

# The Development of Metaphoric Competence of English Majors in China Based on the Multiliteracies Pedagogy

Yanqin Cao<sup>1, a</sup>, Zhaohong Yao<sup>2, b</sup>

<sup>1</sup> International Education College, Xi'an Peihua University, Chang'an Campus, Xi'an, China

<sup>2</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Xidian University, Chang'an Campus, Xi'an, China

<sup>a</sup> catherinecyq@163.com, <sup>b</sup> richardyzh@163.com

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**Abstract:** It is of vital significance to develop English majors' metaphoric competence in China for their conceptual fluency. Through authentic classroom pedagogical design and analysis in terms of situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice in multiliteracies pedagogy, this study put forward feasible teaching methods and discussed its implications in developing metaphoric competence of English majors' in China to promote second language teaching in China. It was proved that the study strengthened students' understanding of cognitive metaphor theory and developed their metaphoric competence, conceptual fluency in English, abilities of critical thinking and academic paper writing. The teaching design has gained popularity among the students in that it not only aroused the students' enthusiasm in active learning, but also facilitated the teacher's transformation of the linguistic theory into practical knowledge, improved the ability of the teacher's action research and promoted the professional development of the English teacher. Meanwhile, the study also enriched and developed the theory of multiliteracies. Empirical research could be carried out in the future and more flexible and diverse training methods could be developed to enhance the metaphoric competence of students at different levels.

## 1. Introduction

Emphasis has been put on the memory, imitation and acquisition of vocabulary, grammar and textual knowledge in English teaching for English majors in China, whereas cultivation of metaphoric competence is neglected. There are many divergences in the conceptual systems between English and Chinese, which are usually overlooked by students in their actual communication. English majors in China are apt to think in the conceptual system in their mother tongue. In other words, they tend to employ the vocabulary and syntactic structure in the target language as the medium of concepts in the mother tongue, causing insufficient conceptual fluency which influences cross-cultural communication.

Danesi [1] pointed out that the key to acquiring a language was to develop conceptual fluency, namely the ability of matching the surface structure of words, sentences with their underlying conceptual structures. As an important thinking pattern and cognitive tool, metaphor in essence is to understand one concept through another. Therefore, it is of vital significance to develop English majors' metaphoric competence for their conceptual fluency. Through authentic classroom pedagogical design and analysis in terms of situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice in multiliteracies pedagogy, this study put forward feasible teaching methods and discussed its implications in developing metaphoric competence of English majors' in China to promote second language teaching in China.

## 2. Multiliteracies pedagogy

Since the publication of *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures* [2] (New London Group, *shorten as NLG* thereafter), multiliteracies has been a heated topic in education and

multimedia study [3] [4] [5], which includes the following four factors:

### **2.1 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 formed out 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 point of view.

### **2.2 Overt Instruction**

By overt instruction is meant the guidance of design resources in multimedia forms by the teacher, which enables the English majors in China to learn to employ 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, multiliteracies pedagogy attaches importance to construction of meaning in authentic context.

### **2.3 Critical Framing**

NLG [2] 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 [6]. A thorough analysis of the learning material can develop English majors' abilities of logical thinking, critical thinking and autonomous learning.

### **2.4 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.

## **3. Classroom teaching design**

With the light of multiliteracies pedagogy, it was attempted to design the teaching procedures to develop metaphoric competence of English Majors in China.

