

An Inquiry into Hidden Meanings in Text: EAL Learners in Search of Deep Text Meaning

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Abstract: Lakoff and Johnson's seminal publication 'Metaphors We Live By' provided new insights into the notion of metaphor, and demonstrated persuasively that metaphor is ubiquitous in not only everyday language but also thought. Similarly, a large number of researchers have shown experimentally the diverse multiplicity of roles of metaphor in discourse, whether it be naturally occurring spoken language or written texts. For instance, Gibbs and Nascimento (1996) conducted a study based on the assumption that readers find poetry more meaningful when they make inferences about the metaphorical relationships which underpin the poem. In a similar area, Picken's (2005) investigation was focused upon how metaphor awareness promoted foreign language learners with a tool to make sense of literature texts. The present research, which partly builds on the afore-mentioned studies, seeks to explore further the role of metaphor awareness in enhancing text comprehension. In this paper I argue that an enhanced awareness of metaphors can deepen L2 learners' text understanding. Learners' metaphor awareness was raised by utilising the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP, henceforth). Learners were explicitly taught different steps of the MIP, which enabled them to both identify metaphors in texts and gain a deeper understanding of the underlying metaphorical relationships. Three sets of data were elicited so as to tap into participants' development of reading comprehension. The first set comprised a reading test –which contained a variety of metaphors, while the second involved audio-recorded students' interactions while working on the application of the MIP into reading passages. The last set involved journal entries given to the learners aimed at capturing their views on their awareness and learning process. Analysis of the data revealed that L2 learners' text understanding substantially improved. More details about data analysis and results will be furnished in the presentation.

Keywords: awareness of metaphor, metaphor identification procedure (MIP), understanding of text

Introduction

It has been stated that the challenge of making sense of a text can be formidable (Marmolejo-Ramos, et al. 2009). The process of reading and comprehending in one's native language is complex, primarily due to the various factors that interact with one another in a non-linear manner. The task of comprehending a text becomes even more complex when it comes to second or foreign language.

In order to successfully and critically engage with a text, language learners have to develop a number of skills, some of which may become major challenges. Grabe (2009) states that developing effective reading skills in a second language (L2) presents problems and challenges, some of which are associated with the lexical knowledge students have to develop, the complex syntax, and the variety of registers and genres students are exposed to. Each of these areas is, however, usually well addressed by language instructors, who very often develop quite effective tools and strategies which assist their learners in succeeding in their language learning process. There is, however, another significant barrier which learners have to overcome, that which relates to the large amount of metaphorically-used words and expressions embedded in discourse.

With the proliferation of Cognitive Linguistics in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it has come to be known that metaphor is, first and foremost, ubiquitous and is not only a linguistic decorative device but also a reflection of how we reason (Evans & Green, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This revolutionary assumption has led a number of researchers to look into the nature of metaphor and how they are exploited in a variety of genres and discourses (Charteris-Black, 2004 ; Eubanks, 2000; Semino, 2008). Similarly, applied linguists and applied cognitive linguists have demonstrated great concern for investigating the implications and applications of metaphor to language teaching and learning (Cameron & Low, 1999; De Knop, Boers, & De Rycker, 2010; Littlemore, 2009; Tyler, 2012). Although research into the applications of metaphor to language teaching and learning has yielded significant findings, they haven't fully permeated through our pedagogical practices. A clear reflection of this is the fact that ESL curricula haven't yet fully integrated the study of metaphor into its consideration of what are the central linguistics aspects necessary for the development of second language skills. Such absence and lack of consideration in the curriculum has resulted in language teachers relegating, and sometimes neglecting, metaphor to an unimportant sphere of language teaching and learning. Consequently, students' learning process has been considerably constrained to the literal domain of language, preventing them from moving away from superficial levels of understanding. A possible route to leading students into those meanings which lie behind superficial spheres of discourse is by making metaphors more visible and accessible to them. Growth of visibility and accessibility to metaphor in discourse would eventually enable learners to unpack those hidden meanings which are carried through metaphorically-used words. The present study is intended to look into the potential role of growth of metaphor awareness in deepening learners' understanding of text.

