Categorisation of metaphors for learning

Darren Elliott
(Sugiyama Women’s University, Nagoya, Japan)

The following comic book by Darren Elliott was originally presented as a handout for Darren’s talk with the same title at the 20th anniversary conference of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Learner Development SIG. Darren used the comic book format as it enabled him to show explicit visual representations of metaphors. Drawing, rather than typing or writing, offered him another way to work through his ideas and figure out exactly what it was he wanted to know. Now he is working up the energy to tackle this research in a more structured way.

References


Have you thought about contributing to ELT Research?

As you’ll see from this issue, