5 ICLEHI 2017-060 Nurul Bazilah Abdul Hamid

Figurative Language Proficiency among Second Language Learners: The Effect of Malay-English Degree of Similarity

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Abstract

This study was designed to look at influences on the mastery of targeted figurative language among second language learners while anticipating their difficulties. English non-literal phrases translated into Malay by Malaysian learners of English were examined, taking into account familiarity factors, in order to ascertain how different levels of users could understand and produce abstract phrases in the English language. Figurative language tests were conducted to assess 41 Malay-speaking tertiary learners of intermediate and advanced levels of English. Half of the number was of authentic participants of the second language environment. It was discovered that figurative phrases that contain equivalent conceptual bases and linguistic forms were the simplest to interpret, while the most difficult were those with (1) equivalent linguistic forms yet different conceptual bases and (2) different surface forms and conceptual bases. From the findings, there is some evidence that the learners may commit negative transfer when processing unknown or unfamiliar English figurative language. Besides, Malaysian learners were able to comprehend more abstract phrases than they produced as contextual clues play a major role in assisting the learners' interpretations. However, the findings differ between the two groups with different levels of proficiency. The implications of these findings are that teachers need to pay more attention to introducing figurative expressions in English classrooms. This study highlighted the low standard of non-literal language proficiency among Malaysian learners. However, the actual effects of using figurative language in classroom instructions in the Malaysian context require further study.

Keywords: Figurative Language, Linguistics, English as a Second Language, Language Transfer, Second Language Acquisition, Sociolinguistics, Bilingualism

Introduction

Figurative language means a language that is dependent on a figurative extension from another meaning that should be decoded (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2014). This includes metaphor, hyperbole, idiom, simile, irony and phrasal verbs which involve psychological aspect during the acquisition process (Roberts and Kreuz, 1993). This means that a language user needs to interpret the meaning of a short phrase since it is not literal and differs from its primary established senses, which are "most closely related to basic human experience" (Charteris-Black, 2002). During the past few decades, second

language acquisition (SLA) research has shown an increased interest in this area because even though the command of figurative language is one of the important indicators of second language (L2) proficiency, to comprehend and produce it is not an easy task, particularly among L2 users (Lazar, 1996).

Figurative language is potentially challenging for second language learners and teachers because it is difficult to approach systematically in second language classrooms. In addition, L2 users often resort to translating expressions of the new language into their native tongue. When they encounter English phrases, learners tend to directly translate them, word for word, referring to their first language (L1) system in order to comprehend them (Pandian, 2002). Hence, cross-linguistic influence plays a significant role in the acquisition of a second or foreign language.

Research Objectives

1) To examine whether the degree of similarity of the linguistic and conceptual forms of Malay figurative language with its Malay counterparts influences the understanding and production ability of the Malaysian language learners.

2) To investigate whether the L2 level of proficiency and familiarity affects the mastery of figurative language.

Research Questions

1) Do the comprehensiveness and production ability of a figurative phrase depend on the degree of similarity of the linguistic and conceptual forms of its L2 counterparts?

2) Is the mastery of figurative language influenced by L2 proficiency and familiarity factors?

Methodology

A total of 50 university students served as subjects for this study, in which 20 of them were categorised as advanced Malay learners of English and the other 21 were in the intermediate Malay learners' group. The remaining 9 participants were native speakers of English who acted as the control group in order to validate the literature on the role of exposure and familiarity in understanding figurative language. Convenience sampling was used to contact these participants from across the campus.

The study was divided into two parts. The first part looked at the types of figurative items that the subjects had difficulty in understanding and producing, while the second part examined the relationship between L2 level of English proficiency and the mastery of the figurative unit. It was developed to measure the participants' comprehension and productive knowledge about the figurative items analysed. For the comprehension test, twelve items were chosen, and items were tested in the form of a multiple-choice test. Meanwhile, a cued completion task was designed for the production test, also consisting of twelve items.

The result analysis involves one-way ANOVA analyses of variance with repeated measures, using Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS). The overall results for the three groups of participants were compared to ascertain the differences in figurative language proficiency. A post-hoc Tukey test was utilized to locate where the significant differences lay.

