

A Study of Idiom Teaching from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor

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Abstract: As a part of vocabulary learning, the idiom is an important part of language teaching. This study is to investigate whether conceptual metaphor can promote idioms' teaching and learning or not. In the course of study, we make use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, collecting data through the questionnaire survey and do experiments in teaching and learning idioms. We get the conclusion: the T value of the experimental group and the control group is $p < 0.05$, the pre-test and post-test values is $p < 0.05$. It is feasible to apply the conceptual metaphor in idiom teaching and learning.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor, Idiom teaching and learning, Empirical study

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1 Introduction

Idioms, including proverbs, maxims, allusions and slangs, are a kind of special language expression forms with semantic integrity and fixed structure, which carry rich language and cultural information, and are widely used by people in daily communication. According to Cooper (1999), a native speaker in English uses almost 2,000,000 idioms all his life. The role of idioms has been studied by many scholars, such as Sinclair (1987), who points out that idioms play an important role in facilitating interactions; In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live by* emphasize that "Metaphor is at the core of communication and cognition", and state "the majority of idioms are motivated by conceptual metaphors". Based on the research findings mentioned

above, we tend to prove that the mastery of conceptual metaphor can facilitate learning idioms and improve the proficiency in language use of ESL learners. However, some researches have been insufficient between conceptual metaphors and teaching idioms for ESL, therefore, there is much room left for further exploration so as to work out new approaches to teaching idioms to the ESL learners.

2 Conceptual metaphor theory

Aristotle firstly believes that metaphor exists in words and metaphor as "transference could make us apply alien names in many ways such as from species to species or from genus to species..." (Aristotle, 1954). Conceptual metaphor is "a cross domain mapping in the conceptual system", and "metaphor is not just a rhetorical device, but part of daily speech that affects the way people perceive, think and act", that is, metaphor is pervasive in our life; it is a figure of mind, a way of thinking, and the mapping is a tool to interpret new things, and above all, metaphor is conceptual and the core part of long-term memory in people's conceptual system. Taylor (1999:491) states that a remarkable aspect of conceptual metaphors remains the general direction of the mapping relation. The source domain is concrete, experienced and perceived, while the target domain is abstract and inexperienced. These are familiar metaphors, which plentiful expressions are presented as Business is on the up and up, boosted one's spirits. The source domains and target domains have the experiential bases, like those of HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN, as in "up and up", "low these days".

In China, many scholars have also shown great interest in metonymy and made remarkable achievements in the study of it. Sheng Jiaxuan (1999)

demonstrates the cognitive model of metonymy, which treats “the cognitive framework” and “salience” as the center. Metonymy is not only a figure of speech, but actually a conceptual phenomenon. It is a powerful and indispensable cognitive tool for our conceptualization of abstract categories. In a word, metonymy is the mental process, which is much more than changing of name for things.

3 Methodology

3.1 Objectives of study

Gibbs (1992) proves that the meaning of many idioms is motivated by the conceptual metaphors. We intend to teach idioms under the framework of conceptual metaphors to test the following hypotheses:

(1) It is feasible to apply conceptual metaphors to teaching idioms.

(2) After the experiment, the experimental group differs from the control group in the process of teaching idioms.

(3) The application of conceptual metaphors can facilitate learning idioms.

3.2 Data and methodology

The data in this dissertation includes 71 copies of questionnaires collected from the ESL students at a university in Guangzhou, and a quasi-experimental research in which quantitative analyses are used. Meanwhile, contrastive analysis and introspective method are adopted. The experiments involve a Questionnaire about learning idioms, a Pre-test, a Class-room Test, a One-week Delay Test and a Post-test. Each of the methods has its own strengths, but as Jick (1979) indicates that quantitative and qualitative methods will be viewed as complementary to one another as rival camps. Quantitative and qualitative make it possible to (1) detect the data easily; (2) follow the learning and teaching process to get data; (3) avoid the gross errors that can be made in general scanning. This study provides an in-depth exploration into teaching and learning idioms for the ESL students in China. On the one hand, the students’ attitudes toward learning and teaching idioms are surveyed. It is hoped that this study will provide some guidance for teachers in terms of how to design a teaching idioms unit and how to address to the needs of the ESL students in China.

3.3 Variables

This experiment engages three independent variables: two different teaching approaches, two groups of subjects, two types of idiom presentation. What’s more, processing accuracy scores as dependent variables are also involved.

