

Language Transfer Manifested in English Idiom Acquisition by Chinese EFL Learners

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Idiom acquisition plays an important role in the process of second language learning and acquisition. Proper understanding of linguistic transfer in terms of English idiom acquisition is helpful for EFL learners to improve the efficiency of learning English and also facilitates the process of English teaching. This study examines the Chinese learner's language transfer features manifested in their understanding of English idioms which are classified into five different types according to their linguistic forms and conceptual bases. The results suggest that equivalent linguistic forms and equivalent conceptual bases of idioms are helpful to cause positive transfer while different conceptual bases of idioms may result in negative cross-linguistic transfer. This article may contribute to the development of language transfer theory and provide pedagogical implications of how English idioms should be learned by students and taught by English teachers.

Keywords: language transfer, idiom acquisition, EFL learners

Introduction

Linguistic transfer concerns the phenomenon that the linguistic system of learner's native language in learner's mind may have influence on his or her second language system (Odlin, 1989). Idioms are expressions whose meanings are not the sum of the individual meanings of the words that make up the idioms. Proper understanding of linguistic transfer in terms of English idiom acquisition is helpful for EFL learners to improve the efficiency of learning English and also facilitates the process of English teaching. However, cross-linguistic transfer manifested in English idiom acquisition by Chinese EFL learners has not been fully explored. Therefore, language transfer related to idiom acquisition is worth investigating.

The purpose of this study is to examine language transfer manifested in English idiom acquisition by Chinese EFL learners. The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to the development of language transfer theory and provide pedagogical implications of how English idioms should be learned by students and taught by English teachers.

Literature Review

Many studies have investigated the English idiom acquisition by non-native speakers (Chateris-Black, 2002; Hussein, Khanji, & Makhzoomy, 2000; Irujo, 1986). Irujo (1986) found evidence for positive and negative transfer in L2 English idiom learning by L1 Spanish learners, although his study does not make distinctions between lexical and conceptual content of idioms, making it unclear whether transfer is taking place at the level of form

or meaning or both. The study of Chateris-Black takes a step further in which idioms are classified according to their linguistic forms and conceptual bases (Chateris-Black, 2002). Chateris-Black (2002) examined the English idiom acquisition by L1 Malay learners using comprehension and production tasks. The findings show that Malay learners perform better when the linguistic forms and conceptual bases of English figurative expressions are equivalent to their Malay counterparts, suggesting the positive effect of learner's native language experience. In addition, learners perform worse when the conceptual basis of an English figurative expression is not equivalent to the corresponding Malay expressions, which may result from the effect of negative transfer. In addition, Hussein et al. (2000) aimed to examine the English idiom acquisition by L1 Arabic learners. There are three types of idioms including identical, similar, and different ones. Participants were asked to translate idioms from English to Arabic. The results show that the percentage of correct responses was remarkably higher in translating the identical idioms, indicating the effect of positive language transfer. In a word, previous studies have shown that language transfer could be manifested in L2 idiom acquisition (Chateris-Black, 2002; Hussein et al., 2000; Irujo, 1986; Türker, 2016; 2019). However, few of them have investigated the cross-linguistic transfer manifested in English idiom acquisition by Chinese EFL learners. Therefore, it is crucial to examine language transfer manifested in English idiom acquisition by Chinese EFL learners.

Theoretical Framework

Introduction to the Theory Itself

Language transfer is related to the phenomenon that the native language experience of learners may influence the process of second language learning or acquisition in a positive or negative way. Positive transfer occurs when learner's native language experience facilitates his or her second language learning while negative transfer occurs when learner's native language background has a detrimental effect on his or her second language learning (Odlin, 1989).

Embodiment of the Theory in Idiom Acquisition

Language transfer can be manifested in idiom acquisition. Chateris-Black (2002) had investigated English idiom acquisition by L1-Malay L2-English learners and posits that idioms can be classified into five categories according to their linguistic forms and conceptual bases. The results demonstrate that English idioms with equivalent conceptual bases and equivalent linguistic forms compared to their Malay counterparts are easier for L1-Malay L2-English learners to comprehend, indicating the positive effect of learner's native language experience on their second language learning.

Research Method

Research Questions

Research questions in this study are as follows:

1. Does Chinese learners' L1 linguistic experience influence their English metaphor acquisition?
2. How does the L1 linguistic experience of Chinese EFL learners influence their understanding and acquisition of English idioms?