Literature Review

The Importance of Figurative Language

One of the prominent advantages of grasping L2 figurative language is that it is a good indicator of an L2 learner's language proficiency level. The number of idioms acquired is positively correlated with the degree of success with L2 communicative tasks (Yorio, 1989). Therefore, a language learner should acquire or be taught techniques to master this aspect of language. However, language teachers often overlook the teaching of figurative language in the English classroom. Thus, the lack of ability to comprehend figurative language could be a problem for the language learner due to its constant presence in newspapers, movies, and even daily conversations. Therefore, the high occurrence of figurative language in conversations and instructions shows the importance of comprehending and learning it, especially for L2 students.

Comprehension before Production

The current study examines whether L2 learners experience more difficulty producing figurative expressions than understanding them. This is because several studies showed that L2 users could infer meaning of nonliteral phrases, particularly if contextual clues were given. However, L2 learners do not tend to use the phrases due to lack of confidence and/or opportunity. This is substantiated from a study by Liao and Fukuya (2004), which revealed that learners of English avoid choosing most figurative phrases in a test given and that students performed better on the comprehension test than on the completion test. This suggests that 'comprehension before production' is related to figurative acquisition. This suggests that 'comprehension before production' is related to figurative acquisition. This is also evident because Laufer (2000) demonstrated that using idioms in production poses a much greater challenge for L2 learners than idiom comprehension and that even the very advanced ones often avoid using idioms for fear of making mistakes.

The Influence of Learners' Cognitive Style and Language Proficiency

There are assumptions about how L2 learners' figurative proficiency is related to their L2 language level. A study from Trosburg (1985) shows how L2 students' ability to understand and use metaphorical idiomatic expressions is correlated with their language proficiency. This can be validated by Cummins' (1991) research, which shows that a learner's cognitive academic proficiency (CALP) is transferable. This means that the more proficient an L2 learner is, the more ability s/he has to comprehend non-literal language. Thus, from these arguments, the aim of the current study is to investigate if there is any difference in figurative language proficiency between intermediate and advanced Malaysian users of English.

Familiarity and Frequency of Use

Studies show that familiar idioms are processed much faster and more accurately than unfamiliar ones (Cronk and Schwigert, 1992; Forrester, 1995). The results suggest that the degree of an idiom's familiarity does affect its comprehension and production. A study by Dornyei et al. (2004) shows that the degree of acculturation or active participation in the L2 social community is significantly correlated with the learner's level of success in acquiring figurative language.

Fuste-Herrman (2008) pointed out that the exposure to a wide range of idioms, be they formal or informal, may create familiarity for the language user. This is supported by Nippold and Taylor (2002) who found that frequency and familiarity are both influenced

by culture. Less conceptual analysis is needed when a learner is more familiar with the figurative language due to the greater experience in using it (Norbury, 2004).   However, the use of figurative language among L2 learners can be extremely challenging because social interaction varies from culture to culture. Consequently, both advanced Malaysian learners studying in an English-speaking country and English native speakers were investigated to verify these assumptions.

The Influence of L1 in L2 Figurative Language Interpretation

In Irujo's (1986) study, she found that identical or similar meaning of an L2 figurative language to the L1 could assist L2 learners during the interpreting process. This shows that the transparency of an L2 figurative phrase to its L1 influences the promptness of understanding of it. Meanwhile, from Abdullah and Jackson's (as cited in Liu, 2008, p.67) study on 120 Syrian college seniors, they found out that idioms that are identical in both L1 and L2 are the easiest for L2 learners to comprehend. Nonetheless, L2 idioms which are identical in form but different in meaning caused negative transfer (Irujo, 1986a). In Charteris-Black's (2002) research, some of the conceptual and linguistic characteristics of English and Malay figurative phrases are compared and contrasted in order to create different types of figurative languages. However, there was no comparative study between intermediate and advanced L2 Malaysian learners. Nevertheless, the contrastive models of figurative units that had been proposed by Charteris-Black (2002) will be referred to in this study.

