

***Chengyu* in Chinese Language Teaching: A Preliminary Analysis of Italian Learners' Data**

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Abstract

Chengyu, also known as Chinese four-character idioms, are a type of traditional Chinese idiom, mostly consisting of four characters. They commonly derive from classic Chinese literary sources, including those of the three great philosophical and religious traditions that influenced the entire East Asia cultural sphere: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. *Chengyu*, therefore, possess a wide range of cultural references, and, from Chinese, spread to the languages of the other countries of the sinosphere, such as Japan and Korea. Although many scholars have emphasized the importance of the acquisition of *chengyu*, not much attention has been paid to *chengyu* learning in Chinese Language Teaching research so far. As a preliminary attempt to address this gap, this paper reports the results of two small-scale, exploratory experiments, aimed at investigating Italian learners' general knowledge of *chengyu* and their main interpretation strategies, as well as comparing the effectiveness of direct and indirect instruction in *chengyu* teaching. The experiments involved participants from Bachelor and Master programs of Roma Tre University. The results show a predominant effect of negative transfer from Italian, as well as a better performance of the participants who received indirect instruction.

Keywords: *chengyu*, idioms, foreign language teaching, Chinese, vocabulary

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1. Introduction

An idiom is a conventionalized multiword expression, the meaning of which cannot be deduced from the literal meaning of its constituents.¹ *Chengyu* (*chéngyǔ* 语成, also known as Chinese four-character idioms) are a type of traditional Chinese idiom, mostly consisting of four characters. They commonly derive from classic Chinese literary sources, including those of the three great philosophical and religious traditions that influenced the entire East Asia cultural sphere: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. *Chengyu*, therefore, possess a wide range of cultural references, and, from Chinese, spread to the languages of the other countries of the sinosphere, including Japan and Korea.² In modern days, *chengyu* also have a strong socio-pragmatic function, being frequently used by native speakers of Chinese, especially in written discourse.³ In spite of their relevance, however, research on *chengyu* teaching in the context of Chinese Language Teaching (CLT) is still at a preliminary stage.

This paper reports the results of an experimental pilot study on *chengyu* learning conducted in 2013 at Roma Tre University, with the participation of 47 B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) and M.A. (Master of Arts) students of Chinese. This study attempted to investigate, in an exploratory fashion, Italian CFL learners' general knowledge of *chengyu* and their predominant interpretation strategies, as well as the effectiveness of direct and indirect instruction in *chengyu* teaching. For this purpose, the participants were randomly divided into two groups, one for each technique, and attended a 30 minutes teaching session. After the treatment, a test was administered, and the participants' results were compared. The comparison of the results suggested a better performance of the group that received indirect instruction. The paper begins with a review of the literature on the teaching of idioms and *chengyu* in foreign language teaching. It then describes the methods and the procedures adopted for the experiment, followed by the analysis and discussion of the results.

2. Literature review

After the publication of Michael Lewis's *The Lexical Approach*,⁴ with its basic assumption that language consists of grammaticalized lexis rather than lexicalized grammar, there was a shift in language teaching from grammar to vocabulary teaching, and vocabulary started to be considered an essential part of language teaching. The Lexical Approach gives primary importance to formulaic language. Lewis argued that "language consists broadly of [...]"

¹ See Chitra Fernando, *Idioms and Idiomaticity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3.

² Concerning the cultural references related to *chengyu*, and their diffusion in Japan and Korea, see, respectively: Mo Pengling (莫彭龄), *Hanyu chengyu yu han wenhua* (汉语成语与汉文化) [Chinese *chengyu* and Chinese culture], Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe [南京教育出版社], 2001; Zhang Yu'na (张予娜), "Riyu chengyu, yanyu, guanyongyu de fenlei" (日语成语、谚语、惯用语的分类) [The classification of Japanese *chengyu*, *yanyu*, *guanyongyu*], *Journal of Social Science of Hunan University* (湖南大学社会科学学报), 7/2, 90-94; Wen Meizhen (文美振), "Cong yuyan jiechu kan hanyu chengyu dui hanyu yu qi chengyu de yingxiang" (从语言接触看汉语成语对韩语与其成语的影响) [The influence of Chinese *chengyu* on Korean *seong-eo* from the perspective of linguistic contact], *Journal of Nanjing University of Aeronautics & Astronautics (Social Sciences)* (南京航空航天大学学报(社会科学版)), 2005, 7/4, 59-62.

³ Concerning the register and the stylistic features of *chengyu* see Zhou Jian (周荐), "Lun chengyu de jingdianxing" (论成语的经典性) [On the classicality of *chengyu*], *Nankai xuebao* (南开学报), 1997, 2, 29-35/51.

⁴ Michael Lewis, *The Lexical Approach* (Hove: Language Teaching Publications, 1993).

different kinds of lexical items, the ‘constituent chunks’ of any language”:⁵ apart from single words, these chunks also include collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and idioms. The research literature on formulaic language largely confirms that formulaic expressions are indeed very widespread in language use: Sorhus, for instance, analyzed a corpus of spontaneous Canadian speech and calculated that an item of formulaic language occurred once every five words,⁶ while Biber et al. observed that around 30% of the words in the conversation corpus they analyzed consisted of lexical bundles.⁷ As regards Foreign Language Teaching (FLT), it is now commonly acknowledged that “learners must master formulaic language to reach a proficient level of mastery”.⁸ Being “preferred ways of saying things”,⁹ formulaic expressions are considered a fundamental component for the improvement of vocabulary competence, as well as a means to increase learners’ overall communicative power.

Being a sub-category of formulaic language, idioms should also be included in FLT. Lewis argues that “idioms should play an important role in language teaching, even at elementary and intermediate level”,¹⁰ and a good command of idiomatic expressions is also one of the main indicators of L2 proficiency level in the descriptors for vocabulary range as established by the Common European Framework for Languages.¹¹ Nonetheless, research on idioms has long been neglected, partly due to the fact that figurative expressions are traditionally considered a picturesque and hence marginal component of language.¹² However, in recent years researchers have started to give more attention to this issue, and a growing number of studies have been conducted on the teaching of idiomatic expressions.¹³

Chengyu are often referred to as the quintessence of Chinese language and culture.¹⁴ Two main areas of the research on *chengyu* are of specific interest for the purposes of this

⁵ Michael Lewis, “Pedagogical implications of the lexical approach”, in *Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition: A Rationale for Pedagogy*, edited by James Coady and Thomas Huckin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 255.

⁶ Helen B. Sorhus, “To hear ourselves – Implications for teaching English as a second language”, *English Language Teaching Journal*, 1977, 31, 211-221.

⁷ Douglas Biber, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Linch, Susan Conrad, and Edward Finegan, *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Harlow: Longman, 1999).

⁸ Fatima A. Alali and Norbert Schmitt, “Teaching formulaic sequences: The same or different from teaching single words?”, *TESOL Journal*, 2012, 3/2, 153-180.

