An Investigation into Open-class versus Close-class Metaphorical Expression in Persian English Language Learners' Argumentative Writings

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Abstract

Metaphor is an indispensable part of our cognition and language. The dominance of metaphorical concept in conventional language of people is the main reason of ever increasing attention to metaphor on behalf of second language researchers, and researchers from other disciplines as well. All of these researchers unanimously agree upon the fact that reaching to conceptual fluency in second language is crucial in attaining native-like competency. But as it became clear form reviewing the literature, few empirical studies have been done for analyzing the uses of linguistic metaphor in a corpus of English language learner-written materials.

The present study, by taking an applied linguistics view to the study of metaphor, makes a representative, naturally-occurring empirical corpus from the argumentative essays written by Persian English language learners to analyze metaphor. Therefore the overall aim of this study was to identify and describe Persian English language learners' use of metaphorical language in their writing. For a deeper look into the identified metaphor, the cases of close-class metaphorical items which include dead or sleeping metaphors (Muller 2008) and also open-class metaphorical items which are creative or novel are identified in this data. This calculation revealed the qualitative changes in the type of metaphor that learners use across the levels.

The results indicate that the proportion of open-class metaphorical use did not increase across levels as compared with the close-class ones. Generally,   no case of open-class metaphors

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is found until the C1 level and its use does not overtake the use of close-class ones. It means that as the learners move through the higher levels of English proficiency their ability to use new concepts for expressing their ideas in appropriate English did not increase as well, hence this deficiency is an obstacle for providing a basis for developing competency to accurately use metaphor in the target language.

Key terms: Figurative Language, Metaphor, Linguistic metaphor, Conceptual metaphor, Open-class metaphor, Close-class metaphor, Corpus linguistics, Learner corpora

Introduction

In spite of the abundance of research about how learners acquire second language metaphors by researchers like Cook 1993 and Ellis 1994, the area of research in metaphor and idiom are still in infancy level. Although the proliferation of study about metaphor was noticed in the past, the application of metaphor to English language learning, pedagogical practice and the design of teaching materials is not widespread (Kellerman 2001). However, because of the prevalence of metaphorical language use in everyday language, reaching mastery level in appropriate use of the forms and functions of such conventional repertoire would be an essential part of knowing a language. This has been acknowledged as one of the main challenges faced by second language learners. Reaching to this level of competency requires the construction of reasonable meanings for semantic anomalies which exist in utterances, perception of the boundaries of a conventional metaphor, its extension and also the recognition of the intentions of the speaker.

Discourse studies of metaphor have changed researchers' awareness of different forms and functions of metaphorical expressions and diverse patterns of metaphorical usage. These extensive changes in metaphorical research create a more subtle and informed viewpoint on metaphor. These new trends of metaphorical studies in cognitive linguistics and applied linguistics can be beneficial for pedagogical purposes especially in language teaching. Recent studies on metaphors revealed their key functions, such as the signaling of evaluation, agenda

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management, mitigation and humour, technical language, reference to shared knowledge, and topic change (Semino 2008).

An ability to use metaphorical expressions appropriately contribute to language learner's communicative competence (Littlemore & low 2006 a and b). So this ability might be used for measuring learners' competence at different levels of English language proficiency. Significantly, dealing with metaphorical expressions enables learners to carefully investigate the subtle layers of meaning hidden underneath surface meaning and enrich their vocabulary, connotation and collocational knowledge.

Lantolf (1999) proposed that learning a second language from the perspective of culture entails much more than complying with the behavioral (linguistics or otherwise) patterns of a host culture. He argues that it is about the appropriation of cultural models, including conceptual metaphors, and therefore entails the use of meaning as a way of (re)mediating our psychological and, by implication, our communicative activity. Kecskes and Papp (2000) argue that if learners acquire grammatical and communicative knowledge but fail to develop conceptual knowledge in a new language, their knowledge use will be significantly different from that of native users. Kovecses (2007) investigated metaphor in culture, more specifically, the relation between metaphor and culture. He mentioned that conceptual metaphors vary cross-culturally and within cultures; the causes on which universality and variation in metaphor depend include embodiment (i.e., the neural-bodily basis), social-cultural experience (i.e., context), and cognitive processes (i.e., cognitive preferences and styles) (Kovecses 2007: 293). He claims that the cognitive processes that human beings use are universal, but their applications are not (ibid.). So, equipping the second language learners with the capacity to express them in the second language, using culturally appropriate figurative language is very important.

The reason for considering metaphorical expressions as an integral part of any language seems to be that "our conceptual system is largely metaphorical , then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is much a matter of metaphor" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p.3). The mastery of frequently used metaphoric expression in English can simplify the process

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of English Language learning, help learners achieve an accepted level of proficiency in the second language and extend learners' perspective and make them more sympathetic toward second language culture (Hashemian & TalebiNezhad, 2007).

