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Interlingual Transfer of Idioms by Persian Learners in EFL Sentence Writing

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate whether Iranian university students majoring in English utilize their knowledge of first language in producing idiomatic expressions in sentence writing. It was also intended to provide some information about the comparison between high and low proficient groups in utilizing interlingual transfer in production of idiomatic expressions. To achieve this purpose, an NTC\textsuperscript{1} practice test for TOEFL (Broukal&Wouds, 2000) was administered, and two groups of different language proficiencies (high = 30 and low = 30) were selected from a population of eighty male and female Iranian university students majoring in English according to their mean and standard deviation. The main instruments utilized for data collection were two tests, a translation test (containing 40 idioms in sentences) and a value-judgement test (containing 30 items). The two tests were given to 60 (high and low) proficient students. The obtained data through t-test from the translation test showed that both high and low proficient groups used knowledge of their first language, but the low proficient group used considerably more than the high proficient group. Also, the results of the value-judgement test through Chi-square showed that the low proficient group chose literal meaning of the idioms significantly more than high proficient group. The findings of this study are helpful for EFL adult learners to be aware of transfer strategy and its outcome, comparison and contrast of L1-L2 idioms, inclusion of bilingual glossaries in the EFL course books, and designing bilingual idiomatic dictionaries.

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Keywords: idiomatic expressions; sentence writing; interlingual transfer; literal meaning;interlingual strategy

1. Introduction

Interlingual transfer (transfer from the mother tongue or any other previously learned language) in foreign language is a major cognitive strategy that learners fall back on when their linguistic means falls short of achieving their communicative ends. Needless to say, the mother tongue is an additional source for hypothesis formation that the first language learner does not have. The influence of the mother tongue and the pervasiveness of interlingual transfer is partly considerable, especially in learning situations where students exposure to the foreign language is confined to a few hours per week of formal classroom instruction. Thus, interlingual transfer is a strategy that may be available to the learners to compensate for the inadequacies when attempting to communicate in the foreign language.

Mahmoud (2002) has found that because of the problem of low proficiency in EFL on the one hand and the urge to achieve idiomaticity in it on the other hand, university students seem to arrive at a compromise by falling back on the interlingual transfer

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strategy. However, the learner's non-use of idiomatic expressions could also be due to the lack of knowledge (i.e. ignorance) rather than avoidance which implies knowledge and choice to use or not.

Brown (2000, p. 224) has found that interlingual transfer is a significant source of error for all learners. The beginning stages of learning a second language are especially vulnerable to interlingual transfer from the native language, or interference. The learning of a third language (and subsequent language) provides an interesting context for research. There are varying degrees of interlingual transfer from both the first and the second language to the third language, especially if the second and third languages are closely related or the learner is attempting a third language shortly after beginning a second language. Fluent knowledge or even familiarity with a learner's native language, of course, aids the teacher in detecting and analyzing errors. Kharma and Hajjaj (1989, p.73) stated that "the foreign learner of English who tries to avoid idiomatic expressions will immediately single himself out as a foreigner". Fromkin and Rodman (2001, p. 205) suggested that "Knowing a language includes knowing fixed phrases, consisting of more than one word, with meanings that cannot be inferred from the meanings of the individual words".

1.1. Statement of the problem

English language has thousands of expressions which usually evade the normal rules of grammar and often have implications quite disconnected with the normal meaning of words themselves. There is no doubt that students’ language abilities will improve if they can learn these expressions and use them accurately and appropriately. Most of EFL learners, for example in Iran, after 10 years of formal instruction, still hardly attain a good command of knowledge in EFL to utilize idioms. Like native speakers of English, Persian speakers use idioms when communicating in their mother tongue. It is the intention in this study to see whether they transfer Persian knowledge when they write in EFL. This study is also intended to provide information about whether there is any significant relationship between the level of language proficiency and utilizing interlingual transfer strategy in writing sentences containing idiomatic expressions.

1.2 Research Questions

1. Do Persian learners use knowledge of their first language in utilizing idioms in EFL sentence writing?
2. Is there any relationship between the level of language proficiency and utilizing interlingual transfer in EFL writing?

1.3. Review of literature

According to Irujo (1986), an idiom is a conventionalized expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts. For example, the idiomatic meaning of I was pulling your leg cannot be derived from the meanings of pull and leg. Idioms differ from other figurative expressions, such as similes and metaphors, in that they have conventionalized meanings. Native speakers of English know immediately that I was pulling your leg means "I was teasing you," whereas they have to deduce their own meaning from metaphor such as I was greasing your mind. The distinction between idiom and metaphor is not always precise because many idioms are "dead" or "frozen" metaphors—figurative expressions which have acquired conventionalized meanings. Sholes (2009) defines an idiom as "a phrase which has a meaning that is commonly understood by speakers of the language, but whose meaning is often different from the normal meaning of the words". (p. 1).

