Learnability of Conceptual Metaphor:
1ST Year LMD Students as a Case Study

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Abstract

   The possibility of learning conceptual metaphor and the feasibility of acquainting an EFL learner with metaphor interpretation have been a controversial issue. In the current study, 50 Algerian students were tested twice. In the pre-test, they were given four idiomatic phrases and four conventional metaphors to interpret and the results were compared. At the end of twelve-month familiarising them with non-literal language, the post-test was administered. It encompassed four conventional metaphors, as they were asked to improvise metaphors on their own. The tests revealed that an EFL learner can progressively develop the ability to interpret English metaphors, that he or she can generate only simple metaphors not intricate ones, and that EFL metaphorically organised conceptual system can be learnable.

Keywords:

Conceptual metaphor;Learnability; Interpretation; Conventionality; Acquaintance; Improvisation; EFL

1. Introduction

   It is common knowledge that words are often used in figurative senses. Even young children are apt at using figurative language. Nevertheless, the study of this linguistic phenomenon was for a long time the exclusive domain of literary scholars who were interested in rhetoric or stylistics. In view of this, it is perhaps convenient to begin our discussion of figurative language with the explanatory power that metaphor has. Therefore, native and non- native learners of any language feel comfortable expressing themselves metaphorically in the target language. In this regard, the context of learning is an area where careful and appropriate use of metaphors may spell success. This implies urging students focus on the potent of non- literal language involving crucial communication tasks, because metaphor is, as Scheffler (1979) put it: "inventions of thought to explore a certain kind of possibilities in a heuristic way" (128- 130). Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the exponents of the domain say: "Metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (5).

In this respect, it seems suitable to introduce some basic concepts regarding metaphor and learnability as well. So, linguistic metaphor links two things that appear to be quite different on the surface, but have some likeliness. Whereas, conceptual or cognitive metaphor refers to the understanding of one idea or conceptual domain in terms of another. And, learnability concerns how learnable a piece of instruction is, as it refers to the ease of language learning (MacCarthy 2001).

We can ask how deeply entrenched a metaphor is, in everyday use by ordinary people for everyday purposes. Therefore, the use of the notion of conventionality is different from the way this concept is usually used in linguistics, semiotics, and the philosophy of language. However, the term conventional is used here in the sense of well established and well entrenched. Thus, we can say that a metaphor is highly conventional or conventionalised i.e., well established and deeply entrenched in the usage of a linguistic community Kovecses (2002, 8-9). Since there are both conceptual metaphors (CM s) and their corresponding linguistic expressions, the issue of conventionality covers both CM s and their linguistic manifestations. Both conceptual and linguistic metaphors are all highly conventionalised, in that; speakers of English use them naturally and effortlessly for their normal, everyday purposes (Kovecses 2002).

 The inquiry here is then: What makes the content of a figure of speech such as 'metaphor' learnable? Could we say that the main criterion contributing to shape the ease of learning is when learners experience good intellectual flow and enjoy the figure? This paper intends to examine the problem again using an Algerian experience. It is argued that CM would serve as an excellent means for language improvement, as a linguistic boost as well. Because students would benefit from being familiarized with the use of metaphors in their daily written as well as oral assignments. Eventually, they can achieve wonderful essays if they are well- equipped metaphorically. For learners, it will impress on them the value of acquainting themselves with non-literal expressions that they wish to master in the target language.

1.1. Literature review

There has been very little research reported in the literature that addresses the teachability of conceptual metaphors in L2. Several papers have been published which make suggestions for teaching orientational metaphors, for example, 'more is up, less is down' (Putz et al.2001 a and b), but to our knowledge, other than studies by Kovecses and Szabo (1996), Kovecses (2001), Boers and Demecheleer (2001), and two experiments reported in Boers (2000), these have not explored the impact of teaching on learning.

