Enhancing cross-cultural Communication through conceptual metaphor awareness: The case of 1st year Magister literature students at Laghouat University, Algeria (2013-2014)

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Abstract

In this research, the case for conceptual metaphor analysis of literary texts is put forward as an attempt to incorporate both linguistic and pragmatic analysis in the teaching of literature in foreign language classes. Our research, under the lakovian analysis of language and culture-specific metaphors, explored the many ways that metaphor shapes and influences the comprehension of literary texts. Students of first year ‘Magister’ degree in literature at Laghouat University enrolled in the course in 2013-2014, were the targeted sample of the study which was implemented according to the objectives of the course. Using congruent quantitative assessment of the subjects’ performances in the experimental group and the control group in a sequence of studies, metaphor awareness hypothesis has been tested to show its effects on learners’ achievements in acquiring, integrating and recalling culture specific elements in the chosen texts. The findings of the study confirm that conceptual metaphors sustain cultural interaction in EFL literature classes.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, cross-cultural communication, literature.
1. Introduction
Commonly defined, literature is a social activity; it mirrors up a social reality or delves into issues of personal expression. Literature is one of the most important signs of culture. Conceptual metaphors, as elaborated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) et al, are grounded in people’s experiences and interactions with the outside world. Through living the culture, that is, through equipping foreign language learners with an awareness of how particular communities conceptualise reality and transmit that in the literary texts, learners might get the potential of increased proficiency inherent in the native speakers’ repertoire.

In the series of articles and books published by Lakoff, he tackled the different levels at which metaphors operate, starting from language, thought, culture, literature and recently, political discourse. Relevant to the following research, are the findings in the domains of the strand thought, language, and culture. Salient, as it were, in the literary texts, poetic metaphor is, by far, considered as a property of the human mind, a shared quality between the creative use of the poetic mind and the ordinary reader. The target of raising students’ metaphoric competence is to arrive at a clear grasp of the underlying conceptual metaphors in poems, novels and short stories. That way, both linguistic and conceptual metaphors contribute to increased metaphoric competency that would pave the way for cross-cultural communication. Although, conceptual fluency and metaphoric competence, as the fourth accompanying elements in foreign language literature classes, is among the under-researched areas, this research study seeks to contribute to this still-fresh field of enquiry. Its main objective is to smoothly escalate from one stage to the other to reach cultural awareness as offered by metaphoric competence in literature classes. Starting by the more linguistic awareness of the metaphors we live by, to the cultural and the linguistic differences in the conceptualisation of metaphors within the framework of novel and creative poetic metaphors.

2. Statement of the Problem
In the foreign language classroom, teachers meet different student abilities and competences; however, the degree of difficulty of the teaching materials differs from one discipline to the other. Among the difficulties that teachers of English as a foreign language grope with, are reaching a comprehensive grasp of the cultural elements contained in any language course. In literature, for instance, non-native teachers who are unaware of the cultural underpinnings of metaphorical expression may pass over it unexplained; then, that would create cultural misunderstandings or a superficial interpretation of the themes of a particular literary work.

On the linguistic and the pragmatic levels, students of literature are supposedly required to read at three levels, the literal level, where analysis of the elements of fiction overrides. In the second stage, they are required to look deeply at the themes and the figures of speech employed to reach a third level which aims at critically analysing the work of the writer. Although, teachers might assist the students in the first two stages, but due to the wide variety of critical analysis of literary texts, a more cognitively-oriented view of figurative language might be a facilitator to the learning task. A cognitive treatise of literary texts, in this line of enquiry, might provide learners with a comprehensive view of literary texts by implementing explicit analysis of conceptual
metaphors in each work to locate them within the socio-cultural framework of the writers in question. That way, the multiple layers of meaning might be reached starting from the linguistic to the pragmatic then the critical. Ultimately, the central problem that this research tries to address is the lack of sufficient linguistic and cultural awareness of the literary texts that foreign language students, namely at Laghouat University, deal with in academic courses.

3. Review of Literature

Through analyzing metaphor in both the literary and the non-literary discourses, proponents of a cognitive perspective to language sought to look at the intrinsic mechanisms that underlie its production. Thus, the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor (CTM henceforth) that was established by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) wiped off false traditional assumptions and clarified, among others, the claim that language and thought are metaphorical in nature.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) challenged hitherto neglected aspects of the nature of the conceptual operations behind the production of metaphors. Metaphor tends to extend to thought, itself is proved to be metaphorical in nature. That is, ‘the conceptual system under which we both think and act is fundamentally metaphorical in nature’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:3). Further, the widespread use of metaphor in everyday communication comes from the way people structure and experience the world around them. In other words, the concepts of up and down are engraved in the human memory due to sensory motor experiences at early childhood. Furthermore, the spatial orientations trigger the coherent knowledge of concepts. Upward and downward orientations are manifested through ‘I am feeling up today’ or ‘He is feeling low these days’. Due to its dependence on human beings’ interpretation, meaning tends to be partial. That is, it gives only a partial view of reality. Metaphor highlights some aspects and hides others. In TIME IS MONEY, for example, the context in which it may be used is not applicable during weekends or leisure time.

