

The development of non-literal competence in L2 acquisition: The case of idioms

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Significant research has shown that an important part of discourse is not completely creative and that prefabricated chunks, set phrases or, more generally, formulaic language is ubiquitous in our everyday life conversations (Gibbs 1995; Wray 2000, 2002; Gibbs and Tendhal 2006). An important implication is that mastering a language's ready-made expressions is part of mastering this language as such. However, this can be a complex task given that a certain amount of them are metaphorically rooted. For example, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the concept ANGER in English is conceptualized as A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. Hence the existence of idiomatic expressions such as *boiling with anger*, *to be streamed up*, or *to hit the roof*.

In the light of this theoretical framework, we examine implications from the perspective of adult second language learners since we know that they struggle to develop a successful command of the figurative expressions of their L2 (Irujo, 1986; Danesi, 1992, 1995; Cooper, 1999; Andreou et coll., 2009).

To this end, two groups of thirty French students –B1 and C1 level students– were asked to write essays as part of an English course. A general overview of the learners' figurative competence in production will briefly be presented before moving on to the specific case of idioms (cf. *the apple of my eye* or *a change of scenery*).

The results revealed that idioms were not so rare in the essays. Despite few authentic target forms, a large number of transfers from L1 idioms could be identified. Looking at these results, the participants were asked to rewrite their essay in their mother tongue, French, in order to conduct cross-linguistic comparisons. Idioms were highly frequent in the essays in French, which certainly explain the large quantity of transfers that we found in the English versions of the essays. Additionally, we noticed an inversion in the way participants made use of idioms in their L1 and in their L2. While the essays in French were filled with figurative idioms (cf. *ouvert d'esprit* meaning *open-minded*, *être un legume* meaning *couch patato*) and few functional ones (cf. *bien-sûr* meaning *of course*, *en fait* meaning *in fact*), the essays in English revealed an overuse of functional idioms and very few figurative ones. Implications for teaching will thus be presented.

Keywords: non-literal language; idioms; second language acquisition; L1/L2 comparisons; written discourse.

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