3.4 Materials

The teaching material is *The Big Picture-Idioms as Metaphors* (King, 2008). This book gives illustrated edition to idioms as metaphors, easy to understand the relationship between idioms and metaphors. In order to ensure the efficiency of teaching idioms, most of the selected idioms are divided into the categories, which can be naturally applied as supplementary materials to the related unit.

3.5 Instruments

The instruments include one Questionnaire, one Pre-test, A Classroom Test, One Week Delay Test, and one Post-test. Details of them are presented in following sub-sections. A pre-test and post-test are assigned to the subjects while the data collected from the experiments are calculated by SPSS17.0.

3.6 Process

A questionnaire is designed to gather the first-hand information of the current situation of learning idioms, which consists of 18 questions, centering round current state of learning idioms, the learning strategies, the usage and avoidance of idioms. A classroom test is designed to check the subjects’ level on up-down idioms after one hour of instructing up-down idioms through different approaches. The main purpose of a classroom test is to examine how effective the conceptual metaphors is and to what extent the progress has made in interpreting idioms in different situations. For the convenience of management, the test was conducted in normal class hour and the time is limited to 15 minutes. Therefore, the classroom test only consists of one part: choosing the most appropriate up-down particles to fill in the blanks. Among all the 15 sentences, 5 of them are new to the subjects to measure their transfer ability to conceptual metaphors in interpreting new idioms. The new idioms are those which have not been mentioned in class but their meanings can be inferred as they share the similar motivations of conceptual metaphors as those previously learned idioms.

English teaching is conducted 16 weeks from September 4th, 2018 to December 18th, 2018. The EC and the CC are instructed by the same teacher, using the same textbook, teaching objectives and teaching hours (4 periods per week). The difference is that the EC and the CC are taught in different approaches, namely, the conceptual metaphorical approach and the traditional approach. In other words, idioms are taught by giving their figurative meaning directly or taught with linking with conceptual metaphors. We will return to this issue in greater detail after this brief introduction to procedures. One week later, an additional text is conducted to examine the transfer capability and two approaches influence on long-term retention of idioms. Subjects also finish the tests within 15 minutes. In each class, 15 minutes are especially allocated to instruct the related idioms with the EC being taught with conceptual metaphorical approach and the CC with the traditional

approach. The teaching models of two groups are elaborated in following sub-sections.

4 Data analysis and discussion

The results of the experiment will be elaborated. At first, the data of questionnaire completed by subjects at the beginning of the experiment will be analyzed, aiming at the current situation of learning and teaching idioms to provide references for the course design. In the following analyses, the data are collected in the three types of tests of the research and calculated by SPSS 17.0. If $\text{sig.}(2\text{-tails}) < 0.05$, the differences of statistics are significant, by contrast, if $\text{sig.}(2\text{-tails}) > 0.05$, the differences are not significant. Based on the statistical analysis.

The analyses of the data collected from both the EC and the CC in Pre-test by Independent-sample T-test yield the following outcome in Table 5.5.

Table 4.1. Result of Pre-test (Group Statistics)

Group Statistics					
Score	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
	EC	34	12.06	2.498	.428
	CC	35	11.63	2.451	.414

In Table 4.1, the mean score of the EC is 12.06 and the CC is 11.63, which is similar in value. Furthermore, from Table 5.6, we find that $\text{sig.}(2\text{-tailed}) = .473 > .05$, which indicates that the mark between mean scores in the EC and the CC are not significant, thus the mean scores of the EC and the CC in Pre-test are statistically equal, which have proven that the subjects are at the same level of proficiency on idiom usage before the experiment.

The Pre-test is to examine whether subjects are at

the same level on idiom usage at the beginning of the experiment or not. As the two groups are at the same level, the reliability of experiment will be guaranteed. As showed in Table 4.1, the sig. value is higher than 0.05 both in Levene's Test for Equality of Variances (.473) and Equality of Means (.430). This shows that the differences of their levels on idioms between two classes are not significant. That is to say, the EC and the CC is in the same level of interpreting and using idioms before the experiments.

Table 4.2. Result of Pre-test (Independent Sample T-test)

Independent Sample T-test									
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal Variances Assumed	.001	.976	.722	67	.473	.430	.596	-.759	1.619
Equal Variances not Assumed			.722	66.843	.473	.430	.596	-.759	1.620

4.1 Results of post-test for the EC and the CC

Table 4.2 displays that the Std. Error Mean of the EC is .743 > 0 and the CC is .577 > 0, which means that the compared test is meaningful. The EC's mean score of post-test is 20.54 while the CC's is

15.51, and the EC(20.54) is much higher than the CC (15.51). Moreover, independent samples test displays sig. = .000 < .05, indicating that statistic differences is obvious. It can be concluded that the EC performs much better than the CC in interpreting idioms.

