

The Development of Metonymic Competence of Chinese English Majors from the Perspective of the Multiliteracies Pedagogy

Yanqin Cao

School of Humanities and International Education
Xi'an Peihua University, Chang'an Campus
Xi'an, China

Zhaohong Yao

School of Foreign Languages
Xidian University, Chang'an Campus
Xi'an, China

Abstract—Metonymic competence is a cognitive ability that language learners need to develop urgently. Cultivating metonymic competence of Chinese English majors can not only help students improve their level of language use, but also improve their thinking ability. This study attempts to apply the multiliteracies pedagogy to the cultivation of metonymic competence. Through the design and analysis of real classroom teaching cases in four aspects, namely, situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformation practice, this study proposes feasible teaching methods and discusses their implications for second language teaching. The practice shows that the teaching design strengthens students' understanding of metonymy and develops their metonymic competence, thinking ability and academic writing ability.

Keywords—metonymic competence; the multiliteracies pedagogy; Chinese English majors

I. INTRODUCTION

The national standards for the quality of foreign language and literature teaching in Chinese colleges and universities released by the Ministry of Education in 2018 clearly pointed out that the critical thinking ability of English majors should be cultivated, because the cultivation of critical thinking ability is of great significance not only to the individual students but also to the development of education and the whole country. However, for a long time, the teaching of English majors in Chinese colleges and universities has attached more importance to the memory, imitation and acquisition of vocabulary, grammar and discourse knowledge, while neglecting the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability.

Since the flourishing of cognitive linguistics in the late 1970s, the research on metonymy, especially its cognitive research, has been carried out at home and abroad. Metonymy has stepped out of the barriers of rhetoric and is considered to be more fundamental than metaphor in organizing conceptual systems, restricting and influencing human thinking and action. An important theoretical assumption of cognitive linguistics is that language is not an autonomous cognitive ability. As a representation of thinking, the thinking mechanism behind language is very important for understanding and using language. Therefore, as a basic

cognitive mechanism, metonymy plays an important role in the cultivation of learners' language ability and thinking ability.

During recent years, the application value of metonymy in foreign language teaching has become increasingly prominent. Denroche [1] and Littlemore [2] respectively discussed the importance of metonymic competence in language learning and translation through their monographs. In particular, Denroche [1] proposed the concept of metonymic competence based on Littlemore & Low's metaphorical competence [3]. Metonymy is ubiquitous in language, so the cultivation of students' metonymic awareness and metonymic competence in foreign language teaching can improve their language proficiency and the efficiency of foreign language teaching. Metonymic competence is also a cognitive ability that language learners should possess and is mainly based on basic human experience and formed through cognitive processing of human brain.

II. MULTILITERACIES PEDAGOGY

Since the publication of *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures* [4] (New London Group, NLG for short), multiliteracies has been a heated topic in education and multimedia study [5] [6] [7], which includes the following four factors:

A. Situated Practice

English teaching should be carried out in the authentic learning environment, which results from the communicative nature of English as a language and the goal of developing students' ability of communication. One of the consistent premises of cognitive linguistics is that language is an outcome of human's cognitive processing based on their physical, social and cultural experiences. Knowledge of a language comes from its use. Language is the formation of the interaction of human's subjective cognition and the objective world. As a result, situated practice is identical to the social and experiential nature of language from a cognitive linguistic angle [8].

B. Overt Instruction

By overt instruction is meant the guidance of design resources in multimedia forms by the teacher, which enables Chinese English majors to learn to use language, pictures, music and other multimedia sources in reading and writing. Cognitive linguistics has been adhering to the meaning-centered principle. Moreover, grammar is the meaningful conceptualization in this branch of linguistics. Likewise, the multiliteracies pedagogy attaches importance to construction of meaning in real context [8].

C. Critical Framing

NLG [4] argued that reading and writing abilities are reflections of certain values, cultures and ideologies. And critical framing aims to help students understand the relationship between the text and social practice in history, culture, society, politics, ideology and values [9]. A thorough analysis of the learning material can develop English majors' abilities of logical thinking, critical thinking and autonomous learning [8].