The remaining sections of this article are organized thus: section 2.0 provides an overview of how Cognitive Linguistics has contributed to our current understanding of metaphor. This section also highlights briefly some pedagogical orientations of the study of metaphor and metaphor awareness in language teaching and learning. This section is followed by 3.0 which

describes and discusses the study and the methodology adopted. Finally, I conclude the article (Section 4.0) by noting some of the pedagogical implications of the results.

What we currently know about metaphor

For centuries, researchers and philosophers alike have investigated the role of metaphor in discourse. However, most traditional studies on metaphor have been particularly constrained to philosophy, literature and poetry (Koller, 2003), thus considering it as a purely decorative device. Current views of metaphor, particularly informed by Cognitive Linguistics (CL) approaches, have clearly moved away from philosophical or literary grounds. They have gone on to investigate how metaphor is not only about language but also about thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). From a CL perspective, metaphor is much more than an ornamental device utilized to enrich creative pieces of writings. Metaphor is regarded as a pervasive phenomenon which permeates individuals' everyday life (for a detailed account of metaphor from CL, see the following sections). It reflects the way we reason about the world and is realized in language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). One fundamental assumption underlying the notion of metaphor from a CL approach is the experiential basis of language. This view develops the idea that our bodily and sensorimotor experiences play a fundamental role in how we think of and talk about reality (Johnson, 1980; Knowles & Moon, 2006). This experiential view of metaphor has changed our traditional understanding thereof and has had important implications in different areas, especially for second language teaching and learning.

On lexical grounds, for instance, Cognitive Linguistics has considerably contributed to the teaching of polysemous words, phrasal verbs and idioms. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), one of CL's major theories, has demonstrated quite convincingly that many of what we call 'idioms' or 'idiomatic expressions' are far from being arbitrary. Idioms, according to the CMT, share common underlying relationships which are linked to a particular conceptual metaphor. For instance, such linguistic realizations as 'she blew up at me', 'she just exploded', 'it was just adding fuel to the fire' demonstrate that they are all linked to a common conceptual metaphor, that of 'anger is heat'. The in-depth analysis of expressions like these has shed light on the motivated nature of language, thus giving us useful tools to unpack what lies behind the linguistic realization of a metaphor.

Methodology

The following sections are intended to provide an overview of the participants, methods of data collection and data analysis of the present study. As well, a brief description is provided of the tool utilized for the implementation of the metaphor-awareness curriculum.

For the sake of clarity, it is worth recalling the research question which this study sets out to answer. This article attempts to scrutinize the role of language learners' growth of metaphor awareness in deepening their understanding of text. As can be observed, one important domain of the research question comprises learners' growth of metaphor awareness. Learners' awareness of metaphor was raised through the implementation of the MIP (Metaphor Identification Procedure) over a period of four weeks.

Participants

Twenty five college students participated voluntarily in the present study. All the students were undertaking EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses in order to be able to enter university upon successful completion of their course.

Methods

In order to gather data for the present study, three methods were utilized in the process of data collection. The first comprised a reading test with metaphors embedded. The reading test comprised four sections which measured text understanding in different ways. The first one was a vocabulary section (12 lexical items) where all the words had been metaphorically used in the text. Students were not advised of the metaphorical nature of the words. The second test item was a section which contained four multiple-choice questions. The first three questions were literally intended and basically required that the students searched for specific information in the text. The last multiple-choice question was, however, inferential and required learners to deduce the meaning of a quote taken from the text which was metaphorically oriented. The third section of the test encompassed three comprehension questions which required some elaboration on the part of the students. The last section was a reader-response task which was particularly designed to capture the students' engagement with the text along with the ways in which they engaged in a meaning-making process.

