Enhancing Metaphoric Competence through the Cognitive Approach

Ashraf Haji Maibodi*
Islamic Azad University, Maybod Branch

ABSTRACT: Studies in cognitive linguistics have highlighted the importance of metaphors for language teaching. Metaphoric competence, as an important aspect of intelligence, can contribute to the learning of languages. Most textbooks in ESL/EFL avoid the issue of figurative language and concentrate only on the denotative aspects of language. This article reports a study conducted at the Islamic Azad University, Maybod Branch. The hypothesis of this study was that it is possible to teach metaphoric concepts by activating students' cognition. Sixty junior students of English translation were divided to two groups of 30, each after a placement test. The experimental group was given a treatment including supplementary materials and scaffolding strategies, while the control group was not given any treatment. Data collected from the post-test and from a delayed follow-up post-test were statistically analyzed. The results of these analyses revealed that it is possible to enhance students' metaphoric competence through a cognitive approach in a classroom setting.

Keywords: metaphor, metaphoric competence, cognitive linguistics, communicative competence

The word language is not easily defined without reference to the context in which it is used. Knowing a language means knowing how to produce and understand sentences with particular meaning. Moreover, it is plain to everyone, linguist and non-linguist alike, that very little human communication through language is confined to isolated sentences. To be of more than immediate and limited value in communication, a sentence must stand in relation with other sentences (Chapman, 1982). Given a set of sentences, our knowledge of the language leads to a judgment about whether the sentences follow the normal patterns of a language or not. We have the capacity to determine when a sentence has more than one meaning or when several sentences all have the same meaning. The notion of a text is semantic rather than grammatical and a sentence in a text, which is always grammatically correct, is seldom semantically complete. It gains meaning either from other sentences with which it is being used or written or from other sentences with which it occurs.

Learning about language is obviously a process of analysis, of explicit attention and conscious reflections on the forms and functions of language and on the means by which meaning is made. Literary texts are examples of language in use. Nevertheless, literature frequently contains deviations from accepted norms, that is, language which is different from what may be loosely termed the 'normal' or 'everyday' usage of speech community, yet which is intelligible to the members of that discourse community, if they are willing to apply a special standard of acceptability. Brumfit and Carter (1986) argue that "these deviations maybe lexical, as in the use of neologisms, archaisms, compounds or one part of speech as another, or they maybe grammatical involving departures from syntactical or morphological rules or semantic as in the use of metaphors" (p. 84).

The ability to generate and understand sentences is what makes a person technically competent in any language since language is not simply received passively on our mental screens but is actively

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* Corresponding author`s email address: jay_maibodi@yahoo.com

processed; therefore, knowing a language includes knowing what sentences or parts of sentences are appropriate in various situations. In addition, as Widdowson (1978) believes, this involves an aesthetic understanding of *how* and *why* its rules can be broken or creatively manipulated. It involves appreciating, responding, and seeing through language to the points of view and ideologies, which a language can reveal and conceal.

Figurative Language: Metaphors

Language, which means or intends to mean what it says, and which uses words in their "standard sense", derived from the common practice of ordinary speakers of the language, is said to be literal. Figurative language is a conspicuous departure from what users of a language apprehend as the standard meaning of words, or else the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect. Sometimes described as primarily poetic, words are integral to the functioning of language and indispensable to all modes of discourse (Abrams, 1999). Figurative language deliberately interferes with the system of literal usage by its assumption that terms literally connected with one object can be transferred to another object. The interference takes the form of transference or carrying over with the aim of achieving a newer, wider, special, or more precise meaning. Words chosen in figurative language are not chosen with scientific precision but with regard to their vivid and evocative effect just another way of adding extra dimension to language which gives the reader imaginative pleasure.

Metaphor, as a linguistic device, exists in all human languages and often appears distinct from normal, everyday usage in that it employs vocabulary items, syntactic structures, and sequences that are quite different from those one might encounter. As a type of language, it refers to a particular set of linguistic processes wherein aspects of one object are transferred to another object, so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first. The essence of a metaphor is in understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. Metaphors are expressions that attribute qualities to an object not normally associated with that object.

