

Original Paper

Metaphor in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching and its Implications

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Abstract

Metaphor, as a conceptual and cognitive tool, plays an important role in language learning and teaching. Based on the related research on metaphor, this paper discusses the performance of metaphor in foreign language learning and teaching and the relationship between them. This paper discusses the relationship between metaphor and foreign language learning from three aspects: vocabulary, foreign language communicative competence and culture. Finally, this paper summarizes the implications of metaphor for foreign language teaching: developing metaphoric awareness, strengthening metaphoric competence and using metaphor analysis in teaching evaluation.

Keywords

metaphor, foreign language learning and teaching, metaphoric competence, metaphor analysis, teaching evaluation

1. Introduction

In recent years, the study of metaphor has enjoyed a great deal of interest. Far from being considered a mere rhetorical or poetic device, metaphor has now been shown to play a fundamental role in human language and cognition. Metaphor is ubiquitous in our daily life. Conceptual metaphor is not only a rhetorical device, but also plays an important role in human language and cognition. In order to further understand the relationship between metaphor and foreign language learning and teaching, this paper will combine relevant research results and practical teaching observation, starting from the problems and performance of metaphor in foreign language learning, and summarize the enlightenments of metaphor for foreign language teaching, with the hope to provide guidance for further improving the quality of foreign language teaching.

2. The Development of Metaphor

Metaphor had long been seen as a matter of language not thought before the development of cognitive linguistics. Metaphorical expressions were assumed to be mutually exclusive with the realm of ordinary everyday language: everyday language had no metaphor, and metaphor used mechanisms outside the realm of everyday conventional language. This idea of metaphor was taken so much for granted over the centuries that many people didn't realize that it was just a theory. But with the development of cognitive linguistics as a field of research, the research of metaphor got deeper, in particularly the conceptual metaphor theory, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). In the following development, it is stated that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action and our ordinary conceptual system (Lakoff, 1993). The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.

3. The Problems and Causes of Metaphor in Foreign Language Learning

Because of the conceptual propriety of metaphor and its source of people's individual experience of the world, it is influenced by so many factors, such as culture, politics and even individual characteristics, so it is natural for foreign language learners to encounter difficulties when they are to comprehend and produce metaphor from the perspective of a native-speaker. The problems of metaphor used by foreign language learners reside in comprehension and production of metaphor. In terms of comprehension, for example, they can find it difficult to identify which aspects of the source domain are conventionally transferred onto the target domain, which can lead to errors in comprehension and production (Littlemore, 2001a).

Based on the analysis of metaphor use in three academic lectures, the studies by Littlemore (2001a) and Low, Littlemore and Koester (2008) reveal that the use of metaphor is of great prevalence in English learning as a foreign language, but there are a lot of difficulties that foreign learners of English faced with in understanding the ideas and opinions of lectures and the author's personal stance on them because of the great amount of metaphors occurred in these lectures. In terms of producing metaphors, the biggest problem is that, in most cases, the linguistic metaphors that are produced by foreign language learners do not sound native-like, and, instead of conveying their ideas with accuracy the students end up making errors that prevent them from conveying their real communicative intents.

So why do these problems occur? Based on previous studies and observations, the author summarizes the following points: First, metaphors in different languages cross languages and cultures, which makes it easy for foreign language learners to make wrong transfers from their mother tongue to the target language, resulting in grammatically and semantically inappropriate sentences. Secondly, most foreign language teaching often uses visuals and images to explain metaphors in class to promote understanding and memory of meaning, but this may distract students' attention from the words that constitute the language expression. Finally, there is a gap between understanding metaphors and producing them. Even if students have a good understanding of metaphor, they will still encounter the

problem of metaphor generation. The ability to understand does not mean the ability to produce. The fundamental reason that affects foreign language learners to further improve their language ability is conceptual rather than grammatical. For example, we often hear Chinese English learners complain that they know and understand all the usages of certain words or phrases, but they cannot use them correctly in speaking and writing. Therefore, this paper wants to emphasize that attention should be paid to the relationship between metaphor understanding and metaphor production. Both of them are very important, and the transformation between them cannot be ignored.

