

# The roles of cross-language similarity and context influencing adults' idiom learning in their second language

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## **Abstract:**

This paper explores the role of cross-linguistic similarity and contextual cues in helping adults learning a second language (L2) to learn idioms. Idioms are expressions that often present challenges to L2 learners due to their non-literal and obvious meanings. This study examined how similarities between idioms in learners' first language (L1) and L2, as well as the richness of contextual information, affect comprehension and memorization of idiomatic phrases. The results suggest that idioms with structural or semantic similarities to the learner's L1 are easier to learn, and that contextual cues can significantly enhance comprehension, especially for unfamiliar or dissimilar idioms. These findings emphasize the importance of using cross-linguistic connections and meaningful contexts to improve idiomaticity in second language acquisition. This paper demonstrates the advantages that context and cross-linguistic similarity bring to learning, while also pointing out the limitations of the disadvantages that exist for learning idioms. The two are combined with each other to complement each other to achieve better learning outcomes. Implications for teaching practice and idiomatic pedagogy are discussed.

**Keywords:** ELLs, Cross- language similarity, Context

## **1. Introduction**

Thanks to U.S. policy, immigration is now becoming more and more open. More and more adults are coming to live in the U.S. after much hardship, bringing their children with them. They aspire to a life of greater wealth and freedom, and they promise their children a future. These immigrants want to keep their children in the U.S. and have also begun the process of learning a second language. As a re-

sult, more and more bilinguals are appearing in the continental United States. According to Chapter 2 of Educating Emergent Bilinguals, the percent of fluent bilingual have changed 292% from 1979 to 2014, from 2.5 million to 9.4 million. Perhaps the surge in the number of ELLs is sounding a wake-up call to educators - to pay more attention to the education of ELLs.

Bilingual learning takes place in all aspects of life and learning, with language linking lifestyles and the

transfer of knowledge. Idioms are also an important part of language learning, as they encompass the rich cultural background behind the language as well as a large vocabulary requirement. Idioms are particularly difficult because they often do not have a literal meaning that can be easily inferred. From previous studies, we have found that context, cross-language similarity, and semantic transparency are key factors affecting idiom learning. In addition to semantic transparency, context and cross-language similarity are two factors that have played a crucial role in influencing the study of idiom learning. For this part, we will mainly focus on the roles of cross-language similarity and context influencing adults' idiom learning in their second language.

## 2. Possible contributions of the study

Throughout the history of research data and literature, we can see that there has been limited reporting by researchers related to the role that these mechanisms play. Even though a great deal of research and reporting exists historically, there are no complete conclusions and sufficient research data to provide trustworthy findings. Therefore, it is necessary and urgent to focus on this research. This study may illuminate how adult learners process idiomatic expressions in a second language. By examining the role of cross-linguistic similarities and contextual factors, this study helps to clarify the cognitive mechanisms involved in idiomatic learning, such as memory, reasoning, and analogies.

## 3. The role of cross- language similarity in L2 idiom learning

Cross-linguistic similarity plays a key role in second language acquisition of idioms, affecting the way learners understand and acquire idioms. Idioms are special and metaphorical expressions. It is difficult to analyze the meaning of idioms by individual words, so learning idioms is a great challenge for second language learners.

Cross-linguistic similarity is a key factor in the acquisition of idioms by second language learners, which can help to alleviate the obstacles posed by this challenge. It affects how well and efficiently second language learners understand the metaphors of idioms. This means that when idioms in the learner's native language are very similar to those in the target language, similarity can help accomplish knowledge transfer, enabling the learner to utilize existing knowledge to understand the idioms. Similarly, conceptual similarity helps learners to infer the meaning of idioms in the L2 based on pre-existing grounds. Learners can benefit from the transfer by making idioms easier to recognize, understand and retain. Positive

transfer can, to some extent, facilitate understanding of metaphorical meanings without the need for literal interpretation. It accelerates learners' understanding of metaphorical meanings in second language idioms. However, lack of cross-linguistic similarity may also lead to misunderstanding thus hindering the learning process. This happens when negative transfer occurs, when two similar expressions have different meanings in the two languages, learners may have to forget the wrong interpretation and relearn the idiomatic meaning specific to the second language. In addition, it also means that sometimes it is not possible to find a cultural counterpart or metaphorically substitutable idiom in the mother tongue can also pose an additional challenge to the second language learner. From Cieślicka, A. B. (2015), *Idiom acquisition and processing by second/ foreign language learners*, it shows that cross-linguistic similarity plays an important role in how effectively learners acquire idiomatic expressions in a second language. The degree of similarity between learners' first language and idioms in the L2 can facilitate or hinder the learning process. Cieślicka discusses how similarity of idioms in L1 and L2 affects idiom learning. When both levels of similarity are high, learners can usually infer the meaning of L2 idioms based on their L1 knowledge.

