CHALLENGES OF TEACHING CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS TO ESL STUDENTS

Gezielte und geplante Förderung von Bewegungen im Unterricht kann nicht nur dazu beitragen, Metaphern besser zu erkennen, sondern sie auch kritischer zu interpretieren. Mehr dazu im folgenden Beitrag

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Introduction

Conceptual competence is an underestimated skill in EFL teaching. While we tend to concentrate more on syntactic relations, morphemes and sounds, metaphoric and conceptual networks are fundamental in foreign language teaching. Referring to the Common European Framework for Reference for Languages (CEFR), developed by the Council of Europe to promote coherence in language teaching and learning in Europe, the term metaphor is only mentioned three times in the whole document. Two of the usages of the term are metalinguistic ones and the other is used to describe lexical competence. This is a very outdated view of metaphor and considers it merely as a rhetorical device, thus neglecting its conceptual properties. However, conceptual competence is extremely useful in EFL teaching since speakers interact with other speakers through transferring reality and thinking and one indication that a learner has achieved mastery in a foreign language is the ability to metaphorize. (Danesi, 2004, p. 139)

Language and cognition

Cognitive linguistics holds that language is similar to all other forms of knowledge and as a result it is rooted in cognition. This view goes against the pre established concept of Universal Grammar designed and applied by generative linguists.

Evans and Green suggest that cognitive linguistics is an approach that has adopted a common set of guiding principles, assumptions and perceptions which in turn have led to complementary and overlapping theories. Thus, language reflects "fundamental properties" of the mind and as a result it sheds light on the nature, structure, and organization of thoughts and ideas. (Green, 2006, p. 3) What is of central importance to cognitive linguistics is meaning and context. Cognitive linguists study how particular situations are construed in different ways through different encodings and how the same event is construed through various perspectives and linguistic deviations. (Lee, 2005, p. 2) Thus, special emphasis is put on figurative thinking and metaphorical language since they

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are considered as "powerful tools for our conceptualization of the world" (Schmid, 2006, p. 114).

The process of encoding and construing meaning in a foreign language is significantly difficult. L2 learners are faced with the challenge of not only learning new linguistic information but also with finding ways on how to construe thought, events or circumstances in a different language.

Conceptual metaphor theory

Conceptual metaphors go beyond the borders of rhetorical metaphor. Its importance lies in the fact that it manages to project a concrete domain of knowledge into another abstract domain. According to Charteris-Black metaphor is "the shift in the use of a word or phrase from the context or the domain in which it is expected to occur to another context or domain where it is not expected to occur, thereby causing semantic tension". (Charteris-Black, 2002) In more simple words, in metaphors, an idea is used to understand another idea. Based on this assumption, for cognitive linguists, the foundation of metaphor is comparison or as stated by Charteris-Black the mapping of one concept into another.

Metaphor learning skills

There are two main skills that ESL students need to master in order to facilitate their understanding and usage of metaphorical language in English, namely metaphoric awareness and metaphoric competence.

Metaphor awareness

As stated above and based on the theories of embodiment and cognition, metaphor is a non- arbitrary component of everyday language use and students need to be aware of this capacity. Moreover, they should be equipped with the sufficient information on cross-cultural differences in conceptual and linguistic metaphors in English and be familiar with common source domains. Common source domains are key in mastering metaphor

awareness as an essential component of conceptual metaphor. As stated by Lakoff and Johnson a metaphor is a cognitive process that allows one domain of experience, the target domain, to be reasoned about in terms of another, the source domain. (Johnson, 1980) The target domain is usually an abstract concept such as LIFE, whereas the source domain is typically a more concrete concept, such as a DAY. The metaphor allows us to export conceptual structure about the more concrete domain to the more abstract target domain. . . . Conceptualizing LIFE as a DAY allows us to map the various structures comprising a DAY onto aspects of a LIFE, understanding our BIRTH as the DAWN, OLD AGE as the EVENING, and so forth. These correspondences, called mappings, allow us to make sense of our lives, understand our stage of life, and appreciate that stage (working while the sun is high, savoring the sunset, and so on). According to conceptual theories of metaphor, these systems of mappings, and their applications to reasoning and cognition, are the primary function of metaphor. (Sullivan, 2013)

With regard to this, Boers (2000) has provided several classroom activities that could help students to raise their metaphorical awareness. He suggests asking them about an abstract concept in their own language and in order to raise their awareness on the pervasiveness of metaphor to explain metaphorical topics referring to their own chosen concept. Students can also be asked about personally explaining idiomatic expressions and simultaneously highlighting the cultural properties that lead to differences in their first language and English (Boers, 2000).

Metaphoric competence

Low considers metaphoric competence as an essential skill to master for learners who want to be fully competent in their second language. Metaphoric competence is the ability to accurately interpret and utilize metaphors (Low, 1988) and there are a number of skills that contribute to it. Low identifies the ability to construct

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plausible meanings, knowledge of the boundaries of conventional metaphors, awareness on the multiple layers of metaphors and awareness of the social and interactive nature of metaphors.

