Applied Cognitive Linguistics and design of L2 figurative language material

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to put down the practical issues related to the design of a cognitive linguistic-based material for teaching L2 figurative language. Figurative language, such as metaphors, idioms and metonymies, occurs effortlessly in various modes of speech and it is closely related to L2 communicative competence. Within Applied Cognitive Linguistics, figurative language is a complex phenomenon and has given rise to notions, such as motivation, mental organization and mental imagery. These notions have been proven to foster L2 figurative language long-term retention and lexical precision. Given that Cognitive Linguistics is a cognitively demanding approach, certain actions should be undertaken in order to design learning material and make L2 figurative language instruction feasible.

Keywords: L2, figurative language, Applied Cognitive Linguistics, teaching material, CEFR

Introduction

Lakoff and Johnson's seminal *Metaphors we live by* (1980/2003) stood as the basis for the emergence of Cognitive Linguistics (/Semantics) and made explicit that figurative language is the norm in everyday language practice. Figurative language serves key functions, such as description, explanation, clarification, summation, agenda management, humour and evaluation (Semino, 2008).

From the cognitive linguistic perspective, figurative language is a multifaceted phenomenon; it involves language, the human conceptual system, socio-cultural features and neural and bodily activity (Kövesces, 2005). Applying this radical view of figurative language to second language (henceforth L2) instruction, has been proven to be beneficial for L2 learners in terms of long-term retention and lexical precision (e.g. Hoang & Boers, 2018). These promising results are based on the notions of *motivation*, *mental organization* and *mental imagery* (Boers, 2011).

In particular, motivation is central to human cognition and explains how and why a particular meaning of a figurative expression has arisen (Lakoff, 1987). From this perspective, motivation makes figurative language more memorable (Boers, 2018). Categorization refers to the inevitable and unconscious ability of forming categories based on perceived similarity (Taylor, 2003). Maldonaldo (2008) claims that categories are very useful for the peripheral rules of the target language that often pose more difficulties to L2 learners. Finally, it is suggested

that learners tend to form strong conventional images in order to describe certain figurative language units, such as idioms (Gibbs, 1994).

Applications

Theoretical considerations

Cognitive Linguistics is a cognitively demanding approach (Gutiérrez Pérez, 2017). For this approach to be beneficial, the advantages should become straightforward to L2 learners from the very beginning (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2006).

Given that not all concepts are figurative (Danesi, 2008), a cognitive linguistic-driven instruction should be seen as a supplementary technique and not as the sole means for L2 vocabulary instruction (Boers, 1999).

Lastly, L2 learners should be exposed to figurative language from early on, that is from CEFR (=Common European Framework of Reference for language, Council of Europe, 2001)-based A2 proficiency level (Littlemore, Krennmayr, Turner, & Turner, 2014).

Practical issues

With reference to more practical issues that are expected to rise when designing a cognitive linguistic-driven teaching material, it is suggested that figurative language appears in context (Peleg, Giora, & Fein, 2004).

Second, the selected texts should be authentic in order to be interesting and increase learners' motivation and degree of engagement (Peacock, 1997).

Third, learners should be told that figurative language is ubiquitous in ordinary discourse (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). MacLennan (1994) claims that L2 figurative instruction will be fruitful only if learners are explicitly told that figurative language is an integral aspect of everyday communication and it cannot be ignored.

Fourth, L2 learners tend to connect images to figurative language (Gibbs, 1994). Thus, visual and graphic tools will result in organization and clarity, trigger prior knowledge and provide opportunities for interaction with key content at a more complex level (Mallette, 2020).

Fifth, Piquer-Píriz (2011) argues that L2 learners need to be familiarized with the core senses of polysemous words which are present and of everyday use in any classroom. If a learner knows the basic/core meaning of an L2 word and is familiar with strategies, such as metaphor and metonymy, then s/he will be able to understand, use, and produce the semantic extensions (/figurative meanings) of these words.

Sixth, Sökmen (1997) points out than an organized vocabulary is better learnt that random lists. Boers (2000) has shown that the lexical organization of figurative language under metaphoric themes (=conceptual metaphors) raised learners' metaphor awareness and facilitated retrieval and long-term retention.

Seventh, figurative language organization under conceptual metaphors entails teaching L2 figurative language based on the scheme "A is B" (Danesi, 1995).

Eighth, Danesi & Grieve (2010) argue that familiarization with figurative language can be developed through a *conceptual syllabus*. In a conceptual syllabus, units will be organized around conceptual domains, such as *love, time, weather* and *ideas* along with grammatical and communicative information regarding their functions and frequency in ordinary language use. Alternatively, units can be planned around salient or less highly productive concepts of the target language (Danesi & Grieve, 2010).

Lastly, research has shown that raising L2 learners' awareness of the origin of figurative language can contribute to their long-term retention and eventually to better vocabulary acquisition (Boers, 2001; Boers, Eyckmans, & Stengers, 2007). Hence, it will be beneficial for L2 learners to become familiar with patterns of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences and similarities (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001).

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