

Research on Metaphors in College English Teaching

Cao Haifeng (Corresponding author)

Liberal Study College, Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology

No.19 Qingyuan North Rd, Huangcun, Daxing District, Beijing 102617, China

Tel: 86-10-188-1175-2572 E-mail: caohaifeng@bipt.edu.cn

Sun Shuling

Liberal Study College, Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology

No.19 Qingyuan North Rd, Huangcun, Daxing District, Beijing 102617, China

Tel: 86-10-151-0116-4112 E-mail: sunshuling@bipt.edu.cn

Lu Yaqin

Liberal Study College, Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology

No.19 Qingyuan North Rd, Huangcun, Daxing District, Beijing 102617, China

Tel: 86-10-135-2054-1936 E-mail: luyaqin@bipt.edu.cn

Received: November 12, 2023 Accepted: December 11, 2023

Published: January 4, 2024

doi:10.5296/jei.v10i1.21456

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/jei.v10i1.21456>

Abstract

Metaphor has not received the necessary attention in language learning and teaching because it has always been narrowly understood as a rhetorical device. The author of this article will provide a broad interpretation of metaphor, emphasizing that it is not only a rhetorical device, but also a way of thinking and an effective way to grasp the true meaning of language. Only after realizing the important role of metaphor in English teaching can teachers improve students' metaphorical cognition and critical thinking abilities in their teaching practice, and consciously explore the true meaning and cultural background behind language. Therefore, only by making good use of metaphors can teachers effectively promote English teaching.

Keywords: Metaphor, Metaphorical cognition, English teaching, Ability to think and analyse

1. Introduction

As Lakoff stated, “*For most people, metaphor is not an ordinary language, but a strategy of poetic imagination and rhetorical diversity, extraordinary ... For this reason, most people believe that without metaphor, they can still live freely*” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This concept is not only from the perspective of ordinary people, but also from the perspective of many English teachers, who believe that metaphors are not indispensable in English teaching. But the fact is “*whether in language or in thought and action, metaphors are ubiquitous in our daily life, and the conceptual system on which our thoughts and actions are based is itself based on metaphors*” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors are so common and important that English teachers must understand metaphors and skillfully use them in teaching practice. Therefore, this article will delve into the importance and methods of using metaphors to assist English teaching.

2. Research on the Role of Metaphor in English Teaching

The publication of the book *Metaphors We Live By* in the 1980s sparked a heated discussion about metaphors in education, and as a result, metaphors have been widely applied in educational practice abroad. The researches focusing on metaphors abroad mainly involve the ideas and practices of metaphors in class teaching, the methods of teachers using metaphors to construct teaching designs, and the classification of metaphors. Most of these studies are empirical studies based on metaphorical concepts. In the past two decades, there has been significant progress in the study of metaphor in China, with many scholars having their own unique perspectives and research results. Representative examples include Geng Xue’s systematic exposition and research on conceptual metaphor in her *Review of Recent Five Years of Cognitive Linguistics in China* which provides a visible description of the trend of the development of cognitive linguistics in China based on the data analysis of the journals in Chinese journal networks (Geng, 2021). In the essay written by Zhang (2014) named *The Role of Cognitive Metaphor in College English Discourse*, she had used examples from college English textbooks to illustrate the universality of metaphor and emphasized the importance in English teaching of cultivating students’ metaphorical abilities. However, most of the research still focuses on a one-sided study of metaphor, especially on how to skillfully use metaphors to stimulate students’ interest in learning and thus assist English teaching. Therefore, this article will explore how to skillfully use metaphors in English teaching from the perspectives of vocabulary, sentences, discourse, and cultural connotations, guiding students to systematically master English language knowledge and its cultural connotations.

The construction of any language is from vocabulary to sentences, and then to the form of discourse. Any vocabulary, sentence, and discourse are units used to convey information and express ideas. Therefore, this article will explore the use of metaphors to assist English teaching, from vocabulary to sentences, to discourse and connotation stratification.

2.1 Metaphors Make Vocabulary Learning and Consolidation Less Tedious

For many English learners, learning and memorizing vocabulary is both tedious and frustrating. Because in their eyes, these words are clusters of letters to indicate certain

meanings. What makes things ever worse are polysemy, synonyms, and homographs. Relying solely on mechanical memory to memorize them, is not only difficult, but also impossible to truly understand and use these words. However, some specific applications of metaphor will make things better. If teachers could understand that metaphor has the characteristic of *allowing us to understand one field of experience based on another* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), guiding students to use existing experience to analyze and learn new vocabulary will have different effects. In teaching, teachers can guide students to understand vocabulary from a regular and systematic perspective. Through the use of metaphors, they can provide targeted inspiration and guidance to students, implement effective teaching associations, and enable them to truly understand the meaning of vocabulary in a more concrete and vivid context. With the concept of metaphor, the content that students master and understand is no longer just the individual vocabulary, but a rich and meaningful ideographic unit. For example, in the Gettysburg address of former US President Lincoln, the word *dedicate* was repeatedly used. The teacher could define it as “to give a lot of your time and effort to a specific activity or purpose because you think it is important”, highlighting the metaphorical connotation of putting in effort and sweat for activities of great significance, and making students understand the necessity of using this word in speeches; this also distinguishes it from the word *contribution* that students usually use when expressing *giving*. There is another example, when students have mastered the word *extend*, which is formed by the root word *tend* adding the prefix *ex* to indicate *outward*. Thus, after encountering vocabulary such as *expand* and *extend* again, one does not need to memorize the vocabulary by spelling out the alphabetical order, but instead infers the meaning of the vocabulary through existing experience. Metaphor can also help students enrich the meaning of vocabulary, for example, as a basic vocabulary, *vision* is known to represent *the ability to see; the area that you can see from a particular position*. However, when encountering sentences like *He had a vision of a world in which there would be no wars*, one can infer from their existing knowledge reserves that *vision* here shares the meaning of *imagination* or *fantasy*. Vocabulary is the foundation of reading. Only by constructing a certain number of vocabularies can one read and write effectively and efficiently. However, according to the theory of metaphorical cognition, different cognitive associations in different contexts can turn a word into a polysemous concept related to the context. Therefore, guiding students to strengthen their metaphorical cognition can help them understand the different meanings of vocabulary in different discourses, and truly grasp the connotation and usage of the vocabulary.

2.2 Metaphor Makes Reading and Writing Easier

We speak in a linear sequence, saying some words first and then others when speaking a sentence. Because speaking is related to time and time is metaphorically conceptualized based on space, it is natural for us to conceptualize language based on space... Our spatial concepts can be naturally applied to language expression. We know which word is at the beginning of the sentence and whether the two words are very close together. Or they can be very divided, and they also know whether a word is relatively long or relatively short (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) According to Lakoff and Johnson’s theory, the formation of sentences also relies on metaphors. Only by fully utilizing spatial metaphors can sentences be written or

their meanings be understood. The Gettysburg address by former US President Lincoln is a good example. The metaphorical conceptualization of space in the sentence *Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposal that all men are created equal*. This spatial concept allows sentences to develop layer by layer and meanings to progress layer by layer. Although parentheses were used, the sentence did not feel fragmented, and the logic and progression of the sentence were clear and reasonable. In the process of language acquisition, learners could gradually construct concepts related to sentences by repeatedly reading and analyzing these types of sentences, and can also successfully apply conceptual metaphors of time and space to text reading and writing long sentences.

2.3 Metaphor Helps Learners Understand the Cultural Connotations behind Words

Language is the carrier of culture, and different language phenomena reflect different cultural backgrounds. The ultimate goal of English learning is to acquire comprehensive knowledge of English and expand their knowledge and perspective. Reading is the most enduring and stable learning mode to achieve this goal. However, many English learners only have a simple or one-sided understanding of the literal meaning of the reading material during the reading process, and cannot grasp the theme of the article well, thereby they cannot have a better understanding of the meaning that the author truly wants to express. Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers should pay attention to emphasizing the cultural connotations reflected by metaphors in the text. Due to the fact that English and Chinese belong to two distinct ethnic languages, the metaphors used in languages reflect two distinct cultures. This is most evident in the use of animals to express metaphors in both English and Chinese. For example, if it is also used to describe *robust, as strong as an ox* is used in Chinese, while in English it is used as *as strong as a horse*. These different expressions should stem from the different cultures formed by the different living habits of the two ethnic groups.

2.4 Metaphor Helps Learners Improve Their Critical Thinking Ability

As early as the late 1990s, Huang Yuanshen, a senior professor in the foreign language field in China, wrote an article pointing out that *the phenomenon caused by a lack of analytical, comprehensive, judgmental, reasoning, thinking, and analytical abilities can be referred to as speculative absence* (Huang, 1998). After more than a decade, Professor Huang Yuanshen once again wrote an article pointing out that the situation of speculative absence is still a major problem shared by teachers and students in foreign language learning. For this reason, he also published an article calling for: *If the disease of absence of speculation is not eliminated, foreign language students will have a hard time coming to the forefront* (Huang Yuanshen, 2010). The absence of speculation is not unrelated to metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson believe that *metaphor is an analogy in which people use the similarity between two objects to indirectly imply the characteristics of one object to depict the characteristics of another*. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) According to cognitive linguistics theory, metaphor is not only a rhetorical device, but also a way of thinking. It is a means for people to reconstruct the real world through thinking based on perception. *Because in order to recognize and describe previously unknown things, we must rely on concepts and language expressions that we*

already know and understand, from one to another, from the outside to the inside, and sometimes even unleash astonishing imagination and creativity. This cognitive process is precisely the core of metaphor, which juxtaposes familiar and unfamiliar affairs in an unusual way, thereby deepening our understanding of unfamiliar affairs (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Since metaphor has become a necessity for people to understand new things and improve their cognitive abilities, it is necessary for teachers to guide students to continuously improve their metaphorical cognitive abilities in order to cultivate their critical thinking ability.

Language and thinking are closely related. Metaphors can be seen everywhere in language, which is an indispensable way for language to convey meaning, a way for authors to express their thoughts and emotions, and thus become a bridge for effective communication between authors and readers. If teachers can realize the necessity of using metaphor theory to guide English teaching and attach importance to guiding students to understand and use metaphors in English teaching, they can gradually overcome the existing phenomenon of speculative absence in foreign language teaching and cultivate thoughtful and proficient English learners.

3. Conclusion

Since our lives cannot be separated from metaphors, as an indispensable part of life, metaphors are naturally indispensable in language. Without metaphors, language becomes dull and lacks richness and expressiveness. Hu (2004) once said, “*Mastering metaphorical ability has become an indispensable part of second language teaching*”. Therefore, teachers should provide students with more space for metaphorical thinking and encourage them to use metaphorical language in the teaching process. In the classroom questioning session, students are required to provide metaphorical answers rather than direct answers; When encountering typical sentences in reading, students can be asked to engage in discussions and use divergent thinking to associate more relevant metaphorical expressions. As long as teachers can persist in using learning materials in teaching, help and guide students to gradually construct metaphorical abilities, and improve their creative thinking abilities, students will gradually master the methods of using metaphorical cognition for language learning, so that they can fully understand the abstract connotations and cultural backgrounds conveyed behind words, and thus improve their thinking ability.

References

- Geng, X. (2021). A Review of Research on Cognitive Linguistics in China in the Last Five Years. *Taste and Classics*, 16(3).
- Hu, Z. (2004). *Cognitive Metaphor*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Huang, Y. (2010). The Curriculum of English Majors Must Be Thoroughly Reformed—Further Discussion on “Speculative Absence”. *Foreign Language World*.
- Huang, Y. S. (1998). Speculative absence. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 15(7), 1.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Zhang, L. (2014). The Role of Cognitive Metaphor in College English Discourse. *Journal of Jiamusi Institute of Education*.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Authors Contributions

Cao Haifeng and Sun Shuling were responsible for study design and revising. Prof. Sun Shuling drafted the manuscript and Associated Prof. Cao Haifeng revised it. Lu Yaqin also did the last reading of the paper.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing Interests

Not applicable.

Informed Consent

Obtained.

Ethics Approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Macrothink Institute.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and Peer Review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data Sharing Statement

No additional data are available.

Open Access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.