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Metaphor use implications for fostering EFL students' understanding of mother tongue role in the L2 learning environment

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the possibilities of using metaphor as an ontological tool for sensitizing EFL students to the role of mother tongue use in the foreign language classroom. Data for the study were collected through a structured questionnaire providing an insight into the subjects' mental images of the L1 and L2 in terms of basic characteristics, functions and relationships. Metaphoric reasoning turned out to enhance the students' understanding of the role played by the mother tongue in SLA and enable them to realize that it should be by no means banned from the foreign language learning environment.

Key words: metaphor, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, cognitive sponge, mother tongue use, L2 classroom

INTRODUCTION

Over thirty years ago metaphor successfully entered the area of language study receiving a lot of attention as a device fundamental to human cognition encouraging the understanding of how language, thought and discourse are organized (Long & Richards, 1999). It was, however, not until more than a decade later that metaphor became subject to applied linguistic research into various dimensions of its intervention in language learning and teaching

processes (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Ellis, 2002; Martinez et al., 2001; Thornbury, 1997). Consequently, the present paper is intended to take advantage of a language-in-use approach to metaphor and thus focus on a group of language users' ideas and assumptions about the place of mother tongue in the target language learning setting. The analysis of EFL students' metaphor-triggered reflections on L1 use in L2 classroom will be preceded by two theoretical sections devoted to a brief discussion of the traditional vs. contemporary definitions and understandings of metaphor, including the Lakoff and Johnson Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and of the relationship between the L1 and the L2 as viewed by such outstanding authors as Lev S. Vygotsky, Jim Cummins or Manjula Datta.

TOWARDS DEFINING METAPHOR

Traditionally, metaphor is referred to as a kind of figurative, ornamental and fanciful language produced by the poetic imagination, which implies its extraordinariness and therefore detachment from mundane realities of life. Metaphor fosters "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 9), hence its reliance on the use of similes based on some pre-existing similarities between two compared objects or concepts. This was the perspective taken by Aristotle who regarded metaphors as elliptical similes and claimed that they should be created from words that sound beautiful, whose meaning is beautiful or that are beautiful "by association to the eye or some other sense" (Aristotle R3, 2: 1405, cited in: Grube, 1958, p. 72). However, contemporary researchers (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Martinez et al., 2001; Scott, 1994; Wan et al., 2011) argue that metaphor is more than a mere place-holder performing the esthetic function (Driscoll, 2012); presently, metaphor is viewed as a means paving the way for discovering new, truth disclosing things, the whole process beginning at the level of thought rather than language (Cameron, 1999) as indicated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), pivotal figures of the cognitive-linguistic approach to metaphor. Their revolutionary Conceptual Metaphor Theory moved metaphor from a conventional position of rare rhetorical quirk to that of rudimentary building block of human cognition (Steen, 2014). Accordingly, metaphor is highlighted by them as metaphorical concept which pervades everyday life,

thus inhabiting an individual's thought and action, and performing a focal function in defining reality. The concept and the activity are, therefore, metaphorically structured and so is, as a result, the language. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) divide metaphor into two ontologically interdependent halves or domains, namely the source domain and the target domain – also referred to as vehicle and tenor by Richards (1936, cited in: Way, 1994, p. 5), and as focus and frame by Black (1993) – the former being a collection of literal facets, phenomena and relationships, the latter tending to be abstract in nature. This can be exemplified by the metaphor: *Language is a treasure box* where 'language' is the target domain of experience understood in terms of 'treasure box' as the source domain from which various metaphorical expressions are drawn (e.g. *It always remains unlocked; Its size depends on the number of gems it consists of; Each gem makes magic in a special way*). Concerning metaphorical expressions, they can be specified as linguistic metaphors by means of which the relationship between two thoughts (domains) is supported and externalized (Richards, 1936, cited in: Way, 1994, p. 5).

Generalizing the above presented ideas, metaphor can be defined as the interaction between the abstract and concrete levels of thought comprising and contingent on a system of beliefs and premises shared by the users' community. Owing to metaphor, people can find it easier and more challenging to talk about and reflect on difficult experiences, controversial issues, complex concepts and equivocal relationships (Deignan, 2005), such as native language vs. foreign language or implicit knowledge vs. explicit knowledge which are subject to study in the present paper.

