Compounds: Combinations of the Components?
--- EFL Learners’ Difficulties in Comprehension of Compound Nouns

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Abstract

This study investigates Chinese EFL (English as foreign language) learners’ comprehension difficulty in compound nouns. Two groups of subjects participate in this study: fifty English-majored juniors classified as the intermediate group and thirty non-English-majored sophomores classified as the beginner group. The compound nouns included in this study are abstracted from Charteris-Black’s study (1998) based on three linguistic features that might lead to learners’ difficulties in comprehension: syntactic opacity, idiomatic opacity, and lexical novelty. This study includes two multiple-choice-question tests requiring the subjects to match the definition in the option items and the compound nouns: the first test is word-list test, which contains single compound nouns while the second test is a word-in-the-context test, in which each of the compound nouns is presented in a single-sentence context excerpted from authentic material. The results show that both groups perform better in the first test than in the second test although the difference is not significant. Among the compound nouns with the three linguistic features that are being investigated, both groups perform better with idiomatic opaque ones than the other two types. It is concluded that exposure may play the main role in reducing the learners’ comprehension difficulty with compound nouns, and that Chinese EFL learners might not be good at guessing or inferencing from the information inherent in the single-sentence context.
Keywords: compound nouns, syntactic opacity, idiomatic opacity, and lexical novelty