As an essential part of our everyday language, we have a clear and precise language to describe events, but we run into difficulties when we try to describe ideas and concepts. In order to overcome this intangibility, we resort to metaphors to represent ideas and understanding from our everyday experiences in a meaningful way. Metaphors are not just a matter of linguistic expressions. They are indispensable not only to our imagination but also to our reason, because metaphors reveal partial truths and highlight certain aspects of meaning in the comparisons while leaving others in shadow. The essence lies in understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call the metaphor "imaginative rationality" that is crucial to our understanding. Metaphors are not merely the elaborate use of language. They argue that the ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act, is fundamentally metaphoric in nature. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people (p. 3). As Brumfit and Carter (1986) believe, speakers, using particular conceptual metaphors, will apply inferences from one domain to another. It requires only a little linguistic introspection to see that the metaphor is pervasive in our daily discourse and as a property of language is not in any way unique. The speaker tries to conjure up an image, often colorful, in the minds of the listeners that will allow them to comprehend complex or abstract meaning and to make meaning concrete and therefore permanent. Lakoff (1986) points out that metaphor is not just a way of naming, but also a way of thinking and it is "a figure of thought".

Purpose of the study

One of the many problems in the teaching/learning of a foreign language is the acquisition of competence in the area of figurative language. All aspects of figurativeness (metaphors, idioms, and semantic extensions) seem to present difficulties for EFL learners. The ability to grasp literary, metaphoric expressions like "She cast a spell over me" is characteristic of advanced stages of language competence and most textbooks normally ignore the issue of figurativeness and concentrate on the denotative aspects of language. Although some idiomatic expressions are usually included in

textbooks, they are usually presented as exceptions to the rule, things to be learned as fixed expressions, and to be used in specific contextual situations.

Another difficulty is the learner's incapability to evaluate whether a statement is meant to be a creative metaphor, a joke, an ironical expression, or a literal one. Native speakers of the language have the capacity to make inferences from the context of utterance or how it was/is presented in the writer's context. Nevertheless, the EFL learner requires a very high level of language competence, and understanding metaphors without the appropriate context is quite impossible. The student is often asked to memorize these expressions without actually understanding the beauty of the language in which it is used.

A major difficulty in learning metaphors seems to lie in metaphorical expressions that are based on particular aspects of a culture and have their roots in the social environment of the times in which they were created making them even more difficult for the EFL speakers of the language to comprehend. The nature and use of metaphors varies widely from culture to culture. This is related to the fact that people of a given culture use language to reflect their attitudes toward the world in general and the life of the community they live, in particular. Metaphors may be the product of a cultural incident, an observation by the culture on its own characteristics, or a feeling generated by the culture.

Therefore, the following research questions prompted the study to find answers for the effects of the cognitive approach to enhance concept clarification and literary appreciation:

1. Does the cognitive approach to teaching metaphors in a classroom provide better results than a traditional approach?
2. Will the cognitive approach, as an aspect of pedagogy, be significantly successful in developing the metaphorical competence of learners' in the classroom for the teaching and learning of literature?

Review of the Related Literature

The last century has already witnessed the boost of linguistics since one of the most important and obvious features in the contemporary scene of social and human sciences has been claimed to be the "linguistic or rhetoric turn". That is, many scholars have shifted their attention from the "object" of enquiry to the "language" of enquiry.

Theory and practice suggest that the ability to acquire, produce, and interpret metaphors in the TL is important for language learning (Cameron & Low, 1999). Low (1988) argues that metaphoric competence should be developed in language learners. Metaphoric competence is believed to consist of metaphor awareness and strategies for comprehending and creating metaphors (Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997).

Figurative language, especially the metaphor, has received considerable attention from a foreign language perspective in recent years (Cooper, 1999; Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997; Kovecses & Szabo, 1996; Lazar, 1996). This renewed interest in pedagogical approaches to figurative language has been fuelled by the gradual introduction of cognitive-semantic metaphor theory (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1986, 1987) to the field of applied linguistics (Low, 1988) and psycholinguistics (Gibbs, 1993).