⁹ István Kecskés, “Formulaic language in English lingua franca”, in *Explorations in Pragmatics: Linguistic, Cognitive and Intercultural Aspects*, edited by István Kecskés and Laurence Horn (Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 194.

¹⁰ Michael Lewis, *Lexical Approach*, 99.

¹¹ Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001). Available at: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf [accessed on 28.01.2017].

¹² Mario Cardona, “La comprensione e produzione di idioms: aspetti psicolinguistici e riflessioni glottodidattiche”, *Studi di glottodidattica*, 2008, 3, 46.

¹³ See for instance Suzanne Irujo, “A piece of cake: Learning and teaching idioms”, *ELT Journal*, 1986a, 40/3, 236-242; Thomas C. Cooper, “Teaching idioms”, *Foreign Language Annals*, 1998, 31/2, 255-266; Frank Boers, “Remembering figurative idioms by hypothesizing about their origins”, *Prospect*, 2001, 16, 33-43; Frank Boers and Murielle Demecheleer, “Measuring the impacts of cross-cultural differences on learners’ comprehension of imageable idioms”, *ELT Journal*, 2001, 55/3, 255-262; Frank Boers, June Eyckmans, and Hélène Stengers, “Presenting figurative idioms with a touch of etymology: More than mere mnemonics?”, *Language Teaching Research*, 2007, 11/1, 43-62.

¹⁴ See Mo Pengling (莫彭龄), “Hanyu chengyu xin lun” (汉语成语新论) [New theory of Chinese *chengyu*], *Jiangsu shehui kexue* (江苏社会科学), 2000, 6, 181-184.

paper: descriptive research and second language teaching research.¹⁵ The first area focuses on the description of the semantic and morpho-syntactic characteristics of *chengyu*, as well as their classification. The study conducted by Sun Weizhang on Chinese idiomatic expressions (*shúyǔ* 语熟) is particularly representative of this strand of studies.¹⁶ In his book, the author analyzes the various literary sources and linguistic processes that led to the formation of *chengyu*, as well as the main differences between *chengyu* and other forms of Chinese idiomatic expressions. Other studies classified *chengyu* according to their degree of semantic transparency, identifying three main categories: transparent, semi-transparent and opaque *chengyu*.¹⁷ Transparent *chengyu* are those with no metaphorical meaning, e.g. *yú zhòng bù tóng* 与众不同, which literally means ‘different from the masses, out of the ordinary’. Semi-transparent *chengyu* are those whose figurative meaning is an extension of their compositional meaning, for example *sì miàn bā fāng* 四面八方, ‘all directions’, the meaning of which is an extension of the literal meaning ‘four sides and eight directions’. Finally, opaque *chengyu* are those which display little or no relationship with their literal meaning and metaphorical meaning, e.g. *huà shé tiān zú* 画蛇添足, literally ‘to draw snakes and add feet’, which means ‘to spoil things by doing something superfluous’. According to Pan Xianjun and Zhang Yanping, each one of these three categories corresponds to a different degree of difficulty for foreign learners.¹⁸ The above discussion suggests that *chengyu*, rather than being completely non-compositional, show a wide degree of transparency and analyzability, which is further enhanced by the frequent occurrence of recurrent morpho-syntactic patterns.¹⁹

Ni and Yao²⁰ analyzed the morpho-syntactic features of *chengyu*, pointing out that syntactically they act as single words or phrases, and they can function as any syntactic component. The syntactic function of each *chengyu* mostly depends on its grammatical function, which can be either nominal or predicative and is determined by the morpho-syntactic structure of the *chengyu* itself. For example, a predicate+object structure (see Ex. 1) corresponds to a predicative function:

(1) 饼充饥画

Huà bǐng chōng jī
Draw cakes allay hunger

¹⁵ A third, relevant area for CFL, mentioned by Nong Li’na (浓莉娜), “Jin shi nian lai duiwai hanyu jiaoxue zhong de chengyu jiaoxue zongshu” (近十年来对外汉语教学中的成语教学综述) [Report on *chengyu* teaching in Chinese teaching for foreigners in the last ten years], *Journal of Language and Literature* (Gaojiao ban) (语文学科(高教版)), 2007, 5, 150-160, but beyond the scope of this paper, is the compiling of learner’s dictionaries.

¹⁶ Sun Weizhang (孙维张), *Hanyu Shuyuxue* (汉语熟语学) [Chinese phraseology] (Changchun: Jilin Publishing Group [长春: 吉林教育出版社], 1989).

¹⁷ See Ni Baoyuan (倪宝元) and Yao Pengci (姚鹏慈), *Chengyu jiu zhang* (成语九章) [*Chengyu* in nine chapters] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Publishing House [杭州: 浙江教育出版社], 1990).

¹⁸ Pan Xianjun (潘先军), “Jianlun duiwai hanyu jiaoxue zhong de chengyu wenti” (教学中的成语问题简论对外汉语) [Brief talk on the problem of *chengyu* in Chinese teaching for foreigners], *Chinese Character Culture* (汉字文化), 2006, 1, 54-57; Zhang Yanping (张艳萍), “Liuxuesheng chengyu nanyi tidu yanjiu fangfa tanxi” (留学生成语难易梯度研究方法探析) [Exploratory research method for a *chengyu* difficulty scale for foreign learners], *Yunnan shifan daxue xuebao* (*duiwai hanyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu ban*) (云南师范大学学报(对外汉语教学与研究版)), 2012, 10/5, 22-27

¹⁹ See Cui Yiyong (崔益勇), “Chengyu de ji zhong geshi” (语的几种格式成) [Some types of *chengyu* patterns], *Hanyu xuexi* (汉语学习), 1981, 2, 45-49.

²⁰ Ni Baoyuan and Yao Pengci, *Jiu zhang*.

‘Making drawings of cakes in order to alleviate one’s hunger [i.e. to feed on illusions]’

Nominative *chengyu* can be used either as subjects or direct objects, while predicative *chengyu* can be used as predicates, nominal and verbal modifiers or verb complements.

Some studies also addressed the issue of the use of *chengyu* in context, and showed that many *chengyu* possess several collocational, syntactic and contextual restrictions.²¹ For example, some *chengyu* cannot be modified by degree adverbs such as *hěn* 很, ‘very’, while others can only be used in specific communicative situations. Syntactic restrictions are often suggested by the morpho-syntactic structure of the *chengyu*, for example predicative *chengyu* that contain the morpheme *xiāng* 相, ‘mutually’, as in *xiāng qīn xiāng ài* 亲相爱相, ‘to love each other devotedly’, require a plural subject.