According to research, when idioms have the same meanings and expressions in learners' L1 and L2, learners can understand and master these expressions through positive transfer from L1. However, if the idioms are very different between the two languages, learners face the challenge of needing to rely more on contextual cues to grasp the meaning of the idioms. According to Suñer, F. (2018). *The interplay of cross-linguistic differences and context in L2 idiom comprehension*, Suñer (1977) investigated how learners understand and master idiomatic expressions in a second language, especially when there is not necessarily a correspondence between these idioms and the learners' idioms in the first language. On the one hand, Suñer's study shows that cross-linguistic similarity can greatly facilitate comprehension when idioms have similar meanings in both languages. When the meanings and expressions of idioms in the two languages are highly overlapping, learners are able to transfer knowledge from L1. In addition, comprehension and memorization of idiomatic expressions in L2 can be enhanced as well. On the other hand, cross-linguistic differences can pose certain challenges and limitations. When idioms in two languages differ greatly in form and meaning, the difficulties faced by learners are more severe, and it is difficult for them to really understand the meaning or cause confusion. In addition, the studies of Soto-Sierra, V. and Ferreira, R. A. support this view. From Soto-Sierra, V., & Ferreira, R. A. (2024). *The influence of cross-language similarity and transparency on idiom*, They explored the effects of

cross-linguistic similarity and transparency on second language acquisition of idioms. According to their study, it can be found that when the connection between literal and metaphorical meanings is clear and transparent, idioms with cross-linguistic similarity between learners' native language and second language are more more clear and easy to detect the relationship. On the contrary, when the transparency is reduced, learners need to rely more on contextual cues and find it difficult to comprehend with only limited cumulative knowledge.

#### 4. The role of context in L2 idiom learning

As mentioned earlier, there are limitations to understanding and learning proverbs in a second language solely on the basis of cross-linguistic similarities. Positive transfer of cross-language similarity can help better understanding and mastery, but negative transfer can hinder and limit learning. At this point, context can play a role in the learning of idioms in a second language. Context plays a key role in the learning of second language idioms because it crosses the gap between literal and metaphorical meanings, enhancing comprehension and memorization. As idioms cannot usually be understood by translating individual words, contextualization is a highly effective way of learning to master their meaning and appropriate usage. By embedding idioms in meaningful contexts, learners gain insights into cultural subtle nuances and pragmatic functions, which helps to understand and effectively utilize these expressions in communication. This contextual approach not only improves memorization but also deepens understanding of the cultural and religious practices of the language.

In *Nippold, M. A., & Martin, S. T. (1989), Idiom interpretation in isolation versus context: A developmental study with adolescents*, he did this by comparing the way idioms are understood in separate contexts and in context, therefore defining the role of context in L2 idiom learning. The study illustrated that adolescents interpreted idioms more accurately and comprehensively when they were presented within a contextual framework rather than in isolation. When there are episodes in the context, adolescents are provided with cues and clues to infer meanings based on the context. In addition, the study emphasized that as adolescents grow up, their ability to use context to infer the meaning of idioms increases. In addition, Liontas's views similarly support this theory. From *Liontas, J. (2002). Context and idiom understanding in second languages*, he explores the role of context in second language acquisition, emphasizing how context affects the comprehension and acquisition of idiomatic expressions. The study emphasizes the importance of context for the learning of

idioms by analyzing contextual cues such as situational factors and surrounding texts allowing learners to more accurately infer the intended meaning and appropriate usage of idioms. Additionally, he extends that the inclusion of rich context-based exemplifications in language teaching can improve learners' ability to understand and properly use idioms. Consequently, it improves their overall communicative competence in the second language. Lastly, Türker's study supports Liontas' assertion that context greatly aids idiomatic comprehension by providing contextual cues that help learners deduce the meaning of metaphors. Besides, Türker explores how cross-linguistic similarities between learners' first and target languages can further facilitate idiomatic comprehension. The study emphasizes that although context is crucial for mastering idiomatic expressions, the presence of cross-linguistically familiarity with idiomatic structures can also enhance learning. This also echoes the analysis of cross-linguistic similarity mentioned in the previous section, where the presence of the two factors has a complementary effect.