Fraser (1970, p.22) defines an idiom as a "constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed". Gramley and Patzold (1992, p.71) defined idiom as a "complex lexical item which is longer than a word form but shorter than a sentence and which has a meaning that cannot be derived form the knowledge of its component parts".

Idioms are sometimes referred to as fixed expressions because in many cases the users should not make linguistic changes such as adding or dropping words, replacing a word with another, or changing the order of words. In some cases slant lines and brackets are used in dictionaries to indicate alternative words and words that can be left out respectively (Seidl & McMordie, 2003). Sholes (2009) defines an idiom as "a phrase which has a meaning that is commonly understand by speakers of the language, but whose meaning is often different from the normal meaning of the words" (p. 1). Berman (2000) suggested that one of the characteristics of idioms is that one cannot normally change the same way as one can
change non-idiomatic expression. In other words, idioms are basically fixed expressions. Sometimes the meaning of the idioms can be guessed from the meaning of one of the words but usually the meaning is completely different, that is why they are so tricky for students. Care needs to be taken when writing idioms as many of them are only used in informal language. There are other expressions that are literary or old-fashioned and unsuitable for use in everyday language, except perhaps as a joke. Grouping idioms according to topic can make them easier for students to learn. It also makes it easier for teachers to relate the exercises to topic-based units in books.

According to Mollanazar (2008, p. 49), idioms can be divided into: a) clear or unclear regarding their meaning, b) regular or irregular regarding their form and structure, c) fixed idiom or idiom with variants, i.e., whether any parts of the idiom can be changed or not, and d) formal, general/ neural, colloquial, slang, etc. according to their level of style.

Idioms are part of the lexicon of a language and they can be found in dictionaries. According to Mansouri and Younesi (2004, p. 6) the way in which an idiom or a fixed expression can be translated into another language depends on many factors. It is not only a question of whether an idiom with a similar meaning is available in the language. Other factors include, for example, the significance of the specific lexical items which constitute the idiom, i.e. whether they are manipulated elsewhere in the source text, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of using idiomatic language in a given register in the target language. The first strategy, finding an idiom of similar meaning and similar form in the target language, may seem to offer the ideal solution, but that is not necessarily always the case. Questions of style, register, and rhetorical effect must be taken into consideration.

The translation of idioms takes us a stage further in considering the question of meaning and translation, for idioms, like puns, are culture bound. When two languages have corresponding idiomatic expressions that render the idea of prevarication one idiom is substituted for another. That substitution is made not on the basis of the linguistic elements in the phrase, nor on the basis of a corresponding or similar image contained in the phrase, but on the function of the idiom. The source language phrase is replaced by a target language phrase that serves the same purpose in the target language culture, and the process involves the substitution of source language sign for target language sign (Eftekhari, 2006).

According to Keshavarz (2004, p. 102), interlingual errors result from the transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical, lexico-semantic, and stylistic elements of the learner's mother tongue to the learning of the target language. Different types of interlingual errors are transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical, lexico-semantic, stylistic and cultural elements and false cognates.

Cedar (2008) demonstrated that using idioms is an efficient way to improve effective business communication. Although L2 idioms are hard to master, most advanced L2 learners expect to proficiently make use of them. He stated problems Thai speakers learning English have confronted and illustrated some solutions. Using a questionnaire for data collection, the study showed that some learners were a ware of L1-L2 semantically similar idioms, but most of them had difficulty supplying English idioms that are equivalent to Thai idioms.

Accordingly, the result pointed the way to further investigation of L1 influence and L2 acquisition in the realm of idioms beyond the lexical level. The subjects were 31 graduate This- speaking students at universities in U.S.A. He investigated Thai EFL Learner's knowledge of pragmatic congruency between English idioms and Thai idioms and showed that graduate students at universities in the U.S.A tended to have a very low ability to recognize pragmatic congruency between Thai idioms and English idioms. Many of them reported their uncertainty and inability to decide whether the Thai idioms had counterparts in English.

1.4. Research Hypotheses

Ho1: Persian learners do not use knowledge of their first language in utilizing idioms in EFL sentence writing.

Ho2: There exists no relationship between the level of language proficiency and utilizing interlingual transfer in EFL sentence writing of idioms.

2. Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, films provide natural and authentic context for practice of language. In this regard, the nature of film and its genre might have significant influence on the degree of learners’ comprehension. Genres have substantial role in media studies. Genres guide the thinking and work of people and institutions that produce media content; they structure how specific mediaproducts
actually look and sound and they are vital to what media users expect from their media. Some studies have focused on the language skills in relation to feature films’ genre. These researches have focused on different angles and have reflected different perspectives (Hatakeyama, 2011).

In an attempt to discover the most preferred listening material, Hatakeyama (2011) asked his students who had participated in a class for improving their listening skill strategy (LLS) to submit their listening journals (LJ) every week, which consisted 15% of their class grade. Since there were eight class meetings, there were seven submission opportunities. Every week, the author collected the LJs from the students in class, typed in the title/name of the listening materials the students listened to in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, wrote feedback comments on their LJs, and returned the LJs to the students at the beginning of the following class meeting. Some students listened to more than one material in a week, in which case all the materials they listened to were typed in. Analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel after the end of the term when all the necessary data were collected. The materials the students listened to were categorized into five genres at author’s discretion: news, lectures/presentations, movies/drama, English-learning materials, and others. News included overseas news materials from CNN and BBC as well as domestic materials from NHK (Hong Kong). The examples of lectures/presentations were the materials from TED.com, Justice with Michael Sandel, Yale University’s lectures, and the recordings of ELP Narrative Presentation (NP) lectures. Those in the movies/drama category included movies, DVDs, and TV drama series. English-learning materials were programs created for learners of English, which included English-learning website, NHK’s educational programs for English learners, and listening CDs for English learners. Others were those which neither fell into any of the above categories nor could be identified with the author’s knowledge or brief internet search. The results indicated that the three most popular genres among the students were movies/drama (43%), lectures/presentations (24%), and news (21%), which summed up to 87% of the total number of materials which the students listened to.

Hayati (2010) believed that comedy can reduce the learners’ anxiety and keeps their motivation high, and built his research on such theory. Thirty students were selected as the participants of the research, and they were randomly divided into two groups: FG (film viewers group) and TG (tape-listeners group). After ten sessions of instruction, a set of tests were administered to both groups. They consisted of 10 short tests based on each episode, an overall test based on the unseen episode, and a test of English for today. The results indicated that the FG outperformed the TG in comprehension of comedies.

A comparison of the efficacy of multiple-genre versus single-genre movies on EFL learners’ listening comprehension has been Jalilifarand Ansari’s (2010) focus of study. Twenty five male and female university students watched two movies, which represented two different genres. One of the movies was a single-genre movie and the other a multiple-genre. Participants took a multiple-choice test after viewing each movie. The tests included questions regarding the genre as well as the content of the movies. The results showed a significant progress in the students’ performance related to multiple genre movies, which indicated that multiple genre movies would be a better choice in designing EFL visual aids and materials.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants who took part in the research were chosen among 100 male and female EFL learners studying at Aryana language institute in Ahwaz based on their score on a proficiency test. The details of the test will be given below. Descriptive statistics of the mean scores were computed from the proficiency test to determine which students were entitled to participate in the study. The participants aged 20 to 35 and took IELTS preparation class in the above mentioned institute.

3.2. Instruments and materials

The materials and instruments used in this study were as follows:

1. English Language Proficiency Test (MoallefinEbteda, 2003): The test contained 150 multiple-choice items, and it was used to enable the researchers to select a homogeneous group. This test consisted of grammar (25 items), vocabulary (25 items) and reading and listening comprehension (50 items each). The time allotted to answer the test was 120 minutes.

2. In order to select the learners most preferred genre, a written survey was administered. The survey included three questions: the participants should mention their three most and least preferred movie genre and as for the second and third question, marking only one genre among the twenty genres listed as the most and least preferred was required.

3. After watching each movie participants took two tests which were designed for testing culture and content comprehension.
The first test included ten content-based questions referring to the trend of the film. The second test included ten culture-based questions which focused on the cultural aspects and tips presented in different segments of the movie to evaluate the degree of cultural literacy.

4. A questionnaire was utilized when participants were done with taking the tests. It was incorporated to serve an important purpose of giving the participants a chance to reflect on their genre preference after the treatment. In other words, they could report any genre preference shift if any existed. This phenomenon could finely distinguish practice from theory. With employing the questionnaire the researchers could make sure that the results and the conclusions were not merely based on the hypotheses made before the treatment only, but based on what happens after the treatment as well. The participants were asked to mention segments of the film they found difficult to comprehend. In addition, they should report any genre preference shift for the Persian/Foreign film.