MOTHER TONGUE USE IN L2 CLASSROOM

L2 classroom has been traditionally referred to as a space for acquiring knowledge of a new grammatical and vocabulary system to a total or near-total exclusion of the mother tongue ((Horner & Trimbur 2002) as is the case with such extremely different yet coinciding at the point of code use L2 teaching tools as the Audio-lingual Method and Communicative Approach. It seems that teachers are still following the dogma of L1 as a hindrance in L2 classroom, which stance was over a century ago ridiculed by Büttner (1910). In a similar vein though so much later, Lourdes Ortega (2010) complained

about the unchangingly monolingual status of applied linguistics which tends to view the L1 as having a formally and pedagogically irrelevant role to play in L2 learning (Macaro, 2001). Not surprisingly, it is recommended that the extent to which language teachers, curricula designers and students should focus on the L2 in the instructional time be 90% plus (ACTFL 2008). This apparently stigmatizes L1 use in the learning of the target language becoming, in this way, the *lingua franca* of the classroom. Such position leads to ignoring “in our pedagogy, a role for” the L1 as “the cognitively and socially dominant language” that constitutes a large part of the L2 learning process (Levine, 2011, p. 5).

Counterbalancing this monolingual bias in L2 pedagogy are the theories elaborated on by Lev S. Vygotsky, Manula Datta and Jim Cummins who emphasize a dynamic and constructive nature of the interaction between mother tongue knowledge and target language use. As regards Vygotsky (1997 [1934]), he highlights an important place that is occupied by the knowledge of one’s own language in the study of the L2; he compares it to the acquisition of spontaneous concepts as opposed to the study of the L1 which he associates with the acquisition of scientific concepts. Going further, Vygotsky refers to both languages as analogous systems developing in reverse, higher – and lower-level directions, influencing each other and profiting from each other’s advantages. The native language is viewed by him as an already fixed system of meanings that is transferred to the new language which, in turn, enables the learner to look upon the L1 in more general terms, the whole process raising awareness of their own linguistic operations. The native language is viewed by him as an already fixed system of meanings that is transferred to the new language which, in turn, enables the learner to look upon the L1 in more general terms, the whole process raising awareness of their own linguistic operations. Similarly but in a more elaborate way, Jim Cummins (1979) posits in the Linguistic Interdependence or Dual-Iceberg Hypothesis that underneath the L1 and L2 surface manifestations there develop proficiencies, like literacy, abstract thinking, content learning or problem-solving, that are transferable from one language to another. The language used in tackling these processes draws on CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) that is also common across languages. Cummins (2007) goes on to point out that students whose L1 and L2 levels of proficiency are equally high are likely to experience linguistic and cognitive flexibility considerably surpassing that of students who

are less proficient in both languages. He advocates the principle of additive enrichment, affirming that while learning the L2, students strengthen it with their L1 knowledge rather than subtracting the latter from the former. Finally, it is worth referring to Datta's (2007, p. 21) stance on L1 as a *cognitive sponge* saturating the learner's mind with the ability to assimilate and make sense of a new language. She also asserts that reliance on the L1 in L2 learning is a conducive factor to the development of metalinguistic awareness.

Concurrently, a large body of research findings shows that learning a foreign language engages at least two languages (Belz, 2002; Blyth, 1995; Lieb-scher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2004). For instance, the questionnaire study conducted by Glenn S. Levine (2011) indicated that, despite the tenets and arguments put forward by communicative methodology proponents, the L1 turned out to be used in L2 classroom from one third to almost half the time serving various important functions. Some of the researchers (e. g. Antón & DiCamilla, 1999, Ellwood, 2008; Swain & Lapkin, 2000) uncovered L2 learners' tendency to rely on the L1 as a means of scaffolded assistance as well as structuring and arranging interactions. The L1 was creatively used for the completion of L2 tasks and was also capitalized on as a tool for meta-communication and provision of metalinguistic information. As a result, Claire Kramsch (1998, 2009) came up with an idea of multilingual approach to education intended to replace a native speaker norm-oriented pedagogy of the authentic with an intercultural speaker-oriented pedagogy of the appropriate which would engage students in critical thinking and making comparisons between or among languages, and which would, therefore, pave the way for the L1-supported use of the L2 (Levine, 2011).

THE STUDY

Given the issues raised in the theoretical section above, the study was designed to accomplish the following aims:

- To use metaphor as a tool for examining the EFL students' perspectives on the L1/L2 relationship.
- To examine metaphor as a tool for enhancing the EFL students' awareness of mother tongue role in L2 classroom.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 118 subjects studying English Philology in three different academic centers in Poland (University of Zielona Góra, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław) participated in the present research.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were gleaned from a structured questionnaire comprised of 10 questions, two of which were subject to both a qualitative and quantitative analysis presented in subsequent sections. It was believed that questions encouraging metaphor use would elicit from the respondents a number of imaginatively and comprehensively expressed ideas likely to enhance and at the same time uncover their understanding of the role that is played by the mother tongue in the L2 learning environment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Question¹

Complete the following statement, referring to both languages in a metaphorical (i.e. imaginative, symbolic) way:

The Polish language is, whereas English is

The respondents' metaphorical images fall into four major categories classified as follows (see Fig. 1):

- (1) formal properties
- (2) first things first

¹ Actually, the present author decided to use for the purpose of this paper only a sub-component of a more extensive question as it is directly related to the discussed issues.

