

Monica Karlsson: Idiomatic Mastery in a First and Second Language

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Idiomatic Mastery in a First and Second Language is a volume of the *Second Language Acquisition* series published by *Multilingual Matters*. The author presents a comprehensive and detailed study of idiomatic expressions and lexicon of second language learners. The present research investigates language acquisition through idiomatic expressions. The author goes into the details of the different aspects of idiomatic mastery, concerning the role of visualization techniques in learners' comprehension and retention of L2 idioms, errors, misinterpretations, and the perception of creative idiom variants.

When it comes to idiomatic mastery, first, we have to define the term 'idiom'. It is often used as an umbrella term for different kinds of multi-word sequences, such as phrasal and prepositional verbs, prefabricated patterns, sayings and proverbs (Liu, 2008). As the title suggests, the book presents a deeper understanding of figurative language. The author investigates the aspects of advanced learners' comprehension, retention and production of idiomatic expressions in a first (Swedish) and second (English) language, canonical forms as well as distorted forms referred to as creative variants. The main focus of the study is on the students' comprehension of canonically used idioms, making quantitative and qualitative comparisons between learners' mother tongue and their second language. One of the main purposes of the research is to decide whether multimedia and visualization techniques enhance comparatively advanced learners' (aged between 13 and 18) knowledge of L2 idioms to a greater extent or not. In the first test, the students are administered captioned audio-visual input, and in the second test they are supplied with still pictures, etymological elaboration. Finally, the combination of still pictures and etymological elaboration is presented. Besides canonically used idioms, Chapter 5 introduces the non-canonically used ones, as well. In the last part of the book (Chapter 6) the author turns to the productive mastery of L2 idioms in free composition writing, more precisely, she focuses on the learner's ability to produce idiomatic expressions.

When studying learners' understanding of figurative language, we should take four main influencing factors into consideration: age, context, transparency and frequency. Adolescents were tested in two parallel tests, which focus on their comprehension of canonically used idioms in L1 and L2. It was found that L1 learners between 13 and 18 develop significantly in their understanding of figurative language. Interestingly enough, their L2 development is almost the same, in spite of the fact that they start learning L2 at a lower level of competencies in all grades, which means that students develop at almost the same pace in their L1 and L2.

In the next chapter (Chapter 3) we gain insight into the multimodal and visualization techniques, and their impact on students' comprehension and retention of L2 idioms. We take a closer look at the effects of contextual support concerning comprehension and retention. This part contains two experiments. In the first test captioned audio-visual contexts are explored, and the researcher pays attention to the effects of still pictures, etymological notes, and then the combination of the two. When it comes to the visualization techniques, two important theories may arise, namely Dual Coding Theory, and Levels of Processing Theory. Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1971) concludes that cognition (including encoding, storage, organization and retrieval) is made up of two independent, yet connected systems. One of them deals with verbal coding, i.e. language representation and processing, while the other deals with non-verbal coding, i.e. events, experiences, memories and emotions. Levels of Processing Theory (Craik and Lockhart, 1972) predicts that the deeper the information is processed, the longer a memory trace will last. These two theories address the cognition processes relevant to language learning in general (such as noticing, encoding, storage and retrieval).

In the captioned audio-visual context test (testing 57 students with 23 idioms from situation comedies), the author investigates whether audio-visual contexts in the form of movie clips enhance advanced learners' comprehension and retention of L2 idioms or not. In the case of the so-called 'still pictures, etymological notes and the combination of the two' test (testing 120 students with 21 idioms, presenting their literal meaning, their figurative meaning and an illustration representing both their literal and idiomatic meaning) the researcher investigates whether audio-visual contexts enhance advanced learners' comprehension and retention of L2 idioms or not. In both cases the results of a test group and a control group are compared. Although, the first experiment suggests that movie clips, illustrations and historical explanations do not necessarily aid comprehension more than short written contexts, the students generally achieved better results when the clues were global in character and dealt with the theme of the clip. TV shows, films and situation comedies all support the improvement of language proficiency, since they provide a pleasurable leaning experience. The captioned audio-visual study also confirms this supposition. In the second experiment the students' comprehension increased when the illustrations were figurative in character. To sum up, audio-visual methods are better at supporting language learners in creating idiomatic retention.

After highlighting the aspects of comprehension and retention of idioms, the author turns to the mental lexicon and lexical interlanguage, and furthermore, she emphasizes the ignorance and misinterpretation of idioms (Chapter 4). The mental lexicon deals with how the words are activated, stored, processed and retrieved. It contains all the information – phonological, morphological, semantic and syntactic – that speakers have about individual words and morphemes. The

semantic memory – reflected in the lexicon – is not linguistic because it contains the mental representation of one’s knowledge of the world. The next experiment (testing 177 subjects) investigates the frequency of ignorance and misinterpretation of L2 idioms, and whether misinterpretations can be classified or not, and if so, what types exist. In the case of not being familiar with the idioms, the students were encouraged to guess their meanings. The most frequent category was ‘no answer’ (65%), the second and third categories were ‘incorrect answer’ (25%) and ‘underspecified answer’ (8%). This experiment also proves that transparency and frequency are facilitators when learners try to disambiguate idiom meaning.

The next experiment (Chapter 5) investigates how advanced students understand different degrees of creative permutations in a second language. 13 students participated in a test, including 20 idioms in their canonical form (original form: it’s raining cats and dogs), and their manipulated form (creative variant: it’s raining kitties and puppies – just to mention one example) and their context was also presented. On average, 49% of the students understood the idioms. The results imply that the more creative the item is, the more difficult it is to guess its meaning. This supports Szczepaniak’s presupposition about creativity continuum (2006), which is ‘the degree to which an idiom is successfully disambiguated indeed appears to stand in relation to the extent to which it has been distorted.’

As the previous chapters deal with comprehension and retention, in the last chapter (Chapter 6) production (i.e. productive/active and receptive/passive vocabulary knowledge) is in the main focus. According to Milton (2009) an L2 learner’s productive vocabulary knowledge forms between 50 % and 80% of their receptive vocabulary knowledge. This rate is strongly connected to word frequency, more precisely, more commonly used words are more likely to exist both in receptive/passive and productive/active vocabulary, and less commonly used words are more likely to exist in the receptive/passive vocabulary only. The last experiment of the research investigates how advanced learners are capable of transferring receptive knowledge of L2 idioms into productive mastery in free composition writing, and furthermore, what errors they make. 81 students were tested in the comprehension experiment with 47 idioms. They were asked to compose a fictional essay, using at least 10 of the idioms. The results suggest that students use the most frequent expressions that they are already familiar with. Furthermore, they make errors in connection with the context/meaning, they make grammatical errors, mixing verb forms and tenses, content and function words, and they also make syntactical errors. According to the author the errors can be classified into the following five categories:

1. errors with meaning/context
2. errors with lexical set-up and form
3. syntactical errors induced by the idioms

4. errors not directly induced by the idioms, but part of the idioms' make-up
5. multiple errors, involving two or more of the error types.

To sum up, the comprehension, retention and production of idioms is a very challenging field for language learners. The author offers an interesting method for facilitating mastering the idiomatic knowledge and provides excellent outline of the main aspects of idiomatic mastery. This book is a splendid choice not just for researchers and linguists, but both for teachers and language learners.

References

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