The second method for data collection was audio-recorded student interactions. Students collaboratively worked on the application of the MIP to different reading tasks they were given. The third one comprised different journal entries which contained four open-ended questions.

These journal entries attempted to tap into students' growth of awareness, their perceptions on the MIP as a tool used for awareness raising, and their potential growth of understanding of text.

Of importance is to highlight the tool used to raise learners' awareness of metaphor. The tool implemented to enhance learners' awareness of metaphor was the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). The Metaphor Identification Procedure, Semino (2008) states, was a procedure proposed by the Pragglejazz Group (Pragglejazz is an acronym formed by the initial letters of the names of ten members of the group). The MIP was proposed so that metaphor researchers could have some guidelines to follow as to how to identify metaphorical expressions. For the purpose of this study, the MIP was, however, adapted so it could be used as a teaching tool for metaphor identification by the learners. Most importantly, throughout the four-week teaching intervention period the implementation of the MIP was used as a tool to enhance learners' awareness of metaphor in texts.

Data analysis

It was decided to use both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches to analyze the data. The reading test, which was administered before and after the intervention period, was quantitatively analyzed. Analysis of the reading test would give us an indication of learners' text understanding. Learners' growth of awareness of metaphor was tracked by the data obtained from the other two methods; audio-recorded student interactions and journal entries. The researcher examined the transcripts of the audio-recorded sessions and searched for particular linguistic features which would eventually provide us an indication of growth of awareness of metaphor. One of the key elements tracked in the transcripts was the students' metalanguage of metaphor.

In regards to the journal entries responses, they were thematically analyzed by using QSR NVivo (version 9.0).

Analysis

Text understanding

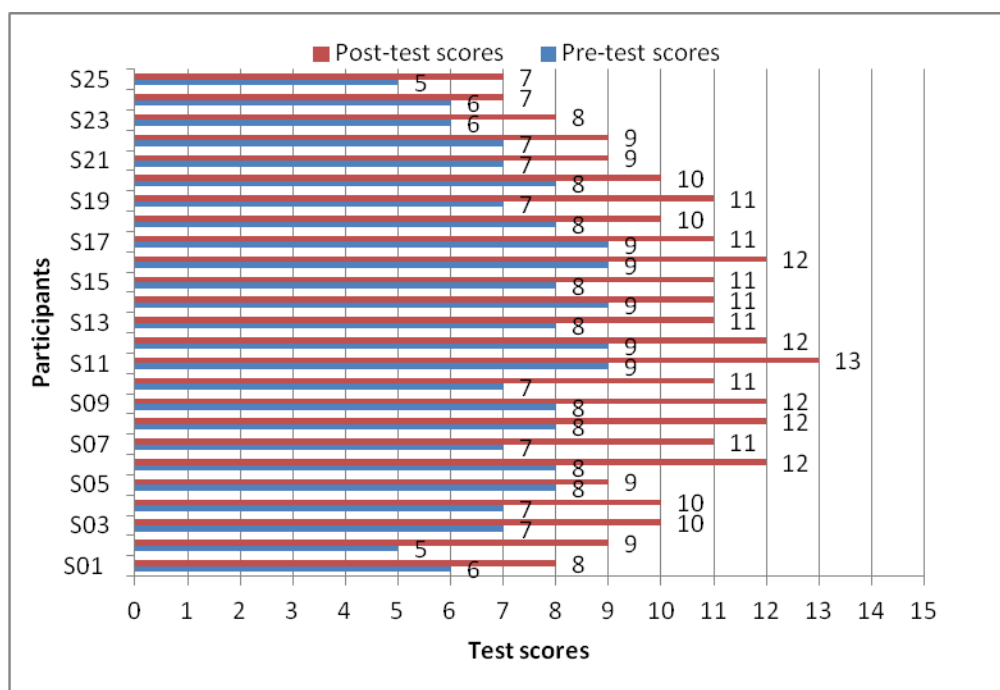
It was attempted to discover if metaphor awareness would improve understanding of text with metaphors embedded. In general, the results pertaining to the first three test items –vocabulary, multiple choice and short-answer questions – show an improvement in reading comprehension over the four-week teaching intervention period. The total test score of these three sections was 15 points, and the results of the descriptive statistics computed for the pre and post test show that the average overall score was 7.44 for the pre-test ($SD= 1.19$), and 10.24 ($SD= 1.64$) for the post-