Table 4.3. Results of Post-test for the EC and the CC

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
score	EC	35	20.54	4.395	.743
	CC	36	15.51	3.509	.577

Table 4.4. Result of Post-test (Independent Sample T-test)

Independent Sample T-test									
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal Variances Assumed	5.875	.018	-4.741	69	.000	-3.455	.729	-4.908	-2.001
Equal Variances not Assumed			-4.808	65.066	.000	-3.455	.719	-4.890	-2.020

The value of sig. (.000) is lower than .05 in Table 4.4. It is empirically proved that the EC has made a much greater progress than the CC. And this appears to support the feasibility of employing conceptual metaphorical approach to learning idioms.

Independent-sample T-test is also used to make a comparison between two groups. As displayed in Table 5.9, the mean score of the EC is 13.85 followed by the CC is 12.77, and sig.(2-tailed) = .409 < .05, which means that there is a disparity between mean scores of two groups. This tends to support that the conceptual metaphors can facilitate learning idioms. Moreover, concerning the last five items that have never been taught in class, 62% of the questions are answered correctly by the EC, compared with 48% by the CC. This also tends to support that the metaphorical ability has been transferred in dealing with unfamiliar idioms.

4.2 Data discussion

We analyze the results obtained in experiments. Firstly, a questionnaire has been used to collect the information for the subjects' need on English idioms. For college students, English idiom is a difficult problem and a traditional view on idioms has been rooted in their mind in the beginning of learning. Idioms are mostly taught according to Chinese meanings translated from English. Moreover, rote memory is widely used in learning them.

Under the instructions of conceptual metaphors by the teachers in class, most students show great enthusiasm for the conceptual metaphorical approach and eager to learn idioms without rote memory. Knowing that they can learn idioms without spending too much time, the students are active to do experiments.

4.2.1 Idioms motivated by conceptual metaphor

The diction is motivated by the connection between the conceptual domain and idiom meaning by means of cognitive mechanism. Moreover, conceptual metaphor is a link between the source domain and the target domain. Therefore, through a teacher's conscious effort, students can receive effective practice in interpreting and making use of idioms. The teaching suggestions and procedures that follow have been designed to take into account the research findings in learning idioms. Lakoff (1987) provides a detailed analysis of this kind of idioms. It is difficult to describe emotions for it has characteristics of abstractness and subjectivity. For instance, knowledge is a most fundamental experiences of human beings.

The constituents of idioms contribute to the meanings and most of idioms generate from the conceptual system rather than from the mental lexicon. Moreover, idioms are not arbitrary but motivated by pre-existing conceptual metaphors. These conceptual metaphors

have already existed in people's conceptual system and bridge the gap between the abstract domain and concrete domain. Thus, idioms are products of the human conceptual system. From this point of view, we find that conceptual metaphor provides motivations for idioms.

4.2.2 Idioms motivated by culture knowledge

When it comes to conventional knowledge, cognitive linguists refer to the shared knowledge in a given culture. Seeing culture as a social phenomenon, the conceptual metaphor aims to find out why certain social behavior takes place and what are the reasons and rules of behavior. In language learning process, people rely on their literal meaning to access their nonliteral meaning with the help of cultural backgrounds. Culture provides people with the information they need to be able to play their role in the larger culture communities. The more specific their sub-groupings are, the more specific is the relatively specialized knowledge shared by members in other different situations. In context of how people have seen that they learn culture, they entail a significant default role for the patterns that they have already experienced. When the learners know culture knowledge, they interpret idioms easily. What's more, as metaphors have cultural characteristics, it is of great importance to provide culture background to learners. Though metaphors are grounded on embodied experiences and human beings pose almost the same physical experiences, the selection of cognition varies greatly from culture to culture. (Kövecses, 2001). This relatively leads to cultural characteristics of conceptual metaphors.

5 Conclusion

We apply the conceptual metaphorical approach for teaching idioms at university. And some pedagogical implications are gained from this research, which may benefit for university English teaching. In the process of teaching idioms, students should not stick to rote some idioms, they should make great effort to find out better ways to interpret idioms, and teachers should seek for some efficient way to enhance learning outcome of the students. Conceptual metaphors can help students to get information of the source domain and target domain of idioms, and furthermore, treat it as the motivations. In the process of idiom instruction, the learners can get

closer to the authentic output of the target language, thus develop their language learning abilities.

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