Another status metaphor gained in Cognitive Linguistics during the last two decades is its pervasiveness and utility in language and thought. In particular, the use of conceptual mappings across domains, the source domain and the target domain. The former refers to the more concrete and tangible concepts through which people understand abstract and often unknown concepts. The latter, however, refers to the domain people want to understand through the use of the source domain (Kovesces, 2002:4). Crucially stated as part of the natural language of human beings, metaphorical concepts can set the milestones for linguistic manifestations of metaphor. To exemplify, the broader conceptual metaphors MORE IS UP and LESS IS DOWN are shown in linguistic expressions as, I am feeling up today, the prices are going to the roof; we fall down into a depression and the list goes on. By structuring the more abstract concepts with concrete ones, metaphor determines our way of viewing and thinking about the world. Worth mentioning is the distinction made by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) between the conceptual mapping and the name attributed to it. To denote the former, they used capitalised phrases, while for the latter they preferred small letters. Further still, Lakoff (1992) named the systematic nature of the conceptual correspondences between the target domain and the source domain, the invariance principle. Through mapping image-schemas, basic principles of our bodily operation in the world, from the source to the target, the categories that are present during the mapping in the target override in a systematic
manner. *Source domain interiors correspond to target domain interiors; source domain exteriors correspond to target domain exteriors* (:10).

Furthermore, the experiential basis of metaphor encompasses other factors that facilitate the choice of one particular source domain over another. Apart from one’s interaction with the world, the cultural factors contribute as well to the choice of the latter. Cultural variations in the conceptualisation of abstract entities are of three distinct points.

Variations in the range of conceptual metaphors and metonymies for a given target; variation in the particular elaborations of conceptual metaphors and metonymies for a given target; variation in the emphasis on metaphor versus metonymy associated with a given target, or the other way around (Kovesces, 2002:183).

The cultural variation in conceptual metaphor is manifested differently according to the range of possible expressions in a particular culture. Indeed, even if two or more cultures may share the same conceptual metaphor, its elaboration differs from one culture to the other. For instance, even if only a few cross-linguistic analyses of conceptual metaphors in Arabic and English have been carried out hitherto, some linguistic expressions in Arabic business discourse were found similar. Fahd AlJumah (2009) analysed a range of business articles in the two languages to discern the possible communalities between the linguistic metaphors and concluded that Arabic and English share the same metaphors for UP&DOWN such as, ‘collapse’, ‘putting down’, ‘fall into’ where the Arabic equivalents are, ‘انهيار’, ‘طرح’, ‘في يقع’. Misunderstanding, however, might arise from the socio-cultural underpinnings of the two communities due to the available linguistic manifestations in a particular language.

After all, the traditional cognitive theory of metaphor accounts for the bidirectional interaction between the physical and the concrete, from one side, and the abstract intrinsic parts of the human body, from the other. The latter led to the widespread interest in the categories, the clusters of image-schemas and the detailed purely cognitive and neural theories of metaphor. It led, further, to new insights in the teaching of metaphors through distinguishing between kinds of both linguistic and conceptual metaphors. The degree to which a particular metaphor is entrenched and used by a speech community determines its degree of conventionality. That is, different communities and cultures may develop diverse conventionalised linguistic expressions in the realm of natural discourse. Conversely, instances of novelty and creation might show up in literary, poetic, political or even musical lyrics. Conventionality can appear both in the conceptual metaphors and their linguistic manifestations. In a conventional metaphor like, LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART, conventionalised linguistic metaphoric expressions might not be provided in the language community due to their unconventionality (Kovesces, 2002:36).

So far the cognitive theory of metaphor has been explained because this research study is motivated by the findings brought hitherto in analysing both fiction and poetry. The next section aims at raising the main research questions of the study. Three main research questions are answered in the study:
1. To what extent can conceptual grounding increase the probability of 1st year Magister learners’ proficiency in analysing literary texts?
2. What are the effects of conceptual metaphor-based analysis of literature on raising their metaphorical competence?
3. What are the effects of metaphor awareness raising analogies on targeted students’ communicative and cultural competence?

