

Conceptual fluency and the use of situation-bound utterances in L2

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Abstract

Recent research has found that L2 learners of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily show concomitant pragmatic skills. Some scholars explained non-native-like production by the lack or low level of conceptual fluency and metaphorical competence in the target language. This paper, however, claims that this explanation is only partly acceptable because pragmatic skills in an L2 do not necessarily reflect conceptual fluency in the target language properly because individual variables rather than conceptual fluency play a decisive role in the selection and use of these pragmatic units.

In order to investigate the validity of this hypothesis a survey was conducted with 88 Non-Native Speakers (NNSs) and 33 Native Speakers of English (NSs) who were given three types of tests: two discourse-completion tests, a problem-solving test and a dialog-interpretation test. Data were analyzed for two variables: cultural specificity of SBUs and individual learner strategies. The findings of the survey demonstrated the existence of three developmental stages which are characterized respectively by strong L1-culture transfer, false generalization, individual choice. Students in the third stage tend to choose SBUs on affective grounds and reject those pragmatic units which they find too culture specific.

Key words: Conceptual Fluency, Common Underlying Conceptual Base, Learner Strategies, Metaphorical Competence, Situation-Bound Utterances.

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1. Introduction: situation-bound utterances (SBUs)

Situation-Bound Utterances (Kecskes, 1997, 1999) constitute a particular group of formulaic expressions. SBUs are highly conventionalized, prefabricated units whose occurrence is tied to more or less standardized communicative situations (Coulmas, 1981; Fonagy, 1982; Kiefer, 1995; Kecskes, 1997). If, according to their obligatoriness and predictability in social situations, formulaic expressions are placed on a continuum where obligatoriness increases to the right, Situation-Bound Utterances will take the rightmost place because their use is highly predetermined by the situation. For instance, in American English to the question 'How are you doing?', the expected answer is usually an SBU which expresses some positive attitude, such as 'Fine, thank you', 'Very well, thank you', and the like. Since the meaning of these pragmatic units is shaped by the interplay of linguistic and extralinguistic factors, they can be best accounted for in a theoretical framework which represents a knowledge-for-use conception. A cognitive-pragmatic approach to SBUs reveals that, in many cases, cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor and conventional knowledge are responsible for the unique situational meaning of SBUs (Kecskes, 1999). In this respect SBUs are similar to other formulaic expressions such as idioms and formulaic implicatures whose meaning structure can also be better accounted for if the underlying cognitive mechanisms are examined. While SBUs are usually tied to standardized communicative situations, idioms and implicatures can occur in any situation where the speaker finds their use appropriate. The proper use of figurative language and conventional knowledge in the L2 are the best signs of 'native-like' competence. Selection and processing of SBUs in communicative situations reveals how well L2 learners can handle figurative language. The question is: Can non-native speakers be expected to develop native-like competence in the target language? The answer is 'no' for two reasons. It will be argued that even if L2 learners can develop a 'native-like grammar', its use will not be native-like because of the insufficient conceptual fluency in L2 and individual variables which may function as hurdles to proper use of figurative language.

2. Multicompetence

Conceptual fluency, which refers, to close-to-native use and comprehension of concepts of the target language, is as crucial for L2 learners as grammatical competence. Before the nature of conceptual fluency is reviewed, it is important to discuss how this type of fluency is tied to multicompetence. The knowledge of more than one language can result in 'multicompetence' which was defined by Cook as 'the compound state of a mind with two grammars' (1991:112). Kecskes and Papp argue that what makes a speaker multicompetent is the Common Underlying Conceptual Base (CUCB) rather than the existence of two grammars in the mind, and postulate a multilingual Lan-

guage Processing Device (LPD) which consists of two or more Constantly Available Interacting Systems (CAIS) and a CUCB (Kecskes & Papp, forthcoming/a). Multicompetence, however, does not develop in each 'multilingual'. A proficiency threshold has to be passed in order for the CUCB to develop (Kecskes & Papp, forthcoming/a). Conceptual fluency is an essential part of this proficiency since multicompetence starts to develop only when the Conceptual Base is affected by the use of a new language. If this threshold has not been reached, learning of subsequent languages is merely an educational enhancement since, as De Bot (1992) claimed, the L1 is usually flexible enough to add the emerging foreign language as an additional register to those already in existence.