5. To create a context in which learners could be evaluated regarding their comprehension and cultural literacy in particular, two movies were selected based on their most preferred movie genre, i.e. comedy. The full length film was not shown due to a number of reasons. The first reason was related to the time limit both the learners and the institute were facing. Secondly, we attempted to take heed of the participants’ social and religious norms and values as far as the content of the movies was concerned. Thus, we decided to make a thirty-minute movie out of each film. However extra care was also taken not to miss any important segment which was directly related to the genre they represent. The researchers also made sure not to disarrange the story of the film. The Persian film was ‘DayerehZangi’ and the American comedy was called ‘Click’.

3.3. Procedure

The experiment, lasting for 2 ninety minute sessions, was conducted at the language laboratory of the above mentioned institute. The following steps were taken in this study:

Step 1: A proficiency test was administered to 100 male and female intermediate EFL learners. The allotted time was 120 minutes. 40 participants were chosen based on their achieved score on the test. The participants were treated as one “movie viewer” group and were not divided during the treatment.

Step 2: The participants’ most preferred movie genre was elicited by administering the survey. All participants had some time to answer the questions and based on the results the movies were selected. In order to assign the correct percentage to each genre descriptive statistics was used. Accordingly, the most preferred movie genre was comedy (46%).

Step 3: At this stage, the participants were asked to watch the film and immediately after watching the film participants took the content-based test followed by the culture-based one. The participants had no time limit for answering the questions on the test. The average time which participants have spent on each test was thirty minutes. It is important to note that only one movie was shown in each session.

Step 4: Finishing the movie viewing phase, it was time for participants to reflect on their genre preference status. At this time, learners were asked to answer the questions and provide reasons on the questionnaire. The questions were clear enough for learners to answer, however, the researcher took the time to present a brief introduction on what needs to be pointed out in the questionnaire by the participants.

4. Results and discussion

The results consist of two parts. The first section deals with the test results and the second section is related to the questionnaire. It is important to note that the data collection of the questionnaire was qualitative since the participants were required to elaborate on their answers comprehensively. And as for the test results, having collected the data, the researchers applied descriptive analysis in order to calculate the mean score for each test separately. At this stage, an independent sample t-test was incorporated twice to analyze the mean differences between tests. The results are presented in two separate tables as the following:

A) The culture-based test for Persian/Foreign films
B) The content-based test for Persian/Foreign films
C) Based on the results presented in Table 1, the mean score of the Persian content-based test is higher than that of foreign film. However, as presented in the below table, the mean difference is not considered significant. This
indicates that the learners’ performance regarding the general comprehension for both foreign and Persian films were almost the same.

Table 1: Comparison Results of General Comprehension between Foreign and Persian Film

| Content-based | N  | Mean | SD  | Sig  |
|---------------|----|------|-----|------|
| Persian       | 40 | 9.7  | .30 | 0.69 |
| Foreign       | 40 | 9.5  | .68 |      |

On the other hand, the mean score of the Persian culture-based test was significantly higher than that of foreign film. As presented in the following table, the level of significance for the differences between two means (p<0.05) indicates that the learners performance for the culture-based test was significantly more efficient than the foreign culture-based test.

Table 2: Comparison Results of Cultural Comprehension between Foreign and Persian Film

| Culture-based | N  | Mean | SD  | Sig  |
|---------------|----|------|-----|------|
| Persian       | 40 | 8.9  | .44 | 0.000|
| Foreign       | 40 | 6.5  | 1.74|      |

As for the first question of the questionnaire, participants mostly mentioned segments related to the foreign film. These segments were put into categories based on what participants consider hard to comprehend. Descriptive analysis was used to classify the top segments which were stated. The results indicated that most segments which were considered difficult to understand were related to the foreign film. In addition, the segments which were repetitively mentioned represented cultural points which were unknown to the learners. At the second rate learners mentioned segments in which hard or unknown vocabulary used by the actors impeded comprehension.

Answers to the second question of the questionnaire was calculated through descriptive statistics as well by assigning percentage to the participants’ two items answers, i.e. YES/NO. At the second stage their reasons for preference shift which created a strong base of discussion for the researchers’ hypothesis was analyzed qualitatively and will be fully discussed in the discussion section.

5. Discussion

The focus of the present study was to investigate the effect of unknown cultural points on the learners’ movie genre preference. According to the results obtained from the data analysis lack of cultural literacy regarding the foreign film lead to genre preference shift. This hypothesis can be discussed and elaborated on from two different angles presented in this study’s methodology.