An important idea in contemporary cognitive science is that the metaphor is not just an aspect of language, but constitutes a significant part of human cognition (Gibbs, 1993; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Sweetser, 1990). In the cognitive study of metaphor, an emphasis is made on the psychological as well as on the socio-cultural and linguistic aspects of metaphor. From a psychological point of view, the metaphor highlights the phenomenon of semantic creativity, the capacity of language users to create and understand novel linguistic combinations. As a cognitive problem, it centers on the question "how does a novel's conceptual entity arise from apparently disparate parts?" Moreover, "how do we derive the significant meaning from a metaphorical utterance?"

Metaphoric competence is important for foreign language learners as it is likely to contribute to their overall communicative language ability. There is an emphasis on the discourse and pragmatic aspects of metaphor rather than literary uses. Speakers draw on their language knowledge, using a range of strategic skills to link the message appropriately with the social purpose and situation. Knowledge of shared cultural references is necessary if one is to understand or produce that target language with any degree of accuracy (Lantolf, 1999). At the level of interpretation, a lack of

appropriate background knowledge can also lead language learners to misunderstand the connotations of apparently straightforward expressions (Littlemore, 2001).

Metaphorical competence and conceptual fluency are closely linked in ways in which a culture organizes its world conceptually. Conceptual metaphors form the basis of much human thought, because they allow all language users to think about abstract concepts in concrete terms.

Conceptual fluency and metaphorical awareness have always been the interest of a number of L2 researchers. Leading the front, are Danesi (1992, 1995) and Johnson and Rosano (1993) who contend that metaphorical language cannot be ignored by the L2 curricula anymore. Many studies have found that people, using metaphors in their first language, were rated as 'more interesting, persuasive, memorable, and having a better command of language' than those not using metaphors. "Being metaphoric" could be a desirable feature of speech in certain contexts and it could alternatively be more an aspect of personal style.

Methodology

In order to help foreign language learners develop their conceptual fluency as well as their metaphoric creativity, i.e., their ability to find and produce the meaning of metaphors, a study was conducted to show the importance of 'metaphors in SLA'.

Participants

Ninety junior students majoring in English Translation participated in this study. The participants were Persian-speaking females, in their fifth semester. A Michigan Test of English Language in the form of a pretest was administered to establish a linguistic homogeneity among the subjects. Only those students whose scores stood one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected. Therefore, 60 students were divided into two groups of 30 each. One was Group A, the experimental group, and the other was Group B, the control group.

Instrumentation

Initially, a pretest on metaphoric competence was administered to the participants of Group A. This test comprised two sections: one on identification, and the other on the comprehension of metaphors. A few idiomatic expressions were presented to the students before launching the study. Afterwards, the books *Attitudes through Idioms* by Adams and Kuder (20 Units) which is organized around an attitude that introduces idioms illustrating that particular attitude were used for the instructions. The rationale to choose *English Idioms in Use* by McCarthy & O'Dell (30 Units) was to expose the juniors to L2 conceptual metaphors and idioms which the modern student needs to know.

Those in Group A were the experimental group, they were given instructions on metaphorical language, and they were given some idea of what conceptual metaphors are for 90 minutes, once a week for 14 consecutive weeks. Group B, the control group, did not undergo any special treatment. No explanations regarding metaphors or idioms were given to them. Students of group A (experimental group) were given explicit instructions to show that every learning is meaningful, a kind of consciously acquired competence which learners put to use. Since figurative language, especially the metaphor, is better clarified under contextualized situations; therefore, the students were encouraged to learn, to infer, to think, and to find out and recall information in different situations.