### **3.1 Situated Practice**

Not confining to isolated instances of language metaphors in the textbook, the instructor chose the authentic material in real communication to arouse students' interest. The heated issue of American's sanctions against HUAWEI and ZTE, two largest telecommunications companies in China, was selected by the teacher. Firstly, students were organized to watch a video related to this news. Then, the teacher meticulously chose two pieces of news (text1 and text2) about this event from *Cable News Network* in U.S.A and *China Daily* respectively. Students were divided into two groups to have a discussion on the attitudes, stances of the two pieces of news to figure out the origin of the news. Students also needed to choose their spokesmen to give the oral report of their findings. They could only find out a few differences based on intuition and perceptual knowledge. Thus, students had a strong desire for the knowledge as an analytic tool. The output-driven pedagogical design completely changed the procedure of imparting theory first and finding examples to explain so that students were aware of the practical value of the theory. This pedagogical design driven by the questions rather than theory was the fundamental characteristics of multiliteracies pedagogy and also an effective solution to long-existing problem in teaching of linguistics [7].

### 3.2 Overt Instruction

Inspired by their inability in dealing with the task, the teacher introduced the theory at due time. The teacher should maintain the principle of introducing theory through language facts with moderate difficulty and novel topic. For example, the teacher could give the following ways about time [8]:

You're wasting my time.

This washing-machine will save your hours.

How do you spend your time these days?

I've invested a lot of time in her.

You need to budget your time.

You don't use your time profitably.

Then, the teacher directed students to the understanding of time through *waste, save, spend, invest, budget, profitably*. By discussion, students were in agreement that time was a limited, valuable resource and commodity in the current society, which should be cherished by everyone. What's more, the teacher could point out the fact that it has become customary to pay people by the hour, week, or year in modern Western culture. Students were then in a better position to have a deeper understanding of the conceptual metaphor **TIME IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY**, on which they could think, talk and act towards time the way they treated a valuable commodity. The teacher went on to help students realize the ubiquity of metaphor through a cartoon. Students were informed that metaphor could be realized through language, pictures, sounds, colors and gestures, etc. After watching fig 1, students were expected to understand the message and the underlying conceptual metaphor conveyed by the cartoon given that it is a description of education in China.



Fig 1

Based on the world knowledge and the cognitive theory of conceptual metaphor instructed by the teacher, students were actively engaged in discussion and construction of knowledge about metaphor. After a brief discussion, students could obtain the surface information that a man was holding a kettle to pour the water into the pipe, under which children were waiting for the water by opening their mouths. The scene in the picture was closely related to students' experience of education so that it could facilitate the association of the scene with their encyclopedic knowledge and experiences of the world. Thus students could figure out the implied meanings of the picture by the interplay of pragmatic intention, encyclopedic knowledge, cognitive model. The source domain of this metaphor that the adult was feeding water to children actually mapped its structure onto the target domain of cramming method of teaching in China. This cartoon criticized the predicament of Chinese education that educationists and teachers pressed students to drink water, trained students how large they should open their mouths to fetch water out of their own will without the knowledge of students' instinct of drinking water for themselves. Students were obliged to drink water the way adults direct them to do it metaphorically expressed strong disapproval of Chinese educational system, in which students passively acquired knowledge under the spoon-fed teaching premise without stimulation of students' initiative and creativity. It was hoped from this cartoon that students' interest should be aroused for their active learning and long-term overall development.

### 3.3 Critical Framing

Kalantzis and Cope has divided critical framing into functional analysis and critical analysis [9]. In terms of developing English majors' metaphoric competence in this research, the former referred to the ability of descriptive analysis of the material with cognitive metaphorical theory and found out the source domains and the target domains and the mappings between them. The latter referred to the interpretative analysis of the material, figuring out the identity, stance influenced by the psychological, social and cultural factors of the creator. In this study, the teacher invited students to discuss in groups to present their findings about metaphorical expressions and the underlying conceptual metaphors. With reference to social and cultural experiences, pragmatic factors, cultural cognitive model and encyclopedic knowledge, students could find out the attitudes, stance and ideology in the two pieces of news. With the training in the situated practice and overt guidance, most students could make a relatively accurate analysis of the conceptual metaphors from metaphorical expressions. The teacher then corrected the undiscovered and inaccurate analysis of the students, summarized the results of the analysis and consolidated the analysis framework of conceptual metaphors.