3. Is the CUCB language and culture specific?

The CUCB is a single store for multi-modal mental representations which are acquired through experience in discourse (Paradis, 1995; Kecskes & Papp, forthcoming/b). Consequently, these representations are linguistically and culturally grounded. Based on her findings Pavlenko (1996:68) concluded that "bilingual cognition is not code-dependent but rather concept-dependent, with the language of origin of the bilingual's concepts related to the learner's history". She suggested that cultural exposure is crucial in the development of concepts. The full acquisition and proper use of a concept requires the learner to know not only its lexical-semantic counterpart and the associated declarative knowledge, but also the multi-modal mental representation and culturally-based behavioral scripts and schema which are acquired through genuine communication. Learners need direct experience with concepts in the target language because the conceptual system of each language operates differently. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3) argued that "our ordinary conceptual system in terms of which we both think and act is fundamentally metaphorical in nature". Metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words. Human thought processes are largely metaphorical because a considerable part of the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. There is psychological evidence to support the cognitive reality of metaphorical structuring (e.g., Gentner and Gentner, 1982; Hunt and Agnoli, 1991; Sweetser, 1990).

Formal differences between languages are reflections of differences in conceptualization. When acquiring a non-primary language, learners have to learn not only the forms of that particular language but also the conceptual structures that are associated with those forms. One difficulty of multilingual development is that each language has its own metaphorical and figurative system which is not compatible with the metaphorical system of another language: Americans "make money", Russians "work for money", Hungarians "look for money". This often results in a nonnative-like production which is usually good and understandable but lacks the idiomaticity of native speaker language production. Foreign language learners usually rely on the

conceptual base of their mother tongue and they map target language forms on L1 conceptualizations (Kecskes, 1995; Pavlenko, 1999). Consequently, their problem is primarily not grammatical but conceptual. This is why there is nothing like full mastery of a second or foreign language, and this is where multicompetence should be distinguished from monocompetence. Foreign language learners have not only to master the grammatical structures and communicative peculiarities of the new language but also, in order to sound native-like, they have to learn to think as native speakers do, perceive the world the way native speakers do, and use the language metaphorically as native speakers do. Since this conceptual fluency (Danesi, 1992) is the basis of all linguistic acts in a language, problems occurring in grammar and in the use of communicative skills are also, quite frequently, the results of inadequate conceptual fluency.

4. Conceptual fluency and metaphorical competence

Among foreign language learners there is an assumption that no real fluency is possible in a foreign language unless the learner spends some time in the target language country. Every language learner traveling in the target language country has experienced a certain kind of frustration which is the result of not conveying meaning the same way as native speakers do, i.e., using wrong or nonnative-like constructions, phrases, and words. What these learners lack most is conceptual fluency which means knowing how the target language reflects or encodes its concepts on the basis of metaphorical structuring (Danesi, 1992:490) and other cognitive mechanisms (Kovecses and Szabo, 1996). This kind of knowledge is as important as grammatical and communicative knowledge. I think that it is even more important than the other two because conceptual knowledge serves as a basis for grammatical and communicative knowledge. For instance, in order to be able to use conditional sentences in English properly, one must understand how conditional is conceptualized in English. One would think conceptual fluency is important only for advanced language proficiency; that is only partly true. Language learners can achieve fairly good fluency in the target language without conceptual fluency in it, mainly because there are many aspects of language learning that are not conceptual. For instance, these aspects may be perceptual, indexical, iconic, or denotative, which can be obtained by the foreign language learners without much difficulty. But speakers with low level of conceptual fluency will never sound native-like. The question is why?

