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METHODS OF UNDERSTANDING IDIOMS EMPLOYED BY KAZAKH AND RUSSIAN LEARNERS

Abstract. In this study, the researcher examined how Kazakh language learners (KLLs) and Russian language learners (RLLs) in Kazakhstan comprehend idioms in jokes. The study involved 25 participants (20 KLLs and 5 RLLs) who were asked to read 10 English and 10 Russian jokes, with some containing idioms. The researcher analyzed the participants' Think-Aloud protocols, identifying 20 idiom comprehension strategies falling into three categories: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. The author also found five major difficulties that participants faced during the idiom comprehension task, such as unfamiliar idioms and cultural differences.

The study's implications suggest that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies, including idioms and jokes, should be incorporated into FL instruction. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of idiom comprehension strategies for FL learners in decoding the meaning of unknown idioms encountered while reading FL texts.

Key words: Kazakh Language Learner, Russian Language Learner, Think-Aloud Protocol, method, pedagogical tool

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ҚАЗАҚ ЖӘНЕ ОРЫС ТІЛДЕРІН ҮЙРЕНУШІЛЕР ҚОЛДАНАТЫН ИДИОМАЛАРДЫ ТҮСІНУ ӘДІСТЕРІ

Аннотация. Бұл мақалада зерттеуші Қазақстандағы қазақ тілін үйренушілер (ҚТҮ) мен орыс тілін үйренушілер (ОРҮ) әзілдегі идиомаларды қалай түсінетінін зерттеді. Зерттеуге 25 қатысушы (20 ҚТҮ және 5 ОРҮ) қатысты, олардан 10 ағылшын және 10 орыс әзілдерін оқуды сұрады, олардың кейбірінде идиомалар бар. Зерттеуші қатысушылардың Think-Aloud протоколдары арқылы талдап, үш санатқа жататын идиомаларды түсінудің 20 стратегиясын анықтады: когнитивтік, метакогнитивтік және әлеуметтік-аффективті. Сондай-ақ олар идиомаларды түсіну тапсырмасын орындау кезінде қатысушылар кездесетін бес негізгі қиындықты қарастырып, мысалы, бейтаныс идиомалар мен мәдени айырмашылықтарды тапты.

Зерттеудің салдары түсіну стратегияларын, соның ішінде идиомалар мен әзілдерді ашық оқытуды FL нұсқауына енгізу керек екенін көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу FL мәтіндерін оқу кезінде кездесетін белгісіз идиомалардың мағынасын декодтауда FL тілін үйренушілер үшін идиоманы түсіну стратегияларының маңыздылығын көрсетеді.

Тірек сөздер: қазақ тілін үйренуші, орыс тілін үйренуші, Think-Aloud протоколы, әдістеме, педагогикалық құрал

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МЕТОДЫ ПОНИМАНИЯ ИДИОМ, ИСПОЛЬЗУЕМЫЕ ИЗУЧАЮЩИМИ КАЗАХСКИЙ И РУССКИЙ ЯЗЫКИ

Аннотация. В этой статье автор продемонстрировал, как изучающие казахский язык (KLL) и изучающие русский язык (RLL) в Казахстане понимают идиомы в шутках. В исследовании приняли участие 25 участников (20 KLL и 5 RLL), которым было предложено прочитать 10 английских и 10 русских анекдотов, некоторые из которых содержали идиомы. Исследователь проанализировала Think-Aloud протоколы участников, выявив 20 стратегий понимания идиом, которые можно разделить на три категории: когнитивные, метакогнитивные и социально-аффективные. Автор также обнаружила пять основных трудностей, с которыми участники столкнулись во время задания на понимание идиом, таких как незнакомые идиомы и культурные различия.

Выводы исследования предполагают, что в обучение иностранному языку следует включить подробное обучение стратегиям понимания, включая идиомы и шутки. Кроме того, исследование подчеркивает важность стратегий понимания идиом для изучающих ИЯ при расшифровке значения неизвестных идиом, встречающихся при чтении текстов на ИЯ.

Ключевые слова: Изучающий казахский язык, изучающий русский язык, Think-Aloud протокол, метод, педагогическое средство.

Introduction

In this research study that utilized mixed methods, the investigation focused on the techniques employed by individuals who are native Kazakh speakers learning Russian (known as Russian Language Learners or RLLs) and individuals who are native Russian speakers learning Kazakh (known as Kazakh Language Learners or KLLs) for understanding idioms. The study employed Think-Aloud Protocols to uncover the difficulties encountered by foreign language learners while reading jokes that relied on both literal and figurative interpretations of idioms across languages.