For example, Hays and McCagg (1999) conducted a study to determine if Japanese EFL university students could learn English idioms based on emotional data (for instance, anger, fear, happiness, sadness) and health related metaphors, including several based on supposed universal embodied experiences, where UP generally indicates positive features and DOWN often signals negative ones . The researchers come up with the idea of raising students' awareness of the relationship between metaphors and embodied experiences, as they could identify the troubles encountered in depicting some key concepts in the given idioms. Accordingly, Low (1988) discusses the notion of metaphoric competence in his paper "On teaching metaphor". He continues by claiming that, the focus is on alerting L2 learners to the presence and effects of conventional metaphor and pedagogical approaches to achieving this in ELT contexts. On the other hand, the work by (Petrie and Oshlag included in Ortony 1993, 579-609) has led to extensive discussion on the use of metaphors in SLT and SLA. Petrie points out that metaphors and analogies hold great instructional value in many major subject fields including literature, business, politics, psychology, physics, etc. He suggests that using metaphor based-instruction can help students to view situations from a fruitful new perspective and that, metaphors and analogies help students to learn unfamiliar and abstract concepts. Others, such as Danesi (1993, 497) believes that conceptual knowledge can be effectively taught in the classroom setting if we are able to integrate appropriate materials and pedagogical practices: students do not develop metaphorical competence by osmosis. It would seem that competence, must be extracted from the continuum of discourse and held up for students to study and practise in any ways that are similar to how we teach them grammar and communication. Cognitive

linguists and cognitive anthropologists, in turn, agree that conceptual meaning is a central feature of human thinking. They disagree, however, on whether conceptual meaning is grounded fundamentally in CM s, in the sense of (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

There has also been opposition to learning CM. Strauss and Quinn (1997) contend, contrary to the generally accepted anthropological stance rooted in the writings of Geertz (1973) that cultural meanings are not only situated in symbols and external artefacts, but are primarily located in the minds of flesh-and –blood members of cultural communities. These meanings constitute cultural models, or schemas, that arise from the basic cultural experiences of individuals and are eventually internalised. Kovecses and Papp (2000) argue that, if learners acquire grammatical and communicative knowledge but fail to develop conceptual knowledge in a new language; their language use will be significantly different from that of native users. Danesi (1993, 490) concurs with this observation in commenting that, even if students develop high levels of communicative proficiency but continue to think in terms of native conceptual system using L2 words and structures to carry their own L1 concepts, they may be understood, but their discourse may be inappropriate.

Boers (2000), likewise, proposes a less ambitious goal in arguing for the need for learners to develop 'metaphor awareness' as opposed to the ability to generate metaphors in the L2, so that they will at least be able to "organise the steady stream of figurative language they are exposed to" (564). In the same direction, Valeva (1996, 36) problematises the question of L2 metaphor interpretation as well as generation by non-native learners. She maintains that there is little value in trying to develop a pedagogical programme for teaching metaphorically organised conceptual knowledge if such knowledge in an L2 is unlearnable in the first place. Finally, (Danesi 1993, 489-500) introduces the idea of 'conceptual fluency', i.e. how a given language builds concepts on the basis of metaphorical structuring. He argues that, conceptual fluency is a largely unconscious mechanism in native speakers that is deficient in non-native learners. Learners tend to think within their L1 conceptual system, which means that their utterances do not quite fit into the structure of the L2, see (Sontag, 1975; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Studies on teaching CM in L2 are rare, but by all accounts the presented literature review is encouraging. Therefore, it appears that CM instruction may result in metaphor depiction, thus generation. Confirming this, no disconfirming evidence has been found (Low, 1988) in the notion of metaphoric competence. The current research focuses on the impact of learning metaphor mechanisms on metaphor interpretation and eventually production. The result of the study may enhance CM learning in EFL classes.

1.2. Metaphor mechanisms to be learned

In the cognitive linguistic view, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. Examples of this include when we talk and think about life in terms of journeys, about arguments in terms of war, about theories in terms of buildings, about ideas in terms of food, about social organisations in terms of plants, and many others. A convenient shorthand way of capturing this view of metaphor is the following: conceptual domain 'A' is conceptual domain 'B', which is what is called a 'conceptual metaphor'. A conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains in which one domain is understood in terms of another. A conceptual domain is any coherent organisation of experience Kovecses (2010).