The second area of research focuses directly on foreign language teaching. Most scholars share the view that there is currently a general lack of guidelines for practitioners and textbook editors, due to the fact that research on *chengyu* teaching has long been neglected by scholars. This has led to a high degree of freedom both in the selection of *chengyu* for textbooks and in language teaching practices. Lao Peixuan compared 35 textbooks and found very big differences between them in the *chengyu* selection.²² For instance, the number of *chengyu* found in advanced-level textbooks ranges from a minimum of 46 to a maximum of 223; moreover, of the total number of 1,019 *chengyu* found in all 35 books, only 171 of them occur more than twice, and only 7 of them more than five times. In addition, only 49.3% are also included in the *Syllabus of Graded Words and Characters*, which is one of the main references for CFLT.²³ Other studies focused on *chengyu* teaching and found that it has been often limited to the basic explanation of the general meaning of each specific *chengyu* followed by a translation (mostly into English), without any deeper analysis of the morphology, the syntactic function and the connotative meaning. Zhou Qing and Wang Meiling argue that the typical approach followed by instructors in teaching *chengyu* is a word-centered approach (*cíběnwèi* 词本位), which derives from Western language teaching theories that consider words as being single, indivisible units.²⁴ However, since characters are the basic units of Chinese, a character-centered approach (*zìběnwèi* 字本位) would instead be more suitable for Chinese teaching, as it could provide learners with a deeper understanding of the structure and the meaning of words, as well as their syntactic use. Indeed, as scholars such as Hong and Zhang²⁵ have pointed out, learners often fail to recognize the morpho-syntactic structure of *chengyu*, i.e. the way the constituent

²¹ See Ni Baoyuan and Yao Pengci, *Jiu zhang*; Hong Bo (洪波), “Duiwai hanyu chengyu jiaoxue tanlun” (对外汉语成语教学探论) [Exploratory discussion on *chengyu* teaching in Chinese for foreigners], *Sun Yatsen University Forum* (中山大学学报论丛), 2003, 23/2, 128-130; Zhang Yaru (张亚茹), “Shilun gaoji jieduan de chengyu jiaoxue (试论高级阶段的成语教学) [On *chengyu* teaching at advanced levels], *Applied Linguistics* (语言文字应用), 2006, 1, 119-125.

²² Lao Peixuan (劳培萱), “Duiwai hanyu jiaocai zhong de chengyu yanjiu” (对外汉语教材中的成语研究) [Research on *chengyu* in Chinese for foreigners teaching materials], *Modern Chinese* (现代语文), 2009, 5, 125-128.

²³ The Office of China National Committee for Chinese Proficiency (国家汉语水平考试委员会办公室考试中心), *The Syllabus of Graded Words and Characters for Chinese Proficiency (Xiudingban)* (汉语水平词汇与汉字等级大纲 (修订版)) (Beijing: Economic Science Press [北京: 经济科学出版社], 2001).

²⁴ Zhou Qing (周青) and Wang Meiling (王美玲), “Dangqian duiwai hanyu chengyu jiaoxue de biduan he fangfa gexin” (当前对外汉语成语教学的弊端和方法革新) [The current drawbacks of *chengyu* teaching in Chinese for foreigners and methodological innovation], *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Engineering* (湖南科技学院学报), 2008, 30/6, 162-164.

²⁵ Hong Bo, “Chengyu jiaoxue tanlun”; Zhang Yaru, “Gaoji jieduan de chengyu jiaoxue”.

characters are combined, and this leads to errors like the one in example 2, where a *chengyu* which already contains a direct object (*qíng* 情, ‘feeling, affection’) is followed by another direct object (*tā* 他, ‘him’):²⁶

- (2) *。的见钟情他我是一 (Zhang 2006: 121)
- | | | | | |
|-----------|------------|----------------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| <i>Wǒ</i> | <i>shì</i> | <i>yī-jàn-zhōng-qíng</i> | <i>tā</i> | <i>de</i> . |
| 1SG | EMPH | as-see-concentrate-feeling | 3SG.M | MOD ²⁷ |
- ‘I fell in love with him at first sight.’

A character-centered approach, on the contrary, could be effective in raising learners’ awareness of the semantic and morpho-syntactic regularities of *chengyu*, and would hopefully help them to infer the meaning and the syntactic function of most unknown *chengyu*.²⁸

In conclusion, many researchers recommend that teachers should cover all aspects of *chengyu* meaning and grammar, including connotation, collocations, syntactic and contextual use and cultural value. Several studies also propose some techniques to be adopted in *chengyu* instruction, such as the analysis of frequent structures and key-characters, the translation into modern Chinese and the reading of *chengyu* stories.²⁹ Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such techniques still needs to be empirically validated: as Guo recently pointed out, “research on explicit instruction and learning strategies, such as analyzing the components of *Chengyu*, inferencing meaning and classifying the properties of *Chengyu*, is [an] area that deserves more study.”³⁰

The present study is an exploratory attempt to shed some light on the effectiveness of different ways of teaching *chengyu*, in order to obtain some preliminary data for a more wide-ranging study, to be conducted in the future. The research questions are as follows:

1. Are there any prevalent tendencies among Italian learners when dealing with unknown *chengyu*?
2. Is inferential, indirect instruction combined with a character-centered (*zibenwei*) approach more effective in *chengyu* learning, compared to the more commonly used translation-based, word-centered (*cibenwei*) direct instruction?

²⁶ Other causes of error are connected with factors such as collocations, connotative meaning and the presence of low frequency characters (e.g., see Hong Bo, “Jiaoxue tanlun”; Shi Jian (时建), “Waiguo xuesheng chengyu xide pianwu ji qi jiaozheng celüe” (外国学生成语习得偏误及其矫正策略) [Foreign learners’ *chengyu* acquisitional errors and their corrective strategies], *Journal of Teachers College Qingdao University* (青岛大学师范学院学报), 2008, 25/3, 105-109; Shi Lin (石琳), “Liuxuesheng shiyong hanyu chengyu de pianwu fenxi ji jiaoxue celüe” (留学生使用汉语成语的偏误分析及教学策略) [Error analysis of foreign learners’ *chengyu* use and pedagogical strategies], *Xinan minzu daxue xuebao (renwen sheke ban)* (西南民族大学学报 (人文社科版)), 2008, 6, 280-283.

²⁷ Abbreviations: 1SG: first-person singular; EMPH: emphatic particle; 3SG.M: third-person singular (masculine); MOD: modal particle.

²⁸ On the benefits of the character-centered approach in Chinese vocabulary teaching see Jia Ying (贾颖), “Zibenwei yu duiwai hanyu cihui jiaoxue” (字本位与对外汉语词汇教学) [The character-centered approach and vocabulary teaching in Chinese for foreigners], *Chinese Language Learning* (汉语学习), 2001, 4, 78-80.

²⁹ E.g., see Pan Xianjun, “Chengyu wenti”; Zhou Qing and Wang Meiling, “Fangfa gexin”; Liu Chenjie (刘辰洁), “Ren zhi yuyanxue shijiao xia de duiwai hanyu chengyu jiaoxue celüe yanjiu” (认知语言视角下的对外汉语成语教学策略研究) [Study on *chengyu* teaching techniques in Chinese for foreigners from a cognitive-linguistics perspective], *Bulletin of Chinese Language Teaching* (语文教学通讯), 2014, 810/11, 84-86.

³⁰ Jiaqi F. Guo, “Learning Chinese idioms: A luxury for the CFL curriculum?”, in *Teaching and Learning Chinese in Higher Education: Theoretical and Practical Issues*, edited by Yang Lu (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2017), 83-108.