Data Collection

Participants. One hundred and fifty students from Chinese universities were recruited for the translation tasks. All the participants speak Mandarin as their native language and learn English as their second language

and have passed College English Test-6. None of them have learned other second languages besides English, which avoid the effect of other second languages on English idiom translation.

Stimuli. Stimuli were chosen based on Zhang (2008). Twenty English idioms were chosen from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (Sisacloir, 2002). Corresponding Chinese idioms which may lead to the right or wrong understanding of English metaphors were listed in Table 1. They were selected from *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (Dictionary of Language Research Institute of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2002). They can be classified as five types according to their meaning and linguistic forms (Chateris-Black, 2002). Participants were required to translate the English idioms into Chinese according to their own understanding and English knowledge.

Procedure. Participants were divided into five groups. Each group contained 30 people. Learners in Groups 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 were required to translate the English idioms of Types 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively. The number of correct answers and the number of interference errors caused by negative transfer were then calculated. One point was awarded for each correct answer.

Table 1

Five Types of Idioms and Corresponding Examples

Category	Types of metaphors	English idioms	Corresponding Chinese idioms
1	Equivalent linguistic form and equivalent conceptual basis	Broken-hearted	心碎
		Sweet talk	甜言蜜语
		To add fuel to the fire	火上浇油
		To strike while the iron is hot	趁热打铁
2	Similar linguistic form and equivalent conceptual basis	To look for a needle in a haystack	大海捞针
		Love me, love my dog	爱屋及乌
		Sprung up mushrooms	雨后春笋
		To kill two birds with one stone	一箭双雕
3	Equivalent linguistic form but different conceptual basis	To make a mountain out of a molehill	愚公移山
		Child's play	儿戏
		To eat one's words	食言
		To make one's blood boil	热血沸腾
4	Different linguistic form but equivalent conceptual basis	To make sb turn in his grave	死不瞑目
		Birds of a feather flock together	物以类聚
		One cannot make bricks without straw	巧妇难为无米之炊
		To fish in the troubled water	浑水摸鱼
5	Similar linguistic form but different conceptual basis	To laugh one's head off	笑掉大牙
		To skate on thin ice	如履薄冰
		To move heaven and earth	翻天覆地
		Tongue in cheek	吐舌头

Data Analysis and Results

Comparison of the differences between five types of English idioms. Non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to compare the differences between five types of English idioms. All the scores of each participant were input into SPSS 27. The results show that the group differences in the test score among the five types of English idioms are statistically significant with $p < 0.001$.

Multiple pairwise comparisons were adopted to examine the differences of each two types of idioms and which two types had significant group difference. The results show that the differences in test scores are

significant in Type 2 and Type 3 ($p < 0.001$), Type 1 and Type 3 ($p < 0.001$), Type 4 and Type 5 ($p = 0.037$), Type 1 and Type 5 ($p < 0.001$), Type 4 and Type 3 ($p = 0.022$), Type 2 and Type 4 ($p = 0.001$), Type 2 and Type 5 ($p < 0.001$), and Type 1 and Type 4 ($p < 0.001$). In addition, there is no significant difference between Type 3 and Type 5, Type 2 and Type 1. Figure 1 illustrates the scores of five types of items, suggesting that scores of Type 1 and Type 2 idioms are generally higher than those of the other three types.

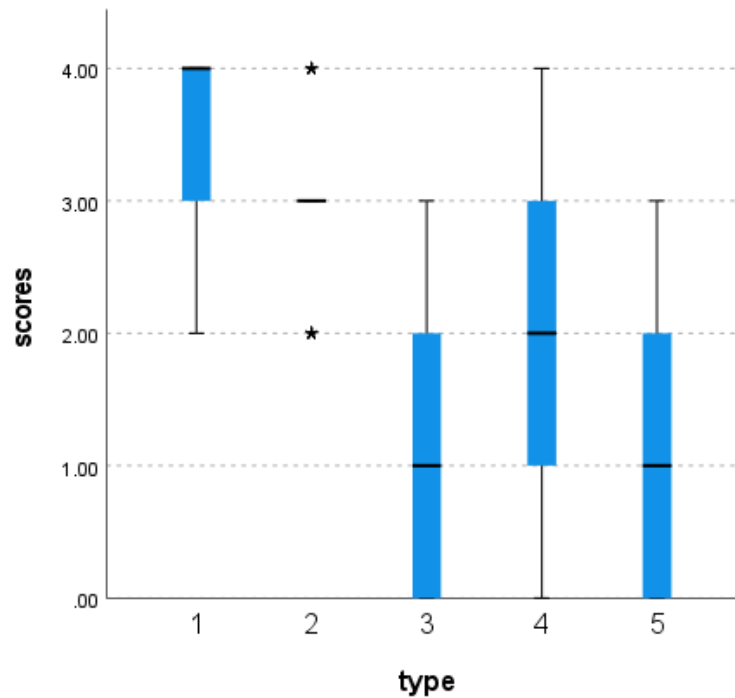


Figure 1. Comparison of scores in five types of English idioms.