The two domains that participate in conceptual metaphor have special names. The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called 'source domain', while the conceptual domain that is understood this way is the 'target domain'. Thus, life, arguments, love, theory, ideas, social organizations, and others are target domains; while journeys, war, buildings, food, plants, and others are source domains. The target is the domain that we try to understand through the use of the source domain Kovecses (2010), they are also known as the tenor and the vehicle.

1.3. Conventionality to be learned

The retrieval of metaphors in general occurs in a deliberate way when talking; many word- pairs containing metaphorically used words are adopted as well. Consider the metaphors below inspired by social organizations such as work, life, and so on, Kovecses (2002, 7):

a- SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS ARE PLANTS: The company is growing fast.

 b- THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS: We have to construct a new theory.

 c- IDEAS ARE FOOD: I cannot digest all these facts.

 d- ARGUMENT IS WAR: I defended my argument.

 Before going further, there is what we call mapping in the metaphorical realm. So,

 Mapping is a systematic group of correspondences that exist between features of the

 source domain and others from the target domain (Lakoff and Turner 1989, 72)**.** They

 introduce the following example of 'Plant' mapping and 'Social organization' one: (The

 grow of the plant ----development of the organization). Metaphorical expressions given as

 illustrations of the CM s above are highly conventionalised, that is, they are well cliched.

 Most speakers would not fact, even notice that they are using metaphor when using the

 expression 'defend' in connection with arguments, 'construct' in connection with

 theories, and 'digest' in connection with 'ideas'. For native speakers of English, these are

 some of the most natural ways to talk about these matters.

 1.4. Research questions

 The study intends to answer the following research questions:

 1. Can EFL learners develop the ability to interpret metaphors?

 2. Is metaphor interpretation more approachable task than idiom depiction?

 3. Can learners generate intricate metaphors in the foreign language?

 4. Is an EFL metaphorically organised conceptual system learnable?

 1.5. Research hypotheses

 The following research hypotheses are proposed to conduct the study:

 1. An EFL learner can progressively develop the ability to interpret metaphors.

 2. They can generate simple metaphors in the target language.

3. EFL metaphorically organised conceptual system can be learnable.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 50 university students majoring in both fields of humanities and natural and life sciences. They were learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). They were native speakers of Arabic, and studied at Tahar Moulay University of Algeria. They were both males and females in their first year of study, and were selected on the basis of their availability. Their age range was between 18 and 20. All of them had already passed successfully the baccalaureat examination at the secondary level with an average of 14 out of 20 in English language subject matter. Prior to the experiment, the instructor provided direct instruction and practice covering figures of speech merely metaphor; since learnability involves considering learning, teaching, and curriculum jointly. Therefore, the participants were fully ready and highly motivated to do the written tests. During the experiment the instructor made sure that the tests' entailments were quite clear and understandable by the entire group, including proficient and less-proficient learners.

There were two separate tests, the pre and the post. First, in the preliminary test, learners were asked to interpret four idiomatic expressions and four conventional metaphors. It gathered the criteria to fit the Pilot Test [1] requirements in order to capture as much information as possible regarding idiomatic or metaphorical bias and schemata. The subjects were asked to sit for a placement test, no communication attempt was tolerated. Second, the final test was administered twelve months later. It encompassed four conventional metaphors to elucidate, as they were required to improvise some by themselves. This test aimed at investigating the acquired metaphorical competence as well as to capture any ways of improvement. The reason for the interval period between the pre-test and the post-test is to try to increase chances of relevant interpretations via affording both acquaintance in handling figurative language and accessibility of the test through suggesting conventional metaphors. This prevents lower competence examinees from random inference when they find the test difficult and beyond their ability.

