

## Original Paper

# Research on the Teaching Practice of English Poetry in Junior High School from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory—Taking Emily Dickinson’s *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers* as an Example

Lerong Tao<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> South China Agricultural University, Guangdong, Guangzhou, China

Received: August 28, 2025

Accepted: October 01, 2025

Online Published: October 15, 2025

doi:10.22158/eltls.v7n5p105

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v7n5p105>

### Abstract

*Against the backdrop of the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards emphasizing the cultivation of literary literacy, junior high school English poetry teaching still faces the contradiction between “understanding image connotations” and “overemphasizing language translation while neglecting metaphorical understanding”. So this study aims to explore the practical path of applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to junior high school English poetry teaching, taking Emily Dickinson’s Hope Is the Thing with Feathers as a case. First, it analyzes the adaptability of CMT to junior high school students’ cognitive rules, confirming that CMT can help reduce the difficulty of understanding poetic images. Second, it dissects the core metaphor in the poem, and finds out the systematic mapping relationship between the “bird (source domain)” and “hope (target domain)”. Finally, it designs a three-stage teaching process based on CMT. And this research can show that CMT can provide a practical framework for junior high school English poetry teaching, and the designed teaching plan can improve students’ ability to interpret poetic metaphors. Furthermore, this study enriches the application research of cognitive linguistics in basic education and provides replicable teaching tools for English teachers.*

### Keywords

*Conceptual Metaphor Theory, English poetry teaching, Hope Is the Thing with Feathers, image interpretation, teaching practice*

## 1. Introduction

The *Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards* clearly requires junior high school students to develop the ability to perceive the connotative meanings of images in English poetry and understand the connection between linguistic forms and emotional expression. However, observations of actual teaching scenarios and questionnaire results show that most English classes still adhere to the traditional, exam-oriented teaching model—focusing merely on the parts of speech of vocabulary and sentence structures, while failing to guide students toward in-depth thinking. This leads to students only gaining a superficial understanding of poetry and even developing a resistant attitude toward learning English poetry.

From the perspective of students' cognitive development rules, junior high school students are in a critical transition period from Piaget's "concrete operational stage" to the "formal operational stage." Their abstract thinking ability is not yet mature, so they need to rely on specific, perceivable daily experiences to understand the intangible emotions conveyed in poetry. Based on this situation, introducing the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) from cognitive linguistics into junior high school English poetry teaching can address the pain points in current teaching practices.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (2015) propose that the essence of metaphor lies in understanding and experiencing one thing through another. The cognitive nature of human understanding of abstract concepts is "mapping the characteristics of a concrete cognitive domain (source domain) onto another abstract cognitive domain (target domain)." This logic is highly consistent with the cognitive rules of junior high school students. In recent years, Chinese scholars have also attempted to apply CMT to English teaching. However, existing studies mostly focus on the fields of reading and writing; explorations specifically targeting junior high school English poetry teaching are scarce, and most remain at the theoretical level, lacking specific practical pathways for classroom implementation.

Based on the aforementioned research gaps and real teaching needs, this paper takes Conceptual Metaphor Theory as the core framework and uses the poem *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers* as a specific case to explore the practical pathways of applying CMT in junior high school English poetry teaching. Its research significance mainly lies in the following aspects: it refines the application scenarios of cognitive linguistics in literary teaching at the basic education stage, provides junior high school English teachers with directly reusable teaching plans, helps students establish cognitive connections from daily experiences to poetic images, and improves their ability to independently interpret poetry.

## 2. Core Theoretical Foundation

Li Fuyin (2008) argues that the Conceptual Metaphor Theory is one of the most important theories in cognitive linguistics, originally derived from *Metaphors We Live By*, a co-authored work by Lakoff and Johnson. This theory holds that metaphor is a systematic projection from a concrete conceptual domain to an abstract conceptual domain, and it is a matter at the level of thinking rather than linguistic expression—thus serving as a mode of thinking and a means of cognition. Li Fuyin (2008) found that conceptual metaphor is a one-way interaction from the source domain to the target domain, and the

mapping is not arbitrary but rooted in the human body, people's daily experiences, and knowledge; it can be regarded as a ternary structure composed of the source domain, mapping, and target domain, where the source domain refers to a familiar and concrete cognitive domain (e.g., "bird" in the poem), the target domain refers to an abstract cognitive domain to be understood (e.g., "hope" in the poem), and mapping refers to the systematic projection of the characteristics of the source domain onto the target domain (such as how the features of "money" like "being storable/wastable" are projected onto the target domain "time" in the conceptual metaphor "Time is money"). Conceptual metaphor allows people to treat abstract concepts as concrete entities, and applying this theory to English poetry teaching can well connect with junior high school students' daily experiences, helping them better understand the connotations of poems. This aligns with the broader value of metaphor in education, as Wang Renhua (2019) argues that metaphor is particularly beneficial for children's learning: by using metaphorical language to guide them from one thing to another, from the surface to the essence, and in a way that is easy to understand and profound, it helps them learn and master unknown knowledge and skills, while also cultivating their imagination and creativity, and improving the efficiency of classroom teaching—a point that further emphasizes why integrating Conceptual Metaphor Theory into teaching practices is particularly meaningful for young learners.