#### 5. Limitations

Through the literature mentioned above, it can be found that cross-linguistic similarity and context play an irreplaceable role and bring absolute benefits when studying the effects of cross-linguistic similarity and context on adults' learning of second language idioms. But also, as mentioned in the articles, the advantages and limitations of these factors must be recognized as well. While cross-linguistic similarity and context can significantly facilitate acquisition of idioms by utilizing familiar structures, it also has limitations.

On the one hand, while cross-linguistic similarity can be a valuable tool for facilitating idiomatic learning by utilizing existing knowledge, it also has limitations that may lead to misunderstanding or confusion. To begin with, cross-linguistic similarity has a cultural difference that cannot be ignored. Cross-linguistic similarity can sometimes lead to confusion, as pseudo-idiomatic words are idioms that look or sound similar but have different meanings in the two languages. There may be similarities between two languages, but this can easily lead to misunderstandings. Words and texts can be transferred, but cultures can never be transferred. Proverbs represent more than just words behind them; they represent the culture behind the words. For example, "no caping" is a good example." The word "cape" represents a hat in many languages. However, "no caping" does not mean "no cap". It originated in the black culture. According to the explanation of Urban Dictionary, "The use of the phrase "no cap" is meant to convey authenticity and truth. The phrase originated in reference to decorative gold teeth, which can be

divided into two distinct varieties: permanent gold teeth (aka “perms”) or caps (aka “pullouts”). Whereas caps can be pulled out with ease, perms, as their name suggests, are permanent. They cannot be taken out for a job interview or court date. They are an honest and lasting expression of the owners’ realness.” If the idiomatic meaning is not well understood, its direct translation in another language may lead to misunderstanding. Secondly, partial similarities can also be misleading. Even when idioms appear similar, subtle differences in usage, connotation or context can lead to misinterpretation. Learners may assume that idioms in L2 function in exactly the same way as idioms in L1, thus ignoring important cultural or contextual nuances. Third, the coverage of cross-linguistic similarity is limited. Not all idiomatic expressions have direct or similar counterparts in different languages. For idioms without cross-language equivalents, learners must rely more on contextual clues and explicit instruction, which makes the unfolding of cross-linguistic similarity challenging.

On the other hand, while context is a powerful tool for facilitating idiomatic learning by providing contextual and cultural cues, it also presents challenges. First, ambiguity can result from unclear contextual references as well as pointers. Context can sometimes be ambiguous or open to interpretation, which leads to difficulties for learners to accurately identify the correct meaning of idioms. In many cases, this can be misleading to learners. First of all, when learners do not have sufficient background knowledge or contextual clues are inadequate, especially when the context is too ambiguous or unfamiliar, recognition problems sometimes occur if they rely solely on the context. In addition, learners have access to a limited stock of knowledge. The learner’s knowledge base may not always be able to solve situations in various contexts every time, which will cause learning problems.

## 6. Conclusion

Despite their contributions to idiomatic acquisition, cross-linguistic similarity and contextual cues have limitations. First, when idiomatic expressions in the second language differ from those in the learner’s first language, this can lead to confusion. Also, they may not always be sufficient for adults. They may have difficulty understanding the nuances of contextually relevant expressions, especially if the context is unfamiliar or ambiguous.

## 7. Application

In conclusion, these findings suggest that both cross-linguistic similarity and context play a crucial role in the second language acquisition of idioms, but neither the use of

cross-linguistic similarity alone nor the understanding of context alone is sufficient. For bilingual learners, some degree of cross-linguistic similarity can be of great help for idiom learning. However, too much use of cross-language similarity can also be misleading and introduce ambiguity. Also, too much reliance on context is not sufficient for idiomatic learning in a second language. Context is not always an aid, and it can also create vague directions. For bilingual learners, reasonably effective substitution of cross-linguistic cultural similarities and understanding of context are both necessary. Learners should use a combination of the two approaches in a reasonably effective way, chosen and applied at the right time according to the learning situation.

In the first place, cross-language necessity is a good method. Compare learners’ idioms in L1 and L2 to highlight similarities and differences. Possible pitfalls of cross-linguistic similarities are detected in time so that misunderstandings can be avoided in time. Second, increased practice can cause qualitative changes. Let learners simulate some conversational scenarios where there are situations where proverbs are used, and use idioms in the simulated conversations. This helps them to practice using idioms appropriately in different social situations. Third, learners are encouraged to integrate the use of proverbs into their daily lives, practicing and consolidating their knowledge of proverbs. Learners are encouraged to use idioms in writing and speaking tasks in order to gradually build familiarity and fluency over time.

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