4. Metaphor in Foreign Language Learning

4.1 Metaphor in Vocabulary Learning

The mastery and application of vocabulary is a big problem for most language learners in their learning process, but it is an extremely important part of foreign language learning which cannot be ignored or under evaluated. Traditional vocabulary teaching methods such as affixing method, example sentence method, repeated memory method, method of combining sound and shape meaning etc., although have some positive effects on the memory of words, they cannot penetrate into the vocabulary, as a result of which learners feel words and meaning are completely two-dimensional, arbitrary and isolated. This problem in the long term is harmful for the students to fully understand the words and to develop the ability to use them in a proper way, which is also a big barrier for the foreign language learners to achieve their goal of communicating with their communicative intents conveyed accurately like a native. However, in foreign language teaching, few learners study metaphors from the perspective of conceptual metaphors, let alone using metaphor theory to explain the relevant vocabulary. Therefore, most students only can rote learning, rather than learn vocabulary from a cognitive perspective. As a result, massive words become a heavy burden for students to learn a foreign language. However, there are also some researches which reveal that metaphors can help with general vocabulary retention. Boers (2004) found that grouping new vocabulary around the conceptual metaphors from which it had been derived would also help students improve their understanding and uptake of the words.

4.2 Metaphor in Communicative Competence

Although there exists controversy as to the understanding of communicative competence among teachers in actual language teaching activities both at home and abroad, the most commonly accepted theory is the view put forward by Widdowson (1999) who distinguished linguistic skills and communicative abilities in describing the contents of communicative competence. He believes that language skills include the traditionally said listening, speaking, reading and writing. And other aspects of communicative competence are communicative skills which are the actual skills used in real communication situations. Yan (2001) pointed out that although the concept of communicative competence is more focused on the social attribute of speech, the interactional and cultural attributes possessed by the cognitive mechanisms of metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) suggest that metaphoric and communicative competence should interact with each other to some degree. From the researches

above, we can conclude that metaphoric competence (Danesi, 1986) and communicative competence are two theoretic concepts put forward by scholars which are different from but interactive with each other, so they can be seen as a complementary relationship. Therefore, in foreign language teaching activities, teachers should pay more attention to the teaching of these two kinds of competence in a different way, so as to develop students' ability to master their target language in all aspects. However, in real communicative activities of foreign language learning, it is not unusual for students to use non-native expressions either in speaking or writing. For example, it is very common for Chinese students learning English as a foreign language to use "Chinglish" (non-native English spoken by Chinese) in their communicating with foreigners or in their paper writings, which sounds very odd and confusing to natives. The examples of such are so many, just a few of them were demonstrated here. Here are some sentences abstracted from an English essay of a Chinese college student learning English: "Parents hope that their sons will become dragons" (Parent hope their children to have a bright future); "There are many students like this teacher" (grammatical error "There are many students who like this teacher"). In the final analysis, the reason of such problems resides in that even if students have achieved a high degree of verbal fluency, they cannot achieve the conceptual fluency. And the so-called conceptual fluency refers to the ability to match the surface structure of the target language with the underlying concept structure reflected (Danesi, 2000, p. 42), while metaphoric competence is underlying structure of a conceptual fluency (Danesi, 1993, p. 493). The root cause of foreign language learners' limited ability to further improve their language is conceptual rather than grammatical. Due to the lack of basic understanding of the conceptual system of the target language, foreign language learners tend to apply the expression system of their mother tongue when expressing their thoughts in a foreign language, which leads to stiff and dull expression that seem to be correct. So in order to strengthen students' ability to communicate like natives, students must have both high level of vocabulary fluency but also high level of conceptual fluency, which needs the cultivation of ability in metaphor. That is to say, to improve foreign language learners' communicative competence, students must strive to improve their ability of using metaphor.