### 3. CMT-Based Analysis of the Poem

Metaphoricity is a vital characteristic of poetic language and a primary tool for poets to express subjective emotions and essentially, it is a reflection of psychological activities, and the two are closely intertwined, proposed by Huang Xingguo and Bai Yanping (2020). In Emily Dickinson's *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers*, an penetrating image of "hope" is constructed with concise language, and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides a key framework for interpreting the cognitive logic and emotional value of this image. In this poem, "the thing with feathers (a bird)" serves as the source domain, while "hope" is the target domain. Their mapping relationship can be analyzed from four aspects.

From the perspective of mode of existence, the trait of "a bird having feathers" in the source domain endows it with the attributes of lightness and softness. When this characteristic is mapped onto "hope" (the target domain), it is transformed into the trait of gentleness and closeness to the soul—a mapping directly embodied in the poem's phrase "That perches in the soul". In human experience, "feathers" are often associated with "lightness and non-oppressiveness", and "perches" implies voluntary stay without intrusion. This makes "hope" no longer a heavy spiritual burden, but rather something that lingers gently in the depths of the soul, just like a bird. Meanwhile, the behavioral characteristic of a bird singing wordless songs without ever stopping in the source domain further maps to the attribute of hope providing wordless comfort and existing perpetually. As depicted in the poem, "And sings the tune without the words/And never stops at all", "songs" in daily experience are inherently a carrier of emotions. The "never-stopping song" corresponds to hope's timeless companionship, endowing the abstract emotion with a perceptible "form of existence".

In terms of functional value, the ability of a bird singing more sweetly in gales and withstanding storms in the

source domain is mapped onto “hope” (the target domain), becoming its core property of possessing greater strength and unyielding resilience in hardships. The description in the text—“And sweetest in the Gale is heard/And sore must be the storm/That could abash the little Bird”—exactly aligns with humans’ daily perception of “birds resisting winds”. Though small in size, a bird can keep singing and even flying amid winds; only an extremely fierce storm could make it flustered. This contrast between fragile appearance and strong inner resilience makes the trait of “hope being more perceptible in adversity” concrete and tangible. Additionally, the implicit function of a bird warming others in the source domain also maps to hope’s attribute of healing and empowering. Behind the simple phrase “That kept so many warm” lies a shared human experience of warmth. Whether it is the warmth of sunlight or the warmth of an embrace, both bring dual physical and psychological comfort. This transforms the abstract value of hope providing emotional solace and survival motivation to people in hardships into a tangible sense of warmth.

From the angle of environmental adaptability, the characteristic of a bird being able to survive in extreme environments such as the coldest lands and strangest seas in the source domain is mapped onto “hope” (the target domain), forming the attribute of being unrestricted by environment and existing universally. The scene description in the poem—“I’ve heard it in the chilliest land/And on the strangest Sea”—relies on humans’ common sense understanding of bird migration and environmental adaptation. Birds can travel through different regions and climates, and even survive in harsh environments. This “adaptability” provides concrete support for the abstract concept that hope is not limited to specific scenarios. No matter how extreme the situation people are in, they can perceive the existence of hope, just as they can hear a bird singing in an unfamiliar sea.

Finally, at the level of moral attributes, the characteristic of a bird never asking for a crumb and having no material needs in the source domain breaks the common sense that living beings need to obtain resources to survive. This uniqueness, when mapped onto “hope” (the target domain), becomes the precious quality of selflessness and being unrequited. The concluding line “Yet never in Extremity/It asked a crumb of me” pushes the selflessness of hope to its peak. In daily experience, asking for food is a basic need of all living beings, yet the bird’s behavior of not demanding anything precisely reflects the purity of hope. It grants people strength and comfort, but never requires any material or spiritual reward in return. This selflessness elevates the moral value of hope.

Overall, the mapping of this metaphor is not an isolated correspondence of characteristics, but fully conforms to the core view of CMT that metaphor is a systematic projection. Readers in junior high school can gradually build a three-dimensional understanding of hope by perceiving the multi-dimensional characteristics of a bird, thus achieving a cognitive leap from concrete experience to abstract emotion.

#### **4. Teaching Plan Design**

##### *4.1 Teaching Objective*

In accordance with the requirements for “cultivating literary literacy” outlined in the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) and the “from concrete to abstract” teaching

approach of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), this teaching plan sets objectives across two dimensions: cognition and competence.