The idioms were divided into six types according to their similarities and differences from the Malay idioms in meaning and structure:

Type 1 – equivalent Malay and English linguistic form and conceptual basis: *in the hands, broken heart, steal my heart, black sheep*

Type 2 – similar Malay and English linguistic form and equivalent conceptual basis: *red-handed, big-mouthed, iron fist, naked eye*

Type 3 - equivalent Malay and English linguistic form and different conceptual basis: *new blood, wind up, eat heart out, cat nap*

Type 4 – different Malay and English linguistic form and equivalent conceptual basis: *tongue-tied, windbag, jump queue, poke nose into*

Type 5 - different Malay and English linguistic form and different conceptual basis (transparent): *turn a blind eye, turn back on, put feet up, back to the wall*

Type 6 – different Malay and English linguistic form and different conceptual basis (opaque): *wring hands, find feet, scratch head, tongue-in-cheek*

FINDINGS

Type	Type of test & Question no.		Intermediate (n=21)	Advanced (n=20)	Native (n=10)
T1	C#1. *in the hands*	C	mean=0.98 SD:0.15	Mean=1 SD:0	mean=1 SD:0
	C#3. *broken heart*				
	P#1. *steal heart*	P	mean=0.93 SD:0.26	Mean=0.975 SD:0.16	mean=0.95 SD:0.22
	P#3. *black sheep*				
	Total T1		mean=0.952 (SD:0.07)	Mean=0.99 (SD:0.1)	mean=0.975 (SD:0.16)
T2	C#5. *red-handed*	C	mean=0.98 SD:0.15	Mean=1 SD:0	mean=1 SD:0
	C#7. *big-mouthed*				
	P#5. *iron fist*	P	mean=0.33 SD:0.48	Mean=0.75 SD:0.44	mean=0.95 SD:0.22
	P#7. *naked eye*				
	Total T2		mean=0.654 (SD:0.23)	Mean=0.875 (SD:0.31)	mean=0.98 (SD:0.158)
T3	C#9. *new blood*	C	mean=0.73 SD:0.45	Mean=0.83 SD:0.38	mean=0.7 SD:0.47
	C#11. *wind up*				
	P#9. *eat heart out*	P	mean=0.5 SD:0.5	Mean=0.73 SD:0.45	mean=0.8 SD:0.41
	P#11. *cat nap*				
	Total T3		mean=0.62 (SD:0.043)	Mean=0.78 (SD: 0.048)	mean=0.75 (SD:0.04)
T4	C#10. *tongue-tied*	C	mean=0.90 SD:0.3	Mean=0.95 SD:0.22	mean=0.9 SD:0.31
	C#12. *windbag*				
	P#10. *jump queue*	P	mean=0.2 SD:0.4	Mean=0.6 SD:0.5	mean=1 SD:0
	P#12. *poke nose into*				
	Total T4		mean=0.55 (SD:0.04)	Mean=0.775 (SD:0.19)	mean=0.95 (SD:0.22)
T5	C#6. *turn a blind eye*	C	mean=0.9 SD:0.3	Mean=1 SD:0	mean=1 SD:0
	C#8. *turn back on*				
	P#6. *put feet up*	P	mean=0.095 SD:0.3	Mean=0.65 SD:0.48	mean=0.95 SD:0.22
	P#8. *back to the wall*				
	Total T5		mean=0.5 (SD:0.005)	Mean=0.825 (SD:0.34)	mean=0.98 (SD:0.16)
T6	C#2. *wring hands*	C	mean=0.93 SD:0.26	Mean=0.85 SD:0.83	mean=1 SD:0
	C#4. *find feet*				
	P#2. *scratch head*	P	mean=0.14 SD:0.35	Mean=0.53 SD:0.51	mean=0.6 SD:0.5
	P#4. *tongue-in-cheek*				
	Total T6		mean=0.54 (SD:0.06)	Mean=0.69 (SD:0.102)	mean=0.8 (SD:0.36)

