

# *A Study on the Influence of Conceptual Metaphor on College English Teaching*

Chan Wang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>, Ying Yuan<sup>1,b</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Institute of Education, Nanchang Normal College of Applied Technology, Gongqingcheng City, Jiangxi, China*

<sup>a</sup>120539045@qq.com, <sup>b</sup>157073265@qq.com

\*Corresponding author

**Keywords:** Conceptual Metaphor; Metaphor Awareness; Metaphor Competence; CET-4

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of classroom instruction guided by conceptual metaphor theory on students' achievements in English, and investigates the influence of conceptual metaphor learning on students' communicative competence. In addition, it also aims at offering a set of instructional strategies for increasing the level of students' English achievement in English teaching at university level. The research framework is based on Lakoff's (1993) Conceptual Metaphor Theory of Learning. The participants for this study were from Nanchang Normal College of Applied Technology. There were altogether 200 students and all the students were in the second year and were preparing for the national English proficiency test. Two Standard National CET-4 tests were used to measure the participants' English proficiency. The validity and reliability of the CET-4 as a predictor of achievement in English have been demonstrated in many studies, and the test was thus confirmed to be objective in this study. The study was intended to confirm the hypothesis that metaphor training in classroom teaching could enhance student achievements in English. This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, such as a small scale semi-structure interview with students and instructors, recordings, and a questionnaire survey.

## 1. Introduction

According to the guidance of Ministry of Education, College students in China are obliged to meet the requirements for the English course, aiming at improving competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing. These required competences have been largely assessed by the CET4 and CET6. In classroom teaching, however, both teachers and students feel frustrated with the learning efficacy in these four aspects.

The problems of what to teach and how to learn have been the focus in EFL. Opinions are divided. Some instructors feel that culture instruction and oral English skills are most important in teaching and learning English, but many others argue that there is no need to offer culture or listening instruction since culture, listening and speaking. Moreover, quite a few of studies have identified dozens of reasons leading to their learning problems. These problems consist of the following perspectives: 1) lack of foreign teachers at their university, 2) few chances of using

English on communicative purposes either in speaking or listening, and 3) inefficiency of English teachers, specifically reflected in their English skills. Students and teachers recognized that the lack of culture awareness of English is a frustration when they are doing readings and listening which are full of metaphors.

Actually, one big factor that affects students' efficiency in English is the lack of metaphor awareness. There is not only the lack of metaphor awareness in English teachers, but also in English learners. Although English teachers in China have abundant opportunities and experience in teaching metaphor, they tend to put more emphasis on grammar and language teaching rather than cultivating students' metaphor awareness or developing their metaphor abilities. Given the current situation in the teaching of English metaphor, it is necessary for us to investigate how we can carry out our classroom instruction with metaphor knowledge and improve students' English proficiency.

## 2. Conceptual Metaphor

### 2.1 Definition of Conceptual Metaphor

Different from the traditional study on metaphor, conceptual metaphor tends to consider it as an important way of cognitive thinking, a conceptual or cognitive organization expressed by the linguistic object. The cognitive approach to metaphor is an important component of cognitive linguistics, which is in turn part of cognitive science as a whole. The Theory of Conceptual metaphor explains the phenomenon of metaphor through the mapping between source domain and target domain and image schema.

In their work *Metaphor We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson first extensively put forward the theory of conceptual metaphor. They conclude the theory of conceptual metaphor like this: Metaphor is so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically; as a result metaphor does not belong to the category of literature only [1]. In fact, metaphors in literature also rely heavily on everyday ones; Metaphor is not only a matter of language, but more importantly a matter of thought. There is a well-known sentence in cognitive linguistics. The theory has thousands of little rooms and long, winding corridors [2]. We may regard the theory as a complicated one from the description of "thousands of little room", and "long, winding corridors".

