

A Study of the Role of Metaphor Instruction in English Education in Universities of China

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Abstract

This study explores strategies to enhance college students' English second language (L2) reading abilities from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory. Metaphors are pervasive in English reading, from vocabulary to syntax and discourse levels. This research aims to optimize students' L2 reading performance by systematically improving their metaphorical cognitive abilities. It employs language tests and cognitive tasks to reveal the current state and weaknesses of students' metaphor cognition, such as metaphor identification, lexical inference, and discourse coherence understanding. The study also investigates students' self-employed metaphor comprehension strategies through questionnaires and interviews and proposes an empirical data-based metaphorical cognitive optimization strategy framework. This framework includes a "metaphor cognitive barrier model" and a "three-dimensional metaphor training framework," integrating high-scoring students' strategies and theoretical literature to guide teaching practices. The findings suggest that enhancing metaphor awareness and understanding can significantly improve students' reading efficiency and comprehension abilities, offering new insights and methods for L2 reading instruction.

Keywords

Cognitive linguistics, metaphorical cognitive theory, college English.

1. Introduction

Metaphor, as a cognitive mechanism proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, involves mapping from a source domain to a target domain, such as "TIME IS RESOURCE," which concretizes abstract concepts like time management through verbs like "save time." In English reading, metaphors are ubiquitous at the lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels. However, existing research indicates that Chinese college students have weak metaphor awareness and insufficient lexical inference skills, especially in academic texts related to economics and technology. This leads to low reading efficiency and an inability to accurately grasp the deeper meanings of texts. For instance, students may struggle with metaphors like "data flow" and "market turbulence." Therefore, studying strategies to enhance college students' English L2 reading abilities from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory is necessary. This approach can optimize their L2 reading performance, improve reading efficiency and comprehension abilities, and provide new ideas and methods for L2 reading teaching, promoting the comprehensive development of students' English reading skills.

In the realm of English language teaching, the application of cognitive linguistics presents a promising alternative to traditional English teaching methodologies. It offers a more motivated and profound approach, enabling learners to delve deeply into the intricacies of English, particularly in the domains of grammar and vocabulary. Cognitive linguistics offers valuable insights into second language learning and teaching by proposing methods to reveal the connections between grammatical expressions and their underlying lexical meanings in the language classroom. This approach aims to improve learning and retention by prompting

learners to delve into the deeper meanings of grammatical elements and contemplate the reasons behind the linguistic choices in the target language. One significant aspect of cognitive linguistics is metaphor learning and teaching, which cultivates metaphorical thinking and enhances students' linguistic acquisition process.

However, despite the potential benefits, many Chinese university students encounter considerable challenges in learning English. These difficulties often stem from the traditional methods employed in language instruction, which tend to prioritize rote memorization over meaningful understanding. As a result, students struggle to grasp the nuances of English language, hindering their overall language proficiency development.

Moreover, a notable gap exists in metaphor instruction among Chinese students studying English. Unlike cognitive linguistics, traditional language teaching approaches typically overlook the importance of metaphorical reasoning in language acquisition. Consequently, students miss out on opportunities to enhance their cognitive and linguistic abilities through metaphor comprehension and application.

2. Research Findings

2.1. Education Limited Understanding and Application of The Cognitive View of Metaphor

Based on the gathered survey data, a total of 236 surveys were gathered, with 124 students majoring in English, the rest from other majors. According to the short answer questions, over 93 percent of non-English majors tend to prioritize literal over figurative language. They view metaphors as mere decorative tools rather than fundamental mechanisms of thought and language. These students adhere to a basic, textbook definition of metaphors, understanding them simply as direct comparisons without using "like" or "as." This narrow definition overlooks the dynamic nature of metaphors in shaping thought, emotion, and cultural discourse. Their engagement with metaphors is also limited to identifying and interpreting them in literary texts, with little appreciation for their use in everyday language, conceptual thinking, or various forms of media.