Procedure

After every 10 units, a simple test was given to evaluate the students' understanding of the instructions. The book *English Idioms in Use* was used as follows: the first two sections on 'What are Idioms?' and 'Using your dictionary' were worked on with care so that the students could get a picture of what they were going to do and what was expected from them. The instructor gave the necessary explanations for each unit and the students worked on the exercises. After every 10 units, a very short, brief test was given to the students to check their progress. *Attitudes through Idioms*, the second book, was more of a self-study. Each lesson was composed of six parts: *Situation, Analysis, Explanation, Attitude, Expansion, and Communication*. Most of the students in Group A were able to handle this book, but only the *'communication part'* in some units were problematic. Since this was done orally, not much attention was devoted to this area. About 20 units were successfully covered in this book and

like the former, after every five units, the students were checked for their progress. Later on, students evaluation revealed that the L2 learners enjoyed learning this book, because it gave them more opportunity to work in groups and discuss the lessons together.

Taking in the guidelines put forward by Boers and Demecheleer (2001, p. 260-261), the students in the experimental group were reminded during instructions to pay attention to cultural differences and to be careful of not making the mistake of interpreting the idiom as a resembling expression in the L1. The students were also encouraged to look for contextual clues and imagery to infer the meaning of the idioms. Very often, idioms that were problematic for the students were clarified through the meaning by associating it with more vivid or concrete scenes with the aim of helping them to retain the novel vocabulary. Evidently, not all imaginable idioms are easily possible to explain, but the cognitive effort put into the brainstorming activity may nevertheless be beneficial for retention and language awareness. The aim was to draw the students' attention to the attitudes presented through these idioms and help them to recognize the cultural difference that exists in these idioms. Finally, after 14 weeks of instructions, a post-test was given in the form of 20 gap-fillers, 20 true-false statements, and 5 brief short stories in the form of a paragraph and about 20 exercises on irrelevant sentences to check students' comprehension and identification. The participants of both groups had to distinguish metaphoric statements and supply the related meanings through idiom comprehension. They were instructed to give their comprehension response as quickly as possible but to be sure that they understood each line before giving the final response. The experiment took about 120 minutes to complete. To measure their ability to find the meaning of metaphors, the focus was on 'novel metaphors' that had not been come across before. In addition, this was evaluated in the section pertaining to 'true-false' and 'short stories'.

Results

The results of the posttest (Table 1) successfully revealed that it is possible to activate the students' cognition to deduce, comprehend, and transfer ideas from the source domain to the target domain. The results of the experiment showed that group A (Mean -16.2, SD - 2.15) outperformed group B (Mean - 12.8, SD -2.49).The observed t-value turned out to be p= 5.51 in the t-distribution table. The critical t-value for our selected level was 3.346 that is lower than the t-observed, which is 5.510, and the df was 58. Since the value of t-observed was higher than t-critical, the null hypothesis was safely rejected.

Table 1. *Results of the posttest - Comparison of the Means between the Experimental and Control Groups after the Treatment*

	VAROO 003	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
scores	0	30	16.2100	2.15940	.39425
	1	30	12.8917	2.49368	.45528

T-Test 1
Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for equality of variances		t-test for Equality of means						
	F	**Sig.**	**t**	**df**	**Sig (2-tailed)**	**Mean Difference**	**Std. Error Difference**	**95% Confidence of Interval of the Difference**	
								Lower	**Upper**
Equal variances assumed	.565	.455	5.510	58	.000	3.31833	.60226	2.11278	4.52388
Equal Variances not assumed			5.510	56.839	.000	3.31833	.60226	2.11226	4.52441

In order to measure the students' retention and recall of metaphors, an unexpected delayed post-test (a follow up task) was given to the both groups after about six weeks. The results of the experimental group revealed that the mean was 14.9 and SD was 2.55 and the scores of the control group mean=10.4 and SD=2.28. The results clearly pointed out to the fact that elaboration and explicit instructions of conceptual metaphors played an effective role. Group B (experimental group) exhibited higher retention rates than group A (control group) which had quite naturally treated these concepts as isolated units to be learned through 'blind' memorization.