The metaphor we use is shown in our language, but it is just the display of conceptual metaphor in the form of language. Conceptual metaphor is grounded in experience, which can be some basic ones, like our visual sense and tactile sense. Our feelings of cold and hot belong to this type. Furthermore, conceptual metaphor can also be complicated experience, like cultural experience. The use of "stage" by Aristotle is a good example. Man can not contact with mind, so there should be a medium, which happens to be concept. We know abstract thoughts through concept, then we metaphorize concept, and turn it to be metaphor in language. As a result, abstract thoughts can be words in the form of metaphor. In cognitive linguistics, this process is called source domain, target domain and mappings. In the conceptual metaphor "LIFE IS A DAY", the abstract item "LIFE" is what we call as target domain, while the word "DAY" is a source domain which helps to explain the meaning of life, because it is a familiar concept for people. Thus, we know abstract and unfamiliar concepts by those specific and familiar ones, and the relationship between source domain and target domain is described by mapping [3].

### 2.2 Theory of Conceptual Metaphor and English Learning

Since the cognitive science combined with linguistics, the study on metaphor has been an important part in cognitive linguistics and become the basis and important experience of cognitive linguistics.

As is known to all, vocabulary is the basic and fundamental element in English learning. With adequate vocabulary, students are more likely to master the fluency of a foreign language. According to the Theory of Conceptual Metaphor, the essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one thing from another thing, from the familiar one to the unfamiliar one. The expression of metaphor is the surface realization of the mapping between different domains. Thus, conceptual metaphor is significant for students to understand and memorize new words. There are many English words are formed on the basis of metaphor, for example, dog-tired, crystal-clear, knee-deep, shoulder-high [4].

In vocabulary teaching, the application of conceptual metaphor can be helpful for students to understand the deep meaning of vocabulary and thus memorize it. In conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS, we can see clearly the process of domain mapping from source domain (plants) to target domain (people). Just like a plant, people go through the phase of childhood, adulthood, old age and death [5].

With the understanding of PEOPLE ARE PLANTS, it will be easy to guess the meaning of AGE WITHERED HER and HE IS A GREEN HAND. Actually, the process of guessing is the way of metaphor thinking, that is, an unfamiliar item is understood through the one we are familiar with. The connection between these two items is the core of metaphor.

### **3. Research Methodology and Results**

#### **3.1 Research Methods**

Non-English major Students always find difficulty in English learning from all aspects, like listening, reading and writing. Therefore, the present experiment aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the effect of improving students' conceptual metaphor knowledge on students' English proficiency?
- 2) What can teachers do to help improve students' understanding and use of conceptual metaphor?

In order to figure out the effect of classroom instruction guided by conceptual metaphor theory on English teaching, there is a combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. First of all, there are questionnaires from students and teachers to see their respective attitude toward the relationship between metaphor awareness and English learning. Secondly, there are records to see teachers' application of metaphor in their daily teaching which will affect students directly. Thirdly, there are students chosen to be control group and experimental group to check if the application of conceptual metaphor can enhance their performance in English learning, especially in their performance of CET-4, which is a national examination students are required to pass during their four years' study. And finally, there is a detailed record of the process as to the application of conceptual metaphor in classroom teaching.

#### **3.2 Research Results and Analysis**

The subjects were second-year university students. Totally 200 students from different majors had taken the questionnaire. 60 out of 150 students were chosen and divided into experimental group and control group randomly, and these two groups took pre-test and post-test in this three-month training class.

### 3.2.1 Results of Pre- and Post Tests

In order to prove that students' performance in English achievement can be affected by their awareness and competence in conceptual metaphor application, two papers selected from CET-4 are chosen to be the pre-test and post-test papers. As the national test to examine college students' ability in language use, it is advisable to use CET-4 papers as the standard to check the relationship between the application of conceptual metaphor and students' performance in English learning. Pre-test aims at testing the participants' ability to apply the theory of Conceptual Metaphor and whether there is any statistically difference between the experimental group and control group. During the three months, experimental group attend 4 lectures which are all about the theory of conceptual metaphor, which include the definition, development, classification and present application in English teaching and 24 periods metaphor teaching for listening, reading, and writing in class and 3-month practice outside class which help students develop their metaphor awareness and metaphor competence, while control group just attend the traditional class without paying special attention to the application of the theory of conceptual metaphor in English teaching.