- (3) global vs. local language
- (4) language ego focus

Figure 1. The subjects' images of Polish and English

Ad (1) The widest category encompasses those respondents who concentrated on the formal properties of both languages, trying to make comparative judgments about their phonological and/or grammatical characteristics usually in connection with degrees of difficulty and complexity. For the most part, the subjects appeared to perceive English as a more pleasant and ear-caressing language, thus referring to it as *a sea of subtle waves* or *a song* and often using such adjectives as *mild, soft, smooth, nice*. At the other end of the students' scale of metaphorical expressions there were the Polish language-related associations which highlighted it as *rustling leaves; a rattlesnake that foreigners are scared of; the sound of drilling; a burning bonfire with lots of hisses, squeaks*. Another perspective taken by the subjects whose answers have been subsumed within this very category concerns the level of difficulty which was definitely estimated higher in the case of Polish (*a twisty maze; a labyrinth; an endless fight; a nightmare; a tough nut to crack*) than in relation to English (*an uncomplicated toy, a straight line, a piece of cake, a beautiful dream*).

Ad (2) The respondents included in the second category underlined the priority of Polish as their first language laying firm foundations for second language acquisition. Many of them made a reference to family relationships speaking about Polish and English as *mother Earth* and *another planet* or *a mother who teaches us first words* and *a nursemaid who also teaches but is not the first teacher*. Some of the students approached the two languages from a geographical and biological perspective highlighting the L1 and the L2 as *the home town we departed from* and *the aim of our journey; home, everything that is familiar* and *a completely new city; a tree with many branches (L1); an apple tree*

and *one of the apples*. There were also more general comments on the L1 as *a background; the first foundation; a basis; a safe place* or *innate knowledge* and on the L2 as *a challenge; a new adventure; some kind of supplement* or *a new, somewhat hostile place which students need to discover*.

Ad (3) The third category reveals the subjects' perception of English as a lingua franca dominating the Polish language in terms of its universal character and widespread use as a means of international communication. The respondents came up with a range of metaphorical expressions based on sports and geographical connotations (e.g. Polish as *a ball that can be used to play football* and English as *a ball that can be used in many games*; Polish as *a road in India* and English as *a highway*). Some of the students whose comments defy a clear-cut classification defined English as *a multicultural connector; a framework language; a doctor* or *an act of showing off*, whereas Polish was highlighted by them as *an old forgotten machine; a helping device; an assistant* or *a physical exercise*. Two other respondents whose descriptions deserve attention depicted Polish as *a bird locked inside the cage* and English as *a tool that broadens students' minds*.

Ad (4) The students ascribed to this narrowest, as shown by the percentage of gathered responses, category sounded least metaphorical compared to the members of other three groups discussed above. Generally, they referred to Polish and English as part of learner identity and a key to communication respectively.

Considering all the comments provided by the respondents in relation to Polish as their L1 and English as their L2, it might be remarked that for the most part, they constituted a comparison made from the perspective of difficulties encountered in learning the two languages, a special emphasis being laid on their phonological characteristics. It is also worth noting that most of the subjects' reflections on their mother tongue and target language entailed biological (e.g. *tree branches, leaves*), geographical (e.g. *journey, destination*) and family-related (e.g. *mother, grandmother*) associations.

Question 2

Using metaphorical expressions, state your point of view on L1 use in L2 classroom.

L2 students' L1 knowledge can be understood as

As an EFL teacher, I would like to permit / forbid (*underline the right word*)
 L1 use in the L2 classroom because

Regarding the respondents' stance on their L1 knowledge (see Fig. 2), the vast majority of them considered it as a helpful factor in the learning process.

Figure 2. L1 knowledge – a helpful or a harmful factor?

Many of the subjects who showed appreciation of mother tongue knowledge commented on it as *a basis; a database; a bridge; a foundation; an experience* or *basic skills* enabling them to better understand L2 rules; in a similar though more imaginative vein, L1 knowledge was also linked to *the base coat on canvas; the knowledge of one's own pocket* or to *a bike*, the riding of which, once mastered, will be remembered. And again, there were created some nature- and journey-related associations like the ones connecting L1 knowledge to *an ever-growing tree; the core of the Earth* or *a window to the world*. A few subjects described L1 knowledge as *an inborn competence; natural gift* or *a book that is already known*, which encourages the present author to assume that the metaphorical reflection activated their knowledge of the innatist theory of language acquisition with its concepts of competence vs. performance or universal grammar and core rules (Brown, 2007). One more positive metaphorical reference deserving to be mentioned connects the L1 to the cardiovascular system and L1 knowledge to ... blood, which once again implicitly confirms the majority of respondents' perception of mother tongue knowledge as fundamental to learner work and success with English as a foreign language.