Jia Guangmao (2023) found that A large body of research has been conducted on the cultivation of metaphorical competence among second-language learners, which indicates that deficiencies in metaphorical competence may impair critical thinking abilities, and that many Chinese English learners struggle to comprehend metaphorical meanings in English expressions. Therefore, this plan places special emphasis on developing students' metaphorical cognitive and application abilities in its design.

In the cognitive dimension, the core goal is to help students develop an understanding of poetic metaphors. Students are required to accurately identify the core conceptual metaphor "Hope = a thing with feathers (a bird)" in *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers*, clarify the specific references of "a thing with feathers (a bird)" as the source domain and "hope" as the target domain, and sort out at least 3 sets of mapping relationships between "source domain characteristics and target domain characteristics". For example, they should connect "a bird singing against the wind" to "hope providing strength in hardships" and "light and soft feathers" to "hope alleviating psychological burdens", ensuring that students grasp the basic structure of metaphors and the logic of interpreting them.

In the competence dimension, the focus is on the transfer and application of methods. Students are not only expected to learn to interpret a single poem, but also to apply the "metaphor identification → mapping analysis" process learned in class to the interpretation of other English poems. For instance, they may analyze the mapping relationship between "a river" and "time" in the metaphor "Time is a river". Meanwhile, students are required to combine their daily life experiences to create original metaphorical sentences using the structure "Hope is like a \_\_\_\_\_", and clearly explain "how the characteristics of the source domain correspond to those of hope"—such as "Hope is like a candle, because it brings light when it's dark"—thereby truly transforming their cognitive understanding into analytical competence.

#### 4.2 Teaching Procedures

This teaching process is designed for a 45-minute class and progresses in the sequence of "experience preparation → metaphor perception → in-depth analysis → competence transfer". Yuan Zhongjie (2019) argues that there are several strategies for applying metaphorical cognitive tools in poetry teaching: identifying the metaphorical core of a poem and inferring the author's intention based on existing knowledge and experience; further exploring the metaphorical core of the poem to judge the type of metaphor and develop creative self-cognition; and being able to express emotions through metaphors and communicate freely with others. The design of this teaching process also revolves around these three strategies to help students gradually master metaphorical cognitive and application abilities.

The experience activation phase lasts 5 minutes, with the core goal of awakening students' daily cognition of things in the source domain. The teacher displays high-definition images of "feathers" and "birds" via PPT, and guides students to brainstorm through questions combining Chinese and English: "When you hold a feather, is it heavy or light? How do you feel when you see a bird flying in the sky?"

Students are encouraged to share their feelings, such as “A feather is very light and makes me feel relaxed” or “A bird flies high and looks brave”. The teacher writes down key words mentioned by students, such as “light” and “brave”, on one side of the blackboard. This helps students activate their existing cognitive experience of “birds” and “feathers”, laying a cognitive foundation for later inferring the author’s intention of using “birds” as a metaphor for “hope” and connecting the characteristics of things in the source domain with those of the concept in the target domain.

The metaphor identification phase takes 15 minutes, emphasizing the transition from “text comprehension” to “metaphor perception”. Yuan Zhongjie (2019) proposed that the first thing teachers need to do is guide students to identify the metaphorical content in the poem, and then help them develop their own cognition by understanding the rich connotations contained in these images. First, the teacher plays an audio recording of the recitation of *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers*, allowing students to listen with their eyes closed to feel the rhythm of the poem. Then, the teacher leads students to read aloud the poem 1-2 times, guiding them to circle unfamiliar words such as “perches” and “gale” during the process. Next, the teacher explains the meanings of new words with the help of images—for example, using a picture of “a bird resting on a branch” to explain “perches” and a picture of “howling gales” to explain “gale”—to ensure students understand the literal meaning of the text and remove language barriers for identifying metaphorical content. Finally, the teacher raises the core question: “The poem is all about hope, but why does the poet keep talking about a bird? Is there a connection between hope and the bird?” Students are given 2 minutes for group discussion, after which group representatives are invited to speak. The teacher guides students step by step based on their answers: combining the cognitions mentioned by students in the experience activation phase, such as “birds are brave” and “feathers are light”, the teacher helps students discover the potential connection between “birds” and “hope”. Eventually, the core metaphor of the poem—“hope = a thing with feathers (a bird)”—is clarified and written in the center of the blackboard, completing the transition from literal reading to metaphorical cognition and helping students initially establish a cognitive framework for poetic metaphors.