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the acquisition of idioms, with a central question in first language (L1) idiom acquisition research being whether the literal or figurative meaning is retrieved first during comprehension or whether they are accessed simultaneously. However, researchers have not reached a consensus on this matter, both for L1 and second language (L2) idiom comprehension. Existing L1 idiom acquisition hypotheses are too limited to explain how L2 and foreign language (FL) learners understand idioms. A heuristic approach has been proposed, which suggests that L2 learners use various strategies such as guessing, using pragmatic knowledge, and experimentation to understand unknown idioms. However, no cross-language research has been carried out to identify the comprehension strategies used by Kazakh Language Learners (KLLs) and Russian Language Learners (RLLs) if an idiom is presented in an FL context equally biased towards a literal and metaphorical interpretation of an idiom, which is common in linguistic jokes. Additionally, FL learners will verbalize their thoughts and decide whether there is an idiom in the jokes or not. Therefore, the current study aims to address the problem of identifying the successful idiom comprehension strategies used by KLLs and RLLs during a Think-Aloud idiom comprehension reading task and the challenges they face.

This study aims to achieve three objectives: (1) recognize the comprehension strategies used by intermediate-level Kazakh and Russian language learners to understand transparent idioms in jokes; (2) determine if comprehension varies based on the category of the idiom (identical, similar, dissimilar, or no equivalent in the participant's first language) and the level of idiom transparency (low, medium, high); and (3) identify the difficulties encountered by Kazakh language learners (KLLs) and Russian language learners (RLLs) when reading jokes that contain transparent idioms.

Materials and methods

The researcher used a mixed methods approach to achieve two goals: to confirm the findings from two different data sets, questionnaires, and Think-Aloud Protocols, and to gain a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the topic. Previous research has contributed to understanding L2 idiom acquisition and comprehension strategies but has not fully integrated quantitative and qualitative methods. In this study, questionnaires were used to describe participants' backgrounds, and Think-Aloud protocols were analyzed to identify idiom comprehension strategies and challenges faced by KLLs and RLLs during a reading task. Quantitative methods were used to determine relationships between language learners' experience, idiom recognition, comprehension, and strategies used. The analysis also investigated whether KLLs and RLLs differed in their use of comprehension strategies and whether recognition and comprehension varied by idiom category and level of transparency. Qualitative methods allowed for an in-depth linguistic analysis of how factors related to text, culture, and learner interacted with idiom recognition and comprehension, and what challenges KLLs and RLLs faced during the reading task. The qualitative analysis helped to interpret the quantitative results.

The author of the study took on multiple roles, including serving as a data collection tool, coding the transcribed Think-Aloud protocols, and interpreting the data. To ensure the participants' trust, the researcher was very transparent about the nature and purpose of the study, the time required, the use and storage of data, and the need for anonymity. Building rapport was especially important to ensure the participants felt comfortable during the recorded Think-Aloud sessions, which took place in a location free from distractions

such as a school, the researcher's office, or a private room. To prepare the participants for the Think-Aloud procedure, the researcher modeled a concurrent (i.e., online) and a retrospective (i.e., off-line) Think-Aloud, and allowed each participant to read three practice jokes to determine if the joke contained an idiom, so they could practice verbalizing their thoughts about how to comprehend (figure out) the meaning of the idiom while reading (concurrent) and then after reading (retrospective). The researcher assisted by translating isolated words in the joke if requested. Participants indicated the need for assistance by using phrases such as "I have no idea" or "I don't know," or by asking "What does this mean?" (Li, 2004, 301–313).

Literature review

A Think-aloud (TA) is a method used to uncover the developing metacognitive knowledge of an individual, which refers to their inner mental knowledge and control of problem-solving strategies. Metacognition started to be systematically examined in the late 1960s and early 1970s after Hart introduced a methodology to test the validity of people's introspections and Flavell provided evidence that metacognition was essential to a child's development and to human higher cognitive behaviors. According to Schraw, metacognition is critical to successful learning because it helps individuals control their cognitive skills and identify weak points that can be improved by building new cognitive skills (Bannert, M., Mengelkamp, Ch., 2008, 39–58). The next step after building awareness about metacognition is to teach necessary strategies to students. Metacognitive skills develop throughout people's lives, beginning in childhood through their verbal and sociocultural experiences. Some psychologists suggested that young children were not able to monitor their thought processes in early childhood, but several studies reported the opposite (Malt, B.C., Eiter, B., 2004, 896-904).

