ABSTRACT

Despite their apparent arbitrary nature, numerous figurative idioms can in fact be taught and learned in an insightful way, as opposed to random and blind memorisation. Controlled experiments in recent years have shown, for example, that learners’ recall of L2 figurative idioms is facilitated by the explicit use of imagery in the presentation stage. This imagery technique can only be fruitful to vocabulary acquisition in the long term, however, if it extends into learner autonomy. A new small-scale experiment was therefore set up to estimate learners’ ability to apply the strategy of imagery processing to figurative idioms independently. One specific imagery technique was put to the test: hypothesising about the origin of L2 idioms. The results were very encouraging both with respect to the feasibility of the task and with respect to its beneficial effect on retention.

Introduction

Figurative idioms have received considerable attention from a foreign language teaching perspective in recent years (eg Kövecses and Szabó 1996; Lazar 1996; Deignan, Gabrys and Solska 1997; Lennon 1998; Cooper 1999; Cornell 1999). This renewed interest in pedagogical approaches to figurative idioms has undoubtedly been fuelled by the gradual introduction of cognitive semantic metaphor theory (eg Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987) to the fields of applied linguistics (eg Low 1988) and psycholinguistics (eg Gibbs 1993). One of the central tenets of cognitive semantics is that a large proportion of figurative language is ‘motivated’ rather than arbitrary. In this view, many figurative idioms can be traced back to a relatively small set of ‘conceptual metaphors’. For example, the figurative expressions She was fuming; I was boiling with anger; Simmer down; She flipped her lid; He exploded; He blew up at me; She was breathing fire; That remark added fuel to the fire; and so on, can all be related to the underlying conceptual metaphors The body is the container for the emotions and Anger is heat (eg Kövecses 1990). Contrary to the ‘traditional’ view, which considered figurative idioms to be ‘dead’ metaphors that could only be learned through ‘blind’ memorisation, cognitive semantics offers the prospect of more systematic and insightful learning of vast numbers of figurative expressions.
The results of several controlled learning experiments have shown that raising learners’ awareness of the metaphoric nature of idioms can indeed have a significant beneficial effect on vocabulary retention (Boers 2000a, 2000b). Three dimensions may jointly contribute to this beneficial effect:

1. The conceptual metaphors (ie the ‘metaphoric themes’ or ‘source domains’) behind sets of various figurative idioms provide a framework of organisation to a world of figurative language which may, at first sight, seem to be completely arbitrary and unsystematic. As organised information is known to be easier to learn than random input, the use of overarching metaphoric themes (such as *Anger is heat*) may facilitate retention.

2. The identification by learners of the metaphoric themes behind the figurative idioms they encounter involves a certain degree of cognitive effort. Such categorisation judgements may promote ‘in-depth’ cognitive processing, which is known to enhance memory storage. For example, learners of business English may invest some extra cognitive effort in putting *The firm will have to prune some of its branches* under the metaphoric heading of *Economics is gardening*.

3. Learning verbal information through imagery processing paves an extra pathway for recall, as the information is thus encoded in a dual fashion. For example, in addition to storing its meaning as ‘fast increase’, the expression *Inflation is soaring* can be stored in association with the image of aeroplanes or rockets.

These three dimensions are in fact straightforward extensions of pedagogical principles that are believed to enhance vocabulary learning in general: facilitating the integration of new lexical information within a framework of existing knowledge (eg Sökmen 1997); encouraging cognitive and affective involvement in vocabulary tasks (eg Laufer and Hulstijn 2001); and exploiting the image-ability of lexical items (eg Ellis and Beaton 1993), respectively.

This paper has two objectives. The first aim is to estimate the relative contribution to vocabulary retention of the third dimension, ie the association of figurative idioms with a concrete image. The second aim is to estimate the feasibility of learner autonomy in this context. After all, imagery processing of figurative idioms can only be really fruitful in the long run if learners manage to establish the associations themselves, independently of a teacher’s input.

**Experiment**

**HYPOTHESES**

One way of inviting learners to use imagery when they encounter a new figurative idiom could be to ask them to hypothesise about its etymological origin.
The simple question ‘Where might this expression come from?’ may be a sufficient incentive for learners to call up in their minds a concrete scene. For example, *Having a chink in one’s armour* could call up the medieval scene of a knight in (not so) full armour. *A steady hand on the tiller* could call up the image of sailing. And so on.

In order to estimate (a) the effect of this technique on learners’ retention of figurative idioms and (b) the feasibility of this technique in a learner-independent context, the following small-scale experiment was set up.

**PARTICIPANTS**

Participants were two parallel groups of upper-intermediate learners of English studying at a college for higher education in Brussels, Belgium. Their first language was Dutch and their average age was 21. Both groups were in the same year and all students had been attending the same English courses, taught by the same teachers. One group (the control group) was made up of 24 (17 female and 7 male) students; the other group (the experimental group) consisted of 30 (22 female and 8 male) students.

