# Analysis of Idiomatic Expression Teaching Strategies in International Chinese Education from the Perspective of Chunk Theory

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**Abstract:** As a consequence of the ongoing evolution of International Chinese Education, the question of how to teach Chinese idiomatic expressions effectively has assumed great importance in the field of language teaching. Idiomatic expressions are characterized by a rich cultural dimension and a vivid, humorous and accessible style that resonates with CFL learners. However, the intrinsic complexity of idiomatic expressions presents a significant challenge to CFL learners, particularly in terms of comprehension and acquisition. This study aims to explore the application and practical effects of the chunk theory in teaching idiomatic expressions in international Chinese. The study is structured as follows: firstly, it analyses the core concepts of the chunk theory; secondly, it analyses the problems in teaching idiomatic expressions; thirdly, it combines the characteristics of international Chinese language teaching; and finally, it proposes a set of strategies for teaching idiomatic expressions.

**Keywords:** international Chinese education, idiomatic expressions, chunk theory

## Introduction

As an indispensable component of spoken Chinese, idiomatic expressions are characterized by their brevity, concision and fixed form. Idiomatic expressions not only enrich the language but also reflect the historical depth and cultural essence of Chinese culture. Consequently, they are often used to assess learners' fluency and authenticity in international Chinese language teaching. However, for CFL learners who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture and the Chinese language environment, mastering these idiomatic expressions can be challenging. This study first reviews the Chunk Theory, then analyses the typical problems encountered by CFL learners in using idiomatic expressions, and finally proposes appropriate teaching countermeasures.

### 1. Overview of chunk theory

The term "Chunk" as used in foreign linguistics refers to groups of words and structures that are expressed in a spoken language. These groups are usually made up of two or more consecutive or non-consecutive combinations of words and are stored in memory as a whole. When used, the chunks can be directly extracted from memory as a whole. The theory was initially developed through psychological research in the United States and subsequently introduced to the field of linguistics by Becker, an American scholar, in 1975. Following its introduction to China, the theory was initially applied to the field of English education[1]. It subsequently attracted the attention of researchers in Chinese language teaching and was gradually integrated into the practice of International Chinese Education.

The use of chunks is of paramount importance in the acquisition of a second language. They possess the

characteristics of completeness and conventionality in oral expression, which facilitate the extraction of complete units from memory without the need for complex grammatical analyses. Furthermore, chunks are not amenable to splitting. Given the vast number of grammatical structures and vocabulary in the Chinese language, it is evident that memorizing complex vocabulary and sentence structures is a formidable task. The use of chunks can facilitate the rapid recognition, comprehension, retention and utilization of intricate sentence structures in Chinese, thereby enhancing the ability of CFL learners s to process and retain information with limited memory and cognitive resources[2].

## 2. Problems in the use of idiomatic expressions by CFL learners

### 2.1 Language structural bias

Idiomatic expressions are characterized by a high degree of stability, with typical structures comprising three words. However, there are exceptions, with a few examples including four or six-word expressions such as "出风头" "打小报告" "高不成低不就". Furthermore, additional examples can be provided. Conversely, idiomatic expressions demonstrate a degree of flexibility, as they can be expanded by the addition of words at the beginning, middle, or end, or by rearranging the existing words. It is crucial for second language learners to comprehend and master this concept of degree[3].

CFL learners frequently err by adding or omitting words when using idiomatic expressions. The structure of some idiomatic expressions allows for the addition of other elements. For example, the phrase "白日做梦" cannot be altered to "白日做了一个梦", as this would result in the loss of the idiomatic expression's regularity and characteristic rhythm. However, there are instances where the addition of words to an idiomatic expression is not permissible. The phrase "唱对台戏" cannot be rendered as "唱了一场对台戏", as the preposition "一场" is superfluous and alters the fundamental structure of the idiomatic expression. In this case, the addition of 'a' is superfluous and alters the fundamental structure of the idiomatic expression. While the majority of idiomatic expressions can be augmented or embedded in vocabulary, it is nearly impossible to reduce the number of words in them. For instance, the idiomatic expression "坐板凳" (with the word "冷" deleted) deviates from its original meaning when the word is omitted.

