PAVING THE WAY FOR THE L2 METAPHOR INSTRUCTION: A SYSTEMATIC OVERVIEW OF METAPHOR AWARENESS-RAISING ACTIVITIES

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This chapter explores the pedagogical potential of metaphor in second language (L2) classrooms by offering a comprehensive overview of activities designed to enhance metaphor awareness. It covers: 1) activities that highlight the prevalence of metaphors, 2) activities that emphasize cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences, 3) activities that clarify the evaluative connotations of metaphors, 4) activities that organize vocabulary around metaphorical themes, 5) activities that use visual aids for explanation, 6) activities that delve into the etymology of metaphors, and 7) activities that incorporate enactment. Additionally, the chapter highlights some underexplored areas in the field of L2 metaphor awareness through these activities.

Keywords: L2 figurative vocabulary, metaphoric competence, metaphor awareness activities

1. INTRODUCTION

Researchers adopting a cognitive approach to metaphor (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) have recognized it as a pervasive feature of everyday language that manifests itself not only in day-to-day speech but also in fiction, news, advertising, academic, political, educational and other types of discourse[1] (Semino, 2008). For example, a common way of referring to migration in the press is in terms of the cognitive domain of water (see among others, Mujagić, 2018; Taylor, 2022), which gives rise to a wide range of metaphorical expressions highlighting certain conceptual relations between the target and source domains (e.g. *a human tide*, *an influx of migrants*, *a wave of new arrivals*). Depending on context, metaphor can be employed, either consciously or unconsciously, to communicate complex ideas in a concise and vivid way, create novel mental images, present a topic in a new light by offering a new perspective, and express a double meaning (Crider and Cirillo, 1991). Given the omnipresence of metaphor in a wide range of discursive contexts and its informative, explanatory, evaluative, mnemonic, and (arguably) persuasive functions, the ability to correctly interpret and use conventional L2 figurative language constitutes an important skill in the L2 learners' toolbox.

2. WHY FOSTER L2 METAPHORICAL COMPETENCE?

The importance of mastering metaphor notwithstanding, a growing body of literature has demonstrated that grasping the meaning of L2 figurative expressions is challenging for learners (Littlemore *et al.*, 2011; Zibin and Hamdan, 2014; Zibin, 2016a). The findings emerging from Littlemore's (2001) study on the interpretation of metaphors by non-native speakers of English following lectures at a British university show two types of metaphor comprehension difficulties: *non*-understanding and, to a greater extent, *mis*understanding of both the informative and the evaluative component transmitted through metaphor. A significant difficulty for learner in

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[1] More details on the quantitative distribution of linguistic manifestations of metaphor across conversations, fiction, news texts, and academic discourse can be found in Steen *et al.* (2010).

attaining a correct interpretation of metaphors is culture-specific assumptions about their vehicles (Littlemore, 2003). The effect of the overlapping and non-overlapping of the conceptual domains of the native and target cultures has been systematically explored by Charteris-Black (2002). On the basis of a comparative analysis of figurative phraseologies of English and Malay, the author identified six types of relationships between figurative expressions and the underlying conceptual bases in the two languages[2], and then tested these configurations in relation to the difficulty they posed to learners. The results of a multi-choice task and a cued completion task revealed that learners (L1 Malay-L2 English) encountered most difficulties with those figurative expressions that had a different conceptual basis and an equivalent linguistic form, as well as culture-specific expressions in which the linguistic form and the conceptual basis were non-corresponding in the L1 and the L2.

