Prompting learners to guess the meaning of idioms: Do wrong guesses linger?

What this research was about and why it is important

Idioms are figurative expressions such as *jump the gun* and *go out on a limb* whose meaning tends to be elusive to language learners and will therefore often need to be clarified. Research has shown that adding information about the context in which the expressions were originally used literally (e.g., when athletes start running before the pistol is fired to start the race, they *jump the gun*) can help learners to make better sense of such expressions and can make the expression more memorable as well. In this study, we investigated the extent to which hints about the original, literal uses helps language learners figure out the meaning of idioms. We also evaluated whether it matters if learners make wrong interpretations, so long as the correct meaning is the given as feedback. The research findings suggest that it does matter because the wrong interpretations can interfere with later recall of the correct meanings. Language teachers who often prompt learners to guess the meanings of vocabulary items need to be aware of this potential downside, at least in the case of confusing items such as idioms.

What the researchers did

- Chinese learners of English were asked to guess the meaning of various English idioms first without and then with information about their original literal uses, after which the actual idiomatic meaning was clarified to them. One week later, the same learners were presented with the same expressions and were asked to recall their meanings.
- We assessed whether the interpretation of the idioms became more accurate after the learners were given the information about the original, literal uses of the expressions.
- We then assessed whether correctly guessed meanings stood a better chance of being recalled one week later than meanings that had needed to be clarified after incorrect guesses.
- We also examined whether inaccurate responses at the recall stage resembled the guesses the learners had proffered the previous week.

What the researchers found

- The learners’ interpretations of the idioms were very often (>50%) more accurate after they were told about the original literal meanings of the expressions.
- Accurate recall of the meanings of the idioms was less likely when guessing had been unsuccessful the previous week than when learners had arrived at a correct interpretation. Put differently, when the correct meanings were learned through corrective feedback, they were less likely to be recalled than when the feedback had confirmed the learners’ correct interpretation.
- Almost half of the inaccurate responses at the recall stage closely resembled wrong guesses proffered by the same learners the previous week.

Things to consider

- The results of this study suggest that wrong guesses may linger in memory and may interfere with later recall of the correct meanings, and this despite corrective feedback at the guessing stage.
- This suggests that language teachers need to estimate, before prompting learners to hazard guesses, whether the circumstances are right for successful guessing.
- It is important to acknowledge that the findings of this specific study concern only idioms and may not apply to other vocabulary items.
- It is also important to acknowledge that this study did not examine a learning procedure where learners are simply given the meanings of the idioms straightaway. We do not know if learning outcomes from such a meaning-given procedure are better than what was observed in this study for failed guesses followed by corrective feedback. More research is clearly needed.

Materials, data, open access article: N/A


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