D. Transformed Practice

Transformed practice is the process of applying knowledge acquired in the new social and cultural context. Students transfer the knowledge obtained during situated practice, overt instruction and critical framing to the new

task, developing their multiliteracies of constructing new multimedia texts [8].

III. CLASSROOM TEACHING DESIGN

Based on the elements of the multiliteracies pedagogy, this study makes an attempt to design the training pattern of metonymic competence for Chinese English majors. The subjects are 150 freshmen and 130 sophomores of English major from a local application-oriented university in Xi'an. After a small number of invalid questionnaires were eliminated, a total of 132 questionnaires were collected from Grade One and 113 questionnaires from Grade Two.

A. Situated Practice

The research group has chosen 34 sentences with metonymies from the monumental book *Metaphors We Live By* composed by Lakoff & Johnson [10], and students are required to find examples of metonymy, to test whether they can rely on their knowledge and understanding to identify the mapping between the target domains and the source domains (see "Table I"). If the scores are above 80, students' performance is excellent; if the scores are between 60 and 79, the performance is fairly good, and if the scores are below 60, the students fail the test. Besides, the percentage of students in each score section is carried out.

TABLE I. RESULTS OF TEST ON IDENTIFICATION OF CONCEPTUAL METONYMIES

The serial number	Conceptual metonymy	Keywords in the source domains	Average Percentage of correctness	Percentage of correctness in Grade One	Percentage of correctness in Grade Two
1	The part for the whole	butt, longhairs, a stronger arm, four-on-the-floor	92.5%	92%	93%
2	Producer for product	Löwenbräu, Ford, Picasso, Heidegger	90.5%	90%	91%
3	Object used for user	sax, BLT, gun, glove, buses	88%	88%	88%
4	Controller for controlled	Nixon, Ozawa, Napoleon, Casey Stengel, me	81.4%	80%	83%
5	Institution for people responsible	Exxon, university, Army, Senate, government	80.8%	79%	83%
6	The place for the institution	The White House, Washington, Kremlin, Paris, Hollywood, Wall Street	84.5%	85%	84%
7	The place for the event	Vietnam, Alamo, Pearl Harbor, Watergate, Grand Central Station	72.4%	71%	74%

Although the above test results are relatively ideal, when teachers ask students for their opinions on metonymy, more than 96% of them believe that metonymy is a commonly used rhetorical device, which can make language expression vivid and rich and enhance the appeal of words. This also reflects that students' understanding of metonymy is confined at the level of language, and they do not connect metonymy with thinking. Next, the teacher asks the students about the motivation of using metonymy. Under the guidance of the teacher, the students realize that metonymy is based on the cognitive need of human beings to understand difficult and abstract things by means of easily perceived and concrete things.

B. Overt Instruction

Induced by the above examples, teachers can make it clear to the students that conceptual metonymy is the cognitive mapping between the source domain and the target domain based on contiguity. According to cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson, the grounding of metonymic concepts involves direct physical or causal associations [10]. Meanwhile, through the metonymy DOVE FOR HOLY SPIRIT with cultural connotation, teachers help students understand metonymies are specific symbols associated with certain cultures. Then the teacher introduces the concept of metonymic competence and points out that its mastery can

improve their language proficiency and develop their thinking ability.

In order to get students' cognition of metonymy out of the specific limitation of nouns, the teacher also employs some common examples of indirect speech acts to facilitate students' understanding of the ubiquity of metonymy. For example, in the case of high temperature in the classroom, if the teacher wants students to open the closed windows, he can use Will you open the Windows? The teacher requires the students to figure out the meaning of the words in the context of the situation. After thinking, students can easily understand this expression which seems to be general questions. The question does not need students to answer YES or NO. Instead, it is an indirect speech which performs the request of asking students to open the window. The reason why this sentence can represent the request is that, in our experience and cognition, the action scenario "the listener will perform something" is a part of the request scenario, which is close to the core of the scenario in concept. This reflects the explanatory power of conceptual contiguity in metonymy. Driven by examples, the teacher introduces the concept of action scenarios. Panther & Thornberg [11] also used similar methods to analyze speech acts. They regarded a speech act as an action scenario, which is composed of several time periods or detailed sub-actions. For example, the scene of mandatory speech acts can include:

- the BEFORE: The listener is able to do something;
The speaker wants the listener to do something.
- the CORE: The speaker entrusts the listener with the obligation to do something.
- the RESULT: The listener is obliged to do something (he must or should do something) .
- the AFTER: The listener will do something.

After the teacher's explanation, students have broadened their horizon of metonymy. It is clear that the use of metonymy is not only limited to the reference of nouns, but also a universal cognitive mechanism in language.

In order to further enhance the perception of metonymy, the teacher lists more creative expressions in life. Here's the headline of a piece of news:

"Students of Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics Go to Market to Show Their Creative Ideas"

In this news, creativity highlights the event of the concentrated appearance of innovative students' scientific and creative works through the operation of the metonymic cognitive mechanism of "THE TYPICAL EVENT FEATURES STANDS FOR THE EVENT". According to the typical features of the event, creativity refers to the numerous events in the cultural festival of Creativity, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship of Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, in which aero-models, various robots and other scientific and creative works are presented together to display the innovative practical achievements of college students and highlight their creativity. Moreover, the synthetic structure "show ideas" highlights the meaning of

"show", carrying the meaning of "show beautiful elements to the public".

C. Critical Framing

According to Chinese scholar Li Ke [12], "metonymic competence is not only reflected in the identification and description of metonymy, but also in the ability to interpret and apply metonymy". After class, the teacher assigns students to watch the film *Mr. Six* and identify conceptual metonymies, finding out the identity, position and the underlying psychological, social and cultural factors behind metonymic expressions. Then students present their reports in the class and both teachers and students are actively engaged in discussion, which are preparations for students' essay writing to analyze metonymies in the film embodied by attitude, position, ideological and cultural patterns. The following is an excerpt from the students' analysis:

THE TYPICAL CHARACTERISTIC STANDS FOR THE INSTITUTION

INSTITUTION STANDS FOR THE PEOPLE INVOLVED

The name of the film *Mr. Six* is a complex concept of metonymy, which embodies the following two conceptual metonymies: the first is the conceptual metonymy — "The typical characteristic stands for the institution", in which The Gun Bureau refers to the police station, derived from the former Bureau of Detention for the police station located in the Alley of the Gun Bureau. Named after *Mr. Six*, the movie activates, in the audience's cognitive context, the encyclopaedic knowledge about *Mr. Six* and The Gun Bureau. The Alley of the Gun Bureau, first built during the reign of Emperor QianLong in the Qing Dynasty, is used to make guns and later serve to store cannons, ordnance, and waste guns. After the end of the Qing Dynasty, it has become a prison. Since liberation, this place once was The Bureau of Reform through Labor. The use of The Gun Bureau to refer to the police station is concise and vivid; the second conceptual metonymy — "Institution stands for the people involved" — is used to refer to figures associated with the institution. *Mr. Six* in Beijing means those who are often imprisoned, usually referring to those chivalrous men who are older, once all-powerful and have a heart of heart. Audiences, especially those who are familiar with the regional culture and Beijing dialect, can easily relate the title of the film to the theme of the film. Before watching the film, they can take the initiative to think about the creative intention of the directors, and cannot help but be full of expectations for the film. The reason for choosing this name is to commemorate the era in which a group of average people have a thrilling feat with of a sense of chivalry lack in our times.

