Metaphorical Strategies in Chinese Children’s English Class

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Abstract. Although there is a lot of research on the cognitive function of metaphor in various fields, there has been relatively little comprehensive research on its function in the process of children English learning, especially in children’s EFL classroom within Chinese context. Therefore, this paper by studying three teachers and their respective classrooms in China attempts to analyze what metaphorical strategies are applied by teachers and their children.

Introduction

When human beings confront the chaos of the universe, it is metaphorical mechanisms that help them to learn about the mystery of the universe and perceive its regularity and structure, and thus categorize this world. The purpose of the contemporary research on metaphor is to trace back to its nature and mechanism to find out how language, culture and human cognition interact to constitute the matrix of a language system. English language learning as a cognitive process is closely related to metaphorical cognition. Children, as the young language learners, absorb a new language through metaphorical cognition. In the present study, the author carries out a research that focuses on the application of metaphor in Chinese children’s English foreign language (EFL) classroom. It is expected that the result will provide reliable data which are likely to vitalize Chinese children’s English learning.

Research Design

Research Questions and Subjects

There has been relatively little comprehensive research on its function in the process of children English learning, especially in children’s EFL classroom within Chinese context. Therefore, this research by studying three teachers and their respective classrooms attempts to analyze: What metaphorical strategies do teachers use to modify their English teaching?

The subjects observed and investigated are three English teachers in Cambridge Young Learners English (CYLE) School and their students from NanChong. Three English teachers work in English department of China West Normal University and they spend their weekends teaching children English. The textbook they use is “CYLE pupil’s book”, which consists of three levels: starters (aged from 5-7), movers (aged from 8-10) and flyers (aged from 10-12).

Data Collection

Videotaping is the most desirable way to collect data. The author gains permission from three teachers, so she can observe and record in their regular classes over a period of the whole year to conduct her study of metaphor application. In order to collect the data as reliable and complete as possible, the teacher’s facial expression, gestures and handwriting, and students’ facial expression, body language and homework, which might be a part of the study on metaphor application in classroom, have been taken down during the observation; the tape recording are listened to carefully after each class; and 5 lessons of each teacher are chosen to be examined in details, with the expectation that they can illustrate general features of metaphor application in the three class and identify the effective features of metaphor application for further analysis.
Data Presentation and Discussion

Comprehension Strategies

Comprehension strategies are techniques used to help us comprehend learning materials better. Here are some comprehension strategies based on metaphorical cognition for vocabulary building and discourse analyzing.

**Vocabulary Building.** For children, whose faculty of memory and skill to learn are inferior to adults’, to remember new words is a tough work. However, meanings of a word have its root in physical experience, and are largely evolved from one original core. So when encountering a new word, how do teachers deal such a problem?

**A. To Use Audio-Visual Aids for Preschoolers and Low Graders**

In Grade One class, children are too young to accept abstract teaching ways, and as Low Graders, their metaphorical thoughts include visualization, which means that direct and vivid knowledge input should be more appropriate for them, so audio-visual aids (tape-recorder) to teach them works. In the same class, teacher also employs pictures as the aids to help children to remember 26 English letters. Such object teaching in T1’s class is common to be observed, which just meets that children, at 6 or 7 years old, only have concrete metaphorical cognition, and their understanding of the unknown knowledge is through image metaphor---mapping the image of one domain onto another. In this sense, songs, folk rhymes, chants; pictures, photographs, charts, etc, are usually adopted, which can be called visualizing methods.

**B. To Stimulate What They Already Know For Low and High Graders**

When meeting a new word, anything from your experience of the world, from your mother tongue, from the target language, or from the context, would be helpful to the understanding of the word. Metaphorical extension, which is often beyond the conventional boundaries of word meaning, plays an important part in meaning understanding, especially in the case of polysemous words. This kind of learning strategy involves one of the working mechanisms of metaphor – conceptual metaphor, which entails a mapping from a concrete physical domain to an often-abstract domain. Since Low and High Graders can already master some abstract metaphors, to stimulate what they have already known is largely based on their physical experiences or coming out of inferences from their physical experiences. Low and High Graders’ metaphorical way to build new meaning is worthy to be praised. So think of this strategy and encourage what children already know into activation, guess the word’s meaning, they will probably find that leaning new words is not a troublesome task but an enjoyable thing to do.

