The Use of Metaphor in Conceptual Learning of College English Vocabulary

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Abstract. Word learning is always one of the most difficult points in college English teaching. From the metaphor cognition point of view, the thesis advances a new vocabulary teaching method—the conceptual learning of English words and phrases via metaphor, and what the teachers should pay attention to when adopt it.

Keywords: Metaphor · Conceptual learning · Vocabulary

1 Introduction

According to American famous psychologist Ausubel D.P., the understanding of concepts, principles and ideas can be achieved through deductive reasoning. In the preface to his book *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View*, he said that "If [he] had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, [he] would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly" (Ausubel, 1968) [1]. Likely, he believed in the idea of meaningful learning rather than rote memorization. According to his theory, to learn meaningfully, individuals must relate new knowledge to relevant concepts they already know. New knowledge must interact with the learner's knowledge structure. That is, the construction of knowledge begins with our observation and recognition of events and objects through concepts we already have. We learn by constructing a network of concepts and adding to them. Because meaningful learning involves recognition of the links between concepts, it has the privilege of being transferred to long-term memory. The most crucial element in meaningful learning is how the new information is integrated into the old knowledge structure. He also pointed it out in his book that "Only if learners can integrate new knowledge into what they have mastered, can they study most efficiently" (Ausubel, 1968) [2].

Metaphor is a common rhetorical device. In terms of traditional linguistic theory, metaphor is a figure of speech, a linguistic phenomenon. Hence it belongs to rhetorical categories. However, in recent years, people gradually accept the theories of Cognitive Linguistics by such linguists as Lakoff and so on. According to them, metaphor is a powerful cognitive tool for our conceptualization of abstract categories instead of a linguistic phenomenon. Its psychological basis is the imagination on some common characteristics of all things in the world. It is a kind of cognitive activity in which

human beings use the experience of a certain field to recognize as well as understand the experience of another field. According to Richards, I.A. (1936) [2] and Black Max (1962) [3], the essence of metaphor lies in an interaction between a metaphorical expression and the context in which it is used. So metaphor is a conceptual phenomenon by nature. In this article, the author tried to explore the connection between the new vocabulary and the original cognitive structure of the students, so as to transfer a 'mapping' of the two.

2   The Conceptual Theory of Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics

Cognitive linguistics is a new subject which developed at the end of the 1970s. It is a new method to study language. Ungerer and Schmid hold that "cognitive linguistics is today represented by three main approaches: the experiential view, the prominence view and the attentional view of language" (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001:25) [4]. In terms of experiential view, "its main claim is that instead of postulating logical rules and objective definitions on the basis of theoretical considerations and introspection, a more practical and empirical path should be pursed" (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001:37) [4] and metaphor is one path. So we can draw the conclusion that metaphor is one part in cognitive linguistics. The main representatives in the study of metaphor are G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, M. Turner and so on. From 1980, cognitive linguists began to reflect on the traditional view of metaphor. They believe that metaphor is a cognitive phenomenon rather than only a linguistic phenomenon. In their book *Metaphors We Live by*, Lakoff and Johnson say that "The essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one thing or experience with the other thing or experience," or "the mapping between one conceptual domain or cognitive domain to the other conceptual domain or cognitive domain" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:28) [5]. That is to say, by means of metaphor, people begin to recognize new things, establish new theories, so as to establish new words and meanings, so metaphor plays a great role in the development of word meaning.

In cognitive linguistics, the study of metaphor is based on "embodied philosophy", that is, people's cognition of metaphor depends on their physical experience and knowledge. According to embodied philosophy, people's thinking is earlier than language; thinking is based on the perception of the human beings and it is imaginative; concept is formed through body, brain and the experience of the world and it is closely related to the cognition of human beings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999:497) [6]. From the development history of humans, people first recognized the objects they could perceive, which were always concrete and practical. Then they would associate the things they have known with the relevant, new and abstract things, so as to find the correlation between them. In other words, we rely on models of the concrete worlds to conceptualize abstract phenomena. In this way, a mapping between two cognitive domains is formed. In principle, any concept from the source domain—the domain supporting the literal meaning of the expression—can be used to describe a concept in the target domain—the domain the sentence is actually about.

3 College Vocabulary Teaching Based on the Theory of Metaphor

As is known to all, English is not only rich in its vocabulary, but also has variety of meanings for every word. It would be very difficult for students to remember the meanings of these words. However, if "we study closely the origin of each word, we can find metaphor in every word" (Hester, 1962:62) [7]. This provides an important way to learn new words meaningfully. In terms of College English vocabulary teaching, we should pay much attention to those three aspects:

A. Use metaphor as a connection device, inspire as well as train students to understand and improve vocabulary.

According to statistics, 70% of the lexical meaning in English is either metaphor or from metaphor (Hester, 1962:70) [7]. A list of meanings of a certain word in dictionary has some connections. The core meaning is the basic and the other meanings are from the development of its metaphor. So during teaching process, the teacher should guide students to find out the image schema, so as to form conceptual metaphor. We use the extensive meaning of the word *foot* in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* as an example for further explanation. With the author's summary, we can get the image schema from the examples of the extensive meaning of the word *foot* as follows:

(1) Foot is the lower or lowest part of something standing or perceived as standing vertically.

E.g.: 1. the **foot** of the stairs
2. the f**oot** of the bed

(2) Foot is a basis.

E.g.: 1. **Foot**ball
2. f**oot**hold

(3) Foot is something or somebody very humble.

E.g.: 1. f**oot**boy
2. f**oot**man

(4) Foot is something extra.

E.g.: 1. f**oot**lights
2. **foot**note

Staying within the field has already been opened up with the example *foot*, we can find the image schema through this metaphorical association and thinking mode. Then the new meaning of the vocabulary is closely associated with students' original knowledge, so they can understand the new meaning more deeply and efficiently.

B. Make full use of the association study of the conceptual learning effectively and expand the depth and breadth of vocabulary mastered by students.

The author believes that vocabulary teaching should focus on a key, that is, to inspire and cultivate students to improve their ability in association, classification as well as comparison in order to achieve the purpose of strengthen understanding and memorizing. It is an effective way of associative learning to make the learning of words meaningful through metaphor.

Actually many students have remembered a lot of words, but when it comes to writing or oral expression, they only can think of some simple words monotonously and inflexibly. So it is important to broaden the depth and breadth of the students' vocabulary through meaningful learning in teaching practice. At the same time, because metaphorical association is flexible and imaginative, the teacher can make the teaching process more interesting. When students find that some familiar words have new meanings and they can use them more effectively, they will show great interest in vocabulary learning naturally. If students have mastered some basic image schema of the word *foot*, the teacher can guide them to deal with some more abstract phrases as follows:

E.g.: 1. He got his **feet** wet. (to begin to participate in an activity)
   2. I am rushed off my **feet**. (to be very busy)
   3. He has a **foot** in both camps. (to have an interest or stake concurrently in tow parties or sides)
   4. I put my best **foot** forward. (to embark on an understanding with as much effort and determination as possible)
   5. I will not allow invaders to set **foot** on Chinese soil. ([often with negative] enter, go into)
   6. I will have this plan at my feet. (have something in one's power or command)

While the teacher guild students to learn these phrases, students will sum up some more abstract scheme images. From example 1 and 2, they can draw the conclusion that *foot is part*; from example 3 and 4, they can get that *foot is idea;* while from example 5 and 6, they can make it that *foot is power*.

C. Improve students' ability to think with metaphor gradually in the teaching practice and in the end make them learn new words through metaphor conceptually and unconsciously.

According to Richards, L.A., word is not a self-sufficient carrier of meaning, so metaphor is not the departure and substitute at the level of words, but the interactive results between tenor and vehicle (1936) [2]. That is to say, metaphor is at any place and polysemy is to a great extent the result of metaphor. In a sense, foreign language learning is a process in which metaphor can reawake in the learners' mind through some methods, especially for polysemy. It is known to all that we must strive to think in the target language in order to learn it well, so it is important to form metaphorical thinking for the purpose of learning English well. Doing like that, students will have the tendency to "integrate new words with basically similar concepts in their cognitive

structure actively" (Ausubel, 1978:75) [1]. Just as Ausubel said, in this way, learners can learn meaningfully, so as to learn more efficiently.

When students have mastered the basic usage of some words He <u>has a foot in both camps.</u> (have an interest or stake concurrently in tow parties or sides) and the extensive meaning, and have summed up the image schemes of these words under the guidance of the teacher, the teacher should lead them to putting these words in practice. For example, while translating the expression "桌脚", students will think of the image schema "FOOT IS LOWER PART", which can be extended to a series of *feet*. Let students take the initiative to form the awareness to use metaphor and use it flexibly. This is the goal for the teacher to teach with metaphor.

4 Conclusion

In summary, the cognitive metaphor theory provides a more convenient and effective way for the teacher to explain new words deeply. The teacher should pay much attention to the three process mentioned above and help students recognize the metaphorical connections between every meaning of a word. Then using this metaphorical connection, students can understand and remember the multiply meanings of a word systematically and effectively, so as to study conceptually through the integration between new words with their original cognitive structure. Of course, the conceptual learning of the vocabulary cannot stay only in the understanding and memorizing of the meaning of words, because a single word will be meaningful only when it is integrated into a sentence. So only by learning the use of the metaphorical meaning of words, can students achieve the ultimate goal of conceptual learning. In order to do that, first of all, the teacher should pay much attention to establish the connection between the meaning of the sentence and students' cognition. Then, the teacher should concentrate on those metaphors with cultural differences and avoid the effect of negative transfer of the mother tongue.

From what is mentioned above, we can get the conclusion that learning words through metaphor students can transfer from rote learning into meaningful learning, so as to have further understanding of words and achieve better learning results. At the same time, they can gain some knowledge about the language and its culture. On the other side, it has higher requirements for teachers. They should have the awareness and ability of cross-cultural teaching and take care of the cross-cultural comparison between the metaphorical meanings of words.

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