Idioms, Collocations, Formulaic Phrases and Second Language Acquisition

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Idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases are three factors playing the important role in the second language acquisition (SLA). This essay firstly deals with the definitions of these concepts, then it illustrates the importance of them to SLA on two perspectives—idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases respectively and they regarded as a whole. Therefore, in this way, the essay may lead to the answer the question “How are idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases important to SLA?”

Keywords: idioms, collocations, formulaic phrases, second language acquisition

Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) is an important area of applied linguistics, which has drawn great attention of the linguists. It is known that many factors may influence SLA, making it successful or not. Idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases are some among them, which can greatly influence L2 learners.

Definitions of the Three Concepts

It is known to us all that words are composed of morphemes. When two or more words combined to form a special meaning unit with a meaning different from the sum of the individual meanings of the words, we have an idiom, such as, “kick the bucket” and “tear a strip off”. Collocations are a set of phrases, in which some words tend to go with other certain words. For example, it is preferred to use “full moon” instead of “complete moon”, “black and blue” rather than “black and purple”. Formulaic phrase is a bit different from those two. It is a phrase which is learned as a whole by L2 learners but which for native speakers consists of smaller constituent parts. For instance, “Excuse me”, “How do you do?”.

The Importance of the Three Concepts to SLA

The above handles the definitions of the concepts. Knowing what they are, let us turn to their importance to SLA. How can they affect SLA? It may be discussed on two perspectives.

On the Perspective of Individual Concept

Idioms

Each language has its own large number of idioms. If a L2 learner is eager to master the language, he must more or less master the unique idioms in the language. From the above definition of the idioms, it is indicated
that a L2 learner will not know the meaning of an idiom even if he has already known each individual word. Therefore, he may be at a loss while the native speaker uses idioms in his speech. For example, “breathe fire” and “boil over” can be found to express the meaning of “anger” in English since “anger” is always associated with the concept of heat in English (鲍志坤, 2016; 刘祥海 & 邵华, 2019). If a L2 learner does not know that, he cannot follow the speaker. Furthermore, it is inevitable for all L2 learners to acquire a second language without knowing any idioms in that language. More or less, they have to know some in order to be more native-like.

Collocations
Different languages have different collocations. Chinese often use “jiantou” to mean hair cutting. A foreign learner at first will be confused at this when he literally interprets it like “cut the head”.

Formulaic Phrase
Not all L2 learners are capable to make creative speech, especially during their early learning stages. The lack of sufficient L2 rules blocks them to construct creative speeches. Then, a number of ready-made expressions, namely, formulaic phrases, can be the remedy to this disadvantage. Formulaic phrase, which is Stage1 in Pienemann’s dimensions, serves as the basis for creative speech and further SLA.

On the Perspective of the Concepts Considered as a Whole
Idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases together can help L2 learners to be communicative and enjoy the sense of being successful as the reward. The following discuss the importance of them as a whole from three different aspects.

Relationship Between Culture and Language
Culture and language interact each other. One belief of their relation is that culture determines language, while language reflects culture. Since many of the idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases have allusions, they can be considered as a part of culture that is socially acquired knowledge to a certain degree. Just as translation is not only the integration of two languages but also two cultures (祝一舒, 2017a; 2017b; 2018a; 2018b) and translation need take culture into consideration (陈爱琴, 2019) since it is not the transformation of symbols but also that of cultures (周润秋, 2018), SLA cannot be separated from culture, either because culture has penetrated into the elements of the whole language system (陈丽屏, 2019). A L2 learner who knows the stories in the Bible well can read the novel East of Eden more easily because almost all the images and allusions in the Bible can be found trace in John Steinbeck’s works (陈丽屏, 2018). Thus, when he comes across “Adam’s apple”, he is aided to understand the language better than the one who does not. L2 learners without the backup of idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases usually act as machines, which can only do word-to-word translation without interpreting the connotation of the source language into the target language (吴美勤 & 祁文慧, 2018; 祁文慧 & 彭玥, 2019). People can do better than machines in translation because we can understand the overtones and connotations of those words on the basis of them instead of only paying attention to the words themselves (吴婷 & 祁文慧, 2019).

The Creativity of the L2 Learner
Human beings are not always creative, and so, is L2 learner. He needs instructions. He has to imitate or use in his speech something already existing. The idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases can help him just on this aspect on the one hand. And on the other hand, once the idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases are
set in a certain language, they will not be allowed to change at will. If a learner is so creative as to change them freely that he himself may not be understood in his communication with the native speakers. Then, he will fail in his SLA. What is behind those idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases is culture (葛莎莎 & 祁文慧, 2018), which cannot be changed by individuals.

The L2 Learner’s Successful Sense

According to those mentioned in section “On the Perspective of the Concepts Considered as a Whole”, L2 learners become communicative and enjoy the sense of being successful with the help of idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases. In this way, L2 learners will become more motivated, so that they can seize more chances and be more successful.

Input and Output

Input refers to the language that is heard by the L2 learner from all kinds of sources, no matter the speaker is native ones or foreigners. In SLA, the more the learner is exposed to the language, the better reward he may get. That is to say, more comprehensible input means more comprehensible output, which is a crucial factor in SLA. As Liu Xiaolin (2019) pointed out that too much Chinese input in the class would do no good to the study of English (刘晓琳, 2019). Learning the concepts discussed in this essay is just one kind of input. It will pave the way for terminal efficient output—better acquisition of the second language. Due to the fact that language can be acquired through immense input, a large number of online resources appear to offer the language input with diversity and sufficiency (邵华, 2018). Many after-class English activities, such as debate, speech contests, and singing contests, are organized to offer more input to the students (杨喜刚, 2019). News reports in British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Cable News Network (CNN), and Voice of America (VOA) together with the public speeches and lectures on the campus are sure to be included in class teaching (周淑莉, 2016).

Lexical Meaning

A lexical item functions as a thoughtgroup. No matter how many words the lexical item contains, it is a single meaning unit. In this senses, idioms, collocations, and formulaic phrases are all lexicon. Lexical meaning is significant in SLA. It is found out that lexical errors constitute most L2 errors and both learners and native speakers view lexical errors as the most serious and disruptive obstacles to communication. That is to say, if a L2 learner can handle lexicon well, it is more promising for him to acquire the language successfully than the person who is not. A research carried on by Li Qing also shows the students who have been offered instructions about collocations get higher scores in their writing if compared with the previous grades (李擎, 2018). Lexical is taken into consideration in writing either in domestic English exams or International Early Learning Study (IELS), CE-Proiciency, and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (吴雪峰, 2019).

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that the concepts of idioms, collocation, and formulaic phrases are very important to SLA. Learning them well may shape the learner’s learning process and help to succeed in SLA. These concepts will not decisively determine SLA, but without which, SLA is sure to be failed.

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