There are two types of TA: concurrent and retrospective. During a concurrent or online TA, participants are asked to verbalize their thoughts while completing a task. The concurrent TA can be a Level 1 (Talk-Aloud) or a Level 2 (Think-Aloud) verbalization. Level 1 involves uttering thoughts already encoded in verbal form, while Level 2 requires recording and verbalizing thoughts held in memory in some other form. Differences in instructions (talk aloud vs. think aloud) affect the type of verbalization the subjects produce. TA (Level 2) is a technique of verbalizing one's thoughts when completing a task that requires thinking. The subjects are asked to say aloud everything they think and everything that occurs to them while performing the task. The use of online data collection is more valid than offline methods (Simmons, B., Lanuza, D., Fonteyn, M., Hicks, F., Holm, K., 2003, 701–719).

A retrospective Level 3 verbalization or offline TA occurs after the participant has completed the concurrent TA. The participant is asked to retell what they remember about how they thought while performing the task. They should report the results of their memories instead of inferences (Cote, N., Goldman, S., 2004, 660–683; Janssen, T., Braaksma, M., Rijlaarsdam, G., 2006, 35-52). This type of TA draws on long-term memory and is used to validate an on-line TA, but it often lacks information present in a concurrent TA (Grant, 2007, 169–181; Cieřlicka, 2006, 115-144).

A Think-Aloud is a technique commonly used in psychological and educational research, although it has faced criticism. Ericsson and Simon's work provided a critical analysis of verbal protocol analysis, which helped to conceptualize the technique and provided strong evidence of its validity in understanding individuals' cognitive processes (Laing, S.P., Kamhi, A.G., 2002, 436-447; Schmitz, 2002, 89-113). However, to ensure the validity of the Think-Aloud, careful planning and execution of procedures are necessary. Van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg warned against possible pitfalls in their practical guide, including invalidity due to disturbance of the cognitive process, memory errors, and interpretation by the subject. Other potential issues include inappropriate cuing, confounding results, and basic accessibility. Researchers must minimize these effects by being aware of participants' characteristics and selecting appropriate tasks representative of the cognitive process involved. Participants should be trained in thinking aloud and provided with clear directions to avoid making inferences. TAs are typically recorded and transcribed into analyzable segments with a coding scheme constructed based on a psychological model that predicts how people will behave during the task. Ideally, a hypothesis and coding scheme should be established before data collection (Gascoigne, 2002, 554–560; Lau, 2006, 383–399).

Several research studies have utilized think-aloud to investigate various language processes, such as reading, spelling, problem-solving, decision-making, writing, listening comprehension, speaking, translating, and negotiation in revision. While some studies have focused on first-language (L1) learners,

others have examined second-language (L2) learners (Dewey, 2004, 303-327; Kaakinen, J.K., Hyönä, J., 2005, 239-257; Leow, R.P., Morgan-Short, K., 2004, 35-57). The language used in think-aloud with L2 learners is a topic of debate, as some argue that L1 should be used due to limited language proficiency, while others suggest that L2 can be used after an orientation. The current study will focus on L2 or foreign language (FL) studies in language processes and provide a summary of the focus, design, and results of 18 think-aloud studies.

In analyzing various studies on idiom acquisition, the comprehension of L2 and FL learners is affected by factors such as idiom familiarity, transparency, frozenness, and context. Familiar idioms are easier to comprehend, and transparent idioms (those that can be broken down into their parts) are easier to comprehend and explain. The results of several experiments suggest that comprehension is facilitated by context and that syntactically frozen idioms are comprehended faster. The type of Think-Aloud method used (concurrent or retrospective) may have different effects on task completion for L2 learners, with some studies showing no detrimental effects and others showing hindrance to comprehension. Reading comprehension in L2 learning is affected by awareness and language proficiency. The nature of the sample and the study setting must also be taken into account when evaluating results (Brown, R, Pressley, M, Van Meter, P, & Schuder, T., 2004, 998-1040; McKeown, R.G., Gentilucci, J.L., 2007, 136-147).

For example, Qi's case study on language-switching behavior included math problem-solving as one of the tasks. A bilingual female graduate student was asked to complete two sets of math problems while thinking aloud. The participant used Chinese more frequently during the math tasks compared to writing and translation tasks. In more difficult math problems, the participant switched to Chinese automatically, indicating that L2 thinking was challenging. This finding supported Anderson's study, which found that advanced L2 learners faced difficulties while thinking aloud. The study used a translation task, where the participant translated English texts into Chinese. Language-switching occurred more frequently during the more demanding translation task, indicating a need for efficient encoding, thought development, lexical meaning verification, and avoidance of working memory overload. The study concluded that language-switching facilitated composing processes instead of hindering them (Berkowitz, E., Cicchelli, T., 2004, 37-57; Hempelmann, Ch. F., 2008, 333-360; Schuller, 2009, 147-167).