Although more limited, studies on metaphor production (Hoang and Boers, 2018; Littlemore *et al.*, 2014; Nacey, 2020; Zibin, 2016b) show that learners also struggle to use L2 metaphorical language. Generally, learners' written productions are reported to display a very low level of metaphorical density (see, for example, Hashemian and Talebi Nezhad, 2006) uncharacteristic of native speaker discourse. According to Littlemore (2009), one reason for the high degree of literality might be the inactive status of metaphor in the mental lexicon. Texts produced by learners have also manifested the use of unusual collocations (Kathpalia and Carmel, 2011). For instance, Littlemore and Low (2006: 275) cite an unusual production by an L1 Chinese-L2 English speaker whose essay contains the expression 'run away from his palm' rather than the preferred English expression 'escape his clutches'. Danesi (2008) refers to such erroneous productions in terms of *conceptual errors*, which arise from activating the wrong vehicle due to the L1 interference. By thinking in terms of their native conceptual systems and consequently employing L1 conceptual structures, learners run the risk of producing conceptually inappropriate metaphorical language (Danesi, 1992).

Metaphor comprehension and production difficulties in the L2 context further underline the importance of building learners' metaphorical competence. Danesi (1992) advocates that L2 learning should aim beyond the

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[2] To discover how this model is applied to test the comprehension of metaphorical expressions by Jordanian EFL learners, see Zibin (2016a).

acquisition of mere verbal fluency, but should complement it with meta-phorical competence and the related notion of *conceptual fluency*, which he defines as knowing how the target language encodes its concepts through metaphorical reasoning. Littlemore and Low (2006) also demonstrate that metaphorical competence is a crucial element of learners' overall communicative ability by connecting it with all the components of Bach-man's model of communicative language ability (i.e. grammatical, textual, illocutionary, and sociolinguistic competences). However, to foster L2 metaphorical competence, it is essential to enhance learners' metaphorical awareness (Lantolf and Bobrova, 2014).

3. Raising metaphorical awareness in the L2 classroom

One of the central tenets of cognitive linguistics is that the associations between form and meaning are motivated rather than arbitrary. Boers and Lindstromberg (2006) argue that the motivated nature of language has pedagogical potential in foreign language instruction, since drawing learners' attention to the motivated underpinnings of language can enhance compre-hension, retention as well as pragmatic and cultural awareness. For example, activities involving the analysis of the relationship between form and mean-ing of a given input encourage deep processing, which in turn is conducive to vocabulary retention (Boers, 2013). In teaching L2 figurative vocabulary, metaphor awareness-raising activities are advocated, that is, activities high-lighting the metaphorical underpinnings behind many figurative expres-sions. According to Boers (2000, 2004), being metaphorically aware implies recognizing the ubiquity of metaphors, underlying themes, non-arbitrary nature, inherent cross-cultural differences and cross-linguistic variety.

Despite the pedagogical potential of metaphor and the importance of acquiring metaphorical competence, it seems that explicit metaphor in-struction is often missing from pedagogical practice and didactic materials (Lamarti, 2011; Rivera León, 2016). Rivera León's (2016) investigation, in which surveys were administered to 87 SFL[3] teachers, revealed that

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[3] Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL)

the majority of instructors do not explicitly address the topic of metaphor, especially in L2 classrooms with low proficiency students. Among those who do, the most popularly employed instructional materials are lists of idiomatic and fixed expressions, songs, and literary texts, while L2 learning manuals are only used by 24 percent of all surveyed teachers. Over half of the respondents were in agreement concerning the low supply and quality of metaphor-teaching materials, which may be one of the reasons for the common absence of metaphor instruction in the L2 classroom. Littlemore and Low (2006) consider other potential causes, such as the difficulty of treating metaphors in a systematic way and the belief that figurative vocabulary can be successfully taught without explicitly referring to metaphor.

3.1 Objectives

Considering the potential obstacles to metaphor instruction, the objective of the present review is to provide a systematic summary of metaphor awareness-raising activities and to report (where possible) on existing studies that offer empirical evidence on their associated learning gains and that outline some of their limitations and practical implications. In some instances, concrete examples of metaphor teaching exercises are provided. In total, seven groups of didactic activities are addressed: 1) activities raising awareness of the ubiquity of metaphor; 2) activities highlighting cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences; 3) activities helping to grasp the evaluative connotations of metaphors; 4) activities involving the organization of vocabulary along metaphoric themes; 5) activities involving pictorial elucidation; 6) activities involving etymological elaboration; and 7) activities based on enactment. The first three groups are classified according to their outcome, and it is these activities for which there appears to be no specific method that has been tested empirically. The rest of the activities are method-centred (the methods being metaphoric themes, pictorial elucidation, etymological elaboration and enactment) and are backed-up by experimental evidence. At the end of this review, some conclusions and some possible avenues for future research are given.