test. The difference between the two means is 2.8, which indicates that –although not conclusively yet –metaphor awareness may have influenced students’ text comprehension in an average of 2.8 points in the post-test.

The data in Figure 4.1 show the total scores obtained by the students in the pre-test and post-test. This data represents the number of correct answers from a total of 15 points. It can be seen from Table 5, that all of the participants total scores in the pre-test ranged between five and nine points. The post-test results show that students’ scores are higher than the pre-test. By looking at the table, it can be noted that all students demonstrate a certain degree of increase in the post-test as compared to the pre-test scores.

From the Table it can be observed that the higher scores in the post-test give an indication of growth in text understanding for all students after the four-week teaching intervention period.

Figure 4.1: Pre-test and post-test overall scores



From the graph it can be clearly observed an improvement in test scores after the teaching period, which –to a large extent –signals students’ improvement in reading understanding.

Some details which deserve special attention are related to the few cases in which little variation between pre and post test results that can be seen in the graph. For instance, student five (S05) only scored one point higher (9) than in the pre-test (8). Another case which shows a small increase in the post-test is S24. We can see that just as S05 the overall score in the post-test is only one point higher with respect to the pre-test. The remainder of the students show an increase in at least 2 or 3 points.

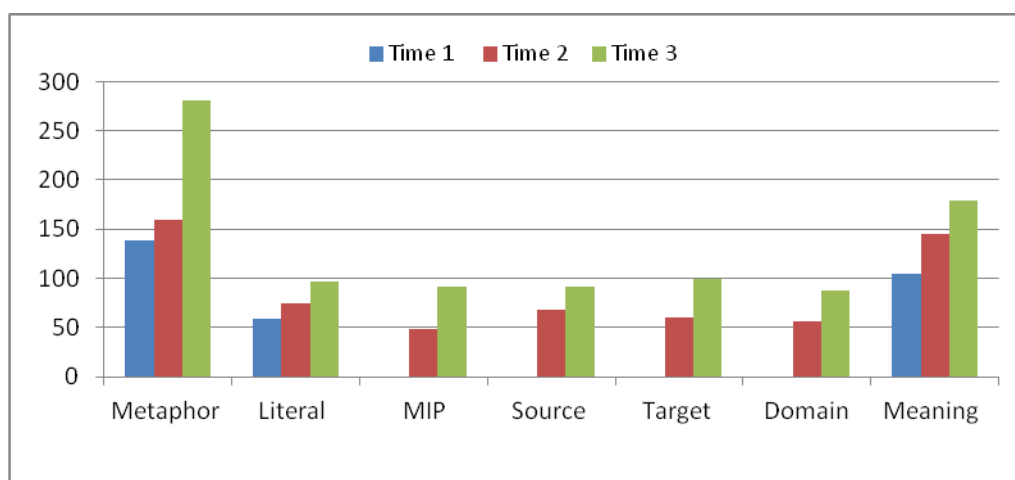
Awareness of metaphor

As mentioned earlier, learners' growth of metaphor awareness was tracked by the data gleaned from audio-recorded student talk and their journal entries responses.

Using the metalanguage of metaphor

Over the 8 lessons, students' use of the metalanguage of metaphor increased significantly. As already mentioned, there were certain lexemes which were not known to students at Time 1 as learners had not yet been introduced to the MIP and, therefore, no familiarity with certain metaphor-related words had been obtained. As can be seen in Figure 6.2, no occurrences of MIP, source, target and domain were found in Time 1. However, we can observe an overall increase across the second and third instances.

