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TEACHING METAPHOR THROUGH SHORT STORIES. A COGNITIVE AND LITERARY APPROACH TO FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: Since the cognitive turn associated with Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphor has been understood not as a decorative feature of language but as a fundamental mechanism of thought that pervades everyday discourse. This reconceptualisation has significant consequences for language teaching, since the ability to comprehend and produce figurative language — metaphoric competence — is now recognised as a core component of communicative ability that second language learners frequently find difficult to acquire. This article argues that the short story is an especially effective vehicle for developing metaphoric competence. It first outlines the shift from ornamental to conceptual views of metaphor and reviews the notion of metaphoric competence and the challenges it poses for learners. It then sets out the pedagogical case for using literature, and short stories in particular, before explaining why the length, density, narrative context, and affective richness of the short story make it uniquely suited to metaphor instruction. The article proposes a sequence of classroom approaches — awareness-raising and noticing, guided identification, grouping expressions by underlying conceptual metaphor, close reading, and movement from comprehension to production — and closes by considering text selection, cross-cultural variation, and the risk of over-analysis. Used judiciously, short stories allow learners to encounter metaphor as living, meaningful language rather than as isolated vocabulary items.

Keywords: metaphor, conceptual metaphor theory, metaphoric competence, short stories, literature in language teaching, figurative language

1. Introduction

For much of the history of language study, metaphor was regarded as a matter of ornament — a special, deviant use of words belonging to poetry and rhetoric rather than to ordinary communication. That view was decisively overturned by the cognitive turn in linguistics. In their seminal work, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that metaphor is not merely a feature of language but a property of thought: our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical, so that we routinely understand abstract domains such as time, emotion, and argument in terms of more concrete domains such as space, temperature, and physical conflict. On this account, expressions such as "spending time," "a warm welcome," or "defending a claim" are not isolated figures of speech but surface reflections of underlying conceptual mappings. Metaphor, far from being exceptional, saturates everyday discourse (Kövecses, 2010).

This reconceptualisation has direct implications for language education. If figurative language is pervasive in ordinary usage, then learners who cannot interpret or produce it will be handicapped

across all areas of communication. Yet the ability to handle metaphor — what Littlemore and Low (2006) call metaphoric competence — has often been treated as a peripheral skill rather than a central one. This article makes the case that short stories offer a particularly effective means of developing that competence. It reviews the cognitive account of metaphor and the notion of metaphoric competence, sets out the pedagogical rationale for using literature and specifically the short story, explains why the short story is well matched to metaphor instruction, proposes a repertoire of classroom approaches, and considers the practical cautions that responsible use of the method requires.

2. Rethinking Metaphor: From Ornament to Conceptual System

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) holds that a metaphor consists of a systematic set of correspondences, or mappings, between a source domain and a target domain (Lakoff, 1993). In the conceptual metaphor commonly summarised as *life is a journey*, for instance, elements of the concrete domain of travel — travellers, paths, destinations, obstacles, crossroads — are mapped onto the abstract domain of living, licensing a whole family of linguistic expressions ("starting out in life," "at a crossroads," "getting nowhere"). Because the mapping is systematic, understanding one expression illuminates many others that draw on the same underlying metaphor. Gibbs (1994) marshalled psycholinguistic evidence that such figurative thought is central to ordinary comprehension rather than an optional extra, and that people process many conventional metaphors as readily as literal language.

Two distinctions from this literature matter for teaching. The first is between conventional and novel metaphor: much everyday metaphor is so entrenched that speakers barely notice it, whereas literary texts often extend, combine, or subvert conventional mappings to create fresh, deliberate effects. The second is that metaphor is partly culturally variable. While some mappings appear to be grounded in near-universal bodily experience, others differ across languages and cultures in ways that can mislead learners (Kövecses, 2010). Both points are pedagogically productive: conventional metaphor gives learners a systematic way into vocabulary, while novel and culturally specific metaphor — abundant in literary narrative — offers rich material for interpretation and discussion.

3. Metaphoric Competence and the Second Language Learner

The recognition that metaphor is central to language rather than marginal to it prompted applied linguists to argue for its place in the curriculum. In an early and influential statement, Low (1988) set out the range of skills learners need in order to handle metaphor — among them the ability to construct plausible meanings, to recognise the boundaries of a metaphor, and to be sensitive to its social and interactional appropriateness. Littlemore and Low (2006) subsequently developed the construct of metaphoric competence and demonstrated, with reference to Bachman's (1990) widely used model of communicative competence, that it is implicated in every component of communicative ability, from grammatical and textual competence to sociolinguistic and strategic competence. Metaphoric competence, on this view, is not an advanced luxury but a pervasive requirement.

Empirical work confirms that figurative language is both a genuine obstacle and a valuable resource. Charteris-Black (2002) found that learners' handling of figurative expressions was strongly affected by the relationship between their first language and the target language, so that

even proficient learners struggled where the two languages mapped concepts differently. At the same time, research indicates that learners' figurative language develops measurably as their proficiency grows (Littlemore, Krennmayr, Turner, & Turner, 2014). Crucially, the systematic nature of conceptual metaphor can be turned to pedagogical advantage: Boers (2000a) showed that guiding learners to recognise the conceptual metaphors underlying groups of expressions improved their retention of vocabulary, because organising items around a shared source domain promotes deeper, more elaborate processing than rote learning of isolated words.

