Touch and Go:
Teaching and Learning of English Binominals in an EFL Context

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Numerous empirical studies have shown that raising the awareness of conceptual metaphors and metonymies (CMs) underling particular idioms in English is indeed helpful for learners to understand and interpret them correctly (e.g, Boers 2000; Berendi, Csabi and Kovecses 2008). Such an approach in instructing L2/FL vocabulary has come to be known as a "cognitive approach." It was also applied to some empirical studies that show when explicitly raising the awareness of the semantic or phonological motivations such as iconic ordering and phonological repetition underlying L2 chunks, learner's retention to them could be considerably enhanced (Boers and Lindstromberg 2008; Lindstromberg and Boers 2008a, 2008b). This study is to investigate the efficacy of two cognitive approaches, one with CMs, while the other with CMs and clues of semantic and phonological motivations on adult Mandarin speakers learning English binomials in a foreign language environment.

For this investigation, this study was divided into two stages: the pilot and the main study. Both studies recruited subjects (pilot-40, main-90) for a Control Group (CG), Experimental Group A (EGA), and Experimental Group B (EGB). CG adopted a non-cognitive approach, receiving the translation and Chinese equivalents of the target English binomial chunks, and EGA adopted a cognitive approach, incorporating the conceptual metaphors and metonymies of the target chunks, while EGB also employed a cognitive approach involving a treatment of the CMs and semantic and phonological clues underlying the binomials. 76 irreversible English binominals chunks had been selected through various dictionaries and COCA based on the principle of unambiguous semantic/phonological motivations. They were in turn double-checked by four native speakers of American English for frequency. 60 were chosen from this process and subject to a transparency and familiarity test on a separate group of subjects (N=25). According to its results, 25 binominals were used in the pilot, while 50 in the main study.

Results yielded from Ss' verbal protocols in the pre-tests, post- and delayed post-tests on comprehension were analyzed in two ways, one for correctness in answer, whereas the other for the degree of understanding in the target schema. Statistical analysis from both studies suggest that, from mean scores alone, CM approach seemed to be better in both pilot and main study for immediate recall, while results of long-term retention in the pilot study show that approach with semantic and phonological clues had an edge over the other two. However, this edge could not be replicated in the main study. To conclude, it seems that both cognitive and non-cognitive approaches benefited the recruited subjects in learning English binomials. After examining the best learned and worst learned English chunks, the confounding factors of these inconclusive findings could be familiarity, transparency of the chunks and the frequency of the words that constitute the chunks. It appears that retention of highly familiar and transparent chunks do not necessarily benefit from the approach employed in the EGB in this study. It is expected that data emerged from production tests which is still under analysis will add more insight to these findings.