4. An overview of metaphor awareness-raising activities

4.1 Activities raising awareness of the ubiquity of metaphor

The first step in building L2 learners' metaphorical competence is to make them conscious of the metaphorical nature of conceptual systems (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), as well as of the pervasiveness of metaphor in everyday language. Boers (2000) proposes a simple activity in which learners are asked to define the difference between the abstract phenomena of friendship and love. By trying to describe these concepts in the L1 or even the L2, they are likely to generate metaphorical linguistic expressions (e.g. *the cornerstone of friendship is trust*), which can then be pointed out by teachers. Learners could also be encouraged to process texts with highlighted metaphorical expressions or to take a more active role by identifying linguistic manifestations of certain conceptual metaphors in texts where metaphorical expressions are not made evident. This also constitutes an opportunity to employ different kinds of discourse.

4.2 Activities highlighting cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences

Because metaphor is both universal and culture-specific (Kövecses, 2005), numerous correspondences may exist between conceptual metaphors and metaphorical expressions between the L1 and L2 (Deignan *et al.*, 1997; Charteris-Black, 2002; Kövecses, 2003). Deignan *et al.* (1997) argue that learners can benefit from consciously exploring these correspondences and differences and propose several activities to raise cross-cultural and cross-linguistic awareness. For example, monolingual groups (i.e. groups in which all learners share the same L1) could be given a metaphor-highlighted text in the L2 and consider the potential translation equivalents in their L1. In multilingual groups of intermediate and advanced learners, it could be fruitful to provide a list with metaphorical expressions and encourage learners to have a discussion comparing these figurative items with the ones in their native language.

4.3   Activities helping to grasp the evaluative connotations of metaphor

Since metaphorical expressions are often laden with evaluative meaning, encouraging learners to reflect whether they have a positive, neutral, or negative connotation can help them better process the provided information and to avoid communication breakdowns. Deignan *et al.* (1997) present an activity where L2 English learners are asked to form collocations in which the first word is a water-related metaphorical expression (e.g. *flood of refugees, flood of memories*) and subsequently reflect on whether they convey a positive or a negative view (e.g. when *flood* is used to talk about people, it can be considered negative because of the comparison with a natural disaster; however, when it is used in conjunction with memories, it does not convey a negative connotation).

4.4   Activities involving the organization of vocabulary using metaphorical themes

Instead of presenting L2 figurative vocabulary by means of random lists, Boers (2000, 2004) advocates cognitive linguistics-inspired presentation of non-literal items, namely lexical organisation along *metaphoric themes*. It is argued that pointing to conceptual metaphors behind figurative expressions provides a framework for integrating lexical knowledge in a more meaningful way. Structuring figurative expressions such as *she erupted* or *she flipped her lid* along metaphoric lines (e.g. ANGER AS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER) rather than traditional functional lines (e.g. expressions describing acute and sudden anger) has been shown to facilitate their retrieval from memory. The benefits of grouping vocabulary items under a common metaphoric theme have been supported by the results of three controlled experiments reported in Boers (2000). In one of these experiments, 73 French-speaking university students received a list of English metaphoric expressions to describe upward and downward economic trends. While the experimental group was given a list organised according to a metaphoric theme conjuring up a specific image (e.g. "diving" in the case of *plunge*), the control group received the typical presentation