A post-test is conducted between the experimental group and control group after three months. The different results from experimental group and control group can be seen from the following tables.

Table 1: Paired Samples Test of EC

	Class	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	EC	13.17	30	2.224	-9.31	.001
post-test	EC	16.05	30	2.594		

Notes: total score: 85 Std. Deviation=standard deviation

Table 1 was conducted to compare the performance of EC in the pre-test and the post-test. It shows the significance value is 0.001( $p < 0.05$ ), which reveals that there is great difference in the gain scores of EC between the pre-test and post-test; the average gain score of EC is 2.88 (13.17--16.05). It implies that after three-month's learning, students' performance in EC has been improved significantly.

Table 2: Paired Samples Test of CC

	Class	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	CC	15.69	30	2.285	-4.604	.002
post-test	CC	16.11	30	3.002		

Notes: total score: 85 Std. Deviation=standard deviation

Table 2 aims to find out whether the performance of CC is distinguished between the pre- test and the post-test after three-month's regular class. According to the results of the statistics in this Table, the significance value is 0.002( $p < 0.05$ ), which indicates there is difference in the gain scores of CC between the pre-test and post-test; and the average gain score of the class is 1.12 (15.69-16.81). That is, after twelve weeks learning, the overall average score of EC do get improved but not much.

As is shown in the table above, there was statistically significance difference between experimental group and control group. These statistics also show experiment group do a better job than control group in this paper of CET-4. It is significant to find that students in experiment group have a distinctive improvement in their understanding and application of conceptual metaphor, which help them form a new perspective in vocabulary accumulation and understanding of the words, phrases, sentences and contexts. Differences in average scores for experiment group in their pre-test and post-test can also be shown in following figure 1.

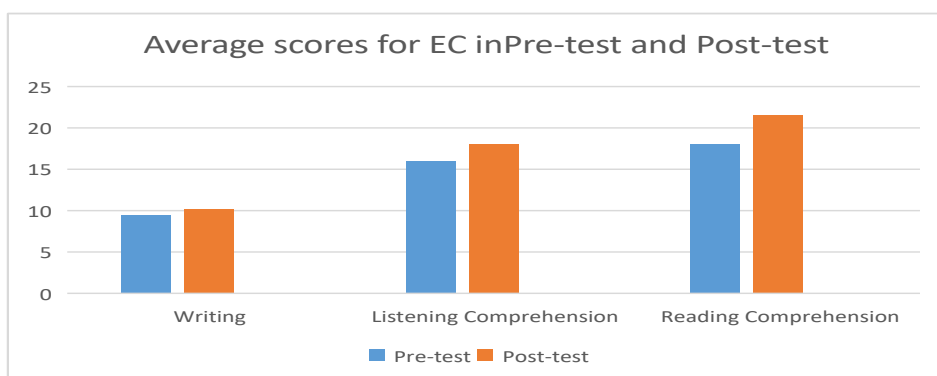


Figure 1: Pre-test and Post-test for EG

It is clearly that after three months' training on cultivating students' awareness of conceptual metaphor and improving their metaphor competence, there was certain progress in their performance of CET-4, including listening comprehension, reading comprehension and writing.

### 3.2.2 Results of Questionnaires

In order to know the present situation of English learners' application of conceptual metaphor, a questionnaire which consists of three questions is designed. The answers to question one are almost the same. Most of them only know metaphor as a rhetoric device, and even 30% of them have no idea of metaphor. As to the second question, majority of the self-judgments by students are bad. The difficulties they list are from all aspects, listening, speaking, reading comprehension and writing. The good news is that they are aware of the importance of learning English, when talking about the way to improve English, they are also aware of the importance of vocabulary and daily practice. And for the third question, students list many obstacles in vocabulary, listening, reading comprehension and writing. Most of them start from the accumulation of vocabulary when they prepare for CET-4. Also, some of them pay a lot of attention to improve the techniques and skills in listening, writing and reading. But they always find it hard to achieve their ideal improvement. For the last question, only 25% of them can fully and accurately understand the metaphors in those sentences. From these results and data, it is obvious that most students do not have the awareness of conceptual metaphor, let alone the ability of conceptual metaphor.