#### 3.3.1 Functional analysis

Text 1(CNN):

- *US - China trade: 24 hours that escalated the fight*

The title of the report from Cable News Network (CNN) of the U.S.A. was US - China trade: 24 hours that escalated the fight which used the implicit conceptual metaphor TRADE FRICTION IS WAR. Here the specific source domain WAR that people are familiar with was employed to structure the abstract target domain TRADE FRICTION. The two sides of a war treated each other as enemies. In order to win the war, they flexibly used offensive or defensive strategies and tactics to defend their own positions and seize the enemy's positions. In the report, based on the systematic structured mapping from the source domain of WAR to the target domain of TRADE FRICTION, the concrete and familiar source domain provided structure for the abstract target domain, profoundly affecting people's thinking and action on the trade friction. Having analyzed the language expressions in the whole report, it could be found that this conceptual metaphor ran through all the report to construct a coherent discourse.

- *After a brief lull in the skirmishing, the trade battle between the United States and China is escalating once again.*

The use of *lull*, *skirmishing*, *the trade battle*, *escalating* were reflections of the conceptual metaphor TRADE FRICTION IS WAR, which carried the message that this was not the first trade friction between China and U.S.A, but the recent situation was further serious.

- *In the last 24 hours alone, the United States dealt a potentially crippling blow to a big Chinese tech company.*

Similar to ruthless blow to the enemy on the battlefield, the government of the United States regarded China's high-tech companies such as ZTE, HUAWEI as potential enemies, which posed a major threat to telecommunications industry and national security of the United States. Therefore, Trump's government was trying to ban high-tech companies of the United States from selling chip and other components to Chinese companies and ban the military use of ZTE and HUAWEI's smartphones in order to seek the active position in the international trade war and more national interests.

- *...and President Donald Trump fired off another angry tweet.*

The United States of America launched the trade war under the authority of President Trump, in which fired off also reflected the aggressiveness and destruction of sanctions against China the way the war to the combatants.

- *China made clear again Tuesday that it was willing to stand its ground in the increasingly tense standoff between the world's two biggest economies.*

Facing the sanctions by the Trump administration, the report also cited China's position that "the Chinese government is bound to hold its ground in the face of an escalating trade standoff between China and the United States." In the current stand-off, the Chinese government will not retreat and give up its position. Instead, it will take on the fight. The metaphor helped to construct Chinese government's attitude towards the sanctions.

- "If the US continues to act recklessly ... we stand ready to show our sword, and fight to win this battle to defend multilateralism and free trade,"...

The sword was a frequently used weapon in the war. *Showing our sword* stood for the intention of fight with the metonymic operation of ACTION STANDS FOR MOTIVE. Based on this metonymy, the conceptual metaphor TRADE FRICTION IS WAR could be constructed. Similarly, to win this battle reflected Chinese government's determination and confidence.

- when Trump directed the Commerce Department to investigate whether imports of foreign steel from China and other countries could be a threat to national security.

- The word *threat* reflected that Trump's government treated the Chinese government and enterprises as its enemy, which should be fought against.

- The US *cracked down on ZTE*,

The use of *cracked down on* displayed American government's tough attitude and oppression towards Chinese companies.

Text 2 (China Daily):

- *Talks can silence the drums of trade war*

- The title of *The China Daily* is *Talks can silence the drums of trade war*,

which highlighted Chinese government's attitude towards American government which started the trade friction. This was a war of no gun smoke. Meanwhile, the title clearly conveyed Chinese government's conviction that talks based on mutual understanding could bring an end to the trade war between the two economies. Two pieces of the jigsaw puzzle in Fig 2 demonstrated the fact that in the global economic integration, China and the U.S.A. were mutually dependent so it was favorable for both sides to seek common ground while putting aside differences for mutual benefit and common development, which was welcome by all the other countries and played a positive and constructive role for the two countries and the world.



