

# Integration of Cognitive Linguistics Theories into Foreign Language Teaching

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## Abstract

**This paper explores the integration of cognitive linguistics and foreign language education, analyzing its impact on modern language teaching theories and practices. It examines the cognitive nature of language learning, the role of language as a cognitive and communicative tool, and its value in enhancing teaching methods. Through specific cases, the study discusses applications in vocabulary, grammar, and discourse instruction. Finally, it envisions future developments, providing theoretical and practical insights for advancing foreign language education.**

## Keywords

**Cognitive Linguistics; Foreign Language Education; Education Innovation.**

## 1. Introduction

In the context of accelerating globalization, foreign language proficiency has become a key indicator of an overall competence and international competitiveness. Especially, cultural aspect in language learning becomes more and more topical in the epoch of mass globalization and integration (Bekzhanova & Ryssaldy, 2015). Modern foreign language teaching no longer focuses solely on imparting linguistic knowledge but emphasizes the development of learners' comprehensive language skills and intercultural communication competence to meet the demands of complex international interactions. This shift in objectives has driven continuous innovation in foreign language teaching theories and practices to enhance learners' language abilities and cultural awareness more effectively.

As a leading field in linguistic research, cognitive linguistics offers a new theoretical framework and practical approach for foreign language education (Jacobsen, 2018). It views language as an integral part of human cognition, highlighting the intrinsic connections between language, thought, experience, and culture. The students' performance in a test will be improved if the teaching process is informed by a cognitive approach highlighting structural relations (White, 2000). Such insights provide valuable implications for foreign language education, particularly in vocabulary instruction, grammar acquisition, semantic comprehension, and intercultural communication. They also lay a foundation for teachers and researchers to develop more scientific, systematic, and effective teaching strategies. Cognitive linguistics provides foreign language education with new theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Over the past fifty years, the research content, methodologies, and subjects of cognitive linguistics have been continuously evolving. In the future, cognitive linguistics is expected to integrate more deeply with other disciplines (Rong Zhenghao & Wang Shaohua, 2024).

## 2. Literature Review

As an emerging discipline, cognitive linguistics breaks through the limitations of traditional linguistics, which primarily focuses on formal language analysis, by extending its research perspective to the close relationship between language and cognition. Its core premise asserts

that language is not an isolated system of symbols but rather a product and reflection of cognitive processes (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Foreign language education aims to cultivate cross-linguistic communicative competence, encompassing multiple dimensions such as teaching methodologies, curriculum design, and individual learner differences. In terms of teaching methodologies, the evolution from traditional grammar-translation methods to the audio-lingual approach, communicative language teaching, and more recently, task-based language teaching reflects a deepening understanding of the nature of language and an increasing emphasis on developing learners' practical language use abilities (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Regarding curriculum design, a learner-centered approach is emphasized, with instructional content and objectives tailored to learners' needs, interests, and language proficiency levels (Nunan, 1988). Additionally, with advancements in educational technology, multimedia and online resources have been increasingly integrated into curriculum design, providing learners with more diverse and enriched learning environments. Furthermore, research on individual differences among foreign language learners has been continuously expanding, examining factors such as age, learning motivation, and learning styles, all of which influence learning outcomes and provide theoretical support for differentiated instruction (Oxford, 1990).

Cognitive linguistics provides foreign language education with new theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Numerous scholars have integrated cognitive linguistics with educational theory, conducting in-depth explorations of their theoretical convergence and practical applications, thereby yielding significant academic achievements. Gao youmei(2011) carried out an empirical study, aiming to identify the significance of cognitive linguistics inspired approach in the Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. Another study examined the effect of CL-grounded instruction on learning propositions in Indonesia, proving the effectiveness of cognitive linguistic theory in second language instruction (Wijaya & Ong, 2018). Kurovskaya (2016) employs cognitive linguistics as a tool to establish pedagogical semiology and elucidates how sign consciousness, formed in the learning environment, influences their world cognition and interpersonal communication.