**PROCEDURE**

Ten figurative idioms were selected from the *Collins COBUILD dictionary of idioms* (1995 edition). The following selection criteria were used:

1. their frequency in the Bank of English (as indicated by the dictionary) was between one and three occurrences per ten million words
2. they did not have a direct equivalent in the participants’ L1
3. they contained lexical components likely to be unfamiliar to our upper-intermediate learners.

The following idioms were retained after this selection process: *Pass the baton; Champ at the bit; A poisoned chalice; A chink in someone’s armour; Haul someone over the coals; Go off at half cock; A steady hand on the tiller; Gird your loins; Run someone ragged* and *A dummy run*.

The participants were given a handout with these figurative idioms and the task to explain their meaning (in writing). The participants were invited to consult *Collins Cobuild English dictionaries*, which were at their disposal. They were also asked to indicate whether or not they had actually resorted to the dictionary to perform the task. Apart from explaining the meaning of the idioms, the participants were given an extra task, which differed for both groups. Both additional tasks required the participants to invest cognitive effort in their processing of the idioms. The control group was asked to supply ‘a possible context in which the idiom could be used’. The experimental group was
asked to supply ‘a possible origin of the idiom’. The latter instruction, of course, was meant to trigger imagery processing. It was hoped that the participants in the experimental group would consult the dictionary not only to look up the meaning of the idioms themselves, but also the literal sense of the unknown lexical components, since this would help them hypothesise about the origin of the expressions. For example, finding the literal sense of tiller was expected to help the learners trace A steady hand on the tiller to the source domain of sailing. By doing so, the participants would be likely to associate the given expression with a concrete scene or image.

Both groups were given 30 minutes to perform the described tasks. The respondents were allowed to resort to their L1 in their explanations if they felt the need to do so. When screening the questionnaires, no-responses (blanks) were discarded for further analysis as these gave no evidence of any potential learning process. This occurred 17 times (7.08 per cent) in the questionnaires collected from the control group and 19 times (6.33 per cent) in those of the experimental group. Items for which the participants indicated that they had not consulted the dictionary were not retained either, because these gave no insight into the relative effectiveness of the particular strategies of dictionary usage. These responses of ‘No dictionary used’ occurred 44 times (18.33 per cent) in the control group as compared with 29 times (9.67 per cent) in the experimental group. This contrast may suggest that the task of proposing a possible origin of the idioms was an extra incentive for participants in the experimental group to look for relevant clues in the dictionary.

One week later, the students were given a follow-up task to measure their retention of the form of the ten figurative idioms. The meanings of the expressions, as explained in the Collins COBUILD dictionary of idioms, were listed (in random order) in a questionnaire and the participants were asked to write down the corresponding idiom if they remembered. To facilitate this production task, the first content words of the idioms were provided (again in random order) in a separate box: Pass, Champ, Poisoned, Chink, Haul, Go off, Steady, Gird, Run and Dummy. Offering these prompts seemed justified for two reasons: (a) the students had not been informed about any follow-up to their dictionary task the previous week, ie they had not received any instruction to memorise the idioms; and (b) that initial task involved comprehension rather than (re)production, ie the respondents had not necessarily focused on the form of the idioms. The questionnaires were screened for participants’ responses to the items which they had processed with the aid of a dictionary the previous week. Some of the students who had participated in the first task were absent during this follow-up activity. Consequently, the resulting database for comparative analysis turned out slightly smaller than was originally hoped for (see below).
Finally, five weeks after the original exercise, the participants were given another follow-up task to measure their retention of the meaning of the idioms. This time the actual expressions were listed (in random order) in a questionnaire and the respondents were asked to explain their meaning. No prompts were given, but the students were allowed to give explanations in their L1 if they wanted to. The questionnaires were again screened for explanations of idioms which the participant had originally processed with the aid of a dictionary. Scoring of the responses was carried out both by the author and by a ‘blind judge’. There were no instances of disagreement in their assessment.

Results and discussion

DICTIONARY EXERCISE

After subtracting items that were left blank, as well as items for which the respondent had not consulted the dictionary, the first questionnaire yielded a total of 179 responses in the control group and 252 in the experimental group. The task of proposing possible origins of the figurative idioms appeared more productive than the task of proposing possible contexts for usage: 87.7 per cent of the responses under the experimental condition included a hypothesis about the etymological origin of the expression, while only 69.83 per cent of the responses under the control condition included a context for usage. This result may be interpreted in different ways: the latter task may have been perceived by the respondents as more difficult, or it may simply have been perceived as less interesting.

Not all the respondents in the experimental group shared the same intuitions about the origins of the idioms, though. For example, *Pass the baton* was associated either with relay racing (ie athletics) or with conducting (ie music). *Gird your loins* was associated either with the scene of a knight getting ready for battle by girding on his belt and sword, or with the scene of a mountaineer getting ready to climb by girding on his belt and ropes. Whether some of the students’ hypotheses actually corresponded with etymological ‘facts’ was doubtful at times. However, if the principal purpose of the exercise is to provide learners with a mnemonic technique (ie imagery processing), then perhaps etymological ‘truth’ need not be so important at this stage, as long as the learners stay fully aware of the hypothetical nature of their ‘theories’. Furthermore, inviting advanced learners (studying linguistics or philology, for example) to check their intuitions against an etymological dictionary could be the next stage in the learning activity.