C: Comprehension   **P: Production**   Table 2: Means and standard deviations of total scores
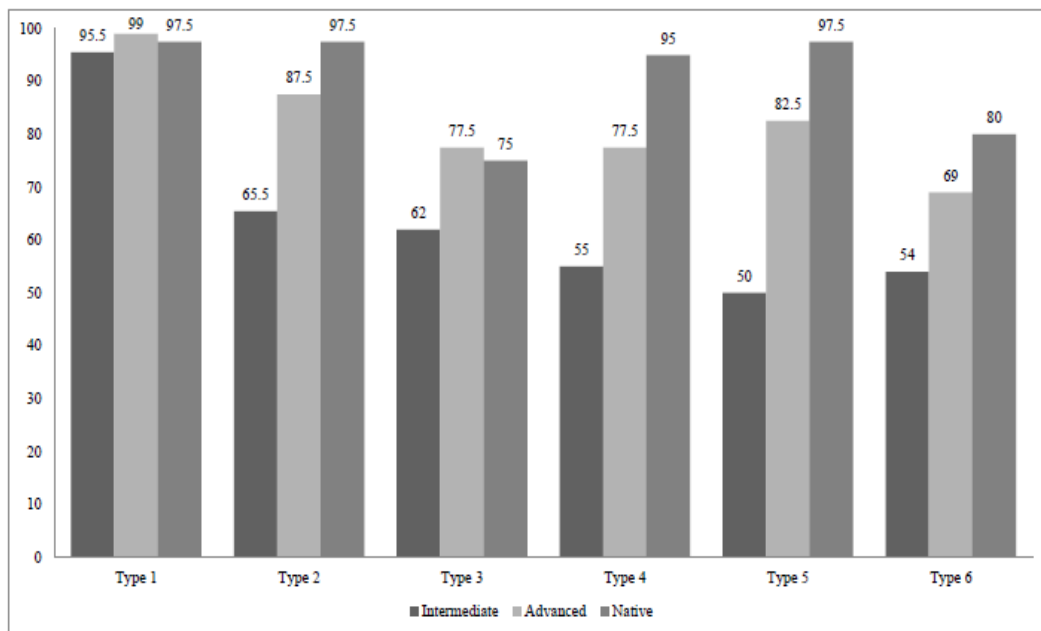

Figure 1: Percentages of accumulative scores for comprehension and production tests according to types of figurative language

Research question 1: Does the degree of similarity of the linguistic and conceptual forms of an L1 figurative expression influence the comprehension and production of its L2 counterparts?

Table 2 and Figure 1 show the results of the first research question regarding whether the results of the comprehension and production of a figurative form varies from the type of figurative expression itself: figurative form type 1 achieved the highest mean for all participants in the two groups of L2 participants. This generally shows that figurative expressions with an equivalent conceptual basis and linguistic form are the easiest to infer.

The forms that are different in terms of linguistic and conceptual basis, as presented in types 5 and 6, were found to be the most difficult among intermediate and advanced Malay users of English. For type 1 figurative form, over 99% of the participants in the advanced group scored 'all correct' in the two tests, which is slightly more than the intermediate group subjects, scoring 95.5% correct. This supports the evidence from Charteris-Black (2002) that figurative units which have the same conceptual and linguistic form as the first language of an L2 user are the easiest to interpret.

Meanwhile, despite the 22% difference between the overall scores of advanced and intermediate groups for figurative language type 2, the two groups scored the second highest for this type. This is because the features are not much different from the first type of figurative units; the second type is considered to have a similar linguistic form yet an equivalent conceptual basis to the second language. The scores for the L2 advanced and the native groups similarly indicated that the type 5 figurative unit ranks third out of all types.

Nevertheless, while the two groups scored 82.5% and 97.5% respectively for the combined scores of comprehension and production tests, the L2 intermediate group found this type of figurative unit the hardest, scoring an overall result of only 50%. This contradicts the results from the advanced group, which achieved the lowest overall scores in type 6. This supports the fact that the understanding and use of a figurative unit depend on the degree of similarity of its linguistic and conceptual forms to its Malay counterparts. Hence, the first hypothesis on the transparency and decomposability of a figurative language can be accepted.