### 3. Core Theories of Cognitive Linguistics

Cognitive linguistics views language as part of human cognition, shaped by perception, categorization, and conceptualization. Key theories include conceptual metaphor theory, frame semantics, construction grammar, etc. With regard to education, cognitive linguistics informs embodied cognition, highlighting the role of physical experience in language learning, and usage-based learning (Tomasello, 2003), which stresses frequency and interaction. Schema theory (Rumelhart, 1980) explains reading comprehension through prior knowledge structures. These insights enhance second language acquisition, reading strategies, and metaphor-based teaching. Four theories related to education are discussed in this chapter, namely Conceptual Blending Theory, Prototype Theory, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and Construction Grammar Theory.

#### 3.1. Conceptual Blending Theory

Conceptual Blending Theory, proposed by Fauconnier and Turner, is a key framework in cognitive linguistics. It posits that language comprehension and production occur through the integration of multiple mental spaces. In communication, individuals extract elements from different input spaces, combine, refine, and extend them to generate new meanings in the blended space. For example, in understanding the metaphorical expression "*The surgeon is a butcher*," the concepts of "*surgeon*" and "*butcher*" belong to different input spaces. Through conceptual blending, selected attributes from both spaces are integrated, leading to the

emergent meaning that *"the surgeon performs surgery poorly"* (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). This theory highlights the dynamic process of meaning construction and provides a theoretical foundation for explaining linguistic phenomena such as metaphor and metonymy in foreign language teaching. As noted by Wang Yin (2006), Conceptual Blending Theory facilitates the analysis of creative language use and offers new perspectives for foreign language education.

### 3.2. Prototype Theory

Prototype Theory, first introduced by Rosch (1975), is a fundamental concept in cognitive linguistics that emphasizes the central-peripheral structure of categories. According to this theory, category members are not equally representative but are distributed based on typicality, with core members at the center and less typical members at the periphery. For instance, within the category of "bird," "sparrow" serves as a prototypical member due to its defining characteristics, such as flight, feathers, and vocalization, whereas "penguin" is a peripheral member because it lacks the ability to fly. In other words, prototype members (e.g., "sparrow") embody the most representative features of a category, while peripheral members illustrate its diversity and extension.

This theory has significant practical value in foreign language vocabulary instruction, providing an effective approach for learners to construct semantic networks efficiently. By emphasizing the central prototypes and their peripheral extensions, teachers can help students grasp the hierarchical structure of word meanings. For example, when teaching the word "bird," instruction may begin with the prototypical example ("sparrow") to highlight core features, followed by introducing peripheral members ("penguin" or "ostrich") to illustrate conceptual diversity. This approach not only deepens students' understanding of word meanings but also fosters a systematic and relational grasp of vocabulary (Taylor, 2003).

Furthermore, Prototype Theory offers valuable insights for language and cultural instruction. The prototypical representation of concepts may vary significantly across linguistic and cultural contexts, reflecting the intricate relationship between language and culture. For instance, in Chinese, the prototype for "bird" may lean toward "swallow" rather than "sparrow." Such cultural differences influence learners' semantic cognition and play a crucial role in intercultural communication. Integrating Prototype Theory into vocabulary instruction not only aids students in accurately acquiring word meanings but also enhances their awareness of cultural nuances embedded in language, thereby improving both the efficiency and quality of foreign language learning.

### 3.3. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is a core framework in cognitive linguistics that reveals how humans understand complex and abstract concepts through concrete, familiar experiences. According to this theory, metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices but fundamental mechanisms of human cognition and linguistic expression. For example, the metaphor "time is money" maps the concrete concept of "money" onto the abstract domain of "time," helping individuals conceptualize time as a valuable and quantifiable resource. This theory underscores the pervasive role of conceptual metaphors in language systems, significantly shaping human thought patterns and modes of expression.

In foreign language teaching, Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides valuable pedagogical insights by offering learners a cognitive approach to understanding linguistic structures. By guiding students to identify and analyze the source and target domains of metaphors in the target language, instructors can facilitate a more intuitive grasp of abstract linguistic structures. For instance, when teaching abstract English expressions, the metaphor "life is a journey" can be used to explain phrases such as "milestones" and "on the right track," thereby reducing learners' cognitive burden in comprehending complex language structures.