Research suggests that at least a certain portion of the human mind is 'programmed' to think metaphorically (see Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Danesi, 1992). Metaphor probably underlies the representation of a considerable part of our common concepts. Coining an analogous term to grammatical competence and communicative competence Danesi (1992) suggested that metaphorical competence (MC) is as important as the other two because it is closely linked to the

ways in which a culture organizes its world conceptually. Not only thinking and acting are based on this conceptual system but in large part communication as well. Therefore, language is an important source of evidence of what that system is like. MC is a basic feature of native-speaker speech production because native speakers usually program discourse in metaphorical ways. According to Winner (1982: 253), the recent experimental literature has made it clear that if "people were limited to strictly literal language, communication would be severely curtailed, if not terminated". At this point, however, Valeva's criticism (1996) of Danesi's approach appears to be correct. She argued against the reduction of conceptual fluency to metaphorical competence. There are many 'literal' concepts, in the sense of being directly understood, without any metaphorical processes. This is absolutely true: metaphorical competence is a very important part of conceptual fluency but it would be a mistake to equate MC with conceptual fluency. Consequently, the real question from our perspective is to what extent can conceptual fluency (and not metaphorical competence!) be developed in a foreign or second language environment?

Based on the results of a pilot study Danesi (1992: 495) suggested that metaphorical competence, even at the level of comprehension, is inadequate in typical classroom learners. In his opinion the reason for this is not that students are incapable of learning metaphors, but most likely that they have never been exposed in formal ways to the conceptual system of the target language. Another study by Danesi (1992) that focused on "metaphorical density" in non-native speakers' essays found that student compositions showed a high degree of 'literalness' and contained conceptual metaphors that were alike in both languages (Spanish and English). Danesi concluded that after three or four years of study in a classroom those students learned virtually no 'new way' of thinking conceptually but relied mainly on their L1 conceptual base.

The importance of developing conceptual fluency has been emphasized in other contexts in a number of research reports. Discussing the production of idioms, Irujo (1993) suggested that students should be taught strategies to deal with figurative language, and those strategies would help them take advantage of the semantic transparency of some idioms. Kövecses and Szabó (1996) argued that teaching about 'orientational' metaphors underlying phrasal verbs will result in better acquisition of this difficult type of idiom. Bouton (1994) reported that formal instruction designed to develop pragmatic skills seemed to be highly effective when it was focused on formulaic implicatures. These studies suggest that conceptual fluency (including metaphorical competence) can be developed in the classroom if students are taught about the underlying cognitive mechanisms. Valeva (1996), however, thinks that the issue of learnability should be investigated before facing the question of teachability, and it is still an open question whether the conceptual system of a foreign language is learnable or not in a classroom setting.

5. The Survey

This study discusses the results of a survey which aimed at testing two closely related assumptions about the selection of SBUs by adult Non-Native Speakers of English (NNSs): a) NNSs rely mainly on their L1 conceptual system when choosing SBUs in the target language, and b) even if NNSs know several SBUs whose use would be appropriate in a given situation their selection is heavily motivated by their individual feelings for or against certain SBUs.

In order to test the validity of these two hypotheses data were analyzed for two variables: *cultural specificity of SBUs* and *individual learner strategies* as it is in these two variables that the dominance of individual choice can be demonstrated best.

5.1. The subjects

Data were collected from 88 non-native speaker (NNS) students and 33 native speakers of English (NS). NNSs represented ten countries (Japan, Spain, China, India, Nepal, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Russia, Mexico) and, at the time they participated in this study, they had been in the U.S. for at least six months. All NNS participants of the survey had a history of starting to learn English as a foreign language. It was anticipated that this fact would seriously affect their use of SBUs because EFL learners always have a more conscious approach to language production than learners who acquire the language in a naturalistic environment with or without instruction. Foreign language learning strategies are usually characterized by an analytic, bottom-up approach to language production, conscious rather than automatic use of unanalyzed chunks, L1 pragmatic dependency, and a dominant role of individual learner strategies (Kecskes, 1995). These strategies generally remain with the language learners for a while even if they have the opportunity to immerse in the target culture. Consequently, such tasks had to be designed for the survey that took into account the students background and previous experience with the target language. Since the goal of this study was to investigate the effect of L1 pragmatic system and use of individual strategies in L2 language production, students could not be detracted from the real task by grammatical and lexical difficulties. Hence, vocabulary, situations, SBUs and tasks were chosen accordingly.

5.2. The tests

All subjects, native speakers and non-native speakers were given three different types of tests:

- 1) *two Discourse Completion Tests (DCT)*. In the first DCT, students were expected to give a response to questions, such as *Can I talk to you after*

class? or *How was the party last night?* In the second type of DCT, participants had to respond to an utterance, such as *Jamie, hi. Listen, I want to apologize for what happened yesterday.*

2) *a Problem Solving Test (PST)*. The test described a situation in which an utterance was expected to be made and students were asked to write whatever they would say in that particular situation. The situations were frequent ones but required culture specific knowledge. For example:

- a) You want to talk to your professor. You knock at his door, open it, and say what?
- b) You are calling your friend Bob on the phone. What do you say when someone picks up the receiver at the other end?

3) *a Dialogue Interpretation Test (DIT)*. The test consisted of dialogues in which students were asked to interpret the SBUs in bold. Sufficient context was given to permit them to do so. The objective of the test was to determine the extent to which the subjects' interpretation of SBUs in American English was the same as that of native speakers who took the same test. For instance:

- a) —Bill, I do not think I can agree with you
—**OK, shoot**
- b) —Frank, I think you really deserved that prize
—**Get out of here**
- c) —Jim, do you think you can repair this coffee machine?
—**Piece of cake**

5.3. Data analysis

NNS's responses were compared to one another and to NS's responses. Students' answers were entered into a table for each test. The table contained the following categories and columns:

NS/NNS	L1	Years of English	Time spent in the US	"Hi, John, how is it going?"	"Can I talk to you after class?"
NNS	Russian	1.5	1.3	Allright	Yes, sure
NNS	Japanese	7.0	1.0	Not bad	Sure

This way it was possible to see vertically all students' answers at a time in each test and horizontally each student's answers to each question, utterance or task. Every answer was entered into the table as was produced by the speaker: no errors were corrected.

In the study the focus is on two variables: cultural specificity and individual learner strategies. Consequently only that part of data is used here which is relevant to these two variables¹. This means that not each test can give us relevant information about both variables². Because of the nature of the research questions and data obtained, which were unquantifiable, a qualitative approach, called 'focused description' in the relevant literature (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991: 17), was applied. Findings are based on observations and careful screening of data for common features, patterns, similarities and tendencies in use.

6. Principal findings of the survey

Recent research has directed attention to the fact that familiarity with the socio-cultural background of the target language is an essential part of our knowledge of languages (e.g., Beebe, 1988; Danesi, 1992; Kecskes, 1999; Yoshida, 1990). Elements of language that are culture-specific are especially difficult for L2 learners to acquire and use properly because not only linguistic but extralinguistic factors affect language use as well. Yoshida (1990:20) described this problem in the following way: "... although I might have knowledge of what to say with whom in what circumstances, that does not necessarily mean that I am able to perform accordingly. Moreover, even if I could perform in an 'American' way if I consciously strove to do so, that does not mean that I feel comfortable doing so". The findings of this survey seem to confirm Yoshida's claim.

6.1. Cultural specificity

Students' reactions observed as elicited through the Problem Solving Test (PST) and the Dialogue Interpretation Test (DIT) demonstrate that cultural differences played a very significant role in the selection of SBUs. This was especially noticeable in two cases:

6.1.1. SBUs with culture-specific pragmatic property

These SBUs usually have a very specific meaning. The gap between 'what is said' and 'what is communicated' is quite wide. They are commonly used by native speakers but NNSs either had difficulty with their interpretation in the DIT or chose to ignore them in the PST even if they perfectly understood their situational meaning. What makes the use of these SBUs difficult for NNSs is the fact that these expressions receive their specific pragmatic charge from the situation. Their figurative meaning sometimes is so remote from

1. The same data were used in another study that focused on the nature of SBUs (Kecskes, 1999).
2. When findings are analyzed, it will be specified which tests the observations are based on.

their literal meaning that NNSs can hardly recognize the metaphorical use. For instance:

OK, shoot (Go ahead)
Piece of cake (Easy)
Get out of here (Don't fool me)

When asked to interpret these utterances NNSs relied on the literal meaning and compositional structure of the expressions which led to misunderstandings. What makes the interpretation of these SBUs even more complicated is that they are widely used in their literal meaning as well. For instance:

—I hope I am not disturbing you.
—Get out of here. Don't you see that I am busy?

Reluctance of NNSs to use these expressions can be explained by the fact that cognitive mechanisms responsible for the metaphorical or figurative meaning of these phrases prove to be too culture-specific for NNSs. For instance, it would be hard to find another culture in which 'easiness' of an action is compared to a 'piece of cake' as in American-English.

Another typical example for cultural specificity is when students were confronted with the following task in the Discourse Interpretation test:

There is a TV show on. The anchor pauses the program for a commercial. S/he wants the audience to continue watching the program after the break. What does s/he say?

Students were expected to remember clichés they hear on TV in this situation. Native speakers came up with the most frequently used expressions such as

Stay tuned. We'll be right back.
We'll have to take a break. Don't go away.

NNSs having spent less than two years in the U.S., however, did very poorly on this task. They could hardly recall anything that at least vaguely resembles the most frequently heard expressions. Although foreign students often watch TV, these utterances sound strange for them, and they just ignore them thinking that they will never need them. Here are some responses:

Keep your channel (Japanese, 13/1)³
When we come back we will an action ... (Spanish, 7/0.6)

3. Information in brackets refers to the L1 of the student, years of studying English and time spent in the U.S.

The correct answer was not a problem for those students who have spent more than two years in the target language country.

6.1.2. Culture-specific situation

NNSs have the same or similar situational frame in their L1 but the expected scripts are different in the two cultures (Kecskes, 1999). For instance, the expression 'How are you doing?' in American English generally functions like a greeting. No other answer than 'Fine, thank you' (or its equivalents) is expected. In many other cultures, however, this expression means what it says: 'tell me how you are doing'. So the situational frame is the same as in American English but the script is different. Not recognizing this type of difference NNS participants of the survey often used their L1 script. In the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) all native speakers reacted to the question 'How are you doing?' with a short, positive response. None of them used a negative answer. This was not always the case in the NNSs' responses. Although most of the students have acquired the positive attitude, there were responses that are not necessarily native-like because they want to say too much. Here are some examples:

— *How are you doing?*

—Hi. Pretty good. How are you? (Japanese, 9/2.6)

—Hi. I am fine, thanks. What about you? (Russian, 4/0.6)

Culture specific situations make it difficult for NNSs to figure out what style or tone is appropriate to use. This is especially obvious when students try to distinguish between relaxed, informal American-style of speech and false intimacy. For instance, when NNSs were given the following task: 'You want to talk to your professor. You knock at his door, open it and say what?', students having spent less than a year in the U.S. applied more or less their own socio-cultural rules:

— Hello Professor Brown, I am in your class, and I have some questions to ask you. Do you have time that I can ask you now? (Japanese, 9/2.9)

— Excuse me sir, are you free now because I need to talk to you for a while. (Malaysian, 10/0.6)