**C. To Cultivate Root metaphors System Consciously**

Most of our normal conceptual system is metaphorically structured, that is, most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts. From the very beginning of human being, there slowly accumulates all kinds of knowledge and precipitates to be root metaphors. Expressions such as “look up to someone”, “be in a low mood” can be traced to the root metaphors of “Good Is Up”, “Bad Is Down”. Unfortunately, in the three observed English classes, the researcher could not find any examples to suit Root Metaphor cultivation among children. Obviously, even some teachers themselves could not recognize the function and importance of Root Metaphor in the teaching process, which actually sets a new path for future English teaching and learning.

**Discourse Analyzing.** Metaphor can be used to analyze a discourse. It is more helpful in top-down process of discourse analysis, which starts with the title, main idea, and comes down to specific words. The learner’s background knowledge can be activated by the title, so that he or she can predict what will probably happen, which is often beneficial to the thorough comprehension of the article. There is an article “Packaging a Person” from a six-Grade student in Millard Hawk Primary School of America, which was the homework in T3’s class, with the purpose to practice High Graders’ comprehension of more complicated articles.

To display personal charm is important for one to understand oneself. A young person, especially a girl, shining with beauty, is the lucky dog of the God. Do not need any make-up. But, the Youth comes and goes in a minute. Packaging for the middle-aged person is to hide the furrows ploughed
by time. Elderly people are beautiful too if their river of life are running its way. There is no need to dye the hair – the snow-capped mountain is a beautiful picture too.

When the next day T3 collected all the homework, she and author herself were surprised that 72% of the students could catch the most metaphors of this article, all of whom admit that they made use of dictionary and only 33% were under the help of their parents.

Retention Strategies

Retention comes after comprehension, meaning to keep in mind what have learned. Retention strategies are techniques used to retain what have comprehended. Research has shown that raising metaphorical awareness improves retention. By metaphorical awareness, it is meant that children must use his or her metaphorical reasoning abilities consciously to strengthen what they have already learned. There are several ways to raise the children’s metaphorical awareness.

To Remember Words in Categories. Everything has meaning not because it refers to something, but because it is either related to our bodily experience or is built on the top of other meaning-bearing elements. As language is the representation of human thoughts reflecting these concepts, it is itself organized by metaphor as well. For instance, we call any member of a class of words “noun” because it refers to an entity, quality, state, action, or concept. Accordingly, any words that are capable of the naming process can be called “noun”. It is via metaphor that maps the naming function of one word onto another word, and put them in the same category of “noun”. Likewise, this applies to other linguistic categories as verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. All these word-categories are taken from the second (movers) and third level (flyers) of CYLE pupil’s books, in which many units are formed around the same object and the words in each unit are in the same category.

To Keep Information Through Games. Children’s life is full of curiosity, here is the introduction of some games, through which children’s metaphorical awareness is built and they can keep the knowledge in their mind.

A. Based on the above section of remembering words in categories, there is a game to strengthen such a memory, whose name is Brainstorm round a word. For High Graders, its emphasis turns to more complicated aspects. For instance, they can be given a root as the center-word, like “part”, to coin more words with prefix or suffix – “partition, depart, partake, participation, impart” etc.

B. Imaginative metaphor actually is an imaginative discussion and association. In children’s world they hold their own understanding to various items. With a question that “what is a teacher”, children can coin a sequence of metaphors like “a film director, a book, a counselor, a policeman, a manager, a signpost, an artist, a key, a walking stick”, then they are free to choose and discuss their favorite metaphor to describe their teacher in their mind.

C. Generally speaking, proverbs are short but meaningful, through which children can keep words-information and direct their destination in their life. One example comes from a story in T3’s class, taken from the third level of CYLE pupil’s book, to help children to understand “The more you have, the less you get.”

One day three friends went to go fishing and they caught a mermaid. The mermaid begged them to let her go. But they refused. So the mermaid said she could make their wish come true. Then the first man said: ‘Please help me to finish my mathematical exercises.” Then he finished. The second man said: “I’d like to be a poet.” Then he could write poems. The third man thought and thought and said: “I want to have a power to do everything...” After his words, the mermaid already died because she left the water for a long time. And the third man got nothing at all.

Conclusions

Therefore, through author’s observation and recording about 3 English classes, it is easy to find that teachers modify their English input through two metaphorical strategies: comprehension strategy and retention strategy. The first one is employed in vocabulary building and discourse analyzing; the second one has two aspects including remembering words in categories and keeping information through games. Generally speaking, metaphorical cognition functions mainly through
two general aspects, namely, filling lexical gaps and as a tool of organization. What should be pointed out about the paper is that not much empirical work has been done. Well-designed and carefully manipulated experiments may lead to research more convincing.

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