

Strategies for Enhancing Chinese College Students' English Metaphorical Competence from the Perspective of Multimodal Metaphor Theory

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Abstract: In the process of globalization, English metaphorical competence has gradually become a key factor in measuring college students' comprehensive English ability. This study advocates the adoption of multimodal metaphor theory to guide the teaching of English metaphors. The article first describes the core framework of multimodal metaphor theory, and reviews the latest progress of metaphorical competence research in second language acquisition in China. Following this, it conducts an empirical study on the current situation of college students' English metaphorical competence through questionnaire surveys and interviews, and analyzes various factors that may influence the development of their metaphorical competence. Then, from the perspective of multimodal metaphor theory, the author discusses some teaching strategies and measures that college teachers can take to enhance college students' English metaphorical competence in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation teaching in the new era. The results of this study could have theoretical significance and practical guidance value for optimizing the theoretical system of English teaching and improving college students' English metaphorical competence.

1. Introduction

Metaphorical competence is crucial for second language learners. It's a key factor affecting their conceptual fluency, and an important indicator of the comprehensive level of language. Metaphor teaching has always been an integral part of English teaching in higher education. However, the way of cultivating metaphorical competence used to be mostly at the level of pure linguistic analysis, neglecting the function of multimodal teaching in the era of artificial intelligence. Starting from the theory of multimodal metaphor and combining with the current situation of college students' metaphorical competence, this study provides some effective teaching strategies and methods for improving college students' metaphorical competence for peers' reference.

2. Overview of Multimodal Metaphor Theory

Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, thinker and educator, once proposed in his famous book

Poetics that metaphor is the replacement of one unfamiliar noun with another, setting the general tone for more than 2,000 years of metaphor research in the subsequent generations. However, since Lakoff and Johnson [1] introduced the earth-shattering *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphors have been freed from the shackles of traditional rhetoric and incorporated into the realm of cognitive studies. Metaphor is a cognitive activity in which human beings use a more familiar and concrete domain of experience (source domain) to understand another more complex and abstract domain of things (target domain). For example, in the metaphorical expression “life is a journey”, “journey” is an easy-to-understand source domain, which is used to map the harder-to-explain target domain of “life”. During the mapping process, the structure, characteristics, and content of the source domain at the conceptual level correspond to those of the target domain. As a way of thinking and cognition, metaphors are formed in human embodied experience and various activities, so metaphors are ubiquitous. Classical studies of conceptual metaphors focus only on pure language itself, ignoring the means other than language that people use to communicate, such as sounds, images, and actions. However, since the proponents of conceptual metaphor theory firmly believed that metaphor is a way of thinking, and human think in metaphors, then metaphor research must be extended to non-linguistic fields. At the end of the twentieth century, the development of information technology pushed forward the multi-modality of the means of human communication, which triggered the shift to multimodal discourse research in the humanities and social sciences and the trend towards interdisciplinary humanities research. Under this macro-context, experts and scholars led by Forceville started the research of multimodal metaphors. In 2006, Forceville [2] formally started to advocate the research of “multimodal metaphors” in *Non-verbal and Multimodal metaphor in a Cognitivist framework: Agendas for Research*, and three years later, Forceville and Urios-Aparisi [3] released *Multimodal Metaphor*, a collection of 18 essays, including commercial advertisements, political cartoons, comic strips, musical scores, lectures, animations, and other linguistic categories, which pushed the study of multimodal metaphors to a climax.

The objects of multimodal metaphor research include the modality itself, the value of interaction between modalities, the construction of metaphor and metonymy, the latitude of metaphor, the experiential and cultural bases of metaphor, and so on. Forceville [2] believes that modality is a system of symbols that can be explicated through specific perceptions, and refines multimodality into nine categories: (1) pictorial signs; (2) written signs; (3) spoken signs; (4) gestures; (5) sounds; (6) music (7) smells; (8) tastes; (9) touch. Multimodal metaphors are relative to unimodal metaphors. In unimodal metaphors, the source and target domains are of the same modal category. In the metaphorical expression “spending money like water”, metaphor occurs in the purely linguistic domain. In multimodal metaphors, the source and target domains are of different modal categories. If a teacher uses the sound of water, motion pictures, or video to convey the message of “spending money like water” in the classroom, a multimodal metaphor is being used. Forceville has used the famous example of “the cat being an elephant” to illustrate the difference between unimodal and multimodal metaphors. In an animated movie, if the producer draws a cat as an animal with an elephant's trunk and two big ears, both the source and target domains exist in the visual metaphor, so it is a unimodal metaphor. If the cat is made to roar like an elephant, then the source domain utilizes two modalities, sound and language, while the target domain utilizes a visual modality, so it is a multimodal metaphor. Multimodal metaphors are based on the association of something new with concepts that already exist in the brain and rely on human metaphorical cognitive thinking. Multimodal metaphors do not differ from unimodal metaphors in their basis and working mechanism, but only in the way they are presented. Multimodal metaphors can convey strong, direct and rich information through sounds, images, tastes, smells, etc. Therefore, compared with unimodal metaphors, multimodal metaphors tend to be more universal and easier to be understood and accepted in multiple contexts and cultures, which is a supplement to and extension

