

The teaching and learning of metaphors in English as a Second Language (ESL)

Lakoff & Johnson (2003) define metaphors as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5). They also explain that “every experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions” (p. 57). The English language makes heavy use of metaphorical words and phrases which could prove problematic for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, whose conceptual systems may differ from the typically western culture that English language metaphors reference.

In an undergraduate course paper I examined the power issues surrounding metaphors in English proficiency test preparation reading passages. This initial examination revealed many pertinent research questions, which I plan to investigate in my Master’s studies. In a more in-depth analysis beyond the scope of the original paper, I am examining nine reading passages and the accompanying practice test questions from Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) preparation guides, presumed representative of actual tests and questions, to determine the numbers and types of metaphors present.

Of the five samples already examined, approximately 20% of each reading passage is metaphoric in content. Passages are on average 700 words long (ETS, 2009) and the average number of words/expressions classified as conceptual metaphors is 122.6. I chose to follow Lakoff & Johnson’s (1980) classifications of conceptual metaphors for this analysis, which breaks down metaphors into three basic categories: ontological, orientational, and structural metaphors. Thus far, ontological metaphors, which quantify abstract concepts as entities or personify them (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), form the overwhelming majority at 77.7%, followed by structural at 12.8% and orientational at 9.2%.

Surprisingly, metaphoric content was not addressed directly or indirectly in the reading passage questions or accompanying information meant to provide tips and advice for test takers. Metaphors are present in the sample reading passages but are not explicitly being tested, which may lead to “washback.” Alderson & Wall (1993) define washback as the influence of testing on teaching and learning; it means that teachers base lessons on preparing students for a test or “teach to the test.” Foreign language learners seeking to study in English speaking universities must achieve – and demonstrate, a high level of communicative competence to be considered for admission so there is great pressure to do well on these tests. There is a healthy literature on the gate keeping nature of English proficiency tests.

The research questions arising from my investigations to date: Are metaphors taught in ESL classrooms and if so, in what form (i.e. explicitly or in some other implicit manner)? Do ESL students understand the concept of metaphor, as well as Western cultural conceptions that English metaphors are based upon? Does a lack of understanding of metaphors inhibit ESL learner success on English proficiency tests? And finally, does the lack of explicit attention to metaphors in English Proficiency tests contribute to their gate keeping effect? I will draw on Foucault, McNamara & Roever, Shohamy and others to investigate these questions through a language and power lens.

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