Non-transferability of some of the features of the source, the use of some sources for describing more than one topic and, in some cases, mixture of metaphors cause difficulties in metaphorical usage for second language learners . But partial overlap in metaphoric structure of first and second language (cross-linguistic and cross-cultural problem) seems to cause most difficulties for learners. It means that second language learner's productive knowledge is almost based on the formal structure of second language but thinking process occurs according to their first language conceptual system. In other words, the application of second language formal structure uses first language concepts. Consequently, when learners are incapable of using the concepts and structure of second language, the asymmetry leads to production of culturally inappropriate text.

The current study set out to answer the following Hypothesis:

There will be differences between the use of open-class metaphorical items with the use of closed-class metaphorical items across the levels.

Methodology

Subjects

At first, 300 female E-learners from the Iran Language institute which is located in Arak were selected randomly to participate in this study. Regarding the goal of this research, the age of the participants ranged from 8 to 28 years old. The participants were selected from the pre-intermediate to advanced level of English proficiency. It was expected that the learners at these levels would accommodate the purpose of the study. The crucial factor in the current research was assigning the correct levels of English Language proficiency of the learners who would perform the allocated writing tasks. For minimizing the effects of other factors such as age, gender, social and educational status, the required questionnaire classified the participants of each level as closely as possible in middle class. For achieving this aim, a background questionnaire was distributed among the learners to elicit the above mentioned information.

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After analyzing the data obtained from this questionnaire, the number of participants was reduced to 220 learners. The selected learners took part in an online placements test according to CEFR standards. Unfortunately only a reduced number of the learners (180 learners) participated in this online test. This might have been due to various reasons such as difficulties for accessing the Internet and other problems. After assigning their level of English proficiency in accordance with the criterion of this study, one writing task from 150 people among these learner was collected.

Materials

The following materials were used in this study:

1. A Background questionnaire which elicited demographic information considering the subjects' socio-educational status.

2. A General English Proficiency Test which determined the proficiency level of the participants in English.

3. The CEFR self-assessment grids for A2-C2 levels which is a series of descriptions of language abilities which can be applied to any language and can be used to set clear targets for achievements within language learning. Each of the six levels (A1,A2,…C2) contains a series of Can Do Statements, that describe the various functions that one expects a language learner perform in reading, writing, listening and speaking, at each level. It has now become accepted as a way of benchmarking language ability all over the world (The Can Do statements for writing ability was provided in appendix IV).

4. A learner corpora which was the collection of authentic texts produced by Iranian English language learners and stored in an electronic format.

5. A Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU) involves identifying as metaphor any lexical unit that has the potential to be processed metaphorically.

Procedures

The following procedures had been taken by the researchers to meet the goals of this study:

l- Designed the required questionnaire.

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2- Distributed the questionnaire and implemented the online English language proficiency test.

3- Analysed the collected data and grouped learners in different levels of English language proficiency.

4- Collected the written essays by these selected learners.

5- Prepared an electronic learner corpora based on the information that gathered from the stage 4.

6- The corpora was divided into lexical units and entered into an Excel spreadsheet, with one lexical unit on each line.

7- All potentially metaphorically used lexical units in the corpora were identified with the MIPVU Metaphor Identification Procedure (Steen et al 2010).

8- The metaphors were categorized into open and close-class.

12- Described the learners' metaphorical use in qualitative terms.

13- Finally the percentage of errors that involved metaphor and also the first language-influenced errors were identified in this real language data.

Results and Discussion

The results of English proficiency test

This test was applied to assess the level of the participants according to CEFR standards. 150 English learners of one institute from the pre-intermediate to advanced level participated in this test which consisted of 25 questions. The results of the descriptive statistics of this test administered to these selected learners are presented in Tables 4.1- 4.5.

Table 4.1.1 Descriptive statistics of CEFR placement test for A2 level.

N-A2	Mean	Median	Mode	S.D	Range	Min.	Max.	Skewness	Kurtosis
30	5.6333	5.5	5	0.7183	2	5	7	.691788	-0.6986

Table 4.1.2 Descriptive statistics of CEFR placement test for B1 level.

N-B1	Mean	Median	Mode	S.D	Range	Min.	Max.	Skewness	Kurtosis
39	10.153	10	9	1.039	3	9	12	0.41709	-.9904

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Table 4.1.3 Descriptive statistics of CEFR placement test for B2 level.

N	Mean	Median	Mode	S.D	Range	Min.	Max.	Skewness	Kurtosis
23	13.52	13	13	0.5931	2	13	15	0.6251	-0.4699

Table 4.1.4 Descriptive statistics of CEFR placement test for C1 level.

N	Mean	Median	Mode	S.D	Range	Min.	Max.	Skewness	Kurtosis
26	18.055	18	17	1.055	3	17	20	.4999	-0.9842

Table 4.1.5 Descriptive statistics of CEFR placement test for C2 level.

