

# Research on the Application of Metaphorical Thinking in Teaching of College English Writing

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**Abstract.** In English writing classes, some college students' writing expressions are not authentic, logic is not coherent, and the content lacks something new. Based on the two functions of metaphor: rhetorical and textual, this paper discusses the application of metaphor thinking in college English writing class in order to enrich students' writing expressions and help them to construct coherent essays. Through lectures of metaphor knowledge in class, case analysis, creative writing exercises and reading activities in and out of classroom, the research results show that integrating the teaching of conceptual metaphor into English writing class not only can enable students to have a systematic understanding of metaphor and raise their awareness of it but also can make students think more actively to overcome such problems as writing in a boring and logically chaotic way. Meanwhile, it has increased the students' interest in writing and promoted the quality of English essays to some extent.

## 1. Introduction

Writing is an extremely complex thinking activity, especially English writing. It is the comprehensive embodiment of the author's language output ability and cognitive ability. The process of writing is a synchronous activity of writing and thinking. Only by cultivating English thinking in writing can the writing level be improved. In the course of teaching English writing, it is found that some college students have difficulties in writing, such as poor vocabulary, rigid thinking, almost no rhetorical devices, loose structure and difficulty in constructing coherent essays. These problems affect and restrict their English writing level. This paper tries to put forward a teaching method from the perspective of metaphor thinking to improve the quality of English writing.

## 2. Metaphor and metaphorical thinking

Before conceptual metaphor theory was put forward, metaphor has always been regarded as a rhetorical device in language use. With the deepening of people's research, metaphor as a way of thinking has long been recognized by people. Metaphor is everywhere. It goes hand in hand with our language and thoughts [1]. The philosophical basis of conceptual metaphor is experience. It is based on people's physical and social experiences. The interaction of two concept domains creates a link for the two seemingly unrelated things. Thus people can understand the new things through association based on the similarity of cognition. It can help people use familiar and concrete things to understand strange and abstract things. It can also help people re-understand and recognize known things from a new perspective. The core of metaphor is thinking, not language. Metaphor can be embodied at all levels of language, like words, phrases, sentences and discourses [2].

Metaphorical thinking is one of the fundamental ways for people to understand the world and an important way of scientific thinking [3]. This ubiquitous way of thinking has become one of the ways we live and perceive the world. The cognitive function of metaphor mainly has two aspects. First, it is a way to see the world, and it can provide a new perspective on things. Another is to create new meanings and express new ideas [4]. Therefore, metaphorical thinking is a kind of creative thinking. It is a kind of lateral thinking from one side to the other, connecting two different concepts by analogy, so as to explain the things compared more clearly. Systematicness is the most important characteristic

of metaphorical thinking, which means multiple metaphorical expressions derived from a conceptual metaphor are systematic, because experience has a gestalt perception structure, and the whole multidimensional structure makes the mapping within the metaphor have a systematic correspondence [5]. A series of corresponding relations can give rise to a series of metaphorical expressions, presenting a multi-angle and multi-level understanding of a certain thing.

### 3. The study

#### 3.1 Participants and research questions

Participants of this study were 140 sophomores (non-English majors), including 55 girls and 85 boys. All the students were very cooperative and the study lasted three months.

This study intends to answer the following questions about the current problems in college students' English writing:

(1) Can students use metaphorical thinking in their English writing tasks and give full play to their imagination and creativity ?

(2) Can metaphorical thinking stimulate students' interest in English writing and improve their writing skills?

#### 3.2 Teaching process and practice

##### 3.2.1 Preliminary investigation

In order to better understand the basic situation of students, a classroom survey was conducted before the study, and none of the 140 students had any understanding of the concept of metaphor. However, when it came to the rhetorical device "暗喻(an yu)" in Chinese, the students nodded their heads. This laid a good foundation for the following examples both in Chinese and English to illustrate the concept and function of metaphor.

##### 3.2.2 Formal lectures

Since students were first exposed to the concept of metaphor in English and had no sense of it, the teacher imparted the knowledge of metaphor in combination with examples from the text, including the concept of metaphor, its mode, the mapping base and how abstract concepts were understood with the help of concrete ones. Metaphor examples were displayed in both Chinese and English. So were the different expressions of the same metaphor in two languages. Polysemy was introduced, including the basic meaning, extended meaning or metaphorical meaning of a word. The rhetorical and textual functions of metaphor were taught as well. After that, the teacher showed how conceptual metaphor can be used to construct interesting paragraphs and articles that are semantically coherent and integrated through various metaphorical expressions.

##### 3.2.3 Writing practice

In writing training, teachers encouraged students to give full play to their imagination and creativity, and required students to use metaphors to finish creative writing tasks on familiar topics. For the first time, students were required to write an essay, starting with the title "Love/Life is.... Before writing, the teacher asked the students to warm up in class. They expressed their opinions on the topic of love/life and described them with metaphors. After class, students were required to develop the topic with as many metaphorical expressions as possible to write a coherent composition with 120-200 words.