3. Method

3.1. Design

This explorative study consists in two experiments, the first (Experiment 1) aimed at investigating the main tendencies in the participants' knowledge and interpretation strategies of *chengyu*, the second (Experiment 2) aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the two teaching approaches. Two intact classes were used for data gathering, one third-year B.A. class and one M.A. class. The tests and the treatment for the B.A. groups and the M.A. groups differed slightly, according to the proficiency levels of the participants. Test results for the B.A. groups and the M.A. groups were analyzed separately. The language material for the treatment and for both tests was all taken and adapted from the Corpus of Chinese of the University of Leeds³¹ and then reviewed by a native speaker of Chinese.³²

3.2. Participants

The experiment took place at Roma Tre University. All the participants were CFL learners. There were 30 participants from the B.A. group for the pre-test, all of whom studied Chinese at Roma Tre. Their average age was 22-23, with one exception of a 50-year-old participant. One participant did not indicate his or her age. At the time of Experiment 1, they had studied Chinese for an average period of 3 years, 4 years in two cases and a maximum of 5 years in another two cases. Eight participants had previously had some experience of studying in China, ranging from a minimum duration of three weeks to a maximum duration of two months. After Experiment 1, equal numbers of participants were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups for Experiment 2. The final sample of the participants who took part to Experiment 2 consisted of 6 in the control group and 9 in the experimental group.

The 17 participants from the M.A. group who participated in Experiment 1 were more heterogeneous. Several of them did their Bachelor in universities other than Roma Tre, and had therefore had different learning experiences. This class included 8 first-year and 9 second-year students. The first-year students had an average age of 24 and they had all studied Chinese for an average period of 4 years, ranging from a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 6 years. The second-year students had an average age of 24 and had all studied Chinese for 5 years; 8 participants had spent a period of study in China, ranging from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 4 months. An equal proportion of first- and second-year students was assigned to both the experimental and the control groups, but only 8 participants from the control group and 4 participants from the experimental group took part in the test in Experiment 2. The issue of this disparity between the number of participants in these two groups will be further discussed in the *Analysis* section for Experiment 2.

³¹ See Serge Sharoff, "Creating general-purpose corpora using automated search engine queries", in *Wacky! Working Papers of the Web as Corpus*, edited by Marco Baroni and Silvia Bernardini (Bologna: Gedit, 2006), 63-98.

³² The definitions of the *chengyu* used were checked in monolingual dictionaries, such as Yu Mingshan (于明善), *Duo gongneng chengyu cidian* (多功能成语词典) [Multi-functional *chengyu* dictionary] (Beijing: Sinolingua [北京: 华语教学出版社], 2009).

3.3. Experiment 1

Materials and procedures

Experiment 1 consisted of a 30 minutes test for both classes. The test included five tasks: one open-ended task, one recall task, one recognition task, one translation task and one grammar task. In the open-ended task (Task 1), the participants had to give as complete a definition of *chengyu* as possible, whereas in the recall task (Task 2) they were asked to write down all the *chengyu* that they knew. In the recognition task (Task 3), only included in the M.A. test, the participants had to recognize *chengyu* out of a list of 9 Chinese formulaic expressions; in the translation task (Task 4), the participants had to write down the meanings of five *chengyu*, which included two semantically transparent *chengyu*, one metaphorically transparent *chengyu* and two metaphorically opaque *chengyu*. Lastly, the grammar task (Task 5) consisted of six pairs of sentences, each pair consisting of one that was grammatically correct and one that was grammatically incorrect, and the grammatical correctness of the whole sentence being inferable from the morpho-syntactic features of the *chengyu* contained in it. For each *chengyu*, a translation into Italian was provided. The aim of this task was to test the participants' awareness of the influence of the morphology of the *chengyu* on its syntactic function (see section 2), as well as the influence of the translation into the L1 on the comprehension of its proper use.

No score was assigned for the test, as its only aim was to investigate the students' overall knowledge on *chengyu* and the recurrent patterns in students' interpretation of meaning and grammar acceptability, as well as determining which *chengyu* the students already knew, in order not to include them into Experiment 2. For Task 1, the definitions provided by the participants had to include the following six aspects in order to be considered as complete: 1) the idiomatic nature of *chengyu*; 2) the prevalence of a four-character structure; 3) the literary origin 4) the invariability of *chengyu*; 5) the non-compositionality of meaning; 6) the predominant use in written texts. As none of the ten *chengyu* selected for Experiment 2 occurred in the students' responses to Task 2, the recall task, it was assumed that these *chengyu* were completely unknown to the participants.

Analysis

As already pointed out in the previous section, the test results were not scored and no statistical analysis was carried out, but only the frequencies of correct answers were examined. For the open-ended items general trends were noted.

Table 1 shows the participants' responses to Task 1. Frequencies for every aspect listed in the previous section were calculated.

Table 1. Frequencies (%) of correct answers for pre-test, Task 1

	B.A. (N=30)	M.A. (N=17)
Idiomatycity	40% (12/30)	70.59% (12/17)
Four characters	16.67% (5/30)	64.71% (11/17)
Invariability	6.67% (2/30)	17.65% (3/17)
Literary origins	3.33% (1/30)	5.88% (1/17)
Meaning complexity	10.00% (3/30)	58.82% (10/17)
Written use	3.33% (1/30)	17.65% (3/17)

The data in Table 2 show that both the B.A. and the M.A. students had a good awareness of the idiomatycity of *chengyu* (40% and 70.59% respectively). Other frequently mentioned aspects were the number of characters and the semantic complexity (64.71% and 58.82% for the M.A. group; 16.67% and 10% for the B.A. group). As for the other aspects (i.e. invariability, literary origin and written use), the percentages of occurrences were very low in both groups. Only one participant in each group mentioned the literary origin and the written use. Another aspect worth noticing is that the M.A. group's percentages are generally higher than the B.A. group, thus suggesting a higher awareness of the main characteristics of *chengyu* in more advanced students. No single participant mentioned all six characteristics.

Task 2 and Task 3 were the *chengyu* recall and recognition tasks. Task 3 was included only in the M.A. test. Most of the participants (27/30 in the B.A. group, 12/17 in the M.A. group) mentioned the *chengyu*: *rù xiāng suí sú* 乡随俗入, 'following local customs of a place', probably because it is included in the textbook adopted at Roma Tre.³³ Other *chengyu* frequently mentioned by the M.A. learners were *bèn niǎo xiān fēi* 鸟先飞笨, 'clumsy birds have to start flying earlier' (8/17), and *shùn qí zì rán* 自然顺其, 'to follow the natural course of things' (7/17), which were also included in the textbook adopted for the M.A. course that year³⁴ and had thus been recently studied. The results of Task 3 are shown in Table 2 (the only *chengyu* are items 3, 6 and 9). The data suggests that learners tend to misread every four-character expression as a *chengyu*, which on the one hand confirms their good awareness of the *chengyu*'s predominant four-character structure, as seen in Task 1, while, on the other hand, it can also lead to misinterpretations.³⁵

³³ Federico Masini, Tongbing Zhang, Hua Bai, Anna Di Toro, and Dongmei Liang, *Il cinese per gli italiani* (Milano: Hoepli, 2010).