How do English teachers think about metaphor expressions in class? A questionnaire is also designed for this. Question one: Do you always use metaphor expressions in English class? Most of teachers answered No to this question. They are not sure for the expressions of metaphor. When talking about the specific reasons, they have basically the same viewpoint. Firstly, they do not have time to pay attention to metaphors in class because they already have a lot of teaching assignments and arrangements. Secondly, they regarded metaphor expression as complicated one. Thirdly, they have prejudice over the cultivation of conceptual metaphor awareness, they did not keep pace with times and this leads to the formation of their old and dull teaching methods. The purpose of course teaching is not only the accomplishment of tasks, and more importantly, we need to guarantee the effects of teaching. We did have heavy tasks to fulfill, but students cannot get rid of Chinese style English without the master of metaphor expression. Question two: Is it important to cultivate students' metaphor awareness? Why or why not? We can see college English teachers have some misunderstandings in metaphor awareness. Firstly, teachers' understanding of metaphor did not renew as cognitive linguistics develops. There are still many English teachers considered metaphor as a rhetoric instead of a way of cognition. Secondly, it's a common problem for teachers not using metaphors in class which affects students' metaphor awareness directly. Thirdly, there is no test for

metaphor application in language testing system which leads to the ignorance of the cultivation of metaphors and too much emphasis on test techniques. Fourthly, English teachers thought metaphors have nothing to do with vocabulary and grammar. This concept has proved to be a big mistake. Metaphors related to vocabulary can be called common metaphor, while metaphors related to grammar can be called conceptual metaphor or grammar metaphor. Question three: Since we know the importance of conceptual metaphor in language teaching, what can teachers do to improve students' awareness and ability of metaphor? Similar ways are listed as through lectures and practice to help students form the awareness of metaphor and practice metaphor as a way of thinking. First of all, teachers should strengthen their own awareness of conceptual metaphor in or out of class. Secondly, teachers are encouraged to use more metaphors in lecturing which can make class more active and interesting. Thirdly, students should be required to do more exercise on cultivating conceptual metaphor awareness and take it as a way of thinking, not only a figure of speech.

### 3.2.3 Results of Records

As is known to all, teachers play such an important role in classroom teaching, therefore, their performance and attitude toward the application of conceptual metaphor will affect students' metaphor understanding and metaphor ability.

In order to know English teachers' expression of metaphors in lectures, we recorded the lectures on the same topic Choose to Be Alone on Purpose of four teachers, who have 5 years teaching experience and are popular among students. Each teacher recorded a lecture of 45 minutes. These four teachers all gave lectures on a passage entitled Choose to Be Alone on Purpose with a lot of metaphors in it. It supposed to be easy for English teachers to use metaphor expressions when introducing the background of this passage. Let's select some sentences from the passage. Metaphors are used in those underlined sentences.

- a. Loneliness may be a sort of national disease here and it's more embarrassing for us to admit than any other sin.
- b. Inspiration in solitude is a major commodity for poets and philosophers.
- c. Look at Milton's daughters arranging his cushions and blankets before they silently creep away, so he can create poetry.
- d. If you live with other people, their temporary absence can be refreshing.

And there are a lot more metaphors used in this text which means it is sufficient for English teachers to use metaphor expression when lecturing this passage.

But according to the record, teachers themselves did not use metaphor expressions frequently in class, in their total records, they used metaphor expression for 40 times in total. It is such a small number for four teachers to use in a 45 minutes lecture. Let see some metaphor expressions used by teacher in their teaching.