For the sake of testing the feasibility, equipment, or method, researchers often use a pilot test. It is a standard scientific tool for soft research allowing scientists to conduct a preliminary analysis before committing to a full study or experiment. Therefore, timing, clarity, and checking understanding are the test requirements [1]. The pre-test comprised the following tasks (1) and (2); the post-test included (a) and (b) respectively:

(1) Idiomatic expressions depiction:

Pulling the carpet under feet

Using two different vessels for measuring

Ringing the danger bell

The way leads to each other

   (2) Conventional metaphors interpretation:

HAPPY IS UP

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

COMMUNICATING IS SENDING

IDEAS ARE FOOD

(a) Conventional metaphors interpretation:

ANGER IS A HOT LIQUID

MORE IS UP

NIGHT OWL

IT DOES NOT MATTER IF IT IS BLACK OR WHITE AS LONG AS IT CATCHES MICE

(b) Metaphor improvisation

The time allocated to complete the tests was 90 minutes each.

2.2. Procedures

The testees were assessed at different levels to judge their metaphorical competence:

(1) TKR Tacit knowledge retrieval: Means wording/verbalising the experience-based knowledge to cope with a given material.

(2) KM Knowledge management: Includes ways in which students handle knowledge they have at their disposal to fit the encountered CM s.

(3) ACM Availability of conceptual mapping: Refers to the readiness of the mental map that the respondents draw in shaping their interpretations.

(4) TVI   Tenor-vehicle interplay: Means the correlation existing between the source and the target domain that the subjects have to infer.

(5) LSA Lexico- syntactic accuracy: Refers to the ability to activate the appropriate lexis in accordance with the requirements of a given CM, as it entails word-ordering within a sentence.

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1. Centre of Evaluation and Research, http:// programeval.ucdavise.edu

To achieve a reliable result, it appeared indispensable to consider the above parameters to be applied in each suggested CM. 20 points were allocated for each section of the test, and five parameters to be checked for in each section-item (5 X 4) = 20 X 2 = 40 pts. Inspired by idioms testing (Nayak and Gibbs, 1990), the tester has chosen down-to –earth idiomatic expressions to be addressed. Next, the assigned CM s embody life experiences. Then, targeting fairness the examiner thought that conventionality affords more ease in approaching CMs.   It was felt that suggesting unconventional metaphors would be compelling.

Later, we divided the students into two 25-member groups so as to ensure better monitoring. We dispatched 25 test- sheets in which the assigned tasks were printed with the provided room to be filled. The same procedure was followed for the second group during the next session. The maximum time allowed to compete the test was 90 min each group. The post-test has been organised in the same way one year later.

The assessment committee comprised not only the tester but, four other professors specialised in the field of applied linguistics. The outsiders agreed to award 40 out of 40 as a global mark for relevant answers that were in conformity with the established parameters. The committed teachers evaluated then, compared both tests.

3. Results
3.1. Pre-test

The pre-test findings are the following: First, 70% of the subjects accounted metaphor interpretation more than idiom depiction. Therefore, those who have provided relevant replies emphasised on the correctness of metaphors rather than idioms. Second, CM s took the largest share reaching 70 % out of 98, which was the percentage of

the full answers, and that random guesses were merely idiomatic; 2% was the abstainers' percentage. Third, suggesting highly conventional CM s appeared to be probative variable.

Idioms elucidation was somewhat perplexing task. Therefore, inferring a relevant reply was not so evident. Apriori, trying to associate the conventional meaning of a word with that in the assigned idiom appeared confusing. The students' scores on the test components with regard to the consented parameters, which are not applicable to idiomatic expressions, awarded by the assessors are demonstrated in (Table 1).