N	Mean	Median	Mode	S.D	Range	Min.	Max.	Skewness	Kurtosis
32	21.5937	21.5	21	0.7560	2	21	23	0.8552	-0.6728

According to the above tables, most of the learners at each level obtained the middle scores. So, this result suggested that the selected learners fall within the middle class of E proficiency. Also by considering the mode score in each category it was distinct that most of learners had a performance which is below the mean of obtained scores.

Table : Percentage of lexical units containing open and closed-class metaphor across levels

Levels	Open-class metaphor	Close class metaphor
A2	0%	4.23%
B1	0%	5.6%
B2	0%	4.94%
C1	1.26%	3.35%
C2	1.65%	4.78%

The following table represents the cases of open-class metaphorical items identified by the researcher.

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Table 4.2.8   Open-class metaphorical items used by these learners

C1	Open-class
	Traffic <u>congestion</u>
	The role of religions and superstitions are <u>paling.</u>
	The <u>only jewel</u> that we have of new technology
	The old vehicle doesn't run <u>as smooth as</u> a new one,

C2	Open class
	The culture and tradition is <u>fading off</u>.
	From its <u>humble</u> beginning,
	The <u>dawn</u> of civilization,
	To explore the <u>untrodden</u> path,
	The <u>pace</u> of technology,
	It is firstly crucial to take back every parent to their youth, the time when they <u>flew in the air</u> of their dreams,
	The <u>ripple</u> effect,
	<u>Trudge into the same trap</u>,

The results of the second research question provide data about whether the identified metaphors are open-class or close-class ones. These calculations provided useful information such as from which level the proportion of open-class metaphorical items is found more than the closed-class metaphorical ones. It indicates that from which levels learners try out new things to express their own idea and put emphasis on their personal significance about certain issues. Moreover, the increase of open-class metaphorical items indicates the experimental stage in the process of Language development, in which the learners are engaged with trying out new metaphors. These data indicate qualitative changes of metaphorical use across levels. It must be mentioned that these changes are greatly related to the genres of the essays and tasks.

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In this study the argumentative genre is selected because it is the most widely used genre by Iranian English Language instructor and learners are more familiar with it. So it might reflect a substantial domain of metaphorically used words by the selected learners for the assigned subject which is determined by the researcher. As the data in table 4.2.7 indicates, the proportion of open-class metaphorical use does not increase across levels as compared with the close-class ones. Even at C1 and C2 levels which appear to be the starting and experiential stage for metaphorical use among these learners, the open-class metaphors do not exceed the close-class in the next level. This result is not in accordance with the expected ones because as the learners move through the higher levels of second language proficiency, their ability to use new concepts must increase as well; they should be able to develop their competency for accurate metaphorical use in the target language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the obtained results of the present study, some conclusions can be made which can be useful in areas of language teaching and learning and also in English training material development. All of the analysis in this study was performed on linguistic levels to find the linguistic representations of conceptual metaphors in the present Language data. These findings are mentioned as follows:

The overall metaphoric density in this data (30.482 words) was only 5.18 %, which is fairly low in comparison with Spanish EFL learners in Studies by Chapeton (2010) who found that Spanish EFL learners used 19.8 % metaphorical L in a learner corpus with 20.602 words, and in a study by Littlemore et.al (2010), this rate was 12/11% for Greek EFL learners in a corpus of 19878 words and for German EFL learners it was 15.68% in a corpus with 20950 words. But such studies indicate the conventionality of metaphorical Language which can be found in the argumentative essays written by non-native speakers of English Language. So this area of English Language learning needs further investigations and studies.

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In terms of the frequency of the used metaphor, the results indicated no salient increase in the number of metaphorical Language across levels and even a decrease was observed from B1 to C1 levels in this regard. The findings of the second research question imply that these learners are only able to make use of a limited number of conventional or close-class metaphorical items in their writing until the C1 level.

Such results revealed the qualitative changes in the type of metaphor that these learners are starting to use at each level. The more cases of open-class metaphorical use indicate more challenging stage for learners in which they are pushed to try out new metaphors to state their opinions on certain issues. So, this stage would be an experimental stage in the route of English Language learning. In the current study, this stage apparently starts at C1 level and it does not lead to dramatic increase to the next level.

The comparison of the obtained results with similar studies suggests that the performance of these learners on the subject of metaphorical competency was not fine at all and it needs further investigations by the English Language researchers and teachers.

This study was an attempt to shed light on the aspect of conventional Language metaphoricity which was used by these learners. It is hoped that this study offers some help to Language pedagogy for improving metaphoric competency among EFL learners. The identification of the skills involved in second language metaphor production on behalf of the teachers would be very beneficial as it assists them to further expand the metaphorical comprehension and production ability among their learners.

In this study the focus was mainly on the frequency of metaphors used by the learners and only a little attention was paid to qualitative changes of metaphors, their functions, their stylistic and phraseological features. The examination of theses qualitative changes would reveal whether there is progress in terms of the complexity of functions of the used metaphors. It also would evaluate the ability of learners to use persuasive and rhetorical language in expressing their opinion in English.

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