³⁴ Cen Yuzhen (岑玉珍), *Developing Chinese (Second Edition): Advanced Comprehensive Course (I)* (高级综合 (第二版) 发展汉语 (I)) (Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press [北京: 北京语言大学出版社], 2011).

³⁵ Even though *bèn niǎo xiān fēi* 笨鸟先飞 is in fact a *chengyu*, Item 4 was not considered as correct, as in this case it consists of five characters.

Table 2. Frequencies (%) of the participants' selections for pre-test, Task 3

	English translation	Frequencies
1. 预防针打 <i>Dǎ yǔfǎngzhēn</i>	Inoculate oneself (against bad things)	35.29% (6/17)
2. 伤疤忘了疼好了 <i>Hǎo le shāngbā wàng le téng</i>	Forget the pain once the scar has disappeared	11.76% (2/17)
3. 独一无二 <i>Dú yī wú èr</i>	The one and only	41.18% (7/17)
4. 鸟儿先飞本 <i>Bèniǎo xiān fēi</i>	Clumsy birds have to start flying earlier	82.35% (14/17)
5. 就怕万一，不怕一万 <i>Bù pà yī wàn, jù pà wàn yī</i>	To take every care, in case something unexpected happens	35.29% (6/17)
6. 耳目一新 <i>Ēr mù yī xīn</i>	(To find oneself in) a completely new world	47.06% (8/17)
7. 新的不来，旧的不去 <i>Jiù de bù qù, xīn de bù lái</i>	To get rid of the old to make room for the new	41.18% (7/17)
8. 鸭子笨——上不了架 <i>Bènyāzi – shàng bu liǎo jià</i>	A clumsy duck can't get onto the perch	0% (0/17)
9. 见义勇为 <i>Jiàn yì yǒng wéi</i>	To act bravely for a just cause	52.94% (9/17)

Task 4 was the translation task. It included the *chengyu* *rù xiāng suí sú* 乡随俗入, which, as previously pointed out, was the most familiar *chengyu* for both the M.A. and the B.A. students. This was further confirmed, as 83.35% of the M.A. students and 93.33% of the B.A. students who provided a translation of this item. Another *chengyu* with a high percentage of provided translations was the semantically transparent *yú zhòng bù tóng* 与众不同, 'out of the ordinary', which was translated by 52.94% of M.A. students and 43.3% of B.A. students (for the numbers of provided translations and numbers of correct translations in Task 4, see Table 3).

Table 3. Frequencies (%) of total and correct answers for pre-test, Task 4

	B.A. (N=30)		M.A. (N=17)	
	Total	Correct	Total	Correct
1. 与众不同 <i>Yú zhòng bù tóng</i>	43.33% (13/30)	15.38% (2/13)	52.94% (9/17)	77.7% (7/9)
2. 乡随俗入 <i>Rù xiāng suí sú</i>	93.33% (28/30)	96.43% (27/28)	83.35% (14/17)	100% (14/14)
3. 计百年大 <i>Bǎi nián dà jì</i>	50% (15/30)	0% (0/15)	47.06% (8/17)	37.5% (3/8)
6. 目中无人 <i>Mù zhōng wú rén</i>	30% (9/30)	0% (0/9)	47.06% (8/17)	37.5% (3/8)
5. 狗心狗行 <i>Gǒu xīn gǒu xíng</i>	30% (9/30)	0% (0/9)	29.41% (5/17)	0% (0/5)

From the analysis of the students' translations, some general tendencies can be noticed. First of all, semi-transparent and opaque *chengyu* obtained the lowest percentages of correct translations, in accordance with the assumptions of Pan and Zhang.³⁶ Another tendency is the negative influence of linguistic and cultural transfer from the L1, especially with semi-transparent and opaque *chengyu*. In these cases, one of the most frequently used strategies was to identify any familiar characters and then to think of an Italian proverb or saying that contains elements with a similar meaning. This was particularly evident for the *chengyu*: *gǒu xīn gǒu xíng* 狗心狗行 (Item 5), '[to have a] dog's [vicious] heart and behaviour': most students understood the meaning of at least one familiar character, either *gǒu* 狗, 'dog', or *xīn* 心, 'heart', or *xíng* 行, 'behaviour/to go', and they then thought of an Italian idiomatic expression with some connection to this meaning. They thus translated it with various expressions such as *il cane è il miglior amico dell'uomo* ('a dog is a man's best friend', B.A.: 6/9), *'va' dove ti porta il cuore* (follow your heart', B.A.: 4/9; M.A.: 3/5), *'essere fedeli come un cane*' ('be as loyal as a dog', one both in B.A. and in M.A.), and *'can che abbaia non morde*' ('barking dogs seldom bite'). In these cases, the effect of negative transfer from the L1 was both linguistic and cultural, as the negative polarity of this *chengyu* does not appear in the translations, given that dogs are often associated with positive values such as friendship and loyalty in Western countries. Another example is *bǎi nián dà jì* 计百年大 (Item 3), 'a project of vital and lasting importance' (lit.: 'a great one-hundred-year project'), which was translated in various ways such as *'in molto tempo si possono fare grandi progetti*' ('great projects can be accomplished in a long time'), *'cent'anni non bastano per imparare*' ('a hundred years are not enough to learn something') etc. The same tendency can also be noticed in the translations proposed for *yú zhòng bù tóng* 与众不同 (Item 1), 'out of the ordinary', even though in this case it was less prominent, due to the semantic transparency of this *chengyu*. The various translations included: *'chi fa da sé fa per tre*' (literally: 'if you want something done well, do it for yourself', B.A.: 2/13), *'meglio soli che male*

³⁶ Pan Xianjun, "Chengyu wenti"; Zhang Yanping, "Nanyi tidu".

accompagnati' ('better alone than in bad company', B.A.: 1/13) and 'le persone sono tutte diverse' ('people are all different', M.A.: 1/9). Even the most familiar *chengyu*: *rù xiāng suí sù* 乡随俗入 (Item 2) was translated by two participants of the M.A. group and by one participant of the B.A. group as 'paese che vai, usanza che trovi' (literally: 'country you go, custom you find', which corresponds to the English 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do'). These findings are consistent with the results of the study conducted by Cooper (1999) on the strategies adopted by non-native speakers of English in idiom comprehension, which include reliance on the literal meaning and reference to corresponding idioms in the L1.³⁷

Table 4. Frequencies (%) of correct answers for pre-test, Task 5

	B.A. (N=30)	M.A. (N=17)
Pair 1	23.33% (7/30)	23.53% (4/17)
Pair 2	83.33% (25/30)	70.59% (12/17)
Pair 3	66.67% (20/30)	76.47% (13/17)
Pair 4	60% (18/30)	88.24% (15/17)
Pair 5	60% (18/30)	88.24% (15/17)
Pair 6	93.33% (28/30)	94.12% (16/17)

The last task (Task 5) was the grammar task, the results of which are shown in Table 4. While most learners in both groups performed well in this task, a tendency emerged from the analysis of the results for Item 1: when provided with a L1 translation, the participants tended to ignore the morphological structure of the *chengyu*, and this led to a misinterpretation of its syntactic function. The *chengyu*: *bái zhǐ hēi zì* 纸黑字白, literally: 'white paper black characters', is a nominative *chengyu* which consists of an "adjective+noun+adjective+noun" sequence, while the parallel Italian expression 'mettere nero su bianco' (literally: 'to put black on white', which means to write something down formally and officially in order to avoid disputes or misunderstandings) contains the verb 'mettere' ('put') and can only be used as a predicative phrase.