Research question 2: Is the mastery of figurative language influenced by L2 proficiency and familiarity factors?
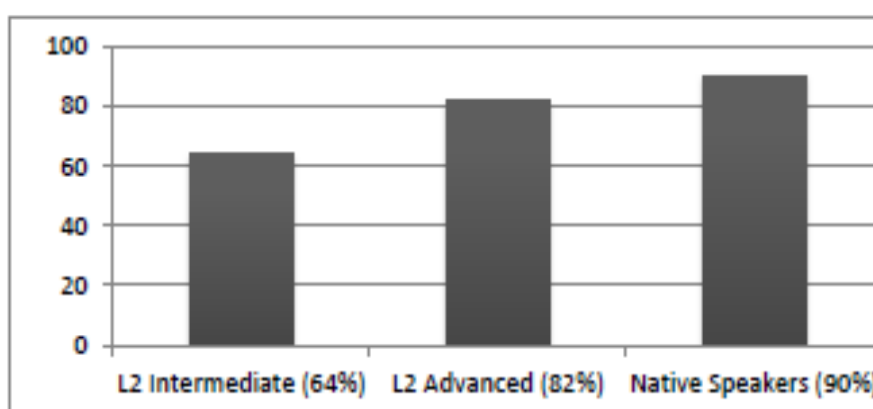

Figure 8: Average scores for Comprehension and Production Tests

Figure 8 displays the average percentages of the group for the combination scores of all the figurative units, in which the accumulative scores for the three groups are converted into percentages. As predicted, the figure suggests that the native group of participants achieved the highest scores. To support these findings, Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics of the total mean scores for all the groups of participants, naming category 1 as the intermediate group, while category 2 belongs to the advanced L2 group, and the native learners' group is in the third category. Hypothesis three could be accepted to some extent, because comparatively, the advanced L2 group scored better (M = 19.7, SD = 2.74) than the intermediate group (M = 15.24, SD = 2.95), although there is not much difference between the advanced and the controlled groups (M = 21.78, SD = 1.09).

Descriptive Statistics

Category		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.0	Total	21	9	21	15.24	2.948
	Valid N (listwise)	21				
2.0	Total	20	14	24	19.70	2.736
	Valid N (listwise)	20				
3.0	Total	9	20	24	21.78	1.093
	Valid N (listwise)	9				

Table 3: Overall mean scores for the two combined tests

The results can be verified by using one-way ANOVA, which found to be highly significant at the .000 level (F = 25.954; 2 degrees of freedom). This is because an alpha significance level of 0.5 was used and the Tukey test showed that there were significant differences between the advanced group and the intermediate group (< 0.000) and between the native group and the intermediate group (< 0.000). Nevertheless, the differences between the advanced and the native groups were not statistically significant (< 0.113), indicating that the overall performances between the two groups were almost the same. The groups thus appear to have had equivalent ability to comprehend and use figurative language. Therefore, the null hypothesis on the differences in figurative language proficiency between the two groups can be established.

Discussion

The influence of the degree of similarity in the English figurative linguistic and conceptual forms on its Malay counterparts

The results shown in Table 2 and Figure 1 show that the understanding of a figurative unit depends on how transparent English figurative is in relation to its Malay equivalent. Figurative form type 1, which contains equivalent linguistic and conceptual forms, proved to be the simplest type of phrases the Malaysian participants could comprehend and produce. Similarly, all the groups of participants found figurative type 2 to be the second easiest. They have the same characteristics as type 1, with part of each phrase being equivalent in each language but part not. Even though the literal translation

into English only partially provides an identical feature to the Malay while the others require a slight prediction of the English meaning, the majority of the L2 participants answered correctly for both comprehension and production tests in type 2.

Meanwhile, Irujo (1986a) found that English idioms which have similar or equivalent features with the Spanish ones are those which are error-prone due to the fact that the learners assumed that they could transfer an L1 figurative unit when this was not always suitable. This is possibly the reason why the advanced group found type 3 figurative units not as easy as types 1 and 2. According to Charteris-Black's (2002) contrastive model for figurative units, the type 3 units have comparable linguistic forms in English and Malay but have a completely different conceptual basis. Therefore, the use of figurative language of this type could cause misinterpretation. That is why both intermediate and advanced groups scored the least for type 3 in the comprehension test.

The intermediate group found type 5 figurative units the hardest to produce, though they were ranked third by advanced users. These units have completely different language and conceptual forms although they are transparent enough to predict. 'Transparent' refers to how the units are "readily accessible on the basis of knowledge that is culturally neutral" (Charteris-Black, p.118). This means that the figurative units under this type can be interpreted in another language because it is not culturally-bound.