Leow (2001) presented the results of a study on the impact of awareness on second language (L2) acquisition in two separate articles. The research involved 28 novice L2 Spanish learners who were selected based on their performance in pre-and post-tests from a group of 85 students. The study aimed to assess the participants' ability to acquire irregular singular and plural simple past forms of stem-changing -ir verbs in Spanish. Before the experiment, all students were exposed to Spanish simple past irregular forms during a regular class session, followed by a pretest that included a multiple-choice recognition task and a fill-in-the-blank production task (Leow, 2001, 113-155).

During the experiment, the participants completed a crossword task that required problem-solving skills related to the targeted forms. They were instructed to speak aloud their thoughts while completing the task in a laboratory setting. The post-exposure recognition and production tasks were conducted immediately after the task. The researchers analyzed the data only from the participants who scored zero in the pretest and 100 percent in the crossword puzzle task to establish a consistent baseline performance for all participants.

The researcher identified two categories of participants based on the transcribed verbal protocols obtained during the task: Category A and Category B. Category A participants exhibited cognitive change, meta-awareness, and the ability to formulate a morphological rule, whereas Category B participants showed cognitive change without meta-awareness or a morphological rule. The statistical analysis of the data revealed that awareness had a significant effect on participants' performance in both recognition and production tasks. The findings supported the notion that learners' awareness played a crucial role in L2 acquisition and revealed that different levels of awareness led to differences in processing.

Results and discussion

This study involved 20 intermediate-level Kazakh language learners who were studying Kazakh as a foreign language at a school in Almaty. It also included 5 intermediate-level Russian language learners who were studying Russian as a foreign language at a school in Almaty. Participation was optional, and all participants provided written consent. The intermediate level of Kazakh or Russian indicated that the students had a strong understanding of written texts but struggled with comprehending certain idioms,

figures of speech, and words with multiple meanings. The participants' proficiency levels were assessed during the screening process.

The study required the participants to read 10 contained transparent idioms. Among the 10 jokes with idioms, 2 were cited as examples, one in Kazakh and the other in Russian. The participants who were KLLs read Kazakh idioms, while RLLs read Russian idioms. The 10 idiomatic jokes had a play on both literal and metaphorical meanings of idioms. The Russian jokes were taken from the website <http://anekdot.mail.ru>, while Kazakh jokes were taken from the website <https://znaniya.com/task/7526552> (see Table 1). No formal permission was obtained from publishers because the text excerpts used in the study were less than 300 words. The idioms used in the Russian jokes were categorized into 4 groups based on their similarity and dissimilarity to idioms in the participants' L1.

Table 1. – *Kazakh Idioms with Equivalent/Analog in the Russian Language*

Өз орнын білу	знать свое место
Жылайын ба, күлейін бе	то ли плакать, то ли смеяться
Арсыз-ұятсыз	ни стыда, ни совести
Бірі ұрымға, бірі қырымға	кто в лес, кто по дрова
Бас қатыру	ломать голову или морочить голову
Бүйректен сирақ шығару	вкривь и вкось
Қас пен көздің арасында	в мгновение ока
Көзді ашып жұмғанша	не успеешь глазом моргнуть
Аяғы жерге тимей жүгіру	одна нога там, другая здесь
Әкесі кілем жайғандай	баклуши бить

To make sure that Russian and Kazakh idioms chosen for this study were relatively of the same level of transparency in both languages, they were rated by six speakers of Russian and Kazakh on a 5-point scale from less transparent (1) to most transparent (5). According to the raters' judgment, the most transparent Russian idioms were idioms #3, #8, #9, and #10, and the least Russian transparent idioms were #7. The most transparent Kazakh idioms were #1, #2, #5, and #8; the less transparent ones were #3 and #7. (See Tables 2 and 3).

Based on the average for each idiom, the researcher grouped Russian and Kazakh idioms into three categories: idioms with a low level of transparency (the range is from 2.1 to 3 on a 5-point scale), idioms with a moderate level of transparency (a range is from 3.1 to 4), and idioms with a high level of transparency (4.1-5).