### 2.2 Grammatical bias

If learners do not understand the grammatical meaning of idioms, it is easy to cause errors in matching the grammatical meaning of idioms. For example, when verbal idioms are used as predicates, most of them do not carry an object. "他特别莫名其妙为什么这些东西让父母高兴", "莫名其妙" should not have an object after puzzled.

### 2.3 Semantic bias

Idiomatic expressions typically comprise both surface meanings and underlying meanings derived from metaphors. When employing such expressions, our primary focus is on the underlying meanings[4]. The surface meaning is more intuitive and can be readily recalled by many learners; however, the deeper meaning, which has evolved through long-term use, must be relearned, which can easily result in misunderstanding when used. To illustrate, the surface meaning of "马马虎虎" directly describes things or behaviors that resemble horses and tigers, whereas the deeper meaning implies that the actions are not undertaken with sufficient seriousness, resulting in mediocre and perfunctory outcomes. If the phrase "这次的项目做得马马虎虎" is taken at face value, it is not immediately apparent why the image of a horse and a tiger is being invoked. It is therefore essential that learners revisit the deeper meaning of the idiomatic expression, which is that the work or task was not carried out with care, lacked precision, and was just barely acceptable. In order to ensure that idiomatic expressions are used accurately, learners must gradually build up a shift in thinking from surface to deeper meanings in their daily use[5].

Another kind of bias is semantic repetition bias, which refers to the fact that a word with the same meaning as the idiom appears before or after the idiom in a sentence, resulting in semantic repetition. For example, "什么方法都应有尽有", "应有尽有" and "都" are repeated. "他做事情都一丝不苟，很认真" "一丝不苟" and "认真" are repeated.

### 2.4 pragmatic bias

The misuse of language is primarily evidenced by the inappropriate use of objects, occasions, and the misapplication

of praise and blame. To illustrate, when introducing a respected teacher, one might say, "他教学非常认真，从不露出狐狸尾巴" The term "狐狸尾巴" is a pejorative phrase that refers to the exposure of someone's true character or shortcomings. In a context where respect and praise are expected, the use of idiomatic expressions is not appropriate. While idiomatic expressions are straightforward and evocative, they are predominantly employed in informal oral discourse and may be deemed unsuitable for formal or public contexts. The utilisation of the phrase "这个项目计划已经很完美，我们无需画蛇添足", in a formal business report may result in the overall tone of the text appearing less formal. This is due to the fact that idiomatic expressions are employed in colloquial contexts, and their direct incorporation into a formal document may be perceived as unprofessional.

There are many idioms in Chinese that come from Chinese myths, legends, fables or historical events, which are vivid and have meanings beyond the literal ones[6]. If learners know the origin of idioms, they will have a better understanding of traditional Chinese culture, such as "夸父逐日" "愚公移山" "四面楚歌" "三顾茅庐". Because of the differences between Chinese and English cultures, the vocabulary of the two languages has different meanings and vocabulary gaps, and other phenomena.

## 3. Measures

Despite considerable investment of time and energy by some learners, the level of authenticity in their language use remains inadequate. The lack of appropriate mastery and use of idiomatic expressions is a significant contributing factor to this issue. The use of Chunk Theory can facilitate the memorization and comprehensive mastery of idiomatic expressions, as well as enhance collocation accuracy in practical contexts. Additionally, the chunks themselves contain embedded social context information, which can guide students to make more appropriate idiomatic expression choices in different situations. In light of the aforementioned, the integration of Chunk Theory into idiomatic expression instruction will prove invaluable in enhancing students' linguistic proficiency[7].

