Benefits and risks of the effects of mother tongue knowledge on the interpretation of figurative expressions

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Applied linguistics covers a wide range of research, but there are still under researched areas, especially in the research into EFL situations. This presentation focuses on the effects of knowledge of the mother tongue on understanding/interpretation of figurative expressions. A considerable number of idioms and proverbs are used figuratively, where cultural knowledge rooted in the mother tongue may reside. The presentation discusses the results of the cross-cultural examinations of the effects of the mother tongue on the understanding of idioms and figurative expressions. The data were analysed from the points of view of the conceptual backgrounds, schemas (or cultural elements) and mental images (or cognition processes). The aim of the examinations was to discover where misunderstandings/ misinterpretation lay, with a view to locating communication problems. Past research that was made use of in this study are Azuma, M. (2005), Cherteris-Black, J. (2002) and Kovecses, Z. (2007).

Research questions
(1) Are there any interpretation differences among the English native speakers, classified as one of the ethnicity differences, such as those of American, Australian and British English speakers?

(2) Are there any interpretation differences between the native and the non-native speakers, classified as mother tongue differences?

(3) Are there any specific phenomena in Japanese EFL learners, classified as a pedagogical problem in a target language?

Methodology
The methods for investigation: testing (Metaphor Cognition Test, M-Cog Test, with 40 test items) and interviews with 50 English NSs (E NSs), comprising 19 Australian, 18 British and 13 American English speakers, and with 34 Japanese NSs (J NSs, the majority of whom were EFL learners). The testing and interviews took place in Australia, Britain, the United States of America and Japan in 2006 – 2007. The scale used to compare data was an interpretation correctness ratio of each item.

M-Cog test

The 40 test items (all in English) in the M-Cog Test were classified into the following three groups according to the characteristics of the items:

The first group, G1: a similarity-sharing group, where the same/similar concepts/wordings occur in the English and the Japanese expressions: 13 items, for example, He is my right arm or Time is money.

The second group, G2: a partial similarity-sharing group, where there are similarities either in the concepts or in the wordings: 16 items, 8 each of English and of Japanese origins, with the classifications of G2E and G2J respectively; among the 8 items in G2E, there is an item of English origin (to come to a head) with its meaning being presumed to be misinterpreted by J NSs (G2E/J in Table 1). The remaining 8 are of Japanese origin, among which are 2 items that share the wordings but the meanings are different in each language: to pull someone’s leg(s) and He must be soft in the head to do such a thing (G2J/E in Table 1).

The third group, G3: a difference group, where there are differences both in the concepts and in the wordings between English (G3E: 5 items) and Japanese (G3J: 6 items): 11 items, for example, to kick the bucket in G3E and a horse out of a bottle gourd in G3J.

Results
RQ1: Phenomena found among the English NSs
The items in G1, G2 and G3 were intended to show the effects in interpretations generated from/caused by knowledge of the mother tongues or general schemas, i.e., if the interpretation ratios of the items in G1, G2E and G2J were high for E NSs and if those in G1, G2J and G3J were high for J NSs, we could say that the mother tongues and/or schemas may have been utilized. From the result in Table 1, knowledge of the mother tongues and/or schemas, i.e. general schemas in a broad sense, was effective to a degree in the interpretations of the expressions (even though they were unfamiliar to them). One item (a body blow) out of the 13 items in G1 in the correctness ratio of American NSs showed a slightly different phenomenon with around a 70% correctness ratio, compared to approx. a 100% correctness ratio in the other NSs. It was interpreted figuratively, where cultural knowledge rooted in the mother tongue may reside. The presentation discusses the result in Table 1, knowledge of the mother tongues and/or schemas, i.e. general schemas in a broad sense, was effective to a degree in the interpretations of the expressions (even though they were unfamiliar to them). One item (a body blow) out of the 13 items in G1 in the correctness ratio of American NSs showed a slightly different phenomenon with around a 70% correctness ratio, compared to approx. a 100% correctness ratio in the other NSs. It was interpreted figuratively, where cultural knowledge rooted in the mother tongue may reside.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item groups</th>
<th>N of items</th>
<th>E NSs N=50</th>
<th>J NSs J=34</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td>56.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2E</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>92.7</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2E/J</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2J</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2J/E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0 in J</td>
<td>85.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3E</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3J</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Correctness Ratios (%)
The problematic expressions in G2J and G3J for E NSs were such expressions as originated in Japanese concepts; however, the metonymic expressions and those with clear images (We are united with a red thread; to cast a shrimip to catch a bream) were less problematic; hence, we could say that intuition and common schemas were effective and that the speakers’ cognitive process was effective in these cases. These allude to the similarity in both the E NSs and J NSs. The most problematic expressions were those with the same wordings but with different meanings in each language, which were shown in the G2E/J and the G2J/E (E and J in the columns stand for English and Japanese respectively).

RQ2 and RQ3: The differences in the mother tongues and the phenomena of EFL learners
There were considerable differences between the two parties: each party interpreted better the expressions originated in or caused by their mother tongues. These phenomena were revealed in the correctness ratios in Table 1. The results of the table indicate that the mother tongue knowledge/schemas were employed in interpretations by the both parties. In addition, qualitative analyses showed vocabulary knowledge of English, e.g., words and/or idioms, and general knowledge, especially of the Japanese subjects, affected their interpretations.

As a specific answer to Topic 3, i.e., whether or not the learners’ specific trait was related to understanding English figurative expressions, the following result was remarkable: a significant phenomenon in the case of Japanese EFL learners’ vocabulary size showed a positive correlation: the Pearson correlation between the M-Cog Test and Vocabulary Levels Test (Schmitt, 2000, 2000 word level) was r=.759; p<.01. Azuma (2005) also indicates a similar correlation between metaphorical competence and vocabulary knowledge (VLT: Schmitt, 2000 & 3000 word levels and Polysemy Test: Azuma, 2005).

Summary and conclusion
With regards to schemas and cultural effects, the schemas and knowledge generated from the mother tongues, past experiences or intuition may have ambivalent effects; however, interpreters could utilize or rely on their schemas and general knowledge, if they knew the risks involved in the interpretation of certain expressions. The most problematic expressions that require caution in this regard are those using the same/similar wordings with different concepts/meanings in the two languages, for example, to come to a head, being soft in the head or to pull someone’s leg(s).

References