of the traditional theory of conceptual metaphors.

In recent years, the study of multimodal metaphors has gradually become a hot topic of academic discussion in China, and experts and scholars have explored the representation and value of multimodal metaphors in media such as animation, movies, videos, comics, and textbooks. Liu Man [4] shows how new media construct a positive national image through multimodal metaphors in the context of epidemic prevention and control. The FILMIP program developed by Sun Yi et al. [5] provides a new way to identify metaphors in movies, and provides a basis for subsequent research despite limitations in application and coding. By analyzing the multimodal symbol design and metaphorical meaning construction in the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Xi Rui [6] reveals the ways in which Chinese cultural traits and philosophical meanings are conveyed. Focusing on multimodal metaphors in textbooks, Lei Li and Chen Wen [7] explores how to convey information and deepen cognition through the metaphorical meanings of modalities such as words, images, and graphical symbols. By analyzing multimodal metaphors in animation, Zhang Lei and Guo Ronghui [8] explores how animation can help audiences form correct perceptions of diseases through war and natural disaster metaphorical scenes. Through analyzing metaphorical scenes in comics, Zhao Xiufeng and Wu Yuxin [9] explores how multimodal metonymy and metaphor interact to convey social communication functions.

As far as the cross-study of multimodal metaphors and teaching is concerned, scholars in China have also developed relevant research. Li Yi and Shi Lei [10] explores the application of multimodal metaphors in teaching and learning from the theoretical level, pointing out that previous studies have mostly focused on linguistic metaphors, while relatively few studies have been conducted on non-linguistic or multimodal metaphors, thus emphasizing the theoretical significance and practical value of the study of multimodal metaphors, as well as discussing the prospects and challenges for their development. Zhang Wei et al. [11] explores the potential of a multimodal metaphor teaching model in improving the efficiency of vocabulary learning for college students through an empirical study, emphasizing the importance of enhancing students' recognition and understanding of metaphors by coordinating multiple modalities. Zhang Changjie [12] proposes applying the multimodal metaphor teaching model to English writing teaching by empirically analyzing the errors in English majors' compositions. Dong Yan [13] proposes that in the era of Internet education, English culture teaching should pay attention to the cultivation of learners' multimodal metaphorical competence and follow the trend of multimodal shift in order to enhance learners' metaphorical competence. Together, these studies of theirs reflect the prospect of multimodal metaphors in the field of education, which not only play a role in vocabulary teaching, but also have an equally important value in writing teaching and culture teaching. Through empirical studies and theoretical discussions, scholars have provided a rich research foundation and practical guidance for teaching multimodal metaphors. However, few authors have analyzed how Chinese college teachers should cultivate and improve the metaphorical competence of English learners from the perspective of multimodal metaphor theory, and relevant strategies and methods are also rather rare.

3. The Current Situation of Research on College Students' English Metaphorical Competence

One of the important goals of language learning is to realize communication, and according to Hymes [14], the communicative competence acquired by human beings includes socio-linguistic competence, planning competence and writing competence, etc. metaphorical competence, as an important embodiment of language ability, runs through the whole process of communication. Hu Zhuanglin [15] believes that the mastery of metaphorical competence has become an indispensable part of second language teaching. Wang Yin [16] has put forward a view of language teaching that