- a. And before you look into the background information, I think you should be familiar with the new words, right?
- b. You might have a quick glance over your books.
- c. So inspiration is a fancy word, it is a literary word and com word.

It seems that teachers also lack of the metaphor awareness which will impede students' ability of application of conceptual metaphor directly and deeply. In order to cultivate students' awareness of metaphor, teachers should be the first to renew their view on metaphor.

## 4. Discussion

Given the above data collection and analysis, we find out that both the teachers' and students'

lack of metaphor awareness, which impedes their application of conceptual metaphor in English learning. But with the instruction of applying conceptual metaphor in English learning, students' performance in listening, reading and writing have been significantly improved.

In view of the control class, the teacher is accustomed to routine the classes just as explaining words and phrases and putting emphasis on grammar explanation, which has little effect on cultivating students' learning ability; in addition, the traditional teaching procedure and teaching pattern are too tedious and single to stimulate students' activeness in English learning. Students show their dissatisfaction with the traditional class by performing passively; they make little progress in English learning and some of them even lost heart in English learning.

As for the experimental class, the teacher changes the way of teaching, paying more attention to the application of conceptual metaphor, which is supposed to be a way of thinking more than a rhetoric device. During the teaching procedure, the teacher collects sufficient materials to show students the frequency of metaphor application, with no exception in CET-4 papers, conducts various lectures and training to let students have the awareness of conceptual metaphor and strengthen their their metaphor competence, and arranges suitable exercise after class. After instruction and training for three months, there is an observable change in the performance of students in the experiment class--- they tend to be more active and confident in English learning, and have a new perspective to improve their English abilities in listening, reading and writing via application of conceptual metaphor.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has examined the effect of classroom teaching of conceptual metaphor on students' English proficiency. It has also attempted to find out whether the application of conceptual metaphor may help university students have a better command of learning vocabulary, a better understanding of foreign cultures and a better improvement of language sense. The findings can be summarized as follows.

Firstly, teachers' awareness of metaphor can not only improve students' device of rhetoric, but also their ways of thinking. It is also significant to for non-English majors to make the use of conceptual metaphor in their English learning. With the application of metaphor in their regular teaching, students can form their ways of metaphor recognition and thus improve their performance in English learning.

Secondly, according to the analysis of the data, students' metaphor awareness can affect their listening comprehension, reading comprehension and writing. It can help students build metaphor awareness under the guidance of English teachers. In addition, the results from one-one interview, personal observation and the questionnaire told us that most students in experiment group improved their interest in English learning after metaphor instruction. What's more, it provides them with a new method to accumulate words and strengthen their understanding for word, phrases, sentences and context.

Thirdly, the results in this study showed that there were three different stages for students to develop in their application of conceptual metaphor in their second language acquisition. By following these stages, teachers can help their students to study more automatically and improve their ability in English listening, reading and writing, so as to meet the requirements of College English course set by the Ministry of Education in China.

Finally, the research findings indicated that the application of conceptual metaphor to college English teaching may help college students improve their performance in their second language acquisition. It can significantly improve students' abilities in language use, including listening, reading and writing.

## References

- [1] Lakoff, George, & Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By* [M]. University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- [2] Lakoff, George. *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor* [M]. Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- [3] Leonardo Veliz. *A Route to the Teaching of Polysemous Lexicon: Benefits from Cognitive Linguistics and Conceptual Metaphor Theory* [J]. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 2017(1):211-217.
- [4] F. Boers. *Metaphor Awareness and Vocabulary Retention* [J]. *Applied Linguistics*, 21(4):553-571, 2008.
- [5] Aswad Muhammad; Yassi Abdul hakim; Pammu Abidin; Nasmilah Nasmilah; Rezaei Gashii Zeynab. *An Account of Teaching Vocabulary to Indonesian EFL Learners through Web-Based Language Instruction (WLI): Attitude in Focus* [J]. *Education Research International*, 2022.