Figure 4.2: Students' use of metalanguage as indicated by metaphorically-related words



A general glance at the data reveals that students' use of the metalanguage of metaphor increased across instances where the average overall number of words was 43.1 ($SD=58.4$) for Time 1, 87.2 ($SD= 45.1$) for Time 2, and 132.4 ($SD=72.9$) for the third instance. As can be seen from the difference between the means, there is an overall increase in the amount of talk about metaphor

which is reflected in the student's lexicon. This is an indication of how what the students were saying contained more metaphorically-related words across instances; similarly, it also reflects how student's awareness of metaphor increased progressively over time. It would appear, then, that this growth in the metalanguage of metaphor follows from the metaphor-awareness raising sessions.

Not only was metaphor awareness examined through the analysis of learners' metalanguage of metaphor but also through the examination of their written responses to different journal entries. The next section looks briefly at what and how students responded to the reflective journals. A thorough analysis of the themes found in the responses is beyond the scope of this paper. Let us turn our attention to some of the elements that were found in the reflective journal entries.

Analysis of journal entries

In this study, students wrote responses to questions about metaphor and metaphor identification in text in journals following three specific lessons. Student reflections were analysed thematically by utilising, QSR NVivo (version 9.0). A number of emergent and recurrent themes came up in the students' writing which are summarized in Table 4.2.2.

Table 4.2.2: Themes in student reflections

Themes	Subthemes
	Metaphor is important but difficult
The usefulness of metaphor	Metaphors promotes lexical learning
	The potential of metaphor to develop language skills
The visibility of metaphor, awareness and uses for it	Recognition of the ubiquity of metaphor
	Working collaboratively leads to more awareness
	Growing awareness resulting from MIP steps

	Metaphor as a means of critical thinking
The interplay between metaphor awareness and text comprehension	Awareness enables deeper understanding
	Awareness and text comprehension leading to more overall learning

A thorough analysis of all these themes is beyond the scope of this article. For the purpose of this paper, attention is drawn to what students say about ‘the usefulness of metaphor’.

The usefulness of metaphor

The first subtheme to be discussed herein is in line with the complexity involved in metaphor understanding, and consequently the confusion to which it may lead.

Before the emergence of cognitive linguistics access to the meaning of metaphor was viewed as secondary, and therefore more complex than literal meanings. It seems that this view is somewhat still reflected in the conceptions of second language learners. In earlier stages of journal responses, students deemed metaphor as being complex to understand:

The metaphors is very difficult..., and maybe a bit confused for me. I don't understand the metaphors very good (Jenny)

I still don't understand it (metaphor) very much (Jess)

In their first journal entry, Jenny and Jess express their views of metaphors and regard them as difficult and confusing. This might indicate that these students have probably never encountered metaphors before or that they associate metaphors to poetry or literature, and thus sees difficulty in them. Picken (2001) points out that ESL (English as a second language) learners constantly struggle to make sense of literary texts which usually contain a high number of metaphors that are used to convey the poetic vision. The following extract shows such a feeling:

I don't like poems because I read many poems in school...and the metaphors are very difficult because it's like another language. I don't understand the metaphors when I read the text. I get confused when I read them (Sam)

Sam, without being asked about poems, makes reference to poetry and the difficulty found in them due to the metaphorical language. Upon recalling his school days when he read poems, Sam finds the difficulty of metaphor on a par with (learning) another language. Just as Jenny and Jess, Sam expresses the idea of confusion when it comes to understanding metaphors. At this stage, Jenny and Sam along with the rest of the students have already been introduced to the MIP (metaphor identification procedure), and their remarks regarding difficulty and confusion relate to metaphor and not to the MIP. It seems that their views of metaphor have been shadowed by what is commonly known as metaphor in poetry and literature. Another comment by a different student reaffirms the students' conceptualizations of metaphor as difficult and confusing.