³⁷ Thomas C. Cooper, "Processing of idioms by L2 learners of English", *TESOL Quarterly*, 1999, 33/2, 233-262.

Table 5. *Chengyu* selection

Chengyu	n/p	Syntactic function	Semantic transparency	English translation
1. 四面八方 <i>Sì miàn bā fāng</i>	n	Subject, object, nominal modifier	MT	All directions
2. 前所未有 <i>Qián suǒ wèi yǒu</i>	p	Predicate, nominal modifier	ST	Unprecedented
3. 语自言自 <i>Zì yán zì yǔ</i>	p	Predicate, verbal modifier	ST	To talk to oneself
4. 显而易见 <i>Xiǎn ér yì jiàn</i>	p	Predicate, nominal modifier, sub-clause	ST	Obviously, (to be) obvious
5. 名列前茅 ³⁸ <i>Míng liè qián máo</i>	p	Predicate, nominal modifier	MO	To be the best, in the top rank
6. 为所作所 <i>Suǒ zuò suǒ wéi</i>	n	Subject, object	ST	All one's actions
7. 坚定不移 <i>Jiān dìng bù yí</i>	p	Predicate, nominal and verbal modifier	ST	(To be) firm and unshakeable, to hold the line
8. 务之急当 <i>Dāng wù zhī jí</i>	n	Subject, object	ST	Priority, the pressing matter of the moment
9. 设法想方 <i>Xiǎng fāng shè fǎ</i>	p	Predicate, verbal modifier	ST	To find ways and means (to accomplish something)
10. 可想而知 <i>Kě xiǎng ér zhī</i>	p	Predicate, sub-clause	ST	One can imagine, it can be easily imagined

Note: n/p: nominal/predicative, ST: semantically transparent, MT: metaphorically transparent, MO: metaphorically opaque.

3.4. Experiment 2

Selection of *chengyu* for the treatment

For the teaching sessions of the treatment, 10 *chengyu* were selected from a list of the 100 most frequent *chengyu* in modern Chinese.³⁹ The criteria followed for the selection are illustrated below:

³⁸ *Máo*茅: cogongrass, held by soldiers in the front line during battles.

³⁹ The list was taken from Tang Xuening (唐雪宁) and Xu Hao (徐浩), *Xiandai Hanyu Changyong Chengyu de Yuyi Renzhi Yanjiu* (现代汉语常用成语的语义认知研究) [A Cognitive Study on the Semantic Meanings of Common Chinese Idioms] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press [北京: 社会科学文献出版社], 2010). The authors compared five dictionaries and selected all the *chengyu* which occurred in at least four of them.

1. Inclusion of at least one *chengyu* for each type of semantic transparency;
2. Inclusion of both nominative and predicative *chengyu*;
3. All *chengyu* should only contain familiar characters, i.e. characters from the *jiǎ* 甲 and *yǐ* 乙 levels of the *Syllabus of Graded Words and Characters*.⁴⁰

The complete list is shown in Table 5. *Chengyu* 1-5 were used for the B.A. group, while *chengyu* 1-10 were used for the M.A. group. The grammatical and syntactic function of each *chengyu*, its degree of semantic transparency and its translation into English are also indicated.

Treatment

The treatment was conducted in April 2013. The teaching sessions for the control groups lasted 30 minutes. The intended duration of the treatment for the experimental groups was also 30 minutes, but since the different type of instruction required more time, the experimental group was given 15 minutes extra.

The two control groups (B.A. and M.A.) received direct teaching integrated with a word-centered approach. As pointed out in section 2, this kind of technique is the one most frequently adopted by teachers in *chengyu* teaching. Direct or didactic teaching follows a deductive sequence, i.e. students are directly supplied with a rule, and they then analyze it with the use of examples that illustrate it.⁴¹ In addition, the word-centered approach considers lexical items as single, indivisible units, without focusing on their constituent parts. Consequently, the meaning of each *chengyu* was presented as a whole, without analyzing in detail the meaning of the single characters and their morpho-syntactic relationships. Students were directly taught the main syntactic functions of each *chengyu*, and a definition in Chinese as well as a translation into Italian were also provided. Finally, the teacher gave some examples for each syntactic function. A PowerPoint™ slide show was used for the presentation.

The teaching technique used for the two experimental groups (B.A. and M.A.) was based on indirect instruction combined with the character-centered approach. The character-centered approach regards characters as the basic units of Chinese language and language analysis focuses on the relationships that occur between them.

One of the benefits of the character-centered approach, as seen above, is to raise learners' awareness of the compositionality of Chinese words, thus facilitating inferences on the meanings and the recurrent structures of every lexical item. It seemed appropriate to combine this approach with indirect or discovery instruction, since this teaching method involves several inductive and consciousness-raising tasks which help learners to discover grammar rules by themselves, by making generalizations on the regularities within the data they are presented with.⁴² The treatment was preceded by an introduction during which a set of guidelines was provided, with the goal of directing the participants' attention towards certain elements of the texts that could serve as clues to be used throughout the inferential process. Such clues could be associated with the morphology of the *chengyu* (word-part clues) or with contextual information (context clues). For the discovery of word-part clues,

After this, they calculated the frequency of each *chengyu* in the online corpus of the Beijing University's *Centre for Chinese Language*.

⁴⁰ The Office of China National Committee for Chinese Proficiency: *Syllabus*.

⁴¹ Rod Ellis, "Instructed language learning and task-based teaching", in *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*, edited by Eli Hinkel (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum), 713-728.

⁴² *Ibid.*

for instance, the participants were instructed to look at the meaning of the component characters of the *chengyu*, and see if their sequence could be connected to any familiar word order of Chinese (e.g. subject+predicate, modifier+noun etc.). Any characters which might help the students to figure out the grammatical function of the *chengyu* were also indicated (e.g.: *zhī* 之, a particle which has the same function as *de* 的, i.e. linking a noun with its modifier, so a *chengyu* which contains this particle is probably nominative). For the discovery of context clues, the participants were instructed to look at the co-text and search for useful information in order to determine the meaning of the *chengyu*.⁴³

After the introduction, some short dialogues containing the target *chengyu* were presented on a PowerPoint™ slide show, and the teacher asked the group to openly discuss the meaning and the syntactic function of each *chengyu*, while applying the strategies presented in the introduction. The students' active participation in the discussion was encouraged throughout the whole treatment, while the teacher's role was basically that of the moderator of the discussion. At the end, the correct answers for each *chengyu* were provided.

