



Metaphorical Conceptualizations of an Adult EFL Learner: Where Old Concepts Are Impregnable

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Abstract: This study tries to follow conceptualizations of an adult Persian EFL learner regarding his language teacher and his experiences of the language class in which he was attending. The focus of attention is on the metaphors he has been asked to produce every other session with the assumption that metaphors are not only essential for communicating abstract and difficult ideas, but also for talking about aspects of ordinary experience (Ortony, 1975). The results of this study reveal how this adult learner's ways of looking at his teacher and his language learning did not change across time; an inflexibility which might be attributed to the ways in which his attitudes towards language and language learning had been shaped by the school system before attending the language class.

Keywords: Metaphorical conceptualizations, adult learners, EFL.

Özet: Bu çalışma, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen yetişkin bir İranlı öğrencinin dil öğretmeni ve dil öğrenme sürecine dair deneyimlerine ilişkin oluşturduğu kavramları belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Metaforlar, soyut ve zor fikirleri anlatmada yardımcı olmalarına ek olarak sıradan deneyimleri de aktarmada temel oluştururlar (Ortony, 1975). Bu varsayımdan yola çıkarak, çalışmanın ana konusunu, katılımcı ile yapılan her oturumda üretmesi istenilen metaforlar oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmanın sonuçları, katılımcının zaman içerisinde öğretmenine ve dil öğrenme sürecine olan bakış açısının değişmediğini göstermiştir. Dile ve dil öğrenmeye karşı geliştirilmiş olan bu değişmez tutum, katılımcının dil dersine başlamadan önce deneyimlediği okul sisteminden kaynaklandığı düşünülebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mecazi kavramlaştırmalar, tetişkin öğrenciler, Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce.

INTRODUCTION

During the last forty years, the field of language teaching has been occupied by the notion of communicative language teaching (henceforward CLT), with its learner-centered and experience-based views of second language teaching and also with one of its paramount mottos "language learning is learning to communicate" (see Brandl, 2007; Breen & Candlin, 1980; Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). This has given rise to an innumerable number of language institutes, courses, books, and material claiming that they can actualize the principles of communicative language teaching and, as a result, lead into more language success.

But, in spite of their claim, the results are usually, at least as far as adult learners are concerned, far from being satisfactory. As a language teacher, I've personally noticed that such learners eagerly register for those classes and attentively participate in them, but the improvement in their communicative ability doesn't seem to be satisfactory. In fact, the number of adult EFL learners who drop out after one or two terms is too high to turn a blind eye to. What are the causes of this kind of failure and the high number of dropouts? Why such adult EFL learners, at least in a society like Iran, cannot communicate with ease even

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after being trained according to the principles set by the proponents of CLT for some consecutive terms? This paper is an attempt to address such questions.

Theoretically speaking, this failure might be ascribed to two main sources, namely EFL teachers and learners. We can blame either language teachers for not fully internalizing those CLT principles into their language classes or students for not studying and working hard enough. The first accusation seems not to be plausible, since, at least, in the language institute in which I have been working as a supervisor for ages the staff members have been chosen after taking part in really difficult pen and paper language tests and then interview sessions. They are, moreover, being supervised every now and then. Their communicative language ability and their profound belief in the principles of CLT are, therefore, satisfactory. Most of them are MA graduates of TEFL from the best universities of the country.

Having intuitively dismissed the first source of failure, I can now turn my attention toward adult learners themselves. As I mentioned earlier, it seems that they come into the language institute with enough motivation. In the interview sessions which I usually attend before they are placed in different classes according to their language abilities, expressions such as “I want to speak English with ease”, “I want to read foreign magazines”, and “I want to watch foreign movies” are not uncommon. In fact, the source of difficulty doesn’t seem to be motivation but emotion since such expressions reveal that such learners are, at least, of high *instrumental* motivation (see Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

Kövecses (2003) divides emotion expressions into two categories of *descriptive* and *expressive*. While the former category encompasses words like “anger”, “angry”, “joy”, and “happy” which *describe* the emotions they signify, the latter category encompasses words like “shit!”, “wow!”, and “yuk!” which can *express* emotions. As things stand in this categorization, it seems reasonable to focus on descriptive expressions in order to get a better idea of language learners’ emotions towards language and language learning. But, the question is how reliable descriptive expressions can be obtained. The answer seems to have been provided by Kövecses himself:

Since figurative terms also describe (and do not primarily express) emotions, this is a subgroup within descriptive terms. Here unlike the previous group, the words and expressions do not literally “name” particular kinds of emotions.... The figurative words and expressions that belong in this group denote various *aspects* of emotion concepts, such as intensity, cause, control, and so forth (p. 4, emphases are original).

And it goes without saying that metaphors constitute the widest and most important category within figurative language. They can create social, cultural, and also psychological realities for people (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This is perhaps why Block (1999) considers metaphor production as “an ongoing process by which we constantly assimilate input by comparing and contrasting it with representations of previous experiences which we retain in our memories” (p.135).