### 3.1 Optimizing teaching thinking and cultivate chunk awareness

In the context of teaching practice, it is imperative that educators shift away from the conventional, word-centrism pedagogical approach and instead embrace a more nuanced understanding and application of the Chunk Theory. By adopting the concept of the chunk as the fundamental unit of instruction, educators can facilitate students' comprehension of the linguistic structure and usage of the Chinese language in a more efficacious manner. Furthermore, educators should proactively foster students' awareness of linguistic chunks. This entails guiding students to discern the fixed collocations and idiomatic expressions embedded in the language, a process that should be integrated into daily teaching. This process necessitates not only an awareness of the form of chunks, but also a sensitivity and understanding of their utilization in specific contexts[8].

### 3.2 Enhancing the learning and accumulation of idiomatic expressions

In order to further improve students' chunk mastery, teachers must design diversified teaching activities that focus on the learning and accumulation of idiomatic expressions. This encompasses, but is not limited to, activities such as reading, listening exercises, simulations and others, with the objective of exposing students to and enabling them to utilize idiomatic expressions in a variety of contexts. In guiding students in the acquisition of idiomatic expressions, educators should adopt pedagogical approaches that are evidence-based and align with the principle of progressive complexity, progressing from simple to complex expressions. The initial focus of the teaching should be on those idiomatic expressions that are readily comprehensible and widely used, in order to establish a robust foundation for students. As students progressively gain proficiency in these fundamental expressions, the instructor will facilitate their investigation of idiomatic expressions with more profound meanings, richer metaphors, and more complex derivations. This progressive teaching method has the potential to not only stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning, but also to effectively improve teaching efficiency. Furthermore, educators should motivate learners to identify and acquire new idiomatic expressions beyond the classroom setting, thereby enhancing their understanding and proficiency[9].

### 3.3 Sorting out and Summarizing Idiomatic Expressions

In International Chinese Education, the sorting and summarizing of idiomatic expressions by teachers plays a pivotal role in enhancing students' comprehension of the linguistic diversity and depth, as well as their communicative abilities in Chinese. It is incumbent upon teachers to analyse the textbooks, to refer to the vocabulary list of the Chinese Proficiency Test, or to make use of the Real Context Corpus, in order to filter out the most basic and frequently used idiomatic expressions from a large number of idiomatic expressions. The selected idiomatic expressions should be classified according to different themes or situations, such as those pertaining to daily life, interpersonal communication, the workplace, and so forth, in order to facilitate their selection according to the teaching themes. Furthermore, the idiomatic expressions should be sorted according to their frequency of use, with greater priority given to those that are more commonly employed. It is essential to prioritize teaching these expressions and elucidating their context within the cultural and linguistic milieu in which they are embedded. This approach facilitates enhanced comprehension and retention among students[10]. Furthermore, it is essential to devise or simulate authentic usage scenarios, enabling students to hone their proficiency in idiomatic expression through practical application in real-life dialogues or role-playing activities.

## 4. Conclusion

In recent years, with the ongoing advancement of International Chinese Education, there has been a notable surge in research exploring the potential integration of the Chunk Theory into the pedagogy of Chinese as a foreign language. The introduction of this theory has introduced novel perspectives and methodologies to the field of Chinese language teaching. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research on the teaching of idiomatic expressions. The fundamental premise of language block teaching is the instruction of words that frequently co-occur or appear together, a method that enhances learning efficiency and minimizes errors in language use. This approach is particularly suited to the teaching of idiomatic expressions. In the context of teaching practice, it is possible for educators to refine their pedagogical approach, foster an understanding of chunks, and subsequently facilitate the acquisition and consolidation of idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, teachers can categorize and synthesize idiomatic expressions to facilitate students' linguistic proficiency and communicative competence.

In conclusion, although research on the teaching of idiomatic expressions is still insufficient, this teaching method undoubtedly provides a new way of thinking to improve the quality and efficiency of Chinese international teaching.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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