Test

The test was administered one week after the treatment and it consisted of the following three tasks: Task 1: reading comprehension task, Task 2: fill-in-the-blanks task, and Task 3: grammar. Both the B.A. and the M.A. groups were given 30 minutes to complete the test.

The reading comprehension task consisted of a short text including all the target *chengyu*. The text was specifically designed for the test and reviewed by a native speaker of Chinese. It consisted of a student's account of a first day in a Chinese university, so that the topic and the vocabulary were intended to be familiar to all the participants. The text was followed by some comprehension, multiple choice questions (5 for the M.A. test, 4 for the B.A. test). The questions and answer options were written in Italian.

The fill-in-the-blanks task consisted of several sentences (5 for the B.A. test, 10 for the M.A. test) with the *chengyu* missing. The *chengyu* were provided at the top of the exercise. The students also had to write a translation of each *chengyu*.

The grammar task consisted of several sentences (5 for the B.A. test, 10 for the M.A. test) with a missing *chengyu*. The missing *chengyu* was provided after each sentence. The students had to indicate the correct position of the *chengyu* inside the sentence. They were also asked to indicate the reasons for their choices.

Each correct answer was given a score of 1 point, while each incorrect or missing answer was scored 0. No score was given to the translations in Task 2 and the open-ended answers in Task 3. The maximum possible score of the B.A. post-test was 14 points (Task 1: 4 points; Task 2: 5 points; Task 3: 5 points). The maximum score of the M.A. post-test was 25 points (Task 1: 5 points; Task 2: 10 points, Task 3: 10 points).

Analysis

Before analyzing the results of the test, two observations should be made. Firstly, the results of the two M.A. comparison groups were excluded from the data analysis. This was for two reasons: the first of these, as indicated in Section 3.2, was that there was a big disparity between the number of participants from the control group and those from the

⁴³ The guidelines for the discovery of word-part and context clues were adapted to Chinese from James F. Baumann, Elizabeth C. Edwards, Eileen M. Boland, Stephen Olejnik, Edward J. Kame'enui, "Vocabulary tricks: Effects of instruction in morphology and context on fifth-grade students' ability to derive and infer word meanings", *American Education Research Journal*, 2003, 40/2, 447-494.

experimental group who took part in the post-test (8 and 4 respectively), so the two groups could not be considered as comparable. The second reason is that the quantity of missing data was too high: the test was probably too long for most participants to complete in 30 minutes, as very few of them could complete all the tasks. For this reason, no valuable analysis could be conducted.

The second observation is related to the type of statistical analysis tests conducted on the data. A Mann-Whitney U test, which test was run on the learners' total score, showed that the difference between the two groups were not significant at $p < .05$ ($U=13$; $Z=1.6$; $p=.1$). Nonetheless, due to the very small sample size, the above analysis is likely to have very low statistical power. As observed by Larson-Hall, "studies with small sample sizes will have significant drawbacks, including low power to find results, and most likely wide confidence intervals, meaning that sampling error is large."⁴⁴ In fact, Figure 1 shows that the distributions of the two data sets are actually rather different, with an overall better performance of the experimental group and the majority of their scores falling above the mean score line.

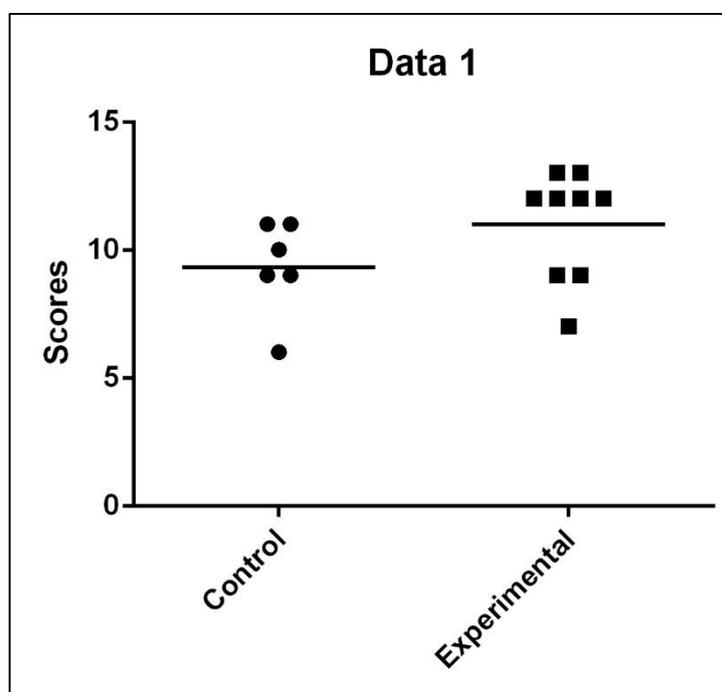


Figure 1. Distributions of data for Experiment 2 test total scores

Table 6 compares the frequencies of correct answers and the mean scores of the two groups in the three tasks of the test, as well as the total mean scores. Here we can see that both the frequencies of correct answers and the mean scores of the experimental group are slightly higher in all three tasks, as well as the total mean score. This seems to indicate that the experimental group had some advantage over the control group.

Table 6. Comparison of Experiment 2 test results

⁴⁴ Jennifer Larson-Hall, *A Guide to Doing Statistics in Second Language Research Using SPSS* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 125.

	Item	Control group (N=6)	Experimental group (N=9)
Task 1		(M=2.83; SD=.75)	(M=3; SD=1.22)
	1	100% (6/6)	88.9% (8/9)
	2	16.7% (1/6)	55.5% (5/9)
	3	66.7% (4/6)	77.8% (7/9)
	4	100% (6/6)	77.8% (7/9)
Task 2		(M=3.33; SD=1.51)	(M=4.44; SD=1.13)
	1	50% (3/6)	77.8% (7/9)
	2	100% (6/6)	100% (9/9)
	3	66.7% (4/6)	88.9% (8/9)
	4	66.7% (4/6)	88.9% (8/9)
	5	66.7% (4/6)	88.9% (8/9)
Task 3		(M=3.17; SD=1.17)	(M=3.56; SD=1.13)
	1	100% (6/6)	100% (9/9)
	2	66.7% (4/6)	88.9% (8/9)
	3	66.7% (4/6)	11.1% (1/9)
	4	33.3% (2/6)	77.8% (7/9)
	5	66.7% (4/6)	77.8% (7/9)
Total mean score (total score=14)		9.33 (SD=1.86)	11 (SD=2.12)

The above observations are confirmed by the analysis of the open-ended questions in Task 2 and Task 3. Firstly, nearly all the participants in the experimental group provided translations for the *chengyu* in Task 2, as well as the descriptions of the answers to the open-ended questions in Task 3, while only a few participants of the control group did so. These data are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Frequency (%) and accuracy of *chengyu* translations, Task 2