Metaphors are also frequently encountered in learning contexts; and, for this reason, studying them might reveal different orientations towards communication and learning. Moreover, metaphors may have useful functions in learning by helping learners raise their awareness of key concepts and issues. Learner metaphors may also help teachers develop professionally by revealing students’ experiences of language learning activities and situations (see for example, Achard & Niemeier, 2004; Cameron, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Littlemore, 2005; Ortony, 1975; Scheffler, 1960; Villamil & de Guerrero, 2000, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study comes from a 19-year-old Persian EFL learner named Reza who came to the language institute in which I was a supervisor around nine months ago in order to register for an EFL course. Having taken our placement test and the follow-up interview, he was decided to be a pre-intermediate language learner. He had not attended any language institute before and his knowledge of English was limited to his high-school years.

In the interview session I asked him why he wanted to learn English and he said “I feel I am [sic] need English manywheres [sic], in studies, for watching English films and use[ing] internet”, indicating that he was, at least, instrumentally motivated. When the registration process was over, I also asked him if he would cooperate with me and fill out a form every other session after the class and he kindly agreed to do so.

The form included the sentences “A language teacher is like... because...” and “A language learner is like...because...” which had to be completed. The class in which Reza attended was held three times each week and continued for two months. Having passed the first term in our language institute, Reza also registered for the next term and therefore the process of completing the form lasted for another two months. Reza’s teacher remained constant in both terms. The first class comprised 16 students and the second class comprised 19 ones, 14 of them were Reza’s first term classmates. It is also worth noting that the form was written in Persian and Reza was also asked to answer in Persian for his language ability was not high enough to encourage writing in English.

RESULTS

What follows is the list of all the metaphors Reza produced:

Language Teacher			Language Learner		
Number	Metaphor	Reason	Number	Metaphor	Reason
1	Tree	Having a lot of information	1	Fruit picker	Collecting the information
2	Candle	Giving light to others	2	Darkness	Being illuminated by teacher’s light
3.	Sea full of fish	Having something to offer	3	Fisherman	Trying to catch something
4.	Van driver	Having responsibility for the load	4.	Van	Being controlled by van driver
5.	Cloud	Giving something	5.	Earth	Being useless without rain
6.	Parrot owner	Repeating something	6.	Parrot	Imitating what is told
7.	Mother	knowing a lot	7.	Infant	Knowing nothing
8.	Water	Giving life	8.	Seed	Being worthless

9.	Tree full of fruit	Being full of information	9.	Passerby	Eating the fruit
10	Sea of words	Being full of information	10.	Drop of water	Wanting to join the sea
11	Tour leader	Guiding	11.	Tourist	Following leader everywhere
12	Safety pin	Attaching something to something	12.	The attached thing	Being attached to the book by the teacher
13	God	Knowing everything	13.	Idiot	Knowing nothing
14	Rescuer	Knowing how to save	14.	Rescued	Being saved by teacher
15	Bridge	Connecting two places	15.	Passenger	Inability to move further without bridge
16	Commander	Having the authority	16.	Soldier	Following the commander
17	Coach	Training	17.	Team member	Following the coach
18	Engineer	Planning	18.	Worker	Working according to the plan

Following Cameron and Low (1999), not only were Reza's metaphors compared with each other across time, but also his elaborations on them were also taken into consideration. As the table shows, among the metaphors produced by Reza almost all of them assign an active, authoritarian role to the teacher while depicting the learners as nothing but passive. This pattern is, more or less, a static one. The whole picture does not change as the time passes by.

The results are inconsistent with what Villamil and de Guerrero (2005) report. The authors found out that EFL writing teachers conceptualizations of an EFL writing teacher changed across time, "departing from a view of teacher as dispenser of knowledge to that of being a guide or leader in a shared activity" (p.83). The results are also inconsistent with Cortazzi and Jin (1999) who discovered that in many cultures students' dominant metaphor for a teacher was *a good teacher is a friend*. In this study the sense of friendliness is only found in *teacher as mother* although Reza's notes reveal that by mother he emphasized having knowledge more than having care.

What can be the source of such a discrepancy between the findings of this study and those mentioned above? Can it be argued that Reza's teacher did not support cooperation, initiative, and independence in his class, whereas the teachers' in the previous studies did so? The answer to this question is negative. Reza's classes were observed four times; two times in the first term and two times in the second term with careful attention to what Reza did or was done to him in the class. Moreover, I also randomly selected four students from the same class in which Reza attended for two subsequent terms. Special care was exercised to make sure that these four subjects had attended most of the class sessions. The interview session was carried out after the students took the second-term final exam and it was totally in

Persian. Each learner was interviewed individually for about 10 minutes. I first asked them the following three questions and then wanted them to talk for a minute or two on their experiences of the English class in which they attended:

- a. Was the relationship between you and your teacher a friendly one?
- b. Did he encourage pair and group work, for example asking you to interview one of your classmates?
- c. Did he focus on acceptability and comprehensibility of the message you wanted to convey or on the form of the message? Or both?