Moreover, Conceptual Metaphor Theory has significant applications in intercultural language instruction. Metaphorical concepts in different languages and cultures often reflect distinct cognitive patterns and value systems. Comparing conceptual metaphors across languages allows learners to gain deeper insights into the cultural connotations underlying language. For example, the Chinese metaphor "time is flowing water" (e.g., "time flies" and "years pass like a shuttle") contrasts with the English metaphor "time is money," illustrating different cultural perspectives on time. Such comparative analysis not only aids learners in mastering metaphorical expressions in the target language but also enhances their intercultural communication competence.

As Wang Yong (2021) noted, Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides language learners with cognitive tools for understanding complex linguistic phenomena. By systematically exploring and analyzing metaphorical structures in the target language, learners can enhance their overall language proficiency while deepening their appreciation of the interplay between language and culture. This offers a robust theoretical foundation and practical approach for advancing foreign language teaching research and practice.

### 3.4. Construction Grammar Theory

Construction Grammar emphasizes the pairing of linguistic form and meaning. A construction is a conventionalized form-meaning unit whose overall meaning cannot be fully inferred from its individual components. For instance, the "*V + NP + PP*" construction, as seen in "*He put the book on the table,*" conveys the meaning of "*causing an object to be in a particular location.*" This suggests that language learning is not merely the accumulation of vocabulary and grammatical rules but rather the acquisition of a wide range of constructions and their associated meanings (Goldberg, 1995).

Chinese scholar Lu Jianming (2008) also highlights the importance of Construction Grammar in language teaching, arguing that it helps students develop a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between linguistic structures and meaning. In instructional practice, teachers can guide students to learn and memorize constructions as holistic units rather than studying vocabulary and grammar in isolation.

## 4. Strategies of Integrating Cognitive Theories into Foreign Language Teaching

Cognitive linguistics provides a more holistic and cognitively realistic approach to language teaching. Building on the key advantages of the four cognitive theories discussed in Section 3, this section explores the application of cognitive linguistic theories to foreign language teaching from three perspectives: vocabulary, grammar, and discourse, aiming to offer insights into improving language teaching quality and efficiency and provide new perspectives and methodologies for teaching practice.

### 4.1. Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

Categorization Theory provides a scientific foundation for vocabulary instruction. This theory posits that humans organize cognition through categorization, and the establishment of semantic categories facilitates learners' understanding of semantic relationships between words. Traditional foreign language teaching primarily focuses on mechanical training in linguistic forms, with relatively little attention paid to learners' cognitive processes. However, from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, language learning is a complex cognitive activity that requires consideration of learners' cognitive patterns and psychological mechanisms. This cognitive-based teaching approach not only enhances learning efficiency but also stimulates students' cognitive engagement and independent learning abilities. In teaching practice, instructors can systematically classify vocabulary based on semantic categories. For example,

when teaching the category of "fruits," words such as "apple," "banana," and "orange" can be grouped within the same semantic category. By guiding students to observe the shared attributes (e.g., all are edible fruits) and distinguishing features (e.g., differences in shape, color, and taste) of these words, teachers help students construct a clear lexical network. This categorization approach not only reinforces students' retention of word meanings but also deepens their understanding of subtle lexical distinctions through comparison.

Furthermore, the application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory can enhance students' mastery of polysemy and semantic extensions. For instance, "foot" originally refers to the anatomical term but extends to meanings such as "the foot of the mountain." In classroom instruction, teachers can incorporate linguistic examples to illustrate the extension patterns of word meanings, thereby fostering students' interest in the cognitive mechanisms underlying language and enhancing their depth of understanding and flexible use of vocabulary. Zhang Hui and Lu Weizhong (2010) demonstrated that vocabulary teaching strategies based on cognitive linguistics significantly improve students' grasp of semantic relationships, helping them build a systematic lexical knowledge network and enhancing their vocabulary retention efficiency.