	Control (N=6)		Experimental (N=9)	
	Total	Correct	Total	Correct
1. 显而易见 <i>Xiǎn'ér yì jiàn</i>	16.7% (1/6)	0% (0/1)	66.67% (6/9)	66.67% (4/6)
2. 四面八方 <i>Sì miàn bā fāng</i>	83.33% (5/6)	100% (5/6)	100% (9/9)	100% (9/9)
3. 语自言自 <i>Zì yán zì yǐ</i>	50% (3/6)	66.67% (2/3)	100% (9/9)	77.78 (7/9)
4. 名列前茅 <i>Míng liè qián máo</i>	33.33% (2/6)	50% (1/2)	66.67% (6/9)	83.33% (5/6)
5. 前所未有 <i>Qián suǒ wèi yǒu</i>	16.7% (1/6)	0% (0/1)	55.56% (5/9)	40% (2/5)

The semi-transparent *chengyu*: *sì miàn bā fāng* 四面八方 in Item 2 was the *chengyu* for which the control group provided the higher percentage of translations. They provided very few translations for the other *chengyu*, compared to the number of translations provided by the experimental group. In addition, the experimental group's translations were generally more accurate than those of the control group. For instance, Item 3: *zì yán zì yǐ* 语自言自 ('to talk to one's self') was correctly translated by all the participants in the experimental group, and only two cases out of nine are a little less accurate, though still expressing the essence of the expression (e.g. 'tutto ciò che è stato detto tra sé', lit.: 'everything that has been said to oneself'). On the contrary, in the control group only 3 translations for this *chengyu* were provided, and one is completely incorrect ('sa sempre cosa dire': 'he always knows what to say'). The participants' translations can give us a good insight into the difficulties that students may encounter in the comprehension of *chengyu*. As pointed out in Section 2, some scholars assume that different degrees of semantic transparency correspond to different degrees of difficulty. These assumptions, while confirmed by Experiment 1, are not confirmed by the results of Experiment 2. Item 5: *míng liè qián máo* 名列前茅, the only opaque *chengyu*, was translated by six participants in the experimental group, and two in the control group. All these translations, although none were really accurate, still suggest that the respondents were able to figure out the basic meaning of the expression, presumably from context clues. On the contrary, the semantically transparent *chengyu*: *qián suǒ wèi yǒu* 前所未有 was translated by five participants in the experimental group and only one in the control group. Of these six translations, only two provided by the experimental group can be considered as correct. This may suggest that, when properly instructed, learners find it relatively easy to understand the meaning of metaphorically opaque *chengyu*, while other factors, such as morpho-syntactic transparency and contextual information, seem to have a greater effect on comprehension.

In Task 3, the control group only provided a total number of 7 answers to the open-ended questions, one of which was simply a translation of the sentence. Instead, almost all the participants in the experimental group provided the explanations for each item. It must be pointed out, though, that many participants in both groups did not understand the aim of the task, as most of their explanations have to do with the overall grammaticality of the sentence, rather than indicating the strategies they used to solve the task, which was what the test question aimed to ascertain. Nonetheless, the big number of responses still suggests that the participants in the experimental group had a better awareness of the syntactic functions of *chengyu*.

4. Conclusions

Due to its exploratory nature, the results of this study are affected by several limitations. First of all, it was impossible to answer Research Question 3 (*Are there any significant differences between students with different proficiency levels?*), as the data collected were scarce, and there was too much difference in the number of participants in the control and experimental group. Secondly, the sample size was too small, resulting in lack of statistical power. Thirdly, the results cannot be generalized, as the sample cannot be considered representative of the entire population of CFL students. This is because the proficiency level of the participants was not tested, nor was the sample size big enough to have normal distributions of data.

Given these limitations, some preliminary conclusions can nevertheless be drawn. Experiment 1 showed some recurrent tendencies in the participants' interpretation of the meaning and use of unknown *chengyu*. On the one hand, learners showed a good awareness of the idiomaticity of *chengyu*, even though the notion of *chengyu* was frequently extended to the whole class of Chinese idioms. On the other hand, a relevant effect of negative transfer from Italian was also observed, as the participants frequently tended to over-rely on their L1 in the interpretation of the meaning of the expressions. The influence of the L1 was also observed in the grammar task, where the Italian translations provided inhibited the participants from analyzing the constituents of the *chengyu*. Therefore, as a corollary to Irujo's findings on the transferability of idioms from the L1 to the L2,⁴⁵ it can be hypothesized that, if the two languages are not closely related as is the case of Italian and Chinese, negative transfer is likely to occur.

The results of Experiment 2 suggest that, when teaching *chengyu* to Italian learners of Chinese indirect, inferential instruction combined with a character-centered approach may be more effective than a grammar-translation-based approach. This is suggested not only by the test scores of the experimental group, which were slightly higher in all three tasks, but also by the number and variety of the translations and open-ended answers that this group provided. The advantage of the inductive approach over the deductive approach may be explained according to the Levels of processing theory,⁴⁶ which hypothesizes that deep-level processing can enhance memory storage. As noted by Boers et al., inductive tasks like inferring the meaning of idioms via their etymology require extra cognitive effort and

⁴⁵ Suzanne Irujo, "Don't put your leg in your mouth: Transfer in the acquisition of idioms in a second language", *TESOL Quarterly*, 1986b, 20/2, 287-304.

⁴⁶ See Laird S. Cermak and Fergus I. M. Craik, *Levels of Processing in Human Memory* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1979).

involve deeper processing than rote learning, and this may thus be beneficial to retention.⁴⁷ In addition, several studies on the acquisition of formulaic sequences have demonstrated that, for adult learners, it might be hard to bypass analysis and to commit formulaic sequences to memory holistically. Being this true, “it is worthwhile to channel analytical processing along ways known to enhance retention”.⁴⁸ The character-centered approach in *chengyu* teaching may be just such a way of “accommodating analyticity and formulaicity”.⁴⁹

These results are only a first step in the study of the learning and acquisition of *chengyu*, and more accurate studies are needed. In addition to repeating the experiments with a bigger sample in order to obtain sounder results, other aspects that require deeper inquiry and analysis include the longitudinal effects of different learning techniques on both receptive and productive competence, and differences in acquisition between the elementary, the intermediate and the advanced level. It would also be interesting to examine those factors that tend to hinder or prevent the comprehension of *chengyu*, while attempting to identify and develop the most effective techniques for assisting students to overcome these difficulties.

⁴⁷ Frank Boers, Murielle Demecheleer, and June Eyckmans, “Etymological elaboration as a strategy for learning idioms”, in *Vocabulary in a Second Language*, edited by Paul Bogaards and Batia Laufer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 53-78.

⁴⁸ Frank Boers and Seth Lindstromberg, “Experimental and intervention studies on formulaic sequences in a second language”, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 2012, 32, 83-110.

⁴⁹ Alison Wray, “Formulaic sequences in second language teaching: Principles and practice”, *Applied Linguistics*, 2000, 21/4, 483.

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