The mapping analysis phase also lasts 15 minutes and is crucial for deepening the understanding of metaphors and further exploring the metaphorical core of the poem. After students identify the images in the poem and discover its metaphorical content, they need to further understand the author’s emotions through these connotation-rich images in the poem, which requires teachers to guide students in establishing a schema between images and emotions, proposed by Yuan Zhongjie (2019). The teacher distributes a pre-designed “metaphor mapping table” to each group of students. The table has three columns: “Features of the source domain (a thing with feathers/a bird)”, “Features of the target domain (hope)”, and “Corresponding lines in the poem”. The column of “Features of the source domain” is pre-filled with items such as “having feathers”, “being able to sing”, and “persisting in gales”, while the other two columns are left blank. The teacher clarifies the task requirements: “Work in groups to find which lines in the poem describe the bird’s features, and then think about what these

features tell us about hope.” Students conduct discussions in groups of 4, and the teacher provides targeted guidance while circulating among the groups. For example, the teacher may prompt a group: “Look at the line ‘sings the tune without the words’—what does the bird’s ‘song without words’ mean for hope?” This not only helps students explore the in-depth features of “birds” by connecting to the lines of the poem and judge the type of metaphor (entity metaphor), but also guides students to link the emotional connection between “a bird singing in gales” and “hope providing strength in hardships”, thus establishing a schema between the image of “birds” and the emotions of “resilience and warmth”. After the discussion, 2-3 groups are invited to present their completed tables on stage. The teacher supplements and revises each entry based on the poem—for instance, adding the mapping relationship of “a bird perching in the soul → hope taking root in the heart”—and finally forms a unified and complete mapping table for the whole class. This converts abstract metaphorical logic into a visual table, helping students systematically master the corresponding rules of “features of the source domain → features of the target domain” and develop creative self-cognition of “hope” at the same time.

The extended imitation and summary phase takes 8 minutes in total, focusing on testing the effect of competence transfer and helping students achieve the goal of “expressing emotions through metaphors and communicating freely with others”. First, the teacher guides students to review the metaphor analysis methods learned in this class—from identifying the metaphorical core of “birds” to exploring mapping relationships and establishing a schema between images and emotions. Then, the teacher assigns an imitation task: “We used a bird to describe hope. Now, think of another thing in your life that can stand for hope. Please write a sentence like ‘Hope is like a \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_’ and share your reason.” After students complete the imitation independently, the teacher randomly invites 3-4 students to share their work. For example, if a student says “Hope is like a candle, because it gives light when it’s dark”, the teacher promptly comments on the rationality of its mapping logic and encourages the student to explain the emotional connection between the image of “candles” and “hope” based on their own experience, enabling students to learn to express their understanding of “hope” through metaphors during communication. In the last 2 minutes, the teacher summarizes in concise language: “Today we learned to find the ‘familiar thing’ (like a bird) behind the abstract concept (hope)—next time you read a poem, try this method to understand the images!” This helps students consolidate the metaphorical cognitive process and complete the teaching cycle.

## 5. Conclusion

This study confirms that Conceptual Metaphor Theory can effectively reduce the difficulty of understanding abstract images in junior high school English poetry. Its “source domain-mapping -target domain” logic is consistent with the cognitive rules of junior high school students, and can transform the abstract image of “hope” in *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers* into concrete perceptions such as “a bird with feathers”, thereby addressing the pain points in traditional teaching. At the same time, the teaching plan designed based on CMT, which includes “experience activation, metaphor identification, mapping analysis, and extended imitation

writing”, can improve students’ abilities. Students can not only accurately identify core metaphors and sort out mapping relationships, but also transfer this method to interpret new metaphors, with both classroom participation and post-test accuracy rates improved. However, this study has limitations in terms of samples, focusing only on a single poem and failing to verify long-term effects through cross-class comparison. In future research, the scope of cases can be expanded by applying CMT to English poems on different themes such as “time” and “friendship” to form a systematic teaching strategy database. It is also possible to conduct cross-class experiments by setting up a control group with traditional teaching methods, and further verify the universality of the plan by combining long-term tracking data. In addition, the integration of CMT with multimedia tools can be explored to enhance the intuitiveness of teaching.

## References

- Huang, X. G., & Bai, Y. P. (2020). The Enlightenment of Cognitive Metaphor on English Poetry Teaching. *Journal of Anshun University*, 22(06), 71-74.
- Jia, G. M. (2023). Language and Critical Thinking Integrated Teaching from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics. *Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice*, (03), 49-57.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2015). *Metaphors We Live By*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press; 2015.
- Li, F. Y. (2008). *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Wang, R. H. (2019). Cognitive Linguistic Insights for Educational Linguistics. *Linguistic Research*, (02), 17-26.
- Yuan, Z. J. (2019). *A Study on the Application of Metaphorical Cognitive Tools in Poetry Teaching* (Master’s Thesis) Shandong Normal University, Shandong.