More advanced students, however, seem to have made false generalizations and sounded too relaxed and disturbingly intimate:

—Hi, ex. Randy. (Chinese, 10/1.5)

—Hi, how are you, George? (Laotian, 2/2)

6.2. Individual learner strategies

Individual learner strategies seem to dominate SBU selection and use because SBUs are learned rather than evolve in the L2 (Kecskes, 1999). L2 learners cannot repeat the first language experience, and inadequate input in the target language and an unauthentic environment increase the role of conscious, individual selections. Cognitive mechanisms responsible for SBUs can differ to a great extent in the L1 and L2. Pragmatic transfer, however, is motivated not only by L1 influence but also by individual learner differences. Speakers play an active role in selecting which SBUs to acquire for a particular situation. Their like or dislike of certain expressions and situations was demonstrated in their responses. Students often picked out some expressions from their inventory and started to use them in a formulaic way. The results of the survey confirmed the findings of several other surveys. It has been argued that learners of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily show concomitant pragmatic skills. Bardovi-Harlig (1996) observed that the range of success among students with a high level of grammatical proficiency is quite wide. Kecskes (1999) suggested that this variety in pragmatic proficiency can partly be explained by individual learner differences. Students seem to have more control over their pragmatic development than their grammatical development. They frequently learn pragmatic units and develop pragmatic attitude by choice, which they usually cannot do when learning grammar. Beebe (1988:45) argued that "learners actively choose to adopt (i.e., learn) only those target language varieties that appeal to them on affective grounds and to reject others to which they are sufficiently exposed".

6.2.1. Overuse

NNSs used the same expressions in situations which significantly differ from each other. For instance:

S1: —Can I borrow your pen?

S2: —Would you like some candy?

S3: —Can I talk to you after class?

Response to each by the same student: 'Sure, no problem'. (The student is from Spain, and has spent two years in the US).

6.2.2. Oversimplification

In many cases NNSs preferred simple SBUs to more complex ones. However, they often misunderstood the function of simplicity in those phrases. As a result, their production often appeared to be oversimplified. They used one-word responses to questions where native speakers usually felt the need to add

something to the straight response, or use a 'motivated' one-word utterance. For instance:

— *Can I borrow your pen?*

NNS: Yes

NS: Sure /Certainly /Yeah, sure /OK, here you go.

— *I have to go now. I'll call you tomorrow*

NNS: OK

NS: Okay, see you soon/OK, talk to you later/Alright, take it easy.

This oversimplification is especially common among Asian students who have been in the US for less than two years. So they are not beginners and have quite a bit of experience in the target language culture. In spite of this, they usually make a false generalization about American speaking style. In comparison to formulas in Asian languages, many American expressions may seem to be too short and laconic to these students, so they have the false impression that if they want to sound native-like, they must be as laconic as possible. For instance:

Thank you very much —thanks

Fine, thank you —fine

Sure, you can —sure

6.2.3. Verbosity

False generalization is a part of an evolving process which characterizes the development of NNS discourse style. Responses of NNSs with less than a year experience in the US demonstrate that they are usually more 'verbose' than native speakers. They often seem to have broken the Gricean quantity maxim which says "Make your contribution as informative as required. Don't make your contribution more informative than required" (Grice, 1968). Many students (especially those coming from Malaysia, Nepal, Thailand, etc.) sounded too verbose in situations where Americans expect only short responses. For instance:

— *How was the party last night? Did you have a good time?*

It was really nice. Oh yes. It was cool. (Spanish, 6 months in the US)

Yes, it was a great party. I enjoy meeting different people. (Thai, 6 months in the US)

Good. But I didn't have a good time. (Malaysian, 2 months in the US)

Yes, I had a happy time, because I could meet old friends and had good dishes. (Japanese, 6 months in the US)

