Cross-linguistic dual coding of input and L2 idiom acquisition

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Research in cognitive semantics has shown that the dual coding of input (i.e., the presentation of both verbal and visual information) promotes the retention of information. A number of studies have looked for ways of accommodating the principles of dual-coding theory in the teaching of idiomatic language. The results have been mixed. While some studies (e.g., Szczepaniak and Lew, 2011) found that pictures facilitate the acquisition of idiom meaning and form, others raised concerns about their possible distracting effect on the retention of idiom structure (e.g., Boers et al., 2008; 2009).

The present study examined the effect of cross-linguistic dual-input on the acquisition of L2 idioms with semantic equivalents in the learners’ L1. A set of twenty-four English idioms with semantic counterparts in Japanese, but different lexical make-up, was taught to three groups of intermediate Japanese learners of English. The experiment was conducted over two 45-minute sessions with twelve idioms covered in each session. Input consisted of L1 equivalents of the target idioms, L2 example sentences, and a memory card game in which the learners had to pair L1 and L2 idioms in one of the following conditions: (1) L1 idioms in their verbal forms and L2 idiom illustrations, (2) L1 idiom illustrations and L2 idioms in their verbal forms and (3) L1 idiom illustrations and L2 idiom illustrations. In both languages illustrations depicted the literal meanings of idiomatic phrases. One month after the second treatment session, the learners were given a receptive test in which they were asked to match L1 and L2 idioms, and a productive test in which they had to recall the English equivalents of Japanese idioms. The results showed that L2 idiom illustrations interfered with the acquisition of L2 idiom forms. The pedagogical implications of the findings are considered.

Keywords: cross-linguistic processing of figurative language, dual coding theory, L2 idiom learning.