integrates linguistic competence, communicative competence and metaphorical competence. Chen Lang [17] points out that second language learners need to reorganize their concepts so that they can feel, recognize and represent the world as native speakers of a foreign language do, and then use the target language conceptual system to dominate the target language's expression. Liu Zhengguang [18] holds that metaphorical competence forms the basis of linguistic and communicative competence and is one of the most effective ways to cultivate cross-cultural communicative competence. Many scholars at home and abroad have explained the connotation of metaphorical competence. Danesi [19] defines that metaphorical competence is the ability to recognize and use novel metaphors, including context-appropriateness and instrumental-strategy. Littlemore [20] divides metaphorical competence into four aspects: originality of metaphorical output, fluency of metaphorical interpretation, accuracy of metaphorical recognition, and rapidity of metaphorical comprehension. Yuan Fengshi et al. [21] believes that metaphorical competence is the ability of a cognitive subject to construct certain semantic associations between two cognitive objects of different categories based on his own experience. In this study, the metaphorical competence the writer focuses on is Chinese college students' ability to accept and produce metaphors. To be specific, students' ability to recognize, interpret, appreciate and use metaphors can reflect the level of their metaphorical competence. Metaphorical competence is crucial for foreign language learners, and a lack of it can result in learners' foreign language expressions that are free of errors and acceptable, but lack the authenticity of native speakers [22]. Foreign language learners should consciously develop their metaphorical competence and organize their language like native speakers.

Metaphorical competence plays a crucial role in language learning and intercultural communication, and several scholars have explored the application of metaphorical competence in foreign language teaching and second language acquisition. Lu Qingsheng and Peng Chaozhong [23] proposes that metaphorical competence is a basic feature of native speakers' linguistic competence, which has a significant impact on vocabulary teaching, speaking and writing teaching, and cultural teaching. Tian Miao [24] pays attention to the improvement of college students' English metaphorical competence, analyzes the factors affecting the improvement of metaphorical competence, and proposes corresponding teaching strategies. He Bingyan [25] explores the role of metaphorical competence in language learning from the perspective of conceptual fluency, arguing that the cognitive salience of metaphorical expressions is the basis of conceptual fluency. Yang Na [26] focuses on the relationship between L2 metaphorical competence and the construction of lexical cognitive system, emphasizing the role of metaphorical competence in the improvement of L2 vocabulary competence. Deng Xuemei [27] explores the role of metaphorical competence in advanced English learners' vocabulary depth knowledge expansion and discourse construction, and proposes a teaching strategy based on the cultivation of metaphorical competence. In his study, Liu Zhengguang [18] emphasizes the importance of metaphor teaching in university foreign language teaching and considered metaphorical competence as one of the key ways to cultivate intercultural communicative competence. Li Jie's [28] study, guided by the theory of grammatical metaphor, explores the importance of the cultivation of metaphorical competence, arguing that the use of metaphorical language is a sign of adult language competence. On the other hand, Shi Jinfang [29] reviews and analyzes theoretical and empirical studies on second language metaphorical competence, discussing the definition of metaphorical competence, the differences between native language and second language metaphorical competence, and the learnability and teachability of metaphorical competence. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the study by Chen Hongjun, Wang Weiyi, and Yuan Fang [30] discusses the effects of second language proficiency and fluid intelligence on metaphor-generating ability, and emphasizes the importance of foreign language teaching in the cultivation of metaphor-generating ability and creative thinking. These studies not

only reveal the multidimensional role of metaphoric ability in language learning and teaching, but also provide rich theoretical basis and practical guidance for foreign language teaching. This study combines multimodal metaphor theory with college students' metaphorical competence improvement exploration, a field that has not been discussed by previous researchers, and argues in-depth how to integrate metaphorical competence cultivation into language teaching in order to improve college students' English metaphorical competence more effectively.

4. The Cultivation of College Students' English Metaphorical Competence from the Perspective of Multimodal Metaphor Theory

4.1 The Current Situation of College Students' English Metaphorical Competence

Using a combination of questionnaires and interviews, this study selected 120 students from a well-known private university in Guangdong as subjects. Half of them were non-English majors who had just enrolled in their freshman year, and half of them were English majors who were in the first semester of their senior year. The following conclusions are drawn from the experiment: first of all, college students' ability in recognizing and understanding English metaphors varies. 70% of senior students (20% of freshmen) are able to capture the existence of metaphors more acutely and understand their meanings, while others tend to ignore or misunderstand metaphorical expressions. The less capable students tended to focus on basic language knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar in the learning process, while ignoring metaphor as an important linguistic phenomenon. In terms of understanding metaphors, most students can understand basic and common metaphors, such as "Time is money". However, only about 10% of senior students can accurately understand the deeper meanings of some obscure and difficult metaphors with profound cultural backgrounds, such as the metaphorical language in literary works. Secondly, more than 80% of freshmen are weak in the creation and application of English metaphors, while 30% of seniors are relatively weak in this aspect. This is mainly manifested in English writing or oral expression, a lot of Chinese college students find it rather difficult to freely use appropriate metaphors to enrich language expression, and thus their language output often seems monotonous and boring. Finally, about 85% of the students believe that they lack effective strategies and methods in the process of learning English metaphors. They tend to rely on traditional ways of memorization and imitation, and neglect the role of modern technology in enhancing English metaphorical competence.

