

**Individual Paper Session 17**

**Lexicon/Vocabulary**

**Wednesday, July 5**

**4:45-5:15pm**

**Mental images and contextual clues: A comprehension study of animal idiomatic expressions in an EFL environment**

**Wen-shuenn, Wu**

**Chung Hua University**

[wswu@chu.edu.tw](mailto:wswu@chu.edu.tw)

It has been claimed that young children and nonnative speakers of English may actively form mental images to help them comprehend idioms (Gibbs & O'Brien, 1990). In other words, “conventional rich images” and knowledge that people have can partially motivate the meanings of many idioms. However, while some mental images of idiomatic expressions are universal, more are culture-specific. Whereas mental images may play a valuable role in comprehending idioms, comprehension-friendly contexts may play a more important role than mental images to EFL learners when they process the meanings of idioms.

This article investigates whether EFL learners in Taiwan can formulate consistent mental images of one specific type of idiomatic expressions – *animal idiomatic expression* (AIE), and whether these mental images tend to help them comprehend AIEs. Subjects in the current study are 29 undergraduates with an intermediate level of English proficiency and 32 undergraduates with an upper intermediate level of English proficiency from a university in Taiwan. They were given three experiments to see whether mental images and contextual clues perform a positive role in helping them decode the figurative meanings of idioms.

Results suggest that most mental images will probably make the idioms ‘make sense’ to native speakers of English (NSEs) but not to EFL learners. Findings also imply that although many mental images are culture-bound and not helpful for EFL learners to comprehend the figurative meanings of AIEs, comprehension-friendly examples do greatly increase their comprehension. However, many participants were also misled by examples given so that they misinterpreted AIEs. In addition, since idiom teaching has long been ignored in Taiwan, the difference of AIE comprehension between two groups of subject is not statistically significant. These findings support the view that instruction of idiomatic expressions should be provided in an authentic environment with meaningful contextual clues.