Table 1

TKR means tacit knowledge retrieval, KM means knowledge management, ACM means availability of conceptual mapping, TVI means tenor-vehicle interplay, and LSA means lexico-syntactic accuracy, 4 pts for each complied parameter, the global mark is 20 pts

Conceptual metaphor	TKR	KM	ACM	TVI	LSA	Global mark
HAPPY IS UP	3	2	2	3	1	11
LIFE IS A JOURNEY	3	3	3	4	2	15
COMMUNICATING IS SENDING	2	3	2	2	1	10
IDEAS ARE FOOD	3	3	3	4	2	15

Following the grades attributed to the achievements of each suggested metaphor in (Section 2), IDEAS ARE FOOD CM scored (15 out of 20), the same was for LIFE IS A JOURNEY CM (15 out of 20). The global mark awarded for HAPPY IS UP was lower than that of the

previous metaphors (11 out of 20). The remaining CM, COMMUNICATING IS SENDING scored (10 out of 20).

3.2. Post-test

The post-test revealed the following points: First, the interval period (12 months) between the pre and the post-test appeared to be a significant variable. Second, the testees managed CM s embodying emotional data more than others tackling actual occurrences. In (Section 2), 60 % of the subjects built their own metaphors appropriately, 38% gave inappropriate replies. The remaining percentage 2% was that of the abstainers. The respondents' scores on (Section 1) entailments awarded by the assessors are displayed in (Table 2).

Table 2

Conceptual metaphor	TKR	KM	ACM	TVI	LSA	Global mark
ANGER IS A HOT LIQUID	4	3	3	4	3	17
MORE IS UP	2	3	3	2	2	12
NIGHT OWL	2	2	3	2	3	12
IT DOES NOT MATTER IF IT IS BLACK OR WHITE AS LONG AS IT CATCHES MICE	4	3	3	4	3	17

ANGRY IS A HOT LIQUID CM score (17 out of 20) was much higher than MORE IS UP CM (12 out of 20). The same thing was for NIGHT OWL CM (12 out of 20). Here again, the global mark awarded by the

assessors was (17 out of 20) for IT DOES NOT MATTER IF IT IS BLACK OR WHITE AS LONG AS IT CATCHES MICE CM.

4. Discussion

Can EFL learners develop the ability to interpret metaphors? According to the tests achievements, the participants managed CM s of the post-test better than those proposed in pre-test. First, in order to avoid putting them on the defensive, conventionality was indeed an inescapable decision upon which both tests have been built. Second, it seems that the interval period was significant, in the sense that it afforded ways of improvement through recurrent use, exposure, and acquaintance. Evoking the parametric combination in solving a given CM, lexico-syntactic accuracy parameter merely was in progress (Table 2). It is in line with (Lindstromberg 1991 and Boers 2000) view that, the efficacy of conceptual metaphors in the acquisition of specialised lexis. Moreover, Littlemore (2001) detected a tendency in language learners to employ metaphoric extension strategies to work out the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. Second, the availability of conceptual mapping is intimately linked with finding the interplay between the tenor and the vehicle; those two spell the success of any CM interpretation. This implies that, selecting the most salient features in the establishment of ontological as well as epistemic correspondences is somewhat constraining task for a non native learner. Gibbs (1999) believes that "Concepts are not understood via their own representations, but by metaphorical connections to knowledge" (147). In Test 1: (HAPPY IS UP, COMMUNICATING IS SENDING), and in Test 2: (MORE IS UP, NIGHT OWL CM s) scored lower than (LIFE IS A JOURNEY, IDEAS ARE FOOD in Test 1 and (ANGER IS A HOT LIQUID, IT DOES NOT MATTER IF IT IS BLACK OR WHILTE AS LONG AS IT CATCHES MICE CM s in Test 2), and this because students coped withCMs involving emotional data more than CM s dealing with pragmatic contents. In this regard, some students' samples are worth entailing: "ANGRY IS A HOT LIQUID means that when we get angry is like when a hot liquid burns or hurts us. When someone gets angry, he feels as a hot liquid circling in his or her body". "When you get angry, you do everything bad, because you are losing logic and your mind too". (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; 1999) propose that bodily metaphors are universal, people appear to have