Table 2. *Results of the Follow-up Posttest – Comparison of the Means of the Experimental and Control Groups*

VAROO 00003		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
sco	0	30	14.9417	2.55515	.46651
res	1	30	10.4417	2.28534	.41724

Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for equality of variances		t-test for Equality of means					95% Confidence of Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.645	.425.	7.190	58	.000	4.50000	.62587	3.24718	5.75282
Equal Variances not assumed			7.190	57.292	.000	4.50000	.62587	3.24685	5.75315

The results of this study revealed that although the participants did not know almost anything about metaphorical language before launching the study, they did develop their conceptual fluency and metaphorical comprehension after the study wrapped up. A careful study of Tables 1 and 2 points out to a highly significant difference between the performances of the two groups. Clearly, group A outperformed group B. The value of t-observed for the posttest is 5.510 and that of the follow-up posttest is 7.190, and these two values are greater than the t-critical, which is 3.346, reassuring that it, is possible to develop students' literary appreciation of metaphorical concepts through the cognitive approach. Therefore, the second null hypothesis of the study was also safely rejected.

The implications of this study support the idea that it is possible to incorporate metaphors in L2 syllabus, and to make L2 learners aware of the conceptual system of the TL and to encourage the application of metaphors in everyday language use. The ability to identify metaphoric themes behind the figurative idioms the students encountered in the short stories especially showed a certain degree of cognitive effort. Student interviews revealed that most of them did make use of 'imagery' as a strategy to generate the meaning for metaphors like: *by/in leaps and bounds, be at a fever pitch, fall on stony ground, take the plunge, to look daggers at someone*, just to name a few in the context of short stories. No doubt, the response time (speed and accuracy) for processing the novel metaphors was much longer compared to the ones familiar.

Discussions

Research suggests that at least a certain portion of the human mind is 'programmed' to think metaphorically (Danesi 1992; Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987; Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Probably, metaphor underlies the presentation of a considerable part of our common concepts. According to Danesi (1992), metaphoric competence is a basic feature of native speaker discourse, because native speakers usually program discourse in metaphorical ways. Nevertheless, there are many literal

concepts that are directly understood without any metaphorical processes and it can be said there is a moderate relationship between conceptual fluency (CF) and metaphorical competence (MC) at the outside (Hashemian & Talibe Nezad, 2007).

Danesi (1992) suggests that MC is inadequate in typical L2 classrooms and that after three or four years of study, learners show almost no new way of thinking conceptually, but rely mainly on their L1 conceptual base. Nevertheless, this study revealed that it is possible to sensitize L2 students to think metaphorically when they come across these literary concepts. The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (1993) states that the "accurate and appropriate use of English expressions which are in the broadest sense idiomatic is one distinguishing mark of a native command of the language and a reliable measure of the proficiency of foreign learners" (p. x). Metaphoric competence seems to be part of native speakers' linguistic knowledge, and language teaching should develop this competence of metaphorical understanding and discourse programming in L2.

The importance of developing conceptual fluency has been emphasized in other contexts in a number of research reports. Irujo (1993) suggests that students should be taught strategies to deal with figurative language, and those strategies would help them take advantage of the semantic transparency of some idioms. Research has shown that the 'metaphorizing capacity' forces people to extract meaning from almost any well-formed combination of words (Pollio & Burns, 1977; Pollio & Smith, 1979). If people are required to interpret such strings, then they will do so no matter how contrived the interpretation might appear.

Although the importance and relationship between metaphoric competence and communicative competence was analyzed in this study, it can be pointed out that this subject matter closely involves cognitive variations and is related to one's personality, which is interwoven with the second culture of learning. The ability to interpret metaphors quickly in conversation can be a crucial element of interaction. The same conceptual metaphors in different languages are realized through different linguistic expressions and L2 learners find it difficult to use metaphors appropriately (Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997). One of the most influential constraining factors, as far as the pedagogical applications of metaphor are concerned, is the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic variety of figurative language that necessitates the description and analysis of these differences that is crucial to the field of language pedagogy. What contextual conditions facilitate or inhibit the access of conceptual metaphors in language processing, at what point during the moment-by-moment processing of idioms conceptual metaphors are accessed, and how the activations of conceptual metaphors persist when idioms are understood are important questions for further research**.**

