Second Language-Specific Idiom Recognition Skills and Social Communication

WaiMen Noel Chung (nchung@vax2.concordia.ca)
Norman Segalowitz (norman.segalowitz@concordia.ca)
Department of Psychology & Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance, Concordia University
7141 Sherbrooke Street West, Montréal, QC H4B 1R6 Canada

Introduction

In the second language (L2) domain, fluency attainment by adults has always been a great challenge; most people only attain a relatively low level of fluency and there are usually huge individual differences in the levels attained. One hypothesis for this low attainment and high variability is that there exist individual differences at the cognitive level in the processing abilities responsible for fluency. A related hypothesis is that an important determinant of such individual cognitive differences is the amount and kind of exposure and practice the individual has with the second language. Idiomatic phrase recognition skills reflect aspects of fluency that can only be associated with the familiarity with a language that results from actually using it a lot. Such fluency will normally be developed through language use and exposure in real communication. The goal of the present study, therefore, is to see if there is a relationship between L2-specific idiom recognition skills (over and above general word recognition skills) and certain social and communicative aspects of idiom exposure and practice.

Method

Bilingual undergraduates who use their L2 to varying degrees on a daily basis (n=48; first language (L1)=French; L2=English) performed the following tasks to assess the association between L2-specific idiom recognition skills and social and communicative aspects of idiom exposure and practice.

L2 Proficiency was operationalized, as in Chung and Segalowitz (2004), as efficiency of accessing word meaning in a *semantic classification task*. In separate L1 and L2 blocks, subjects (Ss) indicated by panel press whether a visually presented word referred to a living or non-living object (72 trials in each language). Intra-individual variation in reaction time (based on the coefficient of variation-CV) was used as the measure of cognitive processing efficiency (Segalowitz & Segalowitz, 1993). L2-specific measures of lexical access efficiency were obtained by partialling out L1 from L2 measures.

L2 Idiom Recognition skill was operationalized as speed of deciding a common fixed idiomatic phrase in the language is correctly expressed or not. In this *idiom recognition task*, Ss had to decide whether a visually presented idiomatic phrase was correct or incorrect by panel press. L1 and L2 versions of a series of common idiomatic phrases were constructed. The task consisted of 80 test idioms in total, half correctly expressed (e.g., *They fought like cat and dog*) and half incorrectly expressed (e.g., *They fought like cat and mouse*). An L2-specific idiom recognition skill index was computed by partialling out L1 from L2 reaction time scores.

Montreal Index of Linguistic Integration (MILI; Segalowitz & Ryder, 2006) provided self-report measures of contact with speakers in the L1 and the L2 where experience using language involving everyday idiomatic expressions was likely to be had. These measures provided an index of the relative degree to which participants were integrated into the L1 and L2 speaker communities.

Results

The data were submitted to hierarchical multiple regression with L2-specific idiom recognition skills as the dependent measure. In Step 1, the control measure of general L2 word recognition efficiency (residualized CV from the semantic classification task) was entered. In Step 2, control measures of reported overall L1 conversation levels (MILI) were entered. In Step 3, predictor measures of reported overall L2 conversation levels (MILI) were entered. In Step 1, R^2= .004 (*n.s.*), in Step 2, R^2= .006 (*n.s.*), and in Step 3, ΔR^2 = .097 (*p*= .035).

Discussion

The reported overall L2 conversation levels accounted for 9% of unique variance of L2-specific idiom recognition skills, suggesting that high levels of performance with the idiomatic expressions are attained through exposure involving lots of specifically social contact with native speakers (as opposed to just general contact with the language through reading or study). Fluent recognition of idioms is associated with higher levels of social communication to the language that itself reflects a high level of integratedness in the sense of getting out there and using the language a lot with people. Because all L2 measures had been residualized against L1, the results indicate there is a language-specific form of idiom recognition skills that reflect social communication experience rather than general processing abilities.

References

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