Table 2. – *Kazakh Idioms' Transparency Ratings*

Kazakh idioms	1	2	3	4	5	6	Averages for each idiom
Өз орнын білу	5	4	3	5	1	2	3.33
Жылайын ба, күлейін бе	5	1	3	3	3	4	3.17
Арсыз-ұятсыз	5	5	5	5	3	4	4.5
Бірі ұрымға, бірі қырымға	5	2	5	1	5	3	3.5
Бас қатыру	5	2	4	3	2	4	3.33
Бүйректен сирақ шығару	4	1	4	5	2	5	3.5
Қас пен көздің арасында	3	1	2	4	2	4	2.67
Көзді ашып жұмғанша	4	5	3	5	2	5	4
Аяғы жерге тимей жүгіру	5	5	3	2	4	5	4
Әкесі кілем жайғандай	5	5	4	5	4	5	4.67
Averages for 10 idioms given by each rater	4.6	3.1	3.6	3.8	2.8	4.1	

Table 3. – *Russian Idioms' Transparency Ratings*

Kazakh idioms	1	2	3	4	5	6	Averages for each idiom
знать свое место	5	5	5	5	1	5	4.33
то ли плакать, то ли смеяться	5	3	5	4	2	5	4
ни стыда, ни совести	3	1	3	2	3	3	2.5
кто в лес, кто по дрова	4	4	3	5	1	5	3.67
ломать голову или морочить голову	5	5	4	5	1	5	4.17
вкривь и вкось	4	4	2	5	1	5	3.5
в мгновение ока	2	1	2	1	5	4	2.5
не успеешь глазом моргнуть	4	5	2	5	4	4	4
одна нога там, другая здесь	5	3	4	5	1	5	3.83
баклуши бить	4	4	3	3	4	3	3.5
Averages for 10 idioms given by each rater	4.1	3.5	3.3	4	2.3	4.4	

The findings of this study should not be applied beyond the specific participants, methodology, and task employed. The research design has some limitations that should be noted. For example, the study involved only a single Think-Aloud session with each participant, which may not have allowed for sufficient practice in verbalizing their thoughts. Additionally, the number of idioms presented to the language learners was limited due to time constraints and the nature of the protocol, which may have impacted the results. The sample size of the study was also relatively small, which limits the generalizability of the findings, even though parametric tests were used to detect differences. Finally, the idioms used in the reading task were rated by six speakers of Russian and Kazakh, whose L1 was Russian. **Previous** research has shown that non-native speakers may rate idioms differently, which may have affected the grouping of idioms based on their level of transparency.

Conclusion

The aim of this research study, which employed mixed methods and compared Kazakh and Russian language learners, was threefold: (1) to identify the comprehension strategies used by intermediate-level Kazakh and Russian language learners to recognize and understand transparent idioms in jokes, (2) to determine whether comprehension depends on the category of the idiom and its level of transparency, and (3) to discover challenges that Kazakh and Russian language learners encounter while reading jokes with transparent idioms. The findings of this study showed that the ability of the participants to comprehend idioms varied, and that comprehension was affected by various factors including the level of transparency of the idiom, the proficiency level of the learner, and their cultural background. High-level transparency idioms were found to be the easiest for both Kazakh and Russian language learners to comprehend. The study also revealed that exposure to humorous texts based on idioms and plays on words can effectively foster analytic, critical, and divergent thinking among language learners. The study suggests that while it is impossible for a language learner to learn all idioms in a target language, explicit instruction in idiom comprehension strategies can be beneficial. Successful language learners used more effective top-down strategies, which demonstrated efficient cognitive processing. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of idiom comprehension strategies in language learning, and the need for further research on the differences in the strategies used by Kazakh and Russian language learners.

This study has identified several implications for foreign language education practice. Although reading strategies are not explicitly taught in foreign language (FL) curricula, research has shown that a student's cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in their first language (L1) can be transferable to their second language (L2) after reaching a threshold proficiency in the L2. The study has also found that idioms' non-literal meanings can be challenging for FL learners, and only two strategies, Idiom Analog, and Idiom Background Knowledge, were positively correlated with idiom recognition and comprehension. It is, therefore, recommended that FL instructors raise awareness of appropriate idiom comprehension strategy use and model how to apply global, top-down strategies when reading an FL text that contains idiomatic language. The study also suggests that the association of idioms with mental images and personalizing idioms can enhance FL learners' understanding. Guessing from the context and pragmatic life background knowledge are other effective strategies that can be explicitly taught in FL classrooms. Finally, the study recommends the use of humorous discourse to help FL learners become aware of how meanings can be construed and misconstrued.

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