4. The Pedagogical Case for Literature and Short Stories

If metaphoric competence is to be developed, learners need to meet metaphor in rich, meaningful contexts, and literary texts supply exactly this. The case for literature in the language classroom has been made at length by Carter and Long (1991) and by Lazar (1993), who argue that literary texts are motivating, offer authentic and memorable language, engage learners personally and imaginatively, and provide a natural stimulus for discussion and interpretation. After a period in which literature was marginalised in communicative language teaching, the last decades have seen a resurgence of interest, and a growing body of research supports its cautious use (Carter, 2007; Paran, 2008). Reviewing this evidence, Paran (2008) concludes that the benefits of literature depend heavily on the approaches and tasks employed rather than on the mere presence of a literary text, a finding directly relevant to the teaching of metaphor.

Among literary genres, the short story has particular practical advantages, long noted by practitioners who have compiled resources around it (Collie & Slater, 1987; Lazar, 1993). It is self-contained and short enough to be read, discussed, and revisited within the span of a lesson or two, so that learners can engage with a complete, coherent text rather than an extract severed from its context. It typically foregrounds narrative and character, which gives learners a strong interpretive framework, and it concentrates literary effect into a small compass. These same qualities make the short story an efficient vehicle for figurative language, and Lazar (1996) has shown specifically how literary texts can be exploited to expand learners' command of figurative vocabulary.

5. Why the Short Story Is Especially Suited to Metaphor Instruction

Several features of the short story converge to make it an ideal site for metaphor work. The first is manageable length. Because a short story can be treated as a whole, learners encounter its metaphors within the complete web of meaning that gives them their force, rather than as decontextualised examples; the narrative supplies the context that metaphor interpretation depends upon. The second is density. Short-story writers, working within tight constraints, tend to make heavy use of figurative language to compress meaning and evoke atmosphere, so that a single story can yield an unusually concentrated harvest of metaphor for a lesson. The third is the coexistence of conventional and novel metaphor: a story simultaneously reuses the everyday conceptual metaphors that structure the language and extends them into fresh, deliberate images, allowing learners to see both the systematic mappings of ordinary usage and the creative possibilities they afford.

A fourth feature is affective and imaginative engagement. Narrative draws readers into the experience of characters, and this emotional involvement makes the figurative language that carries much of a story's meaning more salient and more memorable — an advantage that dovetails with evidence that elaborate, meaning-focused processing aids retention (Boers, 2000a). A fifth is

cultural embedding: because metaphors frequently encode culturally specific ways of construing experience (Kövecses, 2010), stories offer learners a window onto the cultural models of the target-language community, turning what might otherwise be a source of confusion into an object of insight (Littlemore & Low, 2006). In combination, these features allow the short story to present metaphor not as a list of items to be memorised but as living language performing real communicative and aesthetic work.

6. Approaches and Classroom Activities

A principled sequence for teaching metaphor through a short story can move from noticing to analysis to production. The foundation is awareness-raising. Rather than pre-teaching metaphors as vocabulary, the teacher first helps learners to notice figurative language in the text and to reflect on how it works, an approach that Boers (2000a) found beneficial for both comprehension and retention. Noticing can be supported by a simplified version of established identification practice: adapting the logic of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Pragglejaz Group, 2007), learners can be guided to ask, for a given word, whether its meaning in the story differs from and can be understood in terms of a more basic, concrete sense — a manageable heuristic that makes the abstract notion of metaphor tangible without technical apparatus.

Once figurative expressions have been located, learners can be asked to group them according to the underlying conceptual metaphor they share — collecting, for example, all the language in a story that construes emotion as temperature or life as a journey. This activity makes the systematic character of metaphor visible and helps learners build organised, retrievable networks of vocabulary rather than isolated items (Boers, 2000a; Kövecses, 2010). Close, stylistic reading of especially striking images can then deepen interpretation, inviting learners to consider why the author chose a particular metaphor and what it contributes to characterisation, mood, or theme. Finally, the sequence should move towards production: learners can discuss and debate interpretations, paraphrase metaphors, extend the story's images in their own writing, or craft original metaphors of their own. Because the tasks, not the text alone, determine the learning outcome (Paran, 2008), this progression from receptive noticing to creative production is essential.

7. Considerations and Cautions

The approach carries risks that require careful management. Text selection is paramount: a story must be pitched at a level where its language is largely accessible, so that learners can attend to its metaphors without being overwhelmed by unfamiliar vocabulary and syntax (Lazar, 1993). Cross-cultural variation demands sensitivity, since metaphors that seem transparent to the teacher may rest on cultural models unfamiliar to learners, and expressions that map neatly in the target language may conflict with the learners' first language (Charteris-Black, 2002; Kövecses, 2010); such mismatches are best treated as opportunities for explicit contrastive discussion. Perhaps the greatest danger is over-analysis. If the pleasure of the story is dissected into a mechanical hunt for metaphors, the affective engagement that makes literature valuable is lost, and Paran's (2008) reminder that outcomes depend on the quality of tasks applies with full force. The aim is to illuminate the story's language, not to reduce the text to a quarry of examples. Teachers themselves benefit from developing their own metaphor awareness so that they can guide interpretation confidently while preserving the integrity of the reading experience.

8. Conclusion

The cognitive account of metaphor has transformed our understanding of figurative language, revealing it to be a pervasive and systematic feature of thought and everyday communication rather than a decorative extra. This shift places metaphoric competence at the centre of communicative ability and, with it, at the centre of the language-teaching enterprise. Short stories provide an exceptionally well-suited means of cultivating that competence: compact enough to be treated whole, dense with figurative language, rich in both conventional and novel metaphor, culturally revealing, and emotionally engaging. Approached through a sequence that moves from noticing to analysis to production, and used with due attention to level, culture, and the preservation of readerly pleasure, the short story allows learners to meet metaphor where it lives — in meaningful, purposeful language. In doing so, it offers teachers a way to develop a capacity that learners genuinely need while drawing on the motivating power of literature itself.

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