the roles they play in learning. Idiom learning can be significantly impacted by variables such as prior language competency, language aptitude, learning style, and cognitive ability. Future study on the relationship between individual characteristics and idiom acquisition would be a worthy option, as it would reveal useful solutions for different groups of learners.

Idioms are closely associated with culture and serve as a reflection of cultural values, ideas, and experiences, while some studies fail to acknowledge this. A lot of research ignores the cultural aspect of idiom acquisition and doesn’t set selection criteria for materials or establish a control group, which may produce less rigorous results. Future studies can focus further on the effects of cross-cultural competency and cultural background on idiom acquisition. Meanwhile, a lot of research only focuses on a limited set of idioms, ignoring the potential variations in types of idioms, like verb, noun, verb-object structure, etc. Thus, it may not fully represent the complexity and variety of L2 idiom acquisition. The results would be more meaningful if the experiment materials could be classified with a clear criterion or expanded to idioms with a greater variety of structures.

There is another drawback with the quantitative methods used in some research. First of all, although quantitative methods can provide valuable data, sometimes they cannot fully reflect the complexities of learning idioms. For example, when studies use multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank exercises to test learners’ understanding of idioms, they may neglect the challenges and problems that learners may encounter. By contrast, qualitative methods like direct observation and surveys reveal learners’ thinking processes, obstacles, and their successful strategies. Secondly, it is important to note that quantitative research often uses controlled laboratory environments and artificial language tasks. These may not accurately reflect idioms used in real-life communication. The disconnection from the real language environment restricts the wide application of the results. However, qualitative methods like interviews and group discussions allow researchers to study learners’ idiom acquisition in a more realistic context, because they showcase how learners use idioms in daily communication. In this way, more practical and productive learning strategies can be put forward accordingly.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay discusses how cross-language similarity and context affect adults learning second-lan-

guage idioms comprehensively. Previous studies show that idioms in the second language which have similar in meaning or structure to the learner's first language are easier to learn. Also, contextual information also plays an important role in idiom learning of a second language. When they are taught in meaningful contexts, learners can better infer their meanings and how to use them effectively. So, all of these findings point out the importance of connecting idioms with cross-language similarity and real language contexts.

Although these findings provide valuable insights into this field, there are some limitations. It is clear that many studies fail to explore the complex interplay between these two major factors. Plus, some do not consider other potential influencing factors like individual learning styles and cultural background. So, these deficiencies and research gap provide sufficient implications for future research. Future research could further explore the organic connections between these important factors, and offer more scientific and practical approaches for adult learners to study second-language idioms.

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