THE POTENTIAL OF METAPHOR IN ESL PEDAGOGY
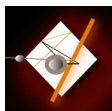
A Pilot Case Study

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Metaphor is an underutilized resource in second-language pedagogy. While metaphor's role in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms has been the subject of research, most studies acknowledge its use only as a means to increase vocabulary retention. This pilot case study acknowledges metaphor's potential in that capacity, but goes further and asks how it might also foster cross-cultural awareness and empathy. This qualitative study employed open-ended questionnaires to inquire into metaphor's inclusion into a private ESL school for university students in a Texas town. The aim was to gauge metaphor's formal or informal integration into the curriculum, and its pedagogical efficacy from the perspective of students, instructors, and administrators. The results suggest active incorporation of metaphor into ESL classrooms stimulates student learning by opening spaces for cross-cultural discussion, and goes further to suggest advocating for metaphor's inclusion in professional learning and communicative settings.

Keywords. ESL pedagogy, Metaphor, Second Language Learning, Intercultural communication.

Metaphor derives from the Greek *meta*, expressing change, and *pherein*, meaning *to carry* (Lazar, 1996). In other words, a metaphor is a *carrying across* of meaning from one object to another. At a basic cognitive level, metaphor simply refers to thinking of one thing in terms of another one. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) began what has become a cross- and interdisciplinary conversation about metaphor's makeup, its use, and its epistemological potential. Baake (2003), for instance, explores metaphor in science writing. His research

into a theoretical-science think tank lends interesting insight into even the reliance of science on metaphor. Research has shown that human inquiry and communication cannot be divorced from metaphorical ways-of-knowing.

A growing body of research contextualizes the power of metaphor in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) pedagogy (Boers, 2000; Deignan et al., 1997; Lazar, 1996; Littlemore, 2001, 2004, 2006). Most inquiries into metaphor's potential as a teaching tool in ESL classrooms have focused on its power to increase vocabulary retention (Boers, 2000; Lazar, 1996; Littlemore, 2004). Deignan et al. (1997) is the sole study yet concerned with the application of metaphor in ESL contexts in order to stimulate and facilitate what they term *cross-linguistic awareness-raising*. The present research builds on their work by distributing questionnaires to university-aged foreign students enrolled in a private English language learning institution. The results and implications are summarized thus:

(a) metaphor is currently under-utilized as a resource in some ESL curricula;

(b) active incorporation of metaphor could yield productive ESL learning outcomes; and

(c) metaphor-based language learning might be utilized in international professional communication contexts.

Metaphor's potential as a learning facilitator is discussed below—but first, a review of the literature.

A Review of Literature

Metaphor as an ESL pedagogical tool is not new, but its suggested application has been narrow. Past research has argued that the best potential for metaphor in ESL classrooms relates to vocabulary retention. Lazar (1996) was the first to argue that figurative language, and metaphor in particular, are often neglected, and could be better employed so students retain more words. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) provide many examples of metaphorical propositions around which vocabulary and expressions can be clustered. Lazar draws on their work to assert that "grouping vocabulary in lexical sets is now an established procedure in the teaching of vocabulary," and it might also "be useful for their vocabulary-building skills if students were encouraged to group

vocabulary around metaphorical sets" (1996, p. 44–45). Doing so may help students remember better because metaphor understanding is a complex cognitive process that fosters memorization. Understanding figurative language involves a process of inference, and "decoding" figurative language involves a number of states (Lazar 1996, p. 46). In progressing through these states, such a pedagogical argument asserts, the learner must comprehend how two usually disparate things are brought together, deduce what features apply to both, and work out how the application of their commonalities and differences inform one another. Such a process burns the metaphor and its associated terms—vocabulary—into students' minds.

Boers (2000) extended Lazar's work with three ESL experiments indicating the same:

> if metaphor is so omnipresent in everyday language, then language learners are bound to be confronted with figurative discourse at various stages of the learning process . . . mastering conventional figurative language must be an inherent part of the language learning process too (Boers, 2000, p. 553).

The nature of figurative language is such, writes Boers, that it can often be traced back to a limited number of metaphoric themes or source domains. Enhancing students' "metaphor awareness" (p. 562) apparently facilitates ESL education naturally, because figurative language is built upon *domains* or *themes* common to all languages.