English majors are likely to have been exposed to a broader and more sophisticated understanding of metaphors. Over half discuss metaphors in terms of cognitive linguistics, exploring how they shape our thinking and perception of the world. This theoretical groundwork, however, does not always translate into an ability to effectively use or analyze metaphors in practice. These students are generally aware of the complexity and cultural specificity of metaphors. They understand that metaphors can vary greatly across different languages and cultures, reflecting unique worldviews. Despite this appreciation, they might struggle with identifying and applying these insights in unfamiliar contexts or in creating their own compelling metaphoric expressions. Furthermore, when it comes to creatively applying metaphors in their writing or interpreting more subtle, real-world uses of metaphors, they say they might not perform as strongly.

2.2. Results of Students' Comprehension of Metaphors Within Their Textbooks

After collecting students' answers to the test questions about metaphor recognition, the author counted the scores of each section, and the results are in the following Table 1.

Table 1: The scoring results of metaphor recognition

Category	Example	Average Score	Median	Mode	Distribution Example
Lexical Metaphor	“Bittersweet memories”	4.29	4	6	1(11%), 2(25%), 3(26%), 4(9%), 5(17%), 6(12%), 7(<1%)
Grammatical Metaphor	“blow it off”	3.05	2	2	8(7%), 9(10%), 10(35%), 11(27%), 12(21%)
Ontological Metaphor	“melt away the irritation”	4.44	3	5	13(13%), 14(39%), 15(19%), 16(29%)
Oriental Metaphor	“living life up”	4.12	4	3	17(46%), 18(39%), 19(15%),
Structural Metaphor	“Life is like a field of newly fallen snow”	5.67	5	6	20(22%), 21(44%), 22(64%)

The survey results on students' familiarity and understanding of various types of metaphors presented in their course materials reveal an overarching trend: students are not uniformly familiar with the range of metaphorical expressions, showing varying levels of comprehension across different metaphor types.

Specifically, while there is a relatively good grasp of structural metaphors, there appears to be less familiarity and understanding when it comes to grammatical and orientational metaphors. This suggests a disparity in the effectiveness of teaching or students' engagement with these metaphor types within their coursework.

3. Discussion

In this questionnaire collection, a total of 236 surveys were gathered, with 124 from students majoring in English, the rest from other majors. Now, based on the results of the survey, let's discuss the insights that this investigation brings to university English teaching.

3.1. Suggestions for Integrating Metaphor Teaching to English

3.1.1. Suggestions for Vocabulary Teaching

The insights from metaphor comprehension can significantly enhance English vocabulary teaching in Chinese universities. Understanding the multiple senses of a word is crucial for vocabulary depth, a fundamental aspect of language learning. It's essential for students to know how word meanings are metaphorically extended in the target language. For instance, while students initially associate “head” with a body part, they later encounter metaphorical

extensions in the textbook *Integrated English*: “the heading of article” or “head of department”. According to the cognitive linguistic perspective, these diverse senses form radial categories, with the basic sense serving as the prototype. In this model, the central senses represent the core meanings, while the more figurative senses extend towards the periphery. Take the dual-function adjectives in our textbook for example:

Quality adjectives extend to degree adjectives: “average” ordinary → generally; “awful”: terrible → extremely; “downright”: straightforward → completely.

People or things above extend to be emerging: “high”: tall → classy; “upper” : located above → of higher status; “ascendant”: rising → developing; “uplifted” : raised up → elated.

Synthetic metaphor are very common: “bitter”: tasting bitter → feeling pain; “sour” : tasting sour → fermented smell → ill-tempered; “soft” : not hard → not bright → not loud → mild.

People or things forward moving mean improved: “advanced” : move forward → sophisticated; “forward” : towards → enlightened; “progressive” : moving forward → making improvements.

Color adjectives “bright” and “dark” extend to emotional adjectives “happy” and “sorrow”, spatial meaning “front and rear” extend to temporal meaning “earlier and later”, spatial meaning “above and below” extend to status meaning “superior and inferior”, through personification, and objectification, etc.