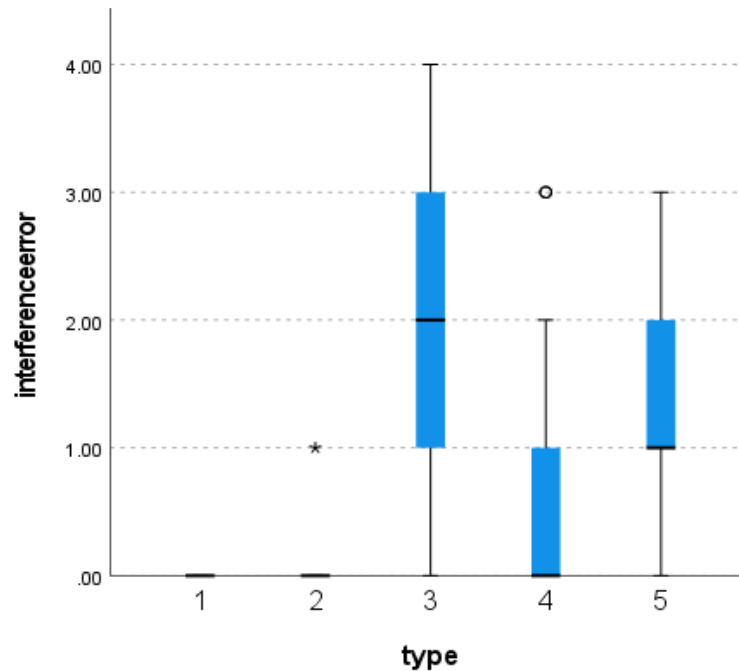


Figure 2. The number of interference errors in different types of idioms.

Error analysis. The statistical model of Kruskal-Wallis test was also conducted to investigate the number of errors caused by negative transfer, namely, interference errors (Irujo, 1986). The results of Kruskal-Wallis test show that there are significant differences in the number of interference errors regarding different types of idioms, $p < 0.001$. Furthermore, the multiple pairwise comparisons show there are significant differences in the number of interference errors between Type 1 and Type 3 ($p < 0.001$), Type 1 and Type 4 ($p = 0.002$), Type 1 and Type 5 ($p < 0.001$), Type 2 and Type 3 ($p < 0.001$), Type 2 and Type 4 ($p = 0.004$), Type 2 and Type 5 ($p < 0.001$), Type 3 and Type 4 ($p < 0.001$), and Type 4 and Type 5 ($p = 0.002$). In addition, it can be seen from Figure 2 that the number of interference errors in Type 3 items is significantly higher than that in Types 1, 2, and 4 items and the number of interference errors in Type 5 items is also significantly higher than that in Types 1, 2, and 4 items.

Discussion

Translation accuracy of different types of English idioms may vary according to their linguistic forms and conceptual basis.

In Type 1, Chinese and English metaphors have equivalent linguistic forms and the conceptual bases. In such cases, the literal meaning and metaphorical meaning are consistent for Chinese EFL learners (Zhang, 2008). As a result, it is easy for them to obtain the correct metaphorical meaning of English idioms with the help of the corresponding Chinese idioms. Taking “to add fuel to the fire” as an example, its literal meaning could readily remind learners of the Chinese counterpart “火上浇油”, thus leading to the right understanding of this idiom which means “to do something that makes people react more strongly or fiercely” metaphorically (Zhang, 2008). In this way, learner’s knowledge of native language facilitates the process of English learning and positive language transfer occurs.

Type 2 items have equivalent conceptual bases but only similar linguistic forms compared to the Chinese counterparts. This similarity requires learners to ignore the English linguistic forms to some extent so as to recall the corresponding Chinese idioms successfully. For instance, the English idiom “Love me, love my dog” has similar linguistic form to its Chinese counterpart “爱屋及乌”. For learners who are going to translate the English idiom, they have to neglect part of its linguistic form to think of the Chinese counterpart “爱屋及乌” and thus get the metaphorical meaning of “If one loves somebody, one should love everything associated with him” (Zhang, 2008). In other words, this process results in a little more difficulty in understanding the English item.