— *Jamie, hi. Listen, I want to apologize for what happened yesterday.*

Never mind. I think I have forgotten your stupid trick (Russian, 6 months in the US)

Um um - who are you? I am sorry. I do not recognize you (Spanish, 6 months in the US)

6.2.4. Ignoring SBUs

Advanced NNSs with long experience in the target language culture are expected to have made the necessary adjustments to the conceptual system of the target language. Their ignoring of SBUs, where native speakers generally use conventional SBUs only, however, show some deliberate break of communicative rules which can hardly be explained by the lack of conceptual fluency. For instance:

— *I have to go now. I'll call you tomorrow*

OK, at what time are you going to call me tomorrow? (Mexican, two years and six months)

— *Hey, what's up?*

I got some trouble. Could you help me? (Japanese, two years in the US)

— *Today is my birthday*

Wonderful. One more year and you can come to the bars with me. (Laotian, 20 months in the US)

7. Conclusions

Contemporary psycholinguistics claims that figurative language does not involve processing the surface literal meaning (Gibbs, 1984; Giora, 1997). After reviewing and reinterpreting the relevant literature, Giora (1997) argued that figurative and literal language use are governed by a general principle of salience according to which salient meanings (e.g., conventional, frequent, familiar, enhanced by prior context) are processed first. Thus, for instance, when the most salient meaning is intended (as in, e.g., the figurative meaning of an SBU), it is accessed directly, without having to process the literal (less salient) meaning first. However, when the opposite occurs, and a less rather than a more salient meaning is intended (e.g., the literal meaning of conventional SBUs) comprehension usually involves a sequential process, upon which the more salient meaning is processed first, before the intended meaning is derived (see Blasko and Connine, 1993; Gibbs, 1980; Gregory and Mergler, 1990). When more than one meaning is salient, a parallel processing is induced. This is what usually happens when figurative and literal meanings of conventional SBUs are equally

salient like in the expression 'get out of here' on page 151 (b) and 153. These meanings are processed initially both literally and metaphorically. The survey demonstrated what bearing figurative and literal language processing has on the use of SBUs in L2. This is summarized in the following points:

1. NNSs have difficulties with adjusting to the language-specific principles of salience in the target language because they rely mainly on their L1-dominated conceptual system when using and processing SBUs. This problem is especially acute when parallel processing is needed to figure out whether the more salient meaning of an SBU is figurative or literal in the given situation.
2. Use of SBUs demonstrated the existence of three developmental stages. The first developmental stage is the period of strong L1-culture transfer, the second is usually characterized by false generalizations, and the third is when things are expected to fall on their place. This three-stage developmental process explains why NNS production was characterized by both 'oversimplification' and 'verbosity'. In fact, there is no contradiction here because 'verbosity' and 'laconism' are two different developmental stages in the use of SBUs. Short answers characterize the language use of more advanced students being in the US for one or two years while verbosity is frequent in the responses of beginners. Students living in the US for more than two years are expected to develop a more balanced use of SBUs which, in many cases, resembles that of the native speakers. But in fact, this is not what happens to many advanced NNSs. It is usually the third period when individual selection starts to play a significant role. Length of stay did not prove to be an independent variable in this survey. Based on the results it cannot be claimed that the more time students spend in the target language country the better their use of SBUs becomes. The language use of students with one year or under is strongly influenced by pragmatic transfer from the L1. Individual learner differences can be explained by the intensiveness and success of their previous studies of English as a foreign language. Students with at least two years of experience in the target language country seem to use SBUs as a sign of their integration in the new language community. Their individual choices cannot be considered as signs of their pragmatic competence because they are significantly affected by factors such as cultural differences and individual learning strategies.
3. The survey demonstrated that length of stay was less important than distance of cultures. Individual selection was especially noticeable in the responses of advanced Asian students. Their production was grammatically correct and even appropriate but not necessarily native-like which

can be explained as a clear endeavor to emphasize their individual use of target language means.

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