Type 6 figurative units have similar characteristics to type 5, but the forms are opaque, as the conceptual basis reflects the encoding of a culture-specific meaning (Charteris-Black, 2002). He stated that conceptual knowledge depends on one's life experience, and that there are "varying layers of transparency within this type that makes it an especially rich one in which to search for cultural icons" (p.119). Therefore, cultural practice is an essential aspect of one's language acquisition. It also determines whether a particular phrase is 'transparent' or 'opaque'.

English figurative languages: Comprehension vs Production

Subjects in all the three groups seemed to score more in the comprehension test than the production test for most of the figurative language categories. This was because each of the missing figurative units in the comprehension test was combined with a one- or two-sentence contextual clue. In this study, the theory seemed to apply to non-native speakers as well, in which they questioned the idiom in a special mental idiom lexicon and then chose the meaning. Therefore, it could be speculated that a particular figurative expression can be decomposed more easily by deducing the meaning of the given expression through contextual clues.

In contrast, it could be seen that L2 learners had difficulties in producing figurative expressions, though part of the phrases and translations were given as clues. Among the two groups of L2 subjects in this study, the highest accumulative score for the production test was scored by the advanced group in figurative unit type 1, which is 98%, while the lowest is at 9.5% by the intermediate group for type 5. Though the Malay translations were given as hints, the subjects were inclined to directly decode the phrases into English in this test. This is because L2 learners prefer the figurative unit with which they are more familiar, whether or not it fits in a particular context.

The effects of L2 proficiency and familiarity in the use of figurative language

There was a small amount of difference between the advanced and the native groups in significant value. Nevertheless, this result should not be over-generalized; it cannot be claimed that the level of figurative language proficiency among the advanced Malaysian learners is the same as that of the native English users. There were significant

differences between the L2 intermediate and the advanced groups in statistics. Accumulatively, the intermediate participants scored 64% as compared to the other two groups. This substantiates the study carried out by Trosburg (1985) on how L2 figurative language comprehension is associated with the language fluency of the learner. In the present study, the advanced participants were those who were being exposed to an English-speaking country; therefore, they were assumed to have a wider opportunity to acquire some figurative phrases as compared to the intermediate students.

Meanwhile, the percentage difference is huge between the native speakers group and the L2 intermediate group. This could validate the argument that the common usage of a figurative language in a community influences one's understanding of a particular non-literal phrase (Liu, 2008). In other words, native speakers could grasp a figurative unit using less conceptual analysis due to their familiarity with and wide exposure to the language.

Limitations

The current study provides a generic impression of the low figurative language proficiency among Malaysian learners but it cannot be assumed that the findings of this study have managed to answer the research questions. The results might have been more varied if the study had involved more participants from the same L1 background, especially from the Malaysian intermediate users of English, due to the declining standard of English in the country. Furthermore, evidence from a larger sample of figurative units would be needed to verify the findings. At the same time, the selected figurative phrases should be ones which are frequently used by native users yet lack familiarity among Malaysians due to culture differences. This is to examine whether their proficiency is comparatively on a par with native English users.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of the study, it could be seen that Malay learners' understanding and production of English figurative language depends on the level of its transparency, linguistically and conceptually, in relation to its Malay counterpart. The Malay learners would commit negative transfer when interpreting and/or producing figurative expressions which have a similar surface form yet have a different conceptual basis due to the different connotations of phrases.

Another finding that could be confirmed from the previous study is that Malaysian users of English are able to infer meaning if a figurative unit is given together with a contextual clue, but are not able to produce the expressions as confident as native English users due to lack of environment and pedagogical exposure. Therefore, it can be assumed that Malaysians are more prone to using literal language to make expressions.

Lastly, it can be seen that the level of language proficiency determines the level of understanding and the ability to make expressions using figurative language. There was a significant difference in the overall performance between the Malay intermediate users and the advanced group in this study, which shows that wide experience in English language environment plays a role in the use of English figurative language.

In terms of the design, the production test should be slightly modified. While the L2 translations could remain, there should not be any other clues so that more authentic responses could be obtained. Furthermore, research could be carried out on the effect of using figurative language in classroom instructions in the Malaysian context. Future research could introduce and explain the meaning of the figurative expressions prior to distributing the test in order to test retention ability among the L2 learners. This could

possibly be achieved if researchers were to collaborate with English instructors when conducting the study.

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