Lazar and Boer suggest including metaphor into ESL pedagogy because, by fostering these linguistic relationships, it heightens "associative fluency" (Littlemore, 2004, p. 267). Associative fluency refers to one's ability to make a wide range of connections when presented with a given stimulus. In making connections between metaphoric themes, ESL students are required to use analogical reasoning and conjure mental imagery—two practices that increase *metaphoric intelligence* (Littlemore, 2001). Such an intelligence refers to "the capacity of language users to create and understand novel linguistic combinations that may be literal nonsense" (Littlemore, 2001, p. 2). Using metaphor in ESL classrooms, then, may heighten students' associative fluency and metaphoric intelligence, which can lead to improved language learning. To extend this research, Littlemore and Low (2006) extrapolated on target versus source domains—semantic fields that represent the parties interacting in metaphor. They note

that a connection between the two domains is made either explicitly by the author, or implicitly by the reader's inferences. Native speakers will, of course, make metaphorical connections more easily and more quickly—the difficulty in translation of novel, other-culture metaphors forces second-language learners to exert more effort and, subsequently, make more lasting neural connections.

Littlemore and Low (2006) also focus on the distinction between conceptual and linguistic metaphors. Conceptual metaphors—usually codified in research by using ALL CAPS—refer to the "abstract, underlying relationship(s) between the two concepts or entities" (p. 5). Linguistic metaphors, on the other hand, refer to the words that *dress* conceptual metaphors. For example, the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS HEAT underlies linguistic metaphors such as "hot under the collar" and "being fired up." Building on Lazar, Boers, and Littlemore's earlier work, Littlemore and Low's (2006) research demonstrates, at a more granular level, that "if teachers systematically draw the attention of language learners to the *source domains of linguistic metaphors* and of vocabulary involving metaphor, then learners' depth of knowledge for that language, and their ability to retain it can improve significantly" (p. 7, italics mine).

Rationale and Research Questions

Although research suggests metaphor can be of use to ESL educators, it has taken a long time for the idea to be applied to "make significant headway into mainstream pedagogical practice and the design of teaching materials" (Littlemore and Low, 2006, p. 4). Perhaps this is because too much focus has been laid on metaphor's use only as a fulcrum for vocabulary retention. Despite clear theoretical implications and inroads, not enough attention has been paid to the empathic power of metaphor in developing cross-cultural awareness.

Boers (2000) and Lazar (1996) emphasize that figurative language, including metaphor, is related to culture. Metaphors vary across cultures (Boers, 2000, p. 553), and "the kinds of figurative language we use stems from the underlying values and assumptions of our culture or society: a well-understood metaphor in one culture may have entirely different meanings in another part of the world" (Lazar, 1996, p. 46). However, Boers and Lazar refer to variation among linguistic metaphors, not conceptual metaphors. Similar forms of figurative meaning—i.e., understood relationships between things,

conceptual metaphor—are found across cultures. In the case of RESPONSIBILITY IS HEAVY (conceptual metaphor), for example, many cultures might relate responsibility to weight in some way. That doesn't necessarily mean, though, that all cultures have linguistic metaphors similar to "weight of the world on my shoulders" or "monkey on my back." But, cultures may value linguistic metaphors that dress the conceptual metaphor differently, while, in other instances, they do not favor such distinctions.

Either way, the cross-cultural comparison of the idea is intellectually stimulating, opening space for language and cultural learning. The complexity of metaphor, in the context of shared meaning within and across cultures, elicits some interesting questions. How is metaphor being used in ESL pedagogy? How often do both conceptual and linguistic metaphors *translate* across cultures and languages? And how could metaphor be more actively employed to facilitate cross-cultural understanding in both academic and professional contexts? These are the questions this pilot case study sets out to address.

Methods

I used open-ended questionnaires to answer the research questions above. During research, I was enrolled in an Intercultural Communication graduate course, for which I participated in service learning at a private ESL educational institution in a Texas town. The working relationship developed during this time helped me establish rapport, culminating in the present study. I distributed the questionnaires below to advanced students, instructors, and staff at the English language-learning center—ELLC, a pseudonym—to gauge how, if at all, the center actively incorporated metaphor into its advanced curriculum. I decided to focus research on advanced ELLC students, as literature suggests introducing metaphor-based instruction in beginner or intermediate classes only hinders learning. This outcome results because the grammatical and syntactical aspects of metaphor, sometimes even the word choice involved, increases complexity and convolutes understanding at those stages of the learning process (Boers, 2000; Littlemore, 2004; Lazar, 1996).