(e.g. "fast change" in the case of *plunge*). In the subsequent task in which learners were asked to write a short essay using the studied lexis, the experimental group exhibited significantly better productive vocabulary retention and reproduction than the control group. To examine whether this effect holds long-term, Boers (2004) administered a one-year delayed follow-up test to the previous (albeit reduced) groups, with the addition of a third group of students who had received continuous metaphor instruction in the last year. The results of a similar language production task no longer displayed significant differences between the experimental and control groups, though the third group performed significantly better. This outcome seems to indicate that long-term benefits of presenting vocabulary along *metaphoric themes* can be achieved if this method is employed on a regular basis, although a better controlled, larger-scale study would be necessary to confirm this assumption. Moreover, while *metaphoric themes* are claimed to be useful for comprehending and storing information, the selected language production tasks do not explicitly reflect receptive vocabulary retention.

4.5   Activities involving pictorial elucidation

Several authors (among others, Boers *et al.*, 2008; Boers *et al.*, 2009) have also turned their attention to image-based pedagogy, investigating whether the use of pictorial aids the recollection of form and the retention of the meaning of figurative expressions. The assumption that this might be the case stems from the postulates of *dual coding theory*, according to which verbal and pictorial coding of information (i.e. associating verbal information with a mental picture) facilitates recall (discussed in Boers and Lindstromberg, 2008). The experimental evidence from the study by Boers, Lindstromberg, Littlemore, Stengers and Eyckmans (2008) shows that supplementing verbal explanations with imagery evoking the literal sense of figurative expressions can help learners remember their meaning, especially if they are encouraged to cognitively engage with the provided pictorial support (e.g. by hypothesizing about the meaning of figurative expressions based on a pictorial clue). The technique of pictorial elucidation is said to be most beneficial to learners with an imaging cognitive style, that

is learners who tend to think in mental pictures rather than words. One limitation of this method, however, is that it facilitates the retention of meaning rather than the reproduction of form, this latter point being further confirmed by the results of a small-scale experiment by Boers, Piquer-Píriz, Stengers and Eyckmans (2009). Students participating in this study seemed to get distracted by the photographs and drawings provided and struggled to reproduce the exact lexical composition of target idioms. To promote retention of both meaning and form, the authors recommend presenting images only after the verbal information has been discussed.

4.6 Activities involving etymological elaboration

Another imagery technique proposed in the literature is *etymological elaboration* that involves the "resuscitation of the literal origins of metaphorical expressions" (Lindstromberg and Boers, 2005: 245) without making use of actual pictures. This method has mainly been applied to the teaching and learning of figurative idioms (Boers, 2001; Boers *et al.*, 2007; Wang *et al.*, 2020). The view that idioms can also be related to a limited set of conceptual metaphors follows logically from the cognitive semantic approach to figurative language (e.g. the idiom *add fuel to the fire* can be traced back to the underlying metaphors THE BODY IS THE CONTAINER FOR THE EMOTIONS and ANGER IS HEAT) (Boers, 2001). Thus, although idioms may seem arbitrary at first sight, cognitive semantics offers an alternative to learn and teach them in a systematic way rather than through blind memorization. In a small-scale experiment, Boers (2001) asked a group of L2 English learners to hypothesize about the origins of unfamiliar idioms, giving them the opportunity to consult a dictionary. It was found that the group of participants who had been asked to supply a possible origin of target idioms showed significantly enhanced retention of form and meaning, in comparison to their peers who had only been asked to supply a possible context of use. However, the author acknowledges that associating idioms with a concrete image (e.g. the idiom *a steady hand on the tiller* with an image of sailing) may imply varying degrees of difficulty for learners from different cultural backgrounds and may not be feasible in the case of opaque idioms. In a more recent investigation,

Wang *et al.* (2020) have shown that learners are more likely to correctly recall those idioms that they perceive to have transparent literal-figurative connections rather than idioms whose grounding they perceive as obscure. Moreover, it has been found that simply informing learners about the origin of unknown idioms can help them reach a correct interpretation and retain their meaning.