FOLLOW-UP TASK TO MEASURE RETENTION OF FORM

Screening the questionnaires along the criteria outlined above yielded 110 potential responses in the control group and 175 in the experimental group.
Overall recall of the expressions was rather poor, but this need not be surprising as the students had not initially processed the idioms with the aim of reproducing them. Nevertheless, the experimental group revealed a better retention than the control group: 30.86 per cent of the responses under the experimental condition were correct, as compared with a mere 9.09 per cent under the control condition. A detailed breakdown of the results (see Appendix 1) shows that the experimental group’s superior recall was quite consistent over the ten figurative idioms under study. A chi-square test confirms that the difference between both groups’ scores was statistically significant (p < .001).

**FOLLOW-UP TASK TO MEASURE RETENTION OF MEANING**

The results of the second follow-up task were processed twice. First, we considered the questionnaires of participants who had attended both previous stages of the experiment, as we wanted to compare the scores of respondents who had had equal exposure to the meaning of the idioms. This generated 83 potential responses in the control group and 135 in the experimental group. Given the fact that the initial (dictionary) exercise was primarily a comprehension task, it is not surprising that the overall scores on this second follow-up task were better for both groups. Still, recall turned out much more likely under the experimental condition: no fewer than 68.89 per cent of the responses in the experimental group were correct as compared with only 34.94 per cent in the control group. The breakdown of the results per idiom (see Appendix 2) shows the degree of consistency of this trend again. Again, a chi-square test confirms that the difference between both groups’ scores was statistically significant (p < .001). Two students in the control group and three students in the experimental group were absent during the first follow-up task but participated in this final task. Adding their questionnaires to the bank of responses had little impact on the general outcome, though: the experimental group’s score (68.35 per cent) stayed twice as high as the control group’s (34.08 per cent).

**Conclusions and implications**

In the small-scale experiment reported here, learners were exposed to figurative idioms in isolation. This is obviously far from an authentic learning experience, where idioms are typically encountered in context and where contextual cues help learners infer meaning. The present article, however, focuses on learners’ retention of idioms after their meaning is established. Various techniques are known to be beneficial to retention of idioms and vocabulary in general (see, for example, Carter and McCarthy 1988; McCarthy 1990; Schmitt and McCarthy 1997), but our study aimed to estimate the relative contribution of just one of these techniques: imagery processing, ie the association of an idiom...
with a concrete image or vivid scene. The results of our small-scale experiment suggest that this contribution can be quite substantial. The other research questions addressed by this paper were (a) whether learners could fruitfully apply imagery processing autonomously, and (b) whether hypothesising about the origins of figurative idioms could provide a fertile soil for doing so. The results of our small-scale experiment give good reason for optimism in both respects.

Still, we need to acknowledge the obvious limitations of the described small-scale experiment. Firstly, not all figurative idioms may lend themselves equally well to the task of hypothesising about their etymological origin. Some may actually be too opaque to call up any images or to inspire any plausible hypotheses at all. Secondly, cross-cultural differences may be an obstacle to fruitful hypothesising (see, for example, Boers and Demecheleer 2001), especially when idioms are grounded in culture-specific knowledge. While most Europeans would probably be able to trace the idiom *Throw down the gauntlet* to medieval duels, this task could prove more difficult for, say, Asian or African learners who may not share the same historical heritage. In short, much research still needs to be done to evaluate this imagery technique when it is applied to more opaque idioms and when it involves learners from more distant cultures. In the meantime, though, there is no harm in piloting possible applications of the technique, both inside and outside classroom settings. In the reported experiment, the hypothesising was carried out on an individual basis, but in classroom contexts learners could brainstorm possible origins of idioms collectively. This collaborative approach could be especially beneficial to less imaginative students, who would then profit from their peers’ suggestions. In self-study contexts, the imagery technique invites a more insightful approach to dictionary entries. Instead of treating idioms as non-decomposable arbitrary units, which can only be learned through blind memorisation, the dictionary user will explore beyond the figurative sense of the idiom into the literal senses of its constituents. A clearer picture may then emerge before the mind’s eye.

**Acknowledgements**

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**REFERENCES**


### Appendix 1: Retention of the form of the idioms (ie recall for production)

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>EXPERIMENTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pass the baton</td>
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<td>A poisoned chalice</td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Go off at half cock</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A steady hand on the tiller</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gird your loins</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run someone ragged</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A dummy run</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>110</td>
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= 9.09% = 30.86%

### Appendix 2: Retention of the meaning of the idioms (ie recall for comprehension)

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<th>EXPERIMENTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</tr>
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<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>A chink in someone’s armour</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haul someone over the coals</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Go off at half cock</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>A steady hand on the tiller</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gird your loins</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run someone ragged</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A dummy run</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>83</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

= 34.94% = 68.89%