It (metaphor) is confusing and I think I can't understand the metaphor in the paragraph that we have to read... the test was too hard for me, I think I understood 10 %. (Kevin)

Sue's reflections on metaphor are in line with Kevin's:

It's difficult to me to think about metaphor because is like not simple to express or understand the meaning, and when I read I don't know if read metaphors, but If I read them maybe I don't understand them because I can be confused about metaphors (Sue)

One can see that both Kevin and Sue acknowledge that metaphors are confusing, hence their lack of understanding. Kevin, for instance, points out that he could not understand the metaphors embedded in the text which the students had to read in that particular class – the third session of the teaching period when students wrote their first journal. Kevin also comments on the reading test, which had been given to the students at the beginning of the teaching period, concludes that little text understanding was reached on his part; “I think I understood 10 %”. Sue, on the other hand, puts forward a number of ideas, one of which relates to the confusion involved in understanding metaphors; confusion which has probably led her to think that “metaphor...is not simple to express or understand the meaning”. This association between metaphor, difficulty and confusion might suggest that students view metaphor as being common to certain genres, poetry and literature, and that tacitly convey the idea that metaphorical meanings are more complex than literal ones. Knowles and Moon (2006) state that “most of us probably made our first conscious acquaintance with metaphorical language in the study of literary texts” (p.121).

In later instances and as the students engaged more critically, we can see how their views regarding difficulty and confusion involved in metaphors have changed. In later journal entries, second journal in particular, it can be seen how students' view regarding the difficulty and importance of metaphor has changed. Students continue to value the importance of metaphors; however, their views regarding the difficulty involved in it are changing.

The metaphors and the MIP is like changing my view and my feeling about the metaphor, so I think that I feel more relax about the metaphors because in the past I felt more confused and difficult about the metaphors, but not now. (Nick)

In Nick's account we can see how confident he feels in his later encounters with metaphors. Not only are his views changing but also how he feels. Although he does not elaborate much on what he means by 'my feeling', we can see that he also makes reference to the fact that he also "feels more relax about metaphors". This suggests that perhaps his level of anxiety is lower when he is now faced with metaphors or texts with metaphors embedded. Nick is also aware that metaphors do not lead him to confusion now (second journal) as compared to "in the past" (first journal). It is interesting to note that, although he makes no reference to whether or not he is more aware of metaphor or whether his text understanding is deeper, he is well aware that his view of metaphor is shifting; metaphor is no longer confusing, nor difficult.

This section has briefly discussed one of the themes found in the examination of learners' journal responses. Although in early responses learners acknowledged the complexity of metaphor, it was observed that participants appeared to have appreciated the value of metaphor in later instances. Not only did they recognize its importance to language and language learning, but also admitted to having a different perception ('different view') of it.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research study, which focused upon the interplay between learners' understanding of texts and awareness of metaphor, has shown that ESL learners can greatly benefit from the implementation of a metaphor-awareness curriculum. The findings suggest that learners' understanding of text with metaphors embedded improved after the intervention period which relied upon the use of the MIP as a metaphor-awareness raising tool. This study has important implications for curriculum design and implementation in ESL contexts.

Introducing the MIP in an ESL curriculum would positively impact the ways in which language teachers deliver their teaching practices. Its successful implementation into the classroom would assist language teachers in the presentation of vocabulary, especially polysemous items, by drawing learners' attention to the underlying conceptual relations which link different meanings of a word to one another. As well, and most importantly, teachers would be afforded with a tool which will help them move their learners' understanding of text away from literal meanings. Therefore, it is of utmost important that a metaphor-awareness curriculum based on the MIP be

implemented in ESL classrooms in order to enhance both teachers' pedagogical practices and learners' literacy levels.

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