

Acquisition of Four-character Idioms in Cantonese-speaking School-age Children

Carol TO, Benjamin T'SOU, Kenny MOK & Yonnie MAN

Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is a life-long process, starting from comprehension of concrete words to the use of literate vocabulary in academic writing. Acquisition of idiomatic expression is often regarded as one of the milestones during later lexical development. An idiom refers to a metaphorical lexicalized phrase which is semantically and syntactically restricted. From a semantic perspective, the meaning of each individual word in an idiom may not be summed to produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole. Syntactically, the words of an idiom often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts. Idiomatic expressions occur widely in daily conversation and on TV. They are also commonly found in classroom conversations as well as school textbooks (Nippold, 1998).

Learning of idiom may depend on the degree of *transparency* and *familiarity* of the idioms. With reference to the explicitness of the meaning they encode, idioms can be classified as *transparent* or *opaque*. Comprehension of transparent idioms involves less figurative interpretation, whereas comprehension of opaque idioms heavily relies on non-literal interpretation and appreciation of the implicit meaning. Familiarity refers to the frequency of the idiom in a language. In Chinese, an idiom often exists in form of a short statement or more often in a condensed form consisting of 4 characters. Unlike the idioms in English, 4-character idioms in Chinese occurs in formal and informal registers as well as in spoken and written modes.

The present study aimed to examine the acquisition of 4-character idioms in Cantonese using three tasks with a multiple-choice format testing children's: (1) awareness of the morphological structure of the 4-character idioms; (2) use of 4-character words in a given context; and (3) denotation of opaque and transparent 4-character words. The data reported in this study are drawn from a very large-scale normative study in Hong Kong known as HKCOLAS (Hong Kong Cantonese Oral Language Assessment Scales, 2006). Six hundred and ninety Cantonese-speaking children aged between 6;08 and 12;01 were recruited from primary schools ranked at different school-banding in Hong Kong.

Results using ANOVA tests showed that the factors of grade level and school-banding, but not gender, have significant main effects on the performance of the three tasks. Children start to appreciate the structure of a 4-character idiom as early as Primary 2. Mastery of the connotations and use of 4-character idioms were not observed until adulthood. Like many other

aspects of later language development related to literacy skills, schooling plays a role in the acquisition process of the 4-character idioms. The results suggested that active learning is required during the course of development.

Reference:

Nippold, M. A. (1998). *Later language development: The school-age and adolescent years*. Austin, Tex.: Pro-Ed.