It is significantly important to state the difference between the conceptual metaphor and the linguistic metaphor. The former refers to the underlying or hidden concept while the latter refers to the exact phrase used to build the conceptual metaphor. For example, the conceptual metaphor, ARGUMENT IS WAR (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) may precipitate into linguistic metaphors as: he can't defend his claims or they shot down the argument. This article stated earlier that comparison is the basis of metaphorical understanding. However, languages may share the same conceptual metaphor but express it in different linguistic forms, or may share neither the conceptual nor the linguistic form as there may also be cases when both the conceptual and linguistic form are similar in both languages (Trim, 2007, p. 29). Metaphor images, especially, tend to be similar if they express physiological needs. Many everyday activities take on the same form in most languages like running water, storm etc. Space and gravity metaphors also tend to be cross cultural since they share the same physical properties in the idea that movement upwards is more difficult, like in the case of it was an uphill task.

Obviously, the most difficult challenge for language learners is when the first and second language, contain different conceptual and linguistic forms as they must learn not only the new linguistic expression but also a new form of conceptualization.

Metaphor learning challenges
Linguistic challenges
The first and foremost challenge faced by ESL students when they encounter metaphor is a purely linguistic one since it is not easy for them to initially distinguish whether a phrase is being used literally or not (Low, 1988). Moreover, context plays a crucial role in metaphor interpretation and understanding and the meaning of the latter may entirely depend on a given context.

However, due to the embodied nature of conceptual metaphors, there is universality in conceptualization from a variety of languages, particularly those that are related to spatial orientation (Trim, 2007, p. 30).Trim considers as a valid example

for this assumption the cases when the concept of anger is expressed through metaphors related to heat because high temperature correlates with being angry. Thus, it is the common human experience and reactions to certain events that contributes to this universal property of metaphor. For instance, metaphors like ANGER IS HOT FLUID/ GAS IN A CONTAINER can be found in English as well as Japanese and Chinese (Trim, 2007, p. 32).

Cross-cultural challenges
The second identified reason on why metaphor is problematic for ESL students is of cultural and pragmatic nature. Basically, students may encounter difficulties when transferring a metaphorical expression from their first language to English (Low, 1988). Because of its embodied nature, apart from pure personal expression, metaphorical language also implies an underlying set of values and evaluation which make the process of understanding even more complex for ESL students (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 11). Nevertheless, Trim states that there are shared features across languages, such as analogies, cultural overlaps, and universal components that make metaphor comprehension cross linguistically easier (Trim, The limits of comprehension in cross-cultural metaphor: Networking in drugs terminology, 2012). He comes to this conclusion after a close examination of drug-related metaphors in 4 languages.

Cognitive challenges
The third and final challenge is characterized by cognitive factors. In order to master metaphoric competence, students need to develop their analogical reasoning skills and ability for mental imagery (Low J. L., 2006, p. 55) in order to create similarities and be able to compare source and target domains and also create mental images. Metaphoric competence is essential for developing grammatical, textual, illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence (Bachman, 1990).

Recommendations for teaching metaphor
Until now, an established method for teaching metaphor to ESL students does not exist. However, researchers advise students to actively interact with language, in order to understand and interpret new metaphorical expressions (see Low, J.L., 2006; Low, G., 1988)
Littlemore and Low suggest using read-

ing passages for metaphorical identification, analysis and interpretation. They suggest the incorporation of activities that help students not only identify but also critically interpret metaphors. The reading passage works as a concrete context which helps students to build their metaphorical awareness while creating a trusty ground for comparison and imagery.

Gillian Lazar provides some excellent examples on how to use a text entitled "A horticultural love story" to discuss metaphorical expressions with plants (Lazar, 2003). She suggests that prior to reading the story in class the teacher should encourage the students to make predictions on the story's plot based on the title. After reading the passage they discuss whether their predictions were right or not. The teacher should then ask the students to underline and identify all the words connected with trees or plants and explore their meaning. Keeping a consistent comprehensible input is very important since the repetition of already known information boosts the students' self esteem and encourages them to move on with the activity. Lazar also suggests translation of metaphorical expressions into the students' first language or finding equivalents of the same expressions. The cultural origin of a given metaphor is very important since it helps with the correct understanding of the expression and its correct usage. Moreover, drawing similarities between L1 and English help vocabulary retention. The association of

an English concept with the students' existing knowledge creates a secure ground when the expression is used in a given context.

Teachers may guide the students through reviewing language related to initial metaphors like ROOT, BLOSSOM and BLOOM. In order to reinforce the acquired knowledge, a writing activity may follow. Students might be initially prepared by the teacher to write on previously discussed abstract topics through establishing the target and source domains. For example, the previously discussed metaphorical expression like the root of a problem, his personality blossomed, put down roots in a new city, their friendship blossomed, she was blooming with happiness, explore one's roots could be used by the students to write about a personal experience or narrate a story they like or have witnessed.

Another very effective way of raising metaphor awareness, as suggested by MacArthur (2010) is the discussion of L1 transfer in metaphor and encouraging students to consult large electronic corpora or thesauruses and not only bilingual dictionaries. This would greatly improve the selected vocabulary of the students and broaden their conceptual competence.

To conclude, it is worth emphasizing the need to incorporate more conceptual and pragmatic competence in ESL teaching. In a world where communication is the key, this should not be underestimated.

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