Questionnaire for ELLC students

1. What country are you from?
2. What is your first language?
3. How long have you been studying English?
4. How many classes have you taken at ELLC?
5. Do you know what 'metaphor' means in English?
6. Do you have a similar term in your own language?
7. Are there differences between 'metaphor' and the closest term in your native language?
8. What English-language metaphors are you familiar with, if any?
9. How did you learn about those metaphors—did an instructor address them in class, a classmate tell you about them, you make the connection independently, etc.?
10. What metaphors do you use in your home country (translated into English)?
11. Do you think talking about or discussing metaphor aids in language learning? If so, how?

Questionnaire for ELLC administrators and instructors

1. Is metaphor incorporated into the ELLC curriculum?   Yes   No
2. If yes:
    a. What student-skill level courses is it used in?
    b. Is it explicitly incorporated (i.e. lessons about metaphor or lessons specifically addressing metaphor)? If so, how is it employed or incorporated?
    c. Are there certain metaphors that are regularly addressed/used? Which ones?
    d. Do you think metaphor could be a valuable tool for second-language pedagogy? If yes, how so?
3. If no:
    a. Do you find yourself using metaphor in the classroom to illustrate other concepts, even though it's not in the curriculum? If so, how?
    b. Are there other, similar, concepts (i.e. analogy, idiom, aphorism) that are incorporated into the curriculum?
    c. Do you think that including lessons about metaphor, or incorporating metaphor, would be valuable to the ELLC curriculum? ☐ Yes ☐ No
    d. If so, what skill-level students would benefit the most? Why?

Upon distributing and receiving back the questionnaires, it became apparent that metaphor, although not officially a part of the ELLC curriculum, found its ways into the classroom, anyway. A unit in the advanced section's curriculum at the ELLC includes extensive discussions about other kinds of figurative language, in particular

idioms. In sitting in classes for the service learning component, I observed metaphor being discussed in relation to various English-language idioms, which often employ metaphoric language. The questionnaires confirmed that the ELLC students are, indeed, exposed to metaphor. In fact, even though the curriculum did not explicitly include metaphor discussion or activities, several students implied that instructors injected metaphor into classes; instructor questionnaire responses confirmed this outcome.

Results and Analysis

Eleven ELLC students—one advanced class section—completed the student questionnaire. Eight respondents were Saudi Arabian, two were from Equatorial Guinea, and one from Nicaragua. All of them had been studying English for at least one year, and all of them had completed at least four one-month terms at the ELLC. According to their responses, they all know what metaphor means in English, and confirmed that they have similar terms in their native languages (L1s). Also, all of the student respondents were aware of one or more English-language metaphors, but only those that an ELLC instructor had introduced to them. Each of the 11 respondents identified one or both of the following English-language metaphors as ones they are familiar with: "all the world's a stage," and "The Iron Curtain." The uniformity of respondents in identifying these two suggests metaphors two possibilities: either all the students were in the same class when an instructor discussed them—which is logistically possible but unlikely; or multiple ELLC instructors used these metaphors in the instruction of advanced students to supplement the official curriculum material—which is more likely. All of the student respondents indicated that incorporating metaphors into class discussions is beneficial to their learning. Even so, the level of detail provided to justify these assertions was limited, perhaps because even advanced ESL students lack the vocabulary to adequately describe the effects metaphor has in language learning.

Two administrators and two instructors took the administrator/instructor questionnaire. The administrators' job titles are: Director of Academics, and Director of the ELLC. Both instructor respondents teach full time at the ELLC, and both regularly work with advanced-level students. All four respondents in this category acknowledged that metaphor is not currently a part of the ELLC advanced-level curriculum. However, both instructors indicated that they actively incorporate metaphor into their lessons—

in the same lesson that they introduce and discuss idioms. Notably, administrators and instructors recognized that doing so improves student learning. Despite this shared acknowledgment, administrators did not elaborate on how or why they thought metaphor is effective in ESL pedagogy, while instructors provided some justification for such views. One instructor said his mention of the metaphor "husband/wife as ball and chain" as a joke during class discussion elicited lively student interaction. At first, they were confused, but intrigued by the figurative language. After the instructor explained the meaning, however, students began discussing similar metaphors in their own culture—as is evident in the data below. A larger class discussion about metaphor ensued during which, the instructor observed, students were more engaged and interested than usual.