4.7. Activities based on enactment

Finally, it is also worth mentioning enactment-based metaphor-awareness raising activities that draw learners' attention to the bodily motivations behind many figurative expressions. In this type of activity inspired by the method of Total Physical Response, students are encouraged to take an active role in understanding figurative vocabulary by acting out the literal, physical senses of metaphorical linguistic expressions (Saaty, 2020). For example, *climbing the career ladder* could be easily acted out to relate the image of climbing to career progression. The existing experimental evidence suggests that enactment of abstract words may promote longer-term retention than the verbal modality (Lindstromberg and Boers, 2005; Saaty, 2020). In one of the experiments reported in Lindstromberg and Boers (2005), the experimental group that had been instructed to enact the meaning of English manner-of-movement verbs demonstrated better retention than the control group who had had to provide a verbal explanation of the target verbs. A similar outcome was reported in Saaty (2020), who investigated the effects of enactment of the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY on both retention and production. It was found that learning metaphoric expressions by means of enactment, rather than semantic clustering and awareness of conceptual metaphors, was more effective in terms of retention but not in terms of production. However, this latter result might be connected to the fact that a free production task was employed to collect data rather than constrained elicitation. It should be noted that enactment-based metaphor awareness-raising activities may not be suitable to teach all figurative vocabulary, and that they may cause discomfort to more introverted learners.

5. Conclusions

The present study aimed to explore the pedagogical potential of metaphor in an L2 classroom by systematically reviewing metaphor awareness-raising activities that have been claimed to serve as a useful didactic tool in helping learners develop metaphorical competence, conceptual fluency, pragmatic competence and communicative competence. An overview of these activities makes it possible to identify their potential multiple benefits and learning gains, including metaphor awareness (i.e. being aware of the ubiquity of metaphor), cultural awareness (i.e. being aware of the cultural and linguistic differences involved in L1 and L2 metaphors), comprehension (i.e. being able to understand the meaning of a metaphorical linguistic expression and the conveyed evaluative connotations), retention of meaning (i.e. being able to remember the meaning of a metaphoric expression for a long period of time) and, to a lesser extent, recollection of form (i.e. being able to reproduce the form of a metaphoric expression or the exact lexical composition of a figurative idiom). It is important to outline that these beneficial effects can be boosted or even impeded by learner-related characteristics, such as their cognitive style and linguistic-cultural background, as well as by item-related properties, including semantic transparency and frequency. Moreover, to successfully use the described methods, L2 instructors also need to consider the learning goals (e.g. production vs. comprehension), the classroom context (e.g. monolingual vs. multilingual, monocultural vs. multicultural groups), the ways of working (e.g. individually vs. collectively), consistency of instruction, as well as the suitability of some activities for different proficiency levels (e.g. less proficient learners may not yet be equipped with the required metalanguage to participate in a discussion; Deignan *et al.*, 1997). Although the extent of such considerations may seem overwhelming at first glance, it is expected that highlighting some of these implications in relation to a specific method will facilitate their use[4].

However, the research on metaphor awareness-raising activities described in this study needs to be expanded and, in some respects, deepened.

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[4] Ready-to-use didactic proposals can be found in the following publications: Gutiérrez Pérez (2016) (EFL); Rivera León (2016) (SFL); Masid (2014) (SFL).

For example, more activities are necessary to encourage the production of conventionally-used metaphorical linguistic expressions as well as more efficient testing methods to successfully elicit data on learners' metaphor production. Longitudinal studies would also allow us to investigate the longer-term retention of the meaning of metaphorical expressions, since the delayed post-tests do not usually take place any longer than two weeks after the classroom experience. As far as specific metaphor awareness-raising activities are concerned, it would be interesting to test the applicability of enactment-based activities to items that are semantically not related to motion, and to examine the use of animated rather than still images in the activities involving pictorial elucidation. Lastly, more research and didactic proposals are necessary to raise the awareness of L2 teachers of metaphor instruction for younger learners.

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