In view of the actual situation of English metaphor education in this private university, the writer holds the view that it's not unusual to see this happening in China, since a quarter of the universities in China are private, and the university we're surveying among the top-ranked private ones. However, the factors affecting students' metaphorical competence are multifaceted: (1) Thinking mode. The fundamental reason why college students use metaphors less is that they can't think like native speakers, and their mother tongue's thinking mode will cause cognitive bias and restrict the development of their English metaphorical competence. (2) Language ability. This is reflected in college students' vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, reading ability, writing ability and so on. The strength of language ability directly determines the performance of college students in understanding and using English metaphors. (3) Cultural background. The use of metaphors is often rooted in some specific cultural soil, and there are differences in metaphorical expressions nurtured by different cultural backgrounds. College students who lack a comprehensive knowledge of the culture, history, religion, customs and habits of English-speaking countries, and who do not have the ability to combine background knowledge with context, will find it hard to understand or use metaphors. (4) Teaching methods and strategies. College students spend a lot of time and energy on classroom learning, thus the level of students' metaphorical competence is largely influenced by metaphor teaching. In teaching environments that don't emphasize the teaching of metaphors and

can't provide abundant metaphor learning resources and practice opportunities, students' metaphorical abilities can't be practiced, and thus their abilities are relatively weaker. (5) Learning environment. A good learning environment, such as rich learning resources, positive academic atmosphere, good teacher-student relationship, etc., will help college students develop their English metaphorical competence, and vice versa. (6) Psychological factors. Language learners' psychology including self-confidence, anxiety, motivation and other aspects will have an impact on the learning results. College students with good psychological qualities are more likely to make progress in the process of English metaphor learning.

4.2 Strategies and Methods to Improve College Students' English Metaphorical Competence from the Perspective of Multimodal Metaphor Theory

4.2.1 Teaching Strategies

In exploring the strategies and methods for improving college students' English metaphorical competence, the multimodal metaphor theory provides us with a brand new perspective, and the following will elaborate the specific teaching strategies from several aspects:

(1) Introduce multimodal teaching resources. It's necessary to utilize multimodal examples of English metaphors such as audio, video, images, etc., to enrich teaching materials, increase students' interest and participation in learning, enhance students' understanding and perception of English metaphors, so that students can better grasp the basic concepts of metaphors, the use of strategies and the knowledge system, and lay a solid foundation for the enhancement of English metaphorical competence.

(2) Create a multimodal language environment. In classroom teaching, teachers can create real multimodal metaphorical contexts, such as demonstrating metaphorical phenomena through video, audio, images and other media, and guide students to feel, recognize and analyse the metaphorical differences between different cultures, so that students can perceive, understand and use English metaphors in the actual language environment, so as to improve their ability to understand and use metaphors in cross-cultural communication.

(3) Conduct multimodal metaphor training. Through brainstorming, group presentations, group competitions, classroom games, public speeches, role-playing, literary creation and other forms of interesting activities, teachers can guide students to practice in metaphorical thinking, stimulate their learning interests, improve their sensitivity to English metaphors, and cultivate their creative consciousness and metaphorical competence. After class, teachers can make full use of Internet resources to develop an English metaphor learning website and build an online platform for English metaphor learning, which provides relevant materials, cases and exercises of English metaphor to facilitate students' independent learning. In addition, social media platforms such as the WeChat official account for metaphor learning can be created, and English metaphor learning groups can be established to allow students to independently create and upload content-rich metaphor texts, metaphor videos and other works, in order to improve their English metaphorical skills in everyday life.

(4) Conduct multimodal metaphor ability assessment. It's strongly recommended to establish a multimodal metaphorical competence evaluation system to comprehensively assess students' ability to understand and use metaphors in different modalities through online teaching platforms, WeChat official account, Bilibili website and other platforms, to give students timely feedback and help them identify and improve their deficiencies in metaphorical comprehension.

4.2.2 Multi-dimensional Enhancement of Students' Metaphorical Competence

Teachers can apply multimodal metaphor theory in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation teaching to help students better understand and use metaphors, cultivate students' cross-cultural communicative competence and metaphorical thinking, and improve their English metaphorical competence, communicative competence and linguistic competence. In the era of AIGC, countless technologies keep emerging, so teachers should actively explore and innovate teaching methods to meet the needs of teaching in a multimodal environment.