The results of the observations together with those of the interviews revealed that the teacher was not the one depicted in Reza's metaphors. He was, on the contrary, a person who cared about the students, a person who emphasized more on meaning than on accuracy, a person who emphasized cooperation, pair and group work, a person whose focus on form was incidental (see Yuqin Zhao & Bitchener, 2007 for an overview of incidental focus on form in teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions). In this way, the students were far from being simply passive recipients of information. The following four excerpts which have been taken from classroom observations might show the friendly atmosphere of the class and the indirect ways by the help of which the teacher not only lets the conversation flow not to be hampered but also implies the correct forms or pronunciations:

(1)

- Reza: Another point I think is
Teacher: Yea, good
Reza: I think about novels...eh...when you are read a novel...eh.....you can produce the face of its people
Teacher: goood
Reza: I mean produce the situation in your brain...and this makes it interesting
Teacher: Yes, that's a very good point. In reading we can imagine the characters in our mind. Good. Very good Reza.

(2)

- Reza: For example, if they want to advise (pronounces it like /'advaiZ/) just one important thing...eh...they have to make a long movie to transmit it to their addresses
Teacher: (looking at other students) Yes, Reza is right. He says that if directors want to advise (pronounces it like /əd'vaiz/) their addressees to do something, they will do it with their movies. (looking at Reza) Excellent.

(3)

- Reza. When I read a book, I think about it
Teacher. Okay
Reza. And I flow the word into my mind...eee... attaching the words into my mind
Teacher. I agree, yes you are right. It is a good way. Reza puts the words into his mind or internalizes the words.

Reza: Yes....I mean internalize
Hadi: Internalize means put into
(another student)
Teacher: Excellent

(4)

Reza: The character is different when we listening to radio...we make him in our mind
Teacher: Yes, that's it
Reza: In a way...eee... we like
Teacher: (looking at Amir, another student) Amir do you agree with what he says
Farzad: Yes, we imagine the character
Reza: Yes, exactly, imagine

As the above-mentioned excerpts might have clarified, the teacher most of the time refrained from being an authoritarian and domineering person. In fact, he put on a friendly, amiable character supporting classroom discussion and cooperation. The results of the interviews also supported this finding.

Therefore, what is the cause of Reza's inflexible attitude toward his language teacher and language learning? Why his attitude did not change across time even though the teacher, at least as far as the interviews and the observations indicated, was different from the one Reza depicted in his metaphors? Why Reza, like many other language learners, quit the language institute after two terms? Why, a teacher metaphor like, for example, *friend* or a learner metaphor like, for example, *artist* were not found among Reza's metaphors.

One tentative answer might be the practices through which his attitude toward language and language learning has been shaped during school years. In some societies like Iran EFL teachers' roles have always been nothing but presenting grammatical points and out-of-context vocabulary items and then test the students accordingly. For example, in one recent study (Nazari, 2007) it was observed that Iranian high school EFL teachers stick to narrow and reductionist views of communicative competence, emphasize sentence making, structure teaching, and word memorizing, while they ignore broader views of communicative competence which foreground activities like summarization, comprehension, and production. In that study the writer summarizes the results of observing several high school EFL classes and interviews with the teachers involved in those classes in the following way:

...though some of the teachers spoke in the L2 for teaching and communication, they spent most of the class time on sentence-level activities, structural exercises, and decontextualized activities which demanded that the learners memorize syntactic structures and vocabulary items (p.208).

Another important question might be raised at this juncture. And that is why Reza, as far as his comments are concerned, has adopted a certain or convinced attitude toward the mechanistic kind of language teaching and learning depicted in his metaphors. The answer to this question is not, of course, an easy one. Perhaps, besides the influential power of the school system, another important force is also involved. In fact, the school system might itself be regarded as the result of another powerful force, the force of culture. In the view of people in Iran teachers are mostly associated with pure power, authority and knowledge. And

perhaps this is why Reza confidently continues to create such metaphors. His views regarding teaching and learning seem to have been motivated by the dominant views of the society and then entrenched in the school years. This answer is in line with the view of Quinn (1991) who claims that metaphors reflect cultural models. She contends that metaphors “far from constituting understanding, are ordinarily selected to fit a preexisting and culturally shared model” (pp. 64-65).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

It is usually difficult to generalize the results of case studies; but because of the three different methods (gathering metaphors, observation, and interview) at least one generalization might be made. In this way, it can be argued that the views of those adult EFL learners who have been trained in a society with an educational system which emphasizes teachers' authority and students' passivity are to a great extent fixed. This might be the reason why such learners drop out of the language institutes which adopt a different approach after about two terms. For this reason, it is suggested that such learners either start language learning in the language institutes prior to high school years or at least before the influence of the school system becomes fully established or if this is not possible, be taught in the same way in which they had been taught at school years.

In fact, this second suggestion might pave the way for future research in this direction. Future studies might test this hypothesis, i.e. whether adult EFL learners are assisted more or remain longer in the language institute if they continue to be taught in the ways similar to those used in the school system.

Last but not least, it might be argued that Reza's dropping out of the language institute can simply be attributed to his instrumental motivation. In other words, Reza passed two terms and learned the rudiments of English by which he might have been able to meet his English needs. This argument seems not to be defensible since Reza started as a pre-intermediate student and ended up as an intermediate one, a level at which a person can hardly satisfy the needs like *speaking with ease* or *watching English movies*.

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