#### 4.2. Grammar Teaching Strategies

Contextualized teaching is a key feature of foreign language instruction guided by cognitive linguistics. Construction Grammar emphasizes the close connection between linguistic forms and their functions, asserting that language use is inseparable from specific contexts. Consequently, under the guidance of cognitive linguistics, foreign language teaching places greater emphasis on integrating language learning with real-world contexts, ensuring that students understand and apply linguistic structures in meaningful situations. Construction Grammar provides a functional and contextualized perspective for grammar instruction, contrasting sharply with traditional rule-based approaches. Construction Grammar posits that grammar is not merely a set of syntactic rules but rather a collection of form-meaning pairings, known as constructions. Based on this theory, grammar instruction should emphasize the holistic and contextualized nature of constructions. Teachers can introduce grammatical structures as complete constructions within real-life contexts. For example, when teaching the "If...then..." conditional construction, instructors can provide example sentences in various contexts, such as "If it rains tomorrow, then we will stay at home" or "If you study hard, then you will get good grades." Through contextualized instruction, students not only understand the cause-and-effect relationship expressed by this construction but also acquire its function and meaning in practical language use.

This construction-oriented teaching approach aims to help students grasp grammar holistically, moving beyond mechanical memorization of abstract rules. As Li Fuyin (2008) noted, grammar instruction based on Construction Grammar facilitates students' deep comprehension of grammatical rules and their ability to transfer this knowledge to real-world language use, thereby improving both learning efficiency and learning quality. This teaching method not only facilitates students' acquisition of linguistic knowledge but also enhances their ability to apply it effectively. Wen Xu (2002) noted that contextualized teaching activates students' background knowledge, bridging the gap between classroom instruction and real-world language use, thereby improving both learning efficiency and outcomes. By constructing authentic contexts, students can perceive the interaction between linguistic form and meaning in natural communicative settings, gradually developing their comprehensive language proficiency. Yuan Tingting(2024) discovered that there are several issues in the current state of university-level English grammar classrooms, such as an emphasis on grammar learning over grammar acquisition, a disconnect between grammar instruction and students' cognitive processes, and a lack of practical classroom activities. Integrating cognitive linguistics into university-level

English grammar teaching offers new insights and approaches for improving classroom efficiency.

### 4.3. Discourse Teaching Strategies

Discourse instruction plays a crucial role in foreign language teaching, bridging lower- and higher-level language skills. Schema Theory in cognitive linguistics provides theoretical support for discourse teaching. This theory suggests that learners' prior knowledge (i.e., schemata) serves as a fundamental basis for understanding new discourse. In instructional practice, teachers can activate students' existing schemata to help them construct an anticipatory framework for discourse comprehension. For instance, before reading a passage about "Western weddings," instructors can employ questioning, visual aids, or discussions to prompt students to recall their prior knowledge related to weddings, thereby activating their "wedding schema." During the reading process, students match, adjust, and reconstruct new information in relation to their existing schema, leading to a more profound understanding of the discourse. This process not only enhances surface-level comprehension but also aids students in analyzing the deeper structure and cultural implications of the text.

Additionally, Conceptual Blending Theory plays a significant role in discourse instruction. This theory reveals the deep cognitive mechanisms underlying figurative language, such as metaphor and metonymy. Teachers can guide students in analyzing the cognitive processes involved in figurative expressions within texts, such as how "a mountain of work" metaphorically conceptualizes an abstract idea in a vivid manner. By exploring discourse from a cognitive perspective, students gain insights into the richness and creativity of linguistic expression. As Wang Chuming (2007) pointed out, the application of Schema Theory and Conceptual Blending Theory in discourse comprehension significantly enhances students' reading proficiency and critical thinking skills, laying a solid foundation for their overall language competence.