4.3 Metaphor and Culture

Language is a carrier of culture, which includes geography, history and society institutions, beliefs, attitudes and worldviews, values, traditions and philosophical thinking etc. Language and culture are closely related, and their relationship can be explained through the production of metaphor. Metaphor is produced through schemata from repetitive experience and the cultural features of metaphor projected onto the cultural world, which makes metaphor possess cultural characteristics. Therefore, metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon or a thinking phenomenon, it is also a cultural phenomenon.

However, the use of metaphor in different historical backgrounds and national cultures is bound to leave a bright brand on metaphor. Therefore, second language learners often feel difficulty in understanding the target language. Although the difference of culture, geography, historical customs, religious believes brings a lot of confusions to understanding of language, learners can improve their

ability to understand through learning conceptual metaphors in the culture of their target language. By learning these metaphors, students can better understand the way of thinking in this nation and know more about their culture. For example, to learn some idioms in English, like meet one's Waterloo, have other fish to fry, all at sea, take the wind of one's sail, keep one's head above the water, is very helpful for students learning English as a foreign language to know English culture better and then to learn English well. As we all know, the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching is to cultivate students' intercultural communication interpersonal skills. Considering the great cultural difference between different cultures in languages, it is necessary to conduct some cultural teaching activities aimed at teaching cultural knowledge in different languages during the processing of foreign language teaching. By analyzing the phenomenon of metaphor in foreign language and exploring its metaphorical cognitive mechanism, students in foreign language learning can understand the deep cultural connotation contained in the foreign language, which can be an important starting point of culture teaching. Therefore, in foreign language learning, students need pay more attention to the learning of metaphor. By learning metaphors in foreign language, students can improve their ability to understand the culture in their target language so as to improve their ability to master the target language more easily.

5. Enlightenments of Metaphor on Foreign Language Teaching

Metaphor cannot only be a barrier to foreign language learning, but also an important way to improve language competence. Properly using metaphor in foreign language teaching is of great significance to improve language comprehension and communicative competence of foreign language learners.

5.1 Developing Metaphoric Consciousness and Strengthening Metaphoric Competence

It is obvious that the ability to comprehend and produce metaphor is of great significance, which is called "metaphoric competence" in linguistics. In order to strengthen foreign language learners' metaphoric competence, students must at first develop their awareness of metaphor in language. Only when the students in foreign language learning are conscious about the relationship between metaphor and foreign language learning that they will be able to consciously make efforts to improve their metaphoric competence. For the teachers, in foreign language teaching, it is very important for them to consciously guide their students to establish the relationship between metaphor and foreign language learning. In foreign language teaching, if the teachers can consciously teach students about the metaphoric knowledge in their target language and take feasible steps to cultivate students' hidden metaphoric awareness and metaphoric competence, the students will be more able to use the techniques of metaphor in their second language acquisition and second language communication.

Developing metaphoric competence requires the discovery of similarities between different things, combining meaningfully the knowledge or experience of two different cognitive domains and achieving gradual transition from expanding the scope of the use of words to the creative use of metaphor. To improve metaphoric competence is a gradual process of accumulation, which can be

developed through conscious instruction and practice. So in foreign language teaching classes, the teachers should consciously pay more attention to the teaching of metaphor.

How to cultivate metaphoric awareness and strengthen metaphoric competence? The author thinks that it needs imagination and creativity. The teachers in foreign language teaching should stimulate the students' imagination and creativity. For example, in foreign language teaching, the teachers should organize more interesting teaching activities such as story-telling about metaphor or group presentation about the source of meaning of metaphors in their target language. Moreover, in foreign language teaching, the teachers should talk more about the metaphoric knowledge of their target language, encouraging the students to try to use some tactics such as metaphor or simile to avoid the difficulties they encounter in foreign language learning. In this way, the students can produce smooth expressions which will have a positive effect on enhancing their self-confidence and their pragmatics abilities when using their foreign language. Through the learning activities in-class and exercises after-class, students can have a good command of techniques and skills of using metaphors in their speaking and writing. The unconscious and frequent use of metaphors in their compositions will, on the one hand, enrich their compositions, on the other hand, it is believed to have a positive effect on the fluency of their speaking.