##### 3.2.4 Students' self-evaluation, peer evaluation plus teachers' general evaluation

The students had a week to write after class. After the completion, the teacher asked the students to carry on self-revision and self-appraisal first. Later, their classmates made suggestions on grammar, spelling, structure and so on. Finally, compositions would be given to the teacher. After correcting, the teacher gave face-to-face instructions to the students.

##### 3.2.5 Questionnaire

Since it was the first time to integrate the concept of metaphor and metaphorical thinking into teaching practice, the teacher would consciously remind students to pay attention to the metaphorical meaning of vocabulary and metaphorical expressions in the text, and encourage them to apply it in each writing task. At the end of the semester, in order to better understand the students' leaning results,

the teacher used questionnaire to make an investigation. The questionnaire was divided into three parts, namely, multiple-choice questions about writing, reading and open-ended questions about learning gains.

#### 4. Results and analysis

The research shows that 87% of the students are able to use metaphorical thinking to describe the given topic. A few errors exist, but they do not affect comprehension. Only 8% of the students are able to skillfully and freely use metaphors who can write a coherent and creative article with flowing ideas. There are 5 percent of the students who are not good at English. Although they can express with metaphor, their expression is far-fetched, and their description is inaccurate. A large number of grammatical errors result in unclear meaning. The metaphorical ability of L2 learners is closely related to their language level [6]. However, this does not affect the majority of students' recognition and acceptance of this way of writing. According to the questionnaire, 92.8% of students indicated that they would apply metaphorical thinking in English writing more often in the future, and 80% of them wanted to know metaphor better by reading more English articles or literary works.

It is undeniable that metaphorical thinking can stimulate students' interest in writing to some extent, and they can give full play to their imagination and creativity, which is also verified in questionnaires. Eighty-five percent of the students consider that writing in metaphorical way can make their mind active and the writing process more interesting. "My English way of thinking for writing has been improved", "I have been exposed to a new writing method", "I have learned metaphor and improved my writing skills", "I have learned the new concept of metaphor, which is of great help to my English learning", and "English writing can be more interesting and vivid" are the learning gains of some students.

#### 5. Discussion

The improvement of metaphorical thinking ability is a complex and long process. First of all, teachers should be equipped with knowledge of metaphor theory and a deep understanding of the essence and connotation of metaphor. The training of metaphorical skills is a long-term practice which requires teachers' perseverance and students' cooperation. The cultivation and improvement of students' metaphorical skills can be carried out from the following aspects:

##### 5.1 Polysemy teaching

In vocabulary teaching, teachers can focus on explaining the metaphorical meaning of some words in specific situations. For example, in English metaphors, the concrete concepts such as high, down, deep and shallow are often projected onto abstract concepts such as quantity, social status and emotion. For instance, You are in *high* spirits and he is really *down* these days. For one thing, explaining the metaphorical meaning can deepen students' understanding of a word's core meaning; For another, it can also enlarge students' vocabulary, so that they can use polysemous words to write in an interesting and authentic way.

##### 5.2 Identifying, understanding and appreciating metaphors in the text

In the textbook *New Century Comprehensive Course of College English 3*, a number of metaphors exist both in the title and the text, which helps to construct a vivid and coherent article. Therefore, it is of great importance to help students identify, understand and appreciate metaphors in the text after systematically imparting metaphor knowledge in class. Students' comprehension ability is improved, which is more conducive to the development of creative thinking. Only when students begin to appreciate the metaphor and know its functions in the text, can they possibly use it in their writing. Sometimes, students' lack of metaphorical output in writing is not because they are not exposed to metaphorical expressions, but because teachers may not or seldom give relevant input.

### 5.3 Extracurricular reading

Many literary works in English are written in a metaphorical way. By reading these works, students can have a better understanding of the thinking mode of English native speakers and know how they construct their conceptual system in a metaphorical way to perceive the world. Only by consciously training and strengthening metaphorical thinking can students apply it in their reading comprehension. In the process of reading, students can collect some authentic English metaphors and learn to use them in writing tasks to form their own writing style.

### 5.4 A comparative study of Chinese and western cultures

Metaphorical language carries a strong cultural connotation and reflects the way of thinking of another culture. Since human beings have many similar physical and social experiences, their conceptual cognition has similarity too. Due to the different historical background, geographical environment, lifestyle and beliefs, there must be some differences in the metaphorical cognitive systems of the two cultures. For example, the Chinese word “牛饮” (niu yin) corresponds to the English word "drink like a fish". Different cognitive results reflect the differences between agricultural culture and Marine culture. Therefore, by contrasting two cultures, students can better understand the thinking mode of English-speaking people, accurately understand their metaphorical language and enhance English metaphorical thinking so as to improve the metaphorical output ability in English writing.

## 6. Conclusion

It is a top-down approach to construct a text from the perspective of metaphor. Metaphor is regarded as an important means of text organization and construction due to its systematic features and the interaction between two conceptual domains [7]. In this way, students can better understand and control the writing process from the level of discourse, which can not only make the articles compact in structure and coherent in meaning, but also make the articles more vivid and interesting due to the diversity of languages. More importantly, in this process, students can expand their thinking and be more creative. What they pay attention to is not only the correctness of language forms, but also the flexible use of new thinking way. Once a metaphor is established, multiple metaphorical expressions can be derived to enrich their writing content.

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