(1) Listening Teaching

In listening teaching, teachers should carefully select English listening teaching materials that cover rich metaphorical expressions, and the topics may include news reports, movie dialogues, public speeches or interview programs. Teachers should not only teach students effective listening strategies, such as prediction, note-taking and information integration, to help them better understand and memorize metaphorical expressions, but also guide them to infer the meaning of metaphors through contextual clues, so as to improve their linguistic reasoning skills. Teachers can utilize multimodal aids such as videos and pictures to enhance students' listening comprehension. For example, while explaining the script of an English documentary containing metaphors, teachers can play the corresponding documentary clips so that students can receive not only plain words but also visual and auditory information, and through direct sensory stimulation and experience, students can understand the meaning of metaphors in a more comprehensive way.

(2) Spoken Language Teaching

Teachers can design English speaking exercises centered on the use of metaphors, such as role-playing, debates and group discussions, to encourage students to consciously use metaphors in real communication and different contexts. These classroom activities should incorporate topics of interest to students, such as relationships, further education, work, etc., in order to motivate students to use metaphors to express their views. During speaking practice, teachers should provide timely feedback to help students identify and correct errors in the use of metaphors. Through peer assessment and self-evaluation, students can learn from each other and improve the accuracy and appropriateness of metaphor use. Teachers should guide students to explore the differences in the use of metaphors in different cultures to enhance their cross-cultural communication awareness. Through comparative analysis, students can better understand the cultural dependence of metaphors and learn to use metaphors appropriately in different cultural contexts.

(3) Reading Teaching

Developing students' ability to recognize and interpret metaphors is the key to improving reading comprehension. Teachers can select English literature, news reports and academic papers containing metaphors as learning materials, guide students to identify and analyze the role and meaning of metaphors in the text, and teach students not only to focus on vocabulary accumulation and grammar usage, but also to grasp the structure and main idea of the text. Teachers can start from metaphor-rich literary works, use enormous network resources to find audio and video resources, design open questions around the metaphorical expressions of the text, as well as classroom activities such as metaphor matching, metaphor rewriting, metaphor expanding, metaphor comparing and contrasting, etc., to motivate students to think about the role of metaphors in enhancing the expressive and persuasive power of the text, so as to improve their ability to understand and use metaphors.

(4) Writing Teaching

In writing teaching, teachers should not only pay attention to the usage of vocabulary and grammar, but also use a multimodal approach to guide students to use metaphors appropriately in their writing in order to enhance the expressiveness of language. Taking descriptive writing as an

example, teachers can create a multimodal scenario and encourage students to feel through sound, video, pictures, etc. Students should record their physical experience and depict it in metaphorical language. Teachers can provide detailed writing feedback to help students improve problems in the use of metaphors. Peers can exchange essays, review each other's work, and discuss their reading reflections. Through teacher critique and peer review, students can learn how to use metaphors more effectively to convey complex concepts and emotions. Teachers can arrange the use of metaphors in different genres and styles and analyze examples of different types of metaphors according to the progress of the course. Through the whole process, students can learn how to choose appropriate metaphors according to different writing purposes and reader groups step by step.

(5) Translation Teaching

Teachers can set up a special chapter in translation teaching and select suitable multimodal materials that contain words, pictures and videos to explain how to deal with the translation of metaphors. For example, teachers can choose some famous domestic movie clips, and through the comparison of Chinese and English subtitles, explain the metaphors they contain and how they're dealt with in the movie. While teachers lead students to appreciate the subtitle translation, they need to guide students to find out how the English subtitles use strategies such as domestication, foreignization, addition, deletion and so on according to the actual needs, so as to make the translated version easier to be accepted by overseas moviegoers. Teachers can design corresponding translation exercises in conjunction with the learning content for students to practice the translation of metaphors. By evaluating and discussing the translation results, students can raise their awareness of the difficulties in metaphor translation and learn how to overcome them, thus improving their ability to translate metaphors.

5. Conclusion

The Internet is developing rapidly, and today's college students, as Internet natives, are getting the experience of multimodal information every day. Teachers in higher education should keep pace with the times and update their theoretical knowledge and teaching methods, not just to teach students the theoretical knowledge of multimodal metaphors, but to use a variety of teaching strategies to assist students to experience multimodal metaphors, and to teach multimodal metaphors in all educating sessions, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating, and thereby comprehensively improve college students' English metaphorical competence. However, this study still has some shortcomings, so constructive suggestions for improvement and opportunities for academic exchange are warmly welcomed.

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