INDIVIDUAL ENTITY STANDS FOR THE COLLECTION

The story itself embodies the cognitive mechanism of conceptual metonymy that a single entity represents the collection. The film tells the conflict of the once famous *Mr. Six* in Beijing and the hoodlums of the new generation. In

fact, *Mr. Six* represents the valorous man of Beijing who was trust-worthy, morally upright and had his own right of speech in the alley and old Beijing. And what XiaoFei represents is those pampered and idle rich second generation and official second generation who are unprincipled, devoid of life pursuits and do things only for their own pleasure. Similarly, in order to seize XiaoFei's girlfriend, XiaoBo, the son of *Mr. Six* in the film, deliberately scratches lines on XiaoFei's car after their conflict, which reflects the so-called new human's unruly mentality to seek their own happiness without considering the pains of others. And *Mr. Six* despises XiaoBo's friend in that he is indulged in playing games without any worry and care after XiaoBo is detained by XiaoFei. Taking the conflict between *Mr. Six* and XiaoFei as a clue, the film aims to reflect the conflict in value between the two groups and two generations, which is thought-provoking and reflects the conceptual metonymy of a single entity standing for the collection.

D. Transformed Practice

Based on the teaching practice of cultivating metonymic competence by multi-modal means, the teacher encourages students to apply their understanding of metonymy and preliminary practice results to the completion of new tasks. Teachers assign students to watch classic films, such as *Forrest Gump*, and require them to analyze the functions of metonymy in shaping characters and presenting themes in the film.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the multiliteracies pedagogy, this study has implemented the teaching design of the cultivation of metonymic competence of Chinese English majors from four aspects: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice. As metonymy is a cognitive thinking mode, the training and cultivation of metonymic competence requires the cooperation of teachers and students to improve students' sensitivity to metonymy in action and encourage them to use metonymy in oral and written practice. The cultivation of metonymic competence cannot be achieved overnight, and the future research needs to continuously focus on how to design more flexible and diverse ways to develop students' metonymic competence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is the periodical achievement of Scientific Research Projects in Higher Education of Shaanxi Association of Higher Education: Research on the Training Mode of College Students' Intercultural Communication Ability under the Background of the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt with the project number of XGH19202; This paper is also sponsored by The Special Scientific Research Project of Education Department of Shaanxi Provincial Government: Research on the Training Mode of Innovative Talents for English Majors in Local Application-oriented Universities from the perspective of WSR with the project number of 19JK0622 and the Shaanxi Province Educational Science "The Thirteenth Five-Year" Planning

Project: Research on the Application of Mobile Streaming Technology in English Listening Teaching with the project number of SGH18H525.

REFERENCES

- [1] Denroche C. Metonymy and Language: A New Theory of Linguistic Processing [M]. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- [2] Littlemore J. Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- [3] Littlemore J & Low G. Metaphoric Competence, Second Language Learning, and Communicative Language Ability [J]. Applied Linguistics, 2006, 27(02): 268-294.
- [4] New London Group. A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures [J]. Harvard Educational Review, 1996 (66): 60-93.
- [5] Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (eds). Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures [C]. South Yarra, VIC: Macmillan, 2000.
- [6] Cole, D. R. & Pullen, D. L. (eds). Multiliteracies in Motion: Current Theory and Practice [C]. London: Routledge, 2010.
- [7] Mills, K. A. The Multiliteracies Classroom [M]. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2011.
- [8] Yanqin Cao, Zhaohong Yao. The Development of Metaphoric Competence of English Majors in China Based on the Multiliteracies Pedagogy [C]. Proceedings of 2018 3rd International Conference on Education, Sports, Arts and Management Engineering, May 26-27, 2018: 103-109.
- [9] Feng Dezheng. Classroom Teaching Design Based on the Multiliteracies Pedagogy: A Case Study of an English Linguistics Lesson [J]. Foreign Languages in China, 2017(03): 55-63.
- [10] Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. Metaphors We Live By [M]. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- [11] Panther Klaus-Uwe & L. Thornburg. The Potentiality for Actuality Metonymy in English and Hungaian. In Panther & Radden (eds.) Metonymy in Language and Thought [C]. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999.
- [12] Li Ke. The Construction of Metonymic Competence and Its Implications in English Reading Teaching [J]. Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education, 2013(04): 16-22.