During the vocabulary teaching process, teachers can also employ visual aids to more vividly illustrate the inherent connections among multiple meanings of words. Students can be familiarized with the fundamental meanings or prototypical senses of words, and then can be progressively expanded to encompass less central senses. It is logical to initiate the introduction with basic or prototypical senses before progressing towards the peripheries of the semantic categories.

3.1.2. Suggestions for Text Teaching

For text teaching, modern cognitive metaphor theory is considered a top-down approach. For instance, look at these two sentences in the textbook of *Integrated English II*: “Life is like a field of newly fallen snow; where I choose to walk every step will show.” “It will take you forward into the 21st century without having to check your tracks in a rear-view mirror.”

Teacher can introduce the conceptual metaphor “Life is a Journey” to students at beginning, which will dominate their understanding of conventional and innovative metaphorical expressions. Then when they encounter the linguistic metaphor in the text, they will not be unfamiliar to the expressions.

In the practice of foreign language teaching, another bottom-up approach is equally crucial. This is because metaphorical expressions in literary texts serve as a medium, through which readers can recognize conceptual metaphors and trigger collisions of cognition.

These two methods are of significant practical importance for foreign language teachers. Applying the top-down approach allows teachers to elevate students' cognitive awareness or activate relevant cognitive metaphors from a cognitive perspective. On the other hand, employing the bottom-up approach, teachers can help students discover language clues in texts to achieve the goal of identifying and understanding metaphors, ultimately grasping the connotations of texts comprehensively and accurately. In other words, the first method involves processing and understanding metaphors during foreign language instruction, while the second method involves processing and understanding metaphors during language learning. The former is deductive, and the latter is inductive, complementing and promoting each other.

3.2. Necessity of Activating Students' Knowledge of The Source of Domain

By activating students' knowledge of the source domain, they can overcome this problems. For instance, to comprehend “Police work on inner city streets is a domestic Vietnam War”(example from the textbook *English Rhetoric*), understanding that Vietnam War signifies chaos, confused,

misdirected and unappreciated struggle is essential. When encountering a source domain term, it often triggers a network of related and contextually relevant senses or features rather than a single sense. In the case of 'Vietnam War,' associated notions like 'kore war' and 'casualties of war' may also be evoked. To understand a metaphor, it's vital to activate a network of features similar to those of the interlocutor and then identify features within this network that pertain to the target domain term. Students may find this process challenging because cultural factors influence the networks of related features surrounding certain source domain terms. Some features within these networks may be more noticeable for individuals from specific cultures (Giora, 2003). Consequently, students' activated networks may lack features present for native speakers or emphasize different ones. Thus, it's crucial for students to recognize potential differences in their feature networks compared to those of native speakers.

In terms of enhancing the comprehension of cross-cultural metaphors and cultural references in second language (L2) contexts, advertising, idioms, and speeches serve as authentic source of material for analyzing cultural references due to its concise conveyance of multiple messages, often layered with metaphors.

In essence, teachers can provide rich teaching material to sensitize learners to cultural dissimilarities in association patterns, fostering a deeper understanding of cross-cultural metaphors.

Through the findings of the questionnaire survey, we can observe that many students are not very clear about the definition of metaphor from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, and need guidance in understanding the metaphoric expressions in the textbooks. Furthermore, they have difficulties in applying metaphor to English language learning.

There are two potential explanations for this phenomenon. Firstly, it's possible that they haven't recognized the metaphorical usage of language in the input they encounter. Metaphorical meanings of words might not stand out to them, or they may not have developed the habit of paying attention to them. Secondly, it's conceivable that the metaphorical meanings do exist in their passive vocabulary but haven't yet been integrated into their active vocabulary, perhaps due to a lack of confidence in using them correctly. In either case, these findings imply the necessity of assisting language learners in appropriately employing metaphor in the target language. This indicates a need for more targeted teaching that clarifies how literal language can convey metaphorical meanings.