similar physical experiences of the world through their bodies. In the same vein, (Hays and McCagg 1999) view that: "We experience much our world in terms of the vertical orientation of our bodies" (37). "MORE IS UP means that things go beyond my ability. It overcomes the limits and lines, and this thing should stop". Third, another noteworthy variable arising from the nature of metaphor itself is the opacity or transparency of a given CM. For instance, COMMUNICATING IS SENDING CM was not covered as LIFE IS A JOURNEY CM in the Pret-test. The former seemed to be perplexing, whereas, the latter appeared so obvious for the subjects. There were asymmetrical levels of conceiving the tenors: 'life' and 'communicating' and the vehicles: 'journey' and 'sending'. So was for conceptual mapping i.e., how a learner organises and structures his or her knowledge. The argument is based on the idea that the incongruence underlying the conceptual mapping among one CM makes it opaque. In other words, there is no logical- correlational link between communicating and sending, because communicating is normally conceived as being two ways channel (sending and receiving) and not one way. Similarly, IT DOES NOT MATTER IF IT IS BLACK OR WHITE AS LONG AS IT CATCHES MICE CM in the Post-test score was quite interesting since it is highly conventional, in addition of being transparent, and very inspiring too; this pertained to relevant interpretations.

Is metaphor interpretation more approachable task than idiom depiction? Regarding leaning, idiomatic expressions did not appear enjoyable task. However, the tendency towards metaphor interpretation was sharp. The contingent answers that the testees gave revealed low mental associations and connotations as well. As an example, some respondents wrote: "pulling the carpet under feet means to defeat someone who is usually the first or the stronger". Using two different vessels for measuring means: "When we do something wrong or bad, we will hurt just ourselves not the others". "We need to think about the next step from all its sides before doing it". In view of this, Gibbs (1992, 1994) has proposed that our comprehension of the vast majority of linguistic metaphors- both idiomatic and novel figurative expressions- is fundamentally a recognition process.

Can learners generate intricate metaphors in the foreign language? They were kin to produce metaphors by themselves after being exposed to. Roughly, 100 palatable metaphors have been improvised by almost 70% of the students. It appears that knowing the mechanisms reigning CM as a prerequisite paves the way for the improvisation process. Some examples seem to be convenient here: "Beautiful life needs beautiful eyes; Technology is a two-sided weapon; I will never stop trying as long as I am near the bush; Money does not sleep, so, we cannot take a rest" Thus, an EFL learner can generate simple CM s. Therefore, learning CM by osmosis according to Sfard (1992) occurs when students are committed in absorbing the mechanisms of how a conceptual metaphor works, and that, it encompasses a double aspect of outer and inner and thus, makes possible an eventual impregnation.

Is an EFL metaphorically organised conceptual system learnable? An EFL metaphorically organised conceptual system is learnable, since it requires exposure and knowing about CM functioning. The point is that, the more often learners use metaphors, the more automatic they become, and the faster students become at using them. That is to say, metaphor acquaintance can be conducive to fast retrieval or effortless production. Metaphor is not at the margin of language, rather, as Harris (1981) convincingly argues, it "is at the very heart of everyday mental and linguistic activity". (cited in Lantolf 1999 b: 42).

The study demonstrated that effective CM interpretation depends on metaphoric proficiency and accordingly, metaphorical competence might be increased through recommended CM familiarisation. Such conceptual maintenance is a major objective for language learners who regularly invoke CM. Larger repertoire of words may have given rise to their better oral and written achievements. There may be a positive connection between CM use and specialised lexis equipment, which will no doubt prove to be fruitful.

5. Conclusion

This paper has considered the possibility of learning conceptual metaphor by presenting four research questions. The answers for the questions confirmed that an EFL learner can develop the ability to interpret metaphors, that metaphor interpretation is more approachable

task than idiom depiction, that learners can generate simple conceptual metaphors, and that an EFL metaphorically organised conceptual system is learnable. Learning conceptual metaphor boosts students' conceptual thinking, as it triggers expressive, compact, and profound language. It has been argued that metaphor familiarisation reflects some language patters as well, since learners would benefit from being frequently exposed to as the acquisition of specialised lexis.

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