Based on the results of the tests, the learners’ general comprehension performance which was evaluated through the content-based test for both Persian and foreign film was quite efficient. Since there was no significant difference between the mean score obtained from both tests. On the other hand, the learners' performance regarding the cultural literacy evaluation which was tested through the second test was not quite the same. In other words, the participants’ performance regarding the target culture was significantly better than that of the foreign culture. These results pave the way for further discussion since it indicates that participants had difficulty understanding foreign culture in the present circumstances.
Regarding the questionnaire distributed after the viewing phase, participants’ reflection on their genre preference consistency/shift represents their evaluation of the movie genre after the treatment. As mentioned earlier, the participants’ case of genre preference shift was only related to the foreign films. A variety of reasons were provided by the learners, however the persistence of the participants’ statement as that lack of knowledge of the culture represented by the movie was a strong base reason for genre preference shift. The fact that the segments which learners found difficult to comprehend were mainly related to the unknown foreign culture also could underscore the result that the learners’ foreign movie comprehension was impeded by lack of cultural knowledge. Therefore, it lead into genre preference shift.

As stated earlier, the genre preference shift was a result of lack of cultural knowledge. Popularized by Hirsch (1987), cultural literacy refers to the “shared knowledge” people need “to be able to communicate effectively with everyone else” (p.32). When learning a foreign language, students need more than grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; another important skill is cultural literacy regarding the target culture. Indeed, Krasner (1999) argues that it takes more than just linguistic competence to be proficient in language. Humor is very culture based, and expanding on the issue of cultural literacy, Ziesing (2001) explains that “understanding humor requires a number of cultural reference points, including history, customs, games, religion, current events, taboos, kinship structures, traditions, and more” (p.8).

Comedies incorporate cultural points and tips in order to create humor; comedies are full of cultural references. Depending on the situation these references might portray regional differences, family issues, religion, race and ethnicity, gender issues, social issues, politics and numerous others. Consequently, cultural differences between the viewer community and the community which the movie represents may hinder comprehension. Subsequently, in a program in which the aim is to teach/evaluate listening comprehension skill and the sub-strategies, drama would make a suitable choice rather than comedy. This claim can elucidate the learners’ reaction toward comedy after watching it. Schmidt-Dowling (2010) reached to the same conclusion in an attempt to select the class multi-media material, by utilizing drama instead of comedy, “as it was felt that certain cultural differences might make humor more difficult to interpret” (p.114).

This speculation becomes stronger by considering Kusumarasdyati’s (2004) experiment. He believed that the post viewing stage should be allocated to teaching culture via comparing and contrasting technique and that culture is an inseparable aspect of language regardless of the skill being taught; to introduce some activities which teachers can utilized while using films, Katchen (1995) focuses on comparing cultures as well, with the belief that it is important that the teacher draws students’ attention to cultural information relevant to understanding the content of the film. What might be the case in the present study is that learners may have had the same condition concerning culture. Their exposure to comedy caused exposure to unknown cultural points. Absence of the required feedback and information about foreign culture resulted in genre preference shift.

There are many examples of studies with the goal of teaching different skills via comedies (Karakas, 2012; Hayati, 2010; Chen, 1998; Katchen, 1995). The difference between them lies in whether culture is considered and controlled. The present work yielded results that support studies which consider and control culture as a substantial factor regardless of the skill being instructed or evaluated. For instance, Chiu (2006) focused on teaching vocabulary by using sitcoms. Nonetheless, he mentioned the cultural pedagogical aspect of the comedies as well. One reason for the selection of the comedy as he mentions is that comedy creates an intriguing and relaxing learning environment in which the students learn not just English words but also culture. Therefore, the cultural references of comedies can never be denied even if the focus is on other aspects of teaching a foreign language.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed at investigating the relationship between movie genre preference and culture. And the results indicated that unknown cultural points can result in genre preference shift. The present study, nevertheless, does not imply the ineffectiveness of considering learners’ genre preference either. A moderate combination of both learners’ preference and instructors’ decision on the selection of movies could resolve the problem of Iranian foreign language by serving the purpose of increasing learners’ motivation and attention and finally reach better performance. In brief, the results could directly reflect on researchers who supposed that teaching culture before movie viewing phase is of great importance. In spite of the fact that only considering learners’ genre preference cannot compensate for elements which impede comprehension (such as cultural literacy), in case a number of considerations, among which some were fully elaborated on in the present study, are made optimum results can be ensured.

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