The integration of cognitive linguistics and foreign language teaching demonstrates significant innovation in emphasizing cognitive learning processes, fostering creative thinking, and promoting contextualized instruction. This integration not only enriches the theoretical framework of foreign language education but also offers new perspectives and methodologies for teaching practice, holding substantial theoretical and practical significance. As Gui Shichun (2011) pointed out in his research on the cognitive processes of second language acquisition, a cognitive linguistics-based approach to teaching aligns more closely with the cognitive principles of language learning, offering students more effective learning pathways. Guided by cognitive linguistic theory, Jia Guangmao(2023) proposed a new approach to integrating critical thinking skills with language proficiency and explored how cognitive linguistic principles can be incorporated into critical thinking-based English instruction. Shu Dingfang (2015) highlighted that the application of cognitive linguistics can effectively stimulate students' potential for linguistic creativity, providing theoretical support and practical strategies for fostering innovation in foreign language education.

## 5. Discussion

The integration of cognitive linguistics into foreign language teaching has brought profound innovation and transformation to foreign language teaching, gradually reshaping traditional teaching models and infusing new vitality into the field. Cognitive linguistics emphasizes the close relationship between language and cognition, focusing on learners' experiences and understanding in the cognitive process. By incorporating core theories of cognitive linguistics, foreign language education can better emphasize the interaction between language, culture, and context, thereby fostering students' cognitive abilities and innovative thinking in language learning.

In teaching practice, cognitive linguistics offers novel perspectives for vocabulary, grammar, and discourse instruction. For instance, in vocabulary teaching, revealing the principles of metaphor and metonymy helps students better understand semantic extensions and their cultural implications. In grammar instruction, explaining cognitive schemas and constructions enhances students' grammatical sensitivity and ability to use structures flexibly. In discourse teaching, emphasizing contextualized and holistic language comprehension develops students' discourse organization skills and overall linguistic competence. The application of these theories not only makes foreign language instruction more systematic and scientific but also stimulates students' learning interest and improves learning efficiency.

Despite the numerous benefits of integrating cognitive linguistics into foreign language education, several challenges remain in its implementation. First, teachers must continually update their professional knowledge, familiarize themselves with relevant cognitive linguistic theories, and flexibly apply them in classroom teaching. Second, there is a lack of sufficient teaching resources, highlighting the urgent need for the development of instructional materials and activities based on cognitive linguistic theories. To address these challenges, educational institutions should strengthen teacher training programs, encourage teachers to participate in academic discussions and innovative teaching practices, and promote the diversification and digital sharing of teaching resources to provide solid support for the integration of these approaches.

As foreign language education continues to attract significant academic attention, the future development of its integration with cognitive linguistics is expected to follow several key directions. First, promoting interdisciplinary research: strengthening collaboration between cognitive linguistics and foreign language education by integrating findings from psychology, educational technology, and artificial intelligence to design more efficient cognitive models and personalized learning pathways. Second, constructing contextualized learning environments: utilizing technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) to simulate real-life language-use scenarios, providing students with immersive learning experiences that facilitate deeper connections between language and context. Third, developing intelligent teaching platforms: leveraging artificial intelligence to create adaptive foreign language learning platforms that offer real-time feedback, personalized guidance, and interactive learning resources to enhance learning outcomes.

In the future, as cognitive linguistics and foreign language education become more deeply integrated, foreign language teaching will continue to advance in both scientific rigor and personalization. This integration will provide robust theoretical and practical support for cultivating highly competent foreign language learners with innovative capabilities and a global perspective.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has explored the integration of four cognitive linguistic theories—Conceptual Blending Theory, Prototype Theory, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and Construction Grammar Theory—into foreign language teaching. By applying these frameworks to vocabulary, grammar, and discourse instruction, educators can foster deeper linguistic comprehension and more effective learning outcomes. This kind of integration emphasizes the cognitive processes of language learning. It not only reinforces students' retention of word meanings, but also enables students to internalize grammatical structures and their pragmatic functions through natural language use. It also guides students to analyze the deeper structure and cultural implication of the text. However, integrating cognitive linguistics into foreign language teaching faces challenges such as the need for continuous teacher training and a shortage of instructional resources. Addressing these issues requires enhanced professional development, academic

engagement, and the expansion of diverse and digitally accessible teaching materials. It is expected that future developments can focus on interdisciplinary study and educational technology platforms, fostering diverse foreign language teaching methodologies and practices.

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