Although the metaphor is claimed to be a neglected dimension in second language teaching (SLT) and second language acquisition research(SLAR) (Danesi, 1992), this study quite rightly claims that it is necessary to integrate metaphorical language in L2 curriculum, which could lead to not only linguistic and metaphorical competence but it also enhances their communicative competence. Metaphorical language learning in general will facilitate the integration of new lexical information within the framework of the existing knowledge and encourage cognitive and affective involvement in vocabulary tasks (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001) and will help in exploiting the image ability of lexical items (Ellis & Beaton, 1993), respectively.

Conclusion

This study aimed to demonstrate the application of the cognitive approach to the teaching of figurative language in general and metaphors, particularly. In this study, it was tried to show that the occurrence of metaphors is systematic, conceptual, and not linguistic in nature. These are systematic in the sense that metaphors must be communicable from the speaker to the hearer in virtue of shared system of principles. They are conceptual in the sense that they bring into correspondence two domains of knowledge viz. the source domain and the target domain where the first involves the second. In the contextualized situations developed to enhance retention and recall of metaphors, cognitive understanding rather than habit formation was emphasized. To enhance literary appreciation through concept clarification, the importance of instructions in SLA helped students to be more familiar with native-like competence, to express their ideas in good English, to learn the features of modern English, as well as to learn the linguistic system for communication. To be more precise, the findings of this study explicitly revealed the fact that it is conceivable to expose L2 learners to conceptual concepts of

the TL, and through explicit instructions expose them to metaphorical language through underlying cognitive mechanisms.

Boers (2000) is of the opinion that the general aim of raising language learners' awareness of metaphor can be broken down into objectives that are more specific. They can be directed to recognize metaphor as a common ingredient of everyday language, with metaphoric themes behind many figurative expressions. Moreover, it is possible to recognize the non-arbitrary nature of many figurative expressions and their cross-cultural differences and cross-linguistic variations (p. 566). Organized information is known to be easier to learn than random input. This small-scale experiment showed that the superior performance of the experimental group was the active use of 'imagery' as a strategy for learning. It was seen that students learn by connecting verbal information and mental images, because information presented through the imagery channel is more salient and better remembered than information that is limited to the verbal channel only. Thus, it is suggested that the acquisition of conceptual competence could be initiated in foreign language teaching, which traditionally concentrated on grammatical and terminological competence.

Cognitive restructuring abilities allow a person to deal flexibly with incoming information, manipulating and transforming it when necessary. Littlemore (2001) in one of the number of researches conducted to examine "metaphoric competence and its relationship to L2 learning and teaching" found that students who have a holistic cognitive style may process metaphors more quickly than those with an analytic cognitive style may. Thus, language teachers should not be surprised if the different aspects of metaphoric competence develop independently and at different rates in different learners. Perrine (1973) believes that every use of figurative language involves a risk of misinterpretations. However, for the person who can translate the figure, the dividends are immense. Fortunately, all people have imagination to some degree, and imagination can be cultivated (p. 618).

It is important to note that due to inherent limitations and shortcomings of a study of this nature, the findings cannot be taken as definite answers to the questions of the research. It is a hope that this could lead to a better understanding of conceptual fluency and metaphoric competence in L2 and of steps to help clarify literary concepts through a better understanding of L2 proficiency. The data presented in this article suggest that metaphoric thought may, under many circumstances, have some role in people's immediate understanding of at least some kinds of idioms in everyday language.

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Author

Ashraf Haji Maibodi is at present a lecturer and full time faculty member of the English Department at the Islamic Azad University, Maybod Branch. She holds a B.A. in Sociology, Economics, and English Literature from the Bangalore University, India. In addition, she holds a B.A. in English Translation and M.A. in TEFL from the Islamic Azad University of Maybod Branch and Khorasghan Branch, respectively. With more than twelve years of teaching experience, she is at present a Ph.D. student in TEFL at the Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran. Her main research interests are sociolinguistics, methodology, and cognitive psychology.