Teaching students about metaphor offers several advantages, such as enhancing language skills and cognitive growth. Understanding these functions enables students to identify metaphoric patterns in grammar and vocabulary, providing a basis for reasoning. Recognition of systemic metaphors in verb types with shared prepositions can be crucial. Despite the potential generalization of these cognitive systems in current language programs, their benefits are often overlooked. These systems, utilized through categorization and prototype identification, can help trace cognitive networks, build schemata, and serve as alternatives to polysemy and homonymy, challenging for students.

It is argued that learners should confront the difficulties inherent in metaphor and nonliteral language. Despite potential inaccuracies in predicting word meanings, teaching students the essentials for understanding authentic English is more economical and effective than ignoring the challenges posed by nonliteral language.

3.3. Suggestions for Integrating Metaphor Teaching to English Education in Chinese Universities

The general trend indicates that students' understanding of metaphors is not consistent across different types, with a clear preference or better comprehension of structural metaphors. This could imply that educational materials or teaching methods may favor certain types of metaphors over others, leading to a varied level of understanding among students. It might also

reflect the inherent difficulty in more abstract metaphor types, such as grammatical metaphors, without explicit instruction or examples.

The insights from metaphor comprehension can significantly enhance English vocabulary teaching in Chinese universities. Understanding the multiple senses of a word is crucial for vocabulary depth, a fundamental aspect of language learning. It's essential for students to know how word meanings are metaphorically extended in the target language. For instance, while students initially associate "head" with a body part, they later encounter metaphorical extensions in the textbook *Integrated English I*: "the heading of article" or "head of department". According to the cognitive linguistic perspective, these diverse senses form radial categories, with the basic sense serving as the prototype. In this model, the central senses represent the core meanings, while the more figurative senses extend towards the periphery. During the vocabulary teaching process, teachers can also employ visual aids to more vividly illustrate the inherent connections among multiple meanings of words. Students can be familiarized with the fundamental meanings or prototypical senses of words, and then can be progressively expanded to encompass less central senses. It is logical to initiate the introduction with basic or prototypical senses before progressing towards the peripheries of the semantic categories.

Incorporating this metaphoric approach into English instruction can help students comprehend and apply vocabulary effectively, enriching their language skills and facilitating deeper lexical acquisition. By teaching students to recognize and utilize metaphorical extensions of words, educators can enhance language proficiency and foster more nuanced language use among Chinese university students.

Many phenomena traditionally considered grammatical by language educators actually contain strong metaphoric components, often within lexical items like phrasal verbs. In the areas such as demonstratives, prepositions, and aspect, it shows that metaphor is centrally involved in grammar acquisition.

Cognitive linguists argue that simple conceptual frameworks called image schemata underpin expressions, behaviors, beliefs, and language. An image schema, such as 'containment,' is a basic state or relationship that is both psychologically tangible and shaped by ongoing physical experiences.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper underscores the importance of adopting a cognitive perspective on metaphor in English education in Chinese universities. By addressing the limited understanding and application of the cognitive view of metaphor, identifying students' limitations and specific challenges in metaphor comprehension, with strategies for integration into curriculum and instruction, educators can empower students to become more proficient and effective communicators. The survey reveals challenges in metaphor comprehension, emphasizing difficulties in understanding metaphors representing abstract concepts, unraveling implicit meanings, applying metaphors to practical contexts, and identifying metaphoric texts. The findings underscore the complexity of metaphor comprehension, requiring not only a grasp of language but also abstract thinking, inference, and nuanced understanding. The struggles in connecting metaphors to real-life situations and recognizing them in texts highlight the need for targeted teaching strategies to enhance metaphorical understanding across various dimensions. To integrate metaphor teaching into English education curricula, educators can incorporate a variety of instructional strategies and activities. These may include interactive exercises to explore conceptual metaphors in English language, multimedia resources to illustrate metaphorical usage in context, and collaborative projects to encourage creative expression through metaphorical language. By diversifying instructional approaches,

educators can cater to the diverse learning styles and preferences of students, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of metaphor instruction.

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