Fig 2

- *Last month, the United States administration fired the opening salvo in what could lead to a full-blown trade war.*

In this sentence, words and phrases concerning war such as *fire*, *the opening salvo*, *a full-blown*, *trade war* were employed to guide the readers understand the trade friction in a more effective way. The news began with the war metaphor to help readers aware of the responsibility of the U.S.A. which provoked the conflict.

- *Fueling the risk of Thucydides' trap*

The use of *fuel* and *trap* highlighted the fact that the trade war ignited by the United States will eventually led both China and the United States to fall into Thucydides' trap. Neither China nor the U.S.A. would win the war. Conversely, both would be losers.

### 3.3.2 Critical analysis

Based on the descriptive analysis of metaphorical expressions in the news, the teacher

encouraged students to analyze the social reality intended by the author in terms of the cultural background, motivation and ideology. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of the news could be obtained that the seemingly objective style of news was only the means by which the author attempted to influence, change or assimilate readers.

Through group discussion, it was agreed that the conceptual metaphor *TRADE FRICTION IS WAR* in CNN's coverage was a manifestation of the hostility of the American government and the Department of Defense towards Chinese enterprises who mistakenly regarded Chinese companies as their enemies threatening their security and interests. This could explain why they imposed severe sanctions against China's high-tech companies such as ZTE, HUAWEI. It was apparent that metaphor was not only a means of language construction, but also a means of thinking and action as shown by Trump administration's stereotyped ideas in the news.

By contrast, the Chinese government was neither overbearing nor servile in this crisis in that if the U.S.A. kept on clinging obstinately to its course, China would also actively strike a powerful counter-blow. Of course, we would do our utter most for the talks and negotiation between the two parties, convincing that Sino-U.S. trade friction could be properly resolved with mutual understanding and concessions.

### **3.4 Transformed Practice**

After the practice of news analysis, the students preliminarily understood the value of linguistic theory and developed the metaphorical thinking ability. At this time, the teacher made full use of discussion and homework to further promote students to apply cognitive metaphor theory to practice, and further improve conceptual fluency. The teacher still chose a social hot topic: the Chinese company ShuangHui's buying out of Smithfield, an American firm. Two reports from China Daily and USA Today were the material for analysis and specific tasks were: (1) analyzing the metaphorical expressions and the underlying conceptual metaphors and summing up the differences. (2) explaining the positions and attitudes reflected in different metaphorical expressions. (3) elucidating the deep reasons that lead to different metaphorical expressions. In classroom discussion, students could make a plausible analysis of the hot issues using the theory learned, recognizing the close relationship between cognitive metaphor theory and real life. In addition, students could learn the stream of thoughts in linguistic research and academic paper writing, that is, what was for analysis (material), how to analyze (theoretical framework), what was found (metaphorical expressions and conceptual metaphors), why we had these metaphors (interpretation of the underlying reasons).

## **4. Discussion and enlightenment**

Giving the effect of teaching practice, the teaching design for developing English majors' metaphoric competence has changed the traditional teaching practice of the teacher's interpretation of the theory followed by analyzing language material with the theory. Implementing the principle of theory as the analytic tool of linguistic facts and the output-driven principle, the teacher meticulously chose the real language as teaching material and assigned students to finish tasks the teacher based on the succinct lecture on the theory. With the teacher's guidance, students endeavored to complete the tasks and further strengthened their understanding of cognitive metaphor theory and developed their metaphoric competence, conceptual fluency in English, abilities of critical thinking and academic paper writing. The teaching design has gained popularity among the students in that it not only aroused the students' enthusiasm in active learning, but also facilitated the teacher's transformation of the linguistic theory into practical knowledge, improved the ability of the teacher's action research and promoted the professional development of the English teacher. Meanwhile, the study also enriched and developed the theory of multiliteracies. Empirical research could be carried out in the future and more flexible and diverse training methods could be developed to enhance the metaphorical ability of students at different levels.

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