This study aims at testing the following hypotheses:
1. Integrating conceptual grounding into the teaching of literature fairly improves 1st year Magister learners’ linguistic and conceptual proficiency.
2. Conceptual metaphor awareness increases the students’ metaphorical competence.
3. The use of cognitive linguistics-inspired metaphor teaching in ‘Magister’ literature class at the University of Laghouat increases learners’ communicative and cultural awareness of the target language.

4. Methodology
As an attempt at answering and further testing the above mentioned questions and hypotheses, a set of methodological procedures was carried out. An experimental investigation within the framework of cognitive-inspired study area was implemented. The study aims to test quantitatively the claim that conceptual metaphor awareness can contribute to conceptual fluency and increased cross cultural communication on the part of learners. Indeed, the study followed the chronological order of empirical investigations. That is, a pretest aimed at identifying individual students’ level of performance; the treatment manifested through the use of conceptual metaphor awareness raising method; and a post test checking for students’ comprehension, production and use of conceptual metaphors in literary discourse.
In the experimental studies, metaphorical competence in literary discourse was investigated using one independent variable that is metaphor-inspired teaching and one dependent variable which is the learner’s capacity of analogical reasoning, metaphor comprehension and use in literature classes. The groups then were compared according to each research question and its variable. In the case of this study, however, two groups were chosen. The dependent variable was present in one group and absent from the other. Then, the two groups were equally tested. Important to point out is the methodological challenge which caused difficulties. This is in part due to difficulties associated with operationalising cognitive linguistic development.

4.1 Sampling
The current empirical study was assigned to the population of first year ‘Magister’ students at Laghouat University enrolled in the Literary Studies course chosen for the study. ‘Magister’ students shared the advantage of formal university-entrance exam and a BA degree. That is, the two sub-groups represented the general post-graduation population in literary studies in Algerian Universities. In pursuit of the endeavor to test metaphor-inspired teaching methods, authentic texts from published literature books were chosen according to the students’ domain of specialty. In particular, texts where conceptual metaphor was found based on thematic relevance to American and British literatures, in this case. After exposure to the same reading text, students in both the control group and the experimental group had an immediate posttest.
experimental group received metaphor-inspired explicit instruction and enhanced schematic support, the control group pursued the regular literary instruction. Differences in posttest performance has been calculated accordingly.

5. Results
5.1 Results and analysis of the first experiment

The results of the first experiment clearly show the difference between the experimental group and the control group in mid-term acquisition of vocabulary items related to culture. The main items that were processed easily by the students are those related to the general encountered items as novel metaphors related to the figures of speech that they routinely study. In the experimental group, however, the lexical items which were highlighted through conceptual metaphors were successfully acquired. The frequently used items in the experimental group were closely related to elements of culture. The mean score of the experimental group outweighs that of the control group but the difference is not significant. The latter can be attributed to many factors, the newness of the material and the methodology used.
5.2 Results and analysis of the second study

The metaphor group outperformed the control group in the second C-test indeed, but the degree of difference is a matter of caution. The mean of the experimental group fell down from 7.28 to 3 instead of increasing. The latter case might be attributed to the length of the task compared to the first one. Furthermore, the test was handed to the students’ three days before the first mid-term examinations. In other words, the psychological atmosphere might have affected students’ achievements. The number of respondents in both groups who accomplished the test was also limited to twelve students only. Thus, the mean score of metaphor group was counted as follows: 

\[ X_a = \frac{36}{12} = 3 \]

The mean of the control group, on the other hand, was calculated through dividing 21 by 12 which yielded 

\[ X_b = \frac{21}{12} = 1.75 \]

Difference between means \((X_a)\) and \((X_b)\) is:

\[ 3 - 1.75 = 1.25 \]

6. Conclusion and significance of the study

As an attempt to incorporate sound methodological techniques to the teaching of conceptual metaphors in literary discourse, the following study serves as a first step towards developing CL-inspired metaphor courses for ‘Magister’ in literary studies students at Laghouat University. It leads, further, to recommendations as to what is needed for positive change to occur at the level of teaching cognitive poetics and cross-cultural communication at Laghouat University. In line with the economic and political stance towards international trade relations with English
speaking countries and the increasing number of published documents in the English language, the study attempts to fill students’ needs accordingly. Students often encounter difficulties when reading documents or academic texts related to culturally-oriented literary texts. Another factor justifying the need for the study is the lack of research in the field of cognitive linguistics on a broader sense, and in literary analysis in particular. Research in the field in Algeria is still raw and needs to be carried out to cater for the needs of students in academic settings. On the whole, the findings from the study are supposed to open up areas for research on the effects of metaphor-based strategies on working out the meaning of new vocabulary items in non-native English speaking countries as far as literary dictum is concerned.
References