In terms of Type 3 idioms, they have equivalent linguistic forms but different conceptual bases when compared to their Chinese counterparts. Problems might arise because of the different conceptual bases. Specifically speaking, learners may get the metaphorical meaning of an English idiom by resorting to the corresponding Chinese idiom which is highly related to the literal translation of the English linguistic forms. However, the corresponding Chinese idiom could be of little assistance in correctly interpreting the English idiom because of the Chinese idiom’s different metaphorical meaning. This may explain the relatively lower score and comparatively higher number of interference errors occurring in this type of idiom. For example, the metaphor “to eat one’s words” means “to take back what one has said” metaphorically (Zhang, 2008). For Chinese EFL learners, its literal translation would easily remind them of the Chinese metaphor “食言” whose metaphoric meaning is “to break one’s promise”, thus leading to the wrong comprehension of the original metaphor. Such type of idioms is likely to make learners bewildered and lead to their negative transfer of first language metaphorical meaning.

Type 4 metaphors are distinct from Type 3 in that they have different linguistic forms and equivalent conceptual bases in comparison with their Chinese counterparts (Zhang, 2008). Corresponding to the English

metaphor “to fish in the troubled water”, the Chinese counterpart “浑水摸鱼” is designed, whose metaphorical meaning is “to gain advantages for oneself from a disturbed state of affairs” (Zhang, 2008). Additionally, for the English metaphor “to make somebody turn in his grave”, the Chinese metaphor “死不瞑目” is in pair with it. This type of metaphors may seem confusing to Chinese EFL learners due to their literal expressions, although some participants are still likely to resort to contrast association and find out the similarity in the metaphorical meaning of the two metaphors (Zhang, 2008). Therefore, idioms of Type 4 are a bit easier for learners to understand than those of Type 3.

The linguistic forms of Type 5 idioms are partially similar while their conceptual bases are totally different, which may be misleading to learners and serve as part of the reason why the score of this type is relatively low and the number of the interference error is relatively high. For instance, the English idiom “to move heaven and earth” and the Chinese idiom “翻天覆地” have partial similarity in linguistic form, but the metaphorical meaning of the former is “to spare no effort to do something” and the latter’s metaphorical meaning is “great and radical (change)”. Compared with the other four types of idioms, this type of idioms tends to induce participants to understand the English items in the way they understand their Chinese counterparts, resulting in the final failure of comprehension. Under such circumstance, different conceptual bases incur negative transfer of first language metaphor.

Based on the previous discussion, it can be found that both linguistic forms and conceptual bases of idioms influence the cross-linguistic transfer of metaphor.

Firstly, the results of this research provide the indication that the degree of difference in linguistic forms between languages may influence the comprehension of second language idioms. The more they are distinct from each other, the more difficult learners will encounter when trying to understand the second language idioms. Consequently, it can be observed that although metaphors of Types 1, 2, and 4 all have equivalent conceptual bases, the highest score among them is from Type 1 idioms with equivalent linguistic forms and the lowest scores among them are from Types 3 and 5 items which have different linguistic forms. These results correspond to the data from previous research, in which second language idiom comprehension is related to the degree of difference in linguistic forms between learner’s native language and their second language (Charteris-Black, 2002).

Secondly, the conceptual bases behind the idioms also play a part in the understanding of English idioms. Specifically, if conceptual bases are equivalent, they may facilitate the idiom learning. Otherwise, learners might comprehend English idioms in an inappropriate way because of the metaphorical meaning of the corresponding Chinese idioms. In such cases, negative transfer often occurs and the number of interference errors increases. This point could be demonstrated by the significantly less number of interference errors in Types 1, 2, and 4 idioms compared with the number of interference errors in Types 3 and 5 idioms which have different conceptual bases. Findings from previous study also support this view (Charteris-Black, 2002). It has been observed that figurative expressions with an equivalent linguistic form and an equivalent conceptual basis were the easier to be acquired compared with figurative items with an equivalent linguistic form but a different linguistic form.

Conclusion

This paper examines features of language transfer manifested in English idiom acquisition. Based on this research, it can be found that factors of linguistic forms and conceptual bases both play an important part in idiom acquisition. Specifically, equivalent linguistic forms and equivalent conceptual bases of idioms are helpful to cause positive transfer while different conceptual bases of idioms may result in negative cross-linguistic transfer.

However, this research has its limitation. It only examines English idiom acquisition by native speakers of Mandarin Chinese. Language transfer manifested in idiom acquisition needs to be investigated in terms of other language background such as German and Japanese for future research.

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