5.2 Metaphor Analysis as a Way of Teaching Evaluation

Metaphor which comes from the interactive experience with the outside world is a conceptual tool, reflecting people's different cognition about what the world is like and how the world works. Metaphor analysis refers to the occurrence of metaphor in spoken and written discourse is analyzes to show the systematic nature of speaker's or writer's attitudes toward their topic and the cultural values that these display (Low, 1999). Broadly speaking, metaphor analysis is looking at how people construe a given topic. It exposes both their conscious and their reflective, or emotional attitude that shapes their treatment of a subject, the cultural values by which these stances are nurtured, the cultural attitude that they have helped develop. The dynamic nature of metaphor is implicit in how it construes its subject from the interaction of two or more sets of meanings. If we take the metaphor "Love is a journey" as an example, the meaning will be construed from how we engage "Love" and "journey" with the other. Thus how the expression will mean depends on how the listeners who engage with the metaphor. To put it simply, metaphor analysis can help us know people's cognition and attitudes about something. Teaching evaluation is also about how people assess participants and activities in teaching process. Therefore, there might be some interrelationship these two. As a matter of fact, there are already some explorations and researches on the application of metaphor analysis on language teaching evaluation. It is reasonable to say metaphor analysis can be a possible way to conduct foreign language teaching evaluation. As we all know, teaching evaluation is an indispensable part of teaching activities. It plays a multifaceted role in the teaching process. It adjusts and controls the teaching activities as a whole to ensure that the teaching activities can reach the predetermined goal and then achieve the goals. The main functions of teaching evaluation are testing teaching effectiveness, diagnosing teaching questions and providing feedbacks. Considering the importance of teaching evaluation in foreign language

teaching, to find good methods of conducting teaching evaluation in a fair and effective way seems to be of great significance. Metaphor analysis may be a new and interesting means to conducting evaluation foreign language teaching. For example, we can use metaphor analysis to get some ideas about how teachers and learners evaluate each other by looking at the metaphors they use to describe each other. Through the metaphor that the students choose to talk about their learning tasks, we can also know the assessment given by the students on the task assigned by their teachers in foreign language teaching. By looking at the different metaphors used by the students to describe their teachers or their learning task in foreign language learning, we are able to understand how they feel about the teachers and the learning tasks, which can be helpful for teachers to know the students' ideas about their teaching activities and then to make corresponding adjustments to improve the quality of foreign language teaching. However, as to the specific ways of applying metaphor analysis to the evaluation in foreign language teaching, there are now not many researches, which is therefore a field that needs more explorations and researches.

6. Conclusion

Not as a simple rhetoric device, but as a conceptual tool, conceptual metaphor has provided a new perspective for foreign language learners to view aspects in foreign language like lexis, grammar, communicative competence and cultural understanding. However, despite its prominence and significance in foreign language learning, learners of foreign language have been shown to struggle with both the production and comprehension of metaphor in their target language. Under such context, the term "metaphoric competence" came into being. Considering the prominent role metaphor plays in foreign language learning, it is very important for foreign language teachers consciously apply metaphor to the practice of foreign language teaching, trying to develop students' metaphor consciousness and strengthen their metaphoric competence. Besides, metaphor analysis can also be a possible and effective way to teaching evaluation in terms of its cognitive tool of showing people's real understanding and views of the world in a vivid way. However, as to the practical ways to apply metaphor to the real practice of foreign language teaching, this paper has not put forward specific approaches, which is therefore an area in which more attention should be given to and more efforts need to make in the future research.

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