The L1 metaphors students listed provide in-roads for a discussion on how actively incorporating metaphor more often in ESL classrooms improves student learning. Among other metaphors presented, some of the L1 metaphors that ELLC students listed included these few: being thrown into a "golden cage" (marriage); between "a rock and a hard place"; and "getting the monkey off one's back." Using such metaphors presents opportunities for instructors to explore cultural and linguistic commonalities, as well as differences. Also, the limited and uniform number of English metaphors ESL students remember and understand suggests that only active integration and discussion of metaphor in the classroom helps students to learn about that kind of figurative language. The questionnaire data confirms as much. Students indicated that the reason they knew and understood "all the world's a stage" and "The Iron Curtain" is because they learned them in class. The complete list of L1 metaphors that ELLC students listed in the questionnaire is as follows:

> Marriage is going into a "golden cage"
> One is a "wolf" is they are reliable
> Self-righteous people have a "feather in their hat"
> They fought until "blood reached their knees"
> "Broken to pieces" is being tired
> Having "a bird on one's head" means they have unresolved problems
> "Feeding crows" will take out (blind) your eyes
> Between "a rock and a hard place"
> "Musician paid before the show" similar to our "don't put the cart before the horse"

As is evident in the, admittedly cursory, data, L1 metaphors are sometimes similar to English ones, and sometimes different. How metaphor varies across cultures, and how those differences can aid in ESL pedagogy, is further explored below.

Discussions and Limitations

In order to understand figurative language, "the learner needs to unravel the covert connections in the utterance through a process of inference . . . we can help [ESL students] if we explicitly encourage them to work through" (Lazar 1996: 46) the complex relationships between English and their native metaphors. Working through metaphors does two things that, ultimately, encourage critical thinking and language learning: first, it forces students to configure linguistic and cultural variables in order to comprehend foreign metaphors; and second, the linguistic and cultural similarities and differences exemplified in cross-cultural metaphor analysis presents in-roads for fostering intercultural empathy and understanding. While students "may learn to use some frequent metaphors without reflection, they are likely to achieve more if they are encouraged to consciously reflect on the metaphorical nature of language" (Deignan et al., p. 353). In other words, regardless of how often ESL teachers might stumble onto metaphor usage in their classrooms, ESL students are best served when teachers introduce metaphors as an intentional part of instruction.

Emphasizing the importance of raising cross-linguistic awareness, Deignan et al. (1997, p. 353) write: "while metaphor is almost certainly a feature of all natural languages, and some conceptual metaphors are common across several cultures and languages, not all linguistic or conceptual metaphors will be shared by any two languages." This is evident in the limited data set above. Some of the metaphors provided by the ELLC students exemplify common conceptual metaphors. Several of the Saudi Arabian student respondents, for instance, cited "between a blade and a wall" as a common metaphor used in their culture. In that case, the conceptual metaphor is the same as is the English metaphor "between a rock and a hard place." The same can be said for "marriage in a golden cage" (ball and chain). In these instances, when similar conceptual metaphors are explored, students benefit in two ways: one, they are presented with a new piece of cultural information suggesting commonality among diversity—i.e. cross-cultural empathy is fostered; and two, that new connection works to anchor both

the new metaphor and the language it *houses* in students' minds. Other L2 metaphors are both conceptually and linguistically similar to students' L1 metaphors—"getting burned," "musician paid before the show," and "bird on one's head" from the ELLC student respondents—are each conceptually and linguistically similar to students' L1 metaphors. In other words, "getting burned," "musician paid before the show," and "bird on one's head," all ELLC student respondent examples, are conceptually and linguistically similar to English metaphors.

Occasionally, some respondents cited L1 metaphors that initial linguistic presentation would seem to show some common conceptual foundation. However, more careful attention to the underlying meanings of such metaphors proved that these metaphors were quite different, despite surface similarities. Being a "wolf" in Saudi Arabian terms is to be reliable or trustworthy; in English, one would be considered cunning and, perhaps, even devious. There is also pedagogical value in such cases. Class discussions about why wolves are reliable in Saudi Arabia but are devious in the US open spaces for cultural comparisons. Also, sometimes ESL educators might elicit novel L1 metaphors from students. Similar benefits might come from that approach, as well. Some might consider metaphorical differences and similarities such as those described above to hinder or convolute ESL pedagogy. However, actively drawing upon metaphor "may fit in the broader pedagogical movement . . . where language learners are encouraged not only to perform in a language, but also *to reflect upon its use and characteristics*" (Boers, 2000, p. 554; italics mine). In reflecting upon metaphor's use and characteristics, as Boers suggests we do with language more generally, we encourage an intercultural dialogue that fosters cross-cultural empathy, facilitates learning, and perhaps might even generate new knowledge.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

Lazar (1996, p. 46) notes that "our task as teachers is to sensitize [ESL] students to the cultural significance which accrues to particular examples of figurative language in English, while encouraging them to compare these associations with those in their own language." Though most research into metaphor's use in ESL education has narrowly focused on its power to increase vocabulary retention, cross-cultural metaphor analysis

provides valuable avenues for discussion and, ultimately, can foster intercultural empathy and improve L2 learning.

Communicative competence includes being able to converse interculturally about foreign subjects and to address different worldviews and ideologies. Indeed, Littlemore and Low (2006) contend that this faculty can be improved using metaphor because, "in order to understand metaphor, it is necessary to appreciate the extended meanings and evaluations given by a specific culture to particular events, places, institutions, or people" (p. 269). Metaphor, then, is capable of educating ESL students in ways that build bridges, metaphorical pun intended.

The cognitive requirement for L2 learners in interpreting metaphor lends to effective engagement with course material, as well. They need to be able to acquire two seemingly opposed skills; they need "rapid access to a standard sense in order to maintain fluency in reading/listening, but at the same time they need to be able to recover, or hypothesize, metaphoric detail in order to interpret accurately and appropriately" (Littlemore & Low, 2006, p. 8). Lazar's (1996) interpretive states provide space for ESL learners to cultivate both of these abilities.

This kind of research, while potentially useful and pragmatic in terms of ways to teach English as L2, does not take into account ideologies inherent in culture-specific metaphors. Littlemore and Low (2006) suggest that future research "looks particularly at the more neglected discourse-related areas of illocutionary and strategic [communicative] competence; learning about words is not the same as learning to use them or deciding whether one is being manipulated" (p. 22). Their suggestion is to foster an ethic in this regard, a critical pedagogy that accounts for the ideological, political, and rhetorical power of metaphor. Future studies in this area might benefit from focusing on how underlying social and power structures are exemplified and reinforced via metaphor. Cognitive neuroscience might also contribute to this line of inquiry in interdisciplinary efforts; research suggests that lexical connections children make when learning their native language is similar to the way adults comprehend metaphor (Littlemore, 2001). Wouldn't it be interesting to compare fMRI scans of children learning to speak with ESL learners introduced to novel metaphors for the first time?

And finally, the metaphor-approach might be beneficially co-opted by the professional and business community. Internationalization of trade and ICT ubiquity has, in recent decades, created an environment where professionals often interact with peers abroad who are culturally and linguistically different. While this study does not suggest how metaphor might be incorporated in the international professional realm with a heuristic or method, it does imply the need for future research to explore such options. Traditional ESL methods are already making inroads into the professional and business worlds by way of private and freelance tutors and schools. I see no reason why metaphor's efficacy as an L2 learning tool wouldn't benefit professionals in their interactions as they navigate cultural and linguistic barriers in their careers. Business relations in China, for instance, require small talk and the cultivation of personal relationships first, before business can proceed. What better way for an American learning Mandarin and conversing with a Chinese colleague to connect than discuss common and disparate figurative speech. One of the most interesting conversations I've had with my Thai father-in-law was ignited by his explanation to me of Thais' use of "frog in a coconut." After some deliberation and example-giving, I figured out that metaphor is roughly equivalent to "head in the sand." The conversation benefited from the colloquial nature of that exchange, and soon we were discussing international politics, newly equipped with the other's term with which to charge the guilty parties. Professionals in more serious situations, too, might benefit from active linguistic and cultural engagement. ■

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