As far as the second, much smaller group of respondents who turned out not to attach importance to their L1 knowledge is concerned, they referred to it as *a weakness, a distraction* or, to put it in the most vivid and expressive words, *a dog barking every day*, claiming that it does not help in L2 learning. However, even among those negative opinions there was one voice maintaining that L1 knowledge might be *disturbing but sometimes gives a fame*, which is indicative of a vague presupposition that when carefully studied and/or properly attended to, it can be really useful.

Switching to the students' opinions on L1 use in the L2 classroom (see Fig. 3), 25,42% were against it, more than twice as many (57,64%) argued for it, the remaining subjects' position (16,94%) being neutral.

Figure 3. L1 use in the L2 classroom

As for the details of provided comments, some of them were more metaphorical than others, one thing is, however, sure: the previously elicited metaphors (i.e. the ones connected with Polish, English and L1 knowledge) motivated the respondents to argumentatively deliberate on possible advantages/disadvantages of mother tongue use in the context of L2 classroom practices. As regards the proponents of L1 use, they went in four main directions revealing the factors that they think most significant. The first group emphasized the role of combining and comparing the L1 and the L2 while teaching target language grammar rules. The second group highlighted the L1 as helpful in clarifying more difficult issues and as making it possible for the teacher to check whether the covered material has been understood. The third group of L1 use advocates concentrated on it as a strategy enabling pupils to compensate for missing knowledge and overcome language learning problems. Concerning the fourth group, its members indicated the place of L1 use in creating a positive, stress-free climate in the L2 classroom and contributing to an increase in learners' sense of security and fulfillment. An interesting remark belonging to this very group referred to L1 use as a factor likely to lower the anxiety that is experienced by students who are to speak L2 in front of others. One idea ran through many of all four groups' descriptions, namely that it is the teacher's responsibility to formulate L1 dosage principles and thus decide on the circumstances and the extent in/to which the mother tongue might be used in the L2 classroom. Some of the comments were sealed with nice metaphorical expressions like the one in which L1 use was associated with *veins with blood* that *nourish the body* of L2 classroom. In other cases, the respondents compared L1 use to knowing how to open the door that leads to the L2 learning experience; to a story that they already know and find it, therefore,

easier to learn a story from a new book or to the kitchen tools about which they seldom think but still use them *in order to cook a great meal*. Concerning the students who opted for banning the mother tongue from the L2 classroom, their explanations were fairly varied as well and similarly to the subjects espousing L1 use, they can be roughly classified into four categories. For the respondents from the first category forbidding mother tongue use is synonymous with giving learners more opportunities to make progress; they were of the opinion that having to use only the L2 from the very outset is a challenge, the facing of which makes the learning process faster and more effective. The second category of responses referred to a close link between using the L2 and thinking in this language, which might be inhibited once the L1 gets in the way. The subjects ascribed to the third category claimed that giving students permission to speak L1 in the L2 learning environment would culminate in interference errors and literal translation, while for the respondents grouped within the fourth category exclusive L2 use would advance the negotiation of meaning and encourage students to seek ways to deal with language learning problems.

Overall, the subjects turned out to be truly engaged in the discussion of L1 use in the L2 classroom, retrieving from memory, processing and explicitly or implicitly referring to a number of ELT methodology concepts (e.g. *i+1* input, code-switching, strategic competence, anxiety, Contrastive Analysis, code of conduct, positive atmosphere in the classroom), the refreshed knowledge about which apparently helped them analyze and better understand the place of the mother tongue in foreign language learning.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main issue addressed in this paper was aimed at examining the value of metaphor as the tool for attracting EFL students' conscious attention to the place of the mother tongue in the L2 classroom. The subjects were exposed to a few metaphor-eliciting statements which provoked the creation of a variety of ideas enabling them to grasp the significance of L1 implementation into the L2 learning context. The respondents moved a long way between the abstract target domain of L1–L2 interdependence and the concrete source domain conceptualizing the former, for example in terms of *a labyrinth* and *a straight*

line; an apple tree and one of the apples; a background and a challenge. The act of drawing on those concrete ideas resulted in an in-depth understanding of the reasons for which the L1 plays such an important role in L2 acquisition. Interestingly, metaphorical reflection triggered the students' ELT methodology knowledge as they eagerly relied on it when trying to justify their line of reasoning. All in all, metaphor as a means of the interaction between the abstract and concrete levels of thinking appeared to lead the subjects to perceive the L1 as a cognitive and didactic asset as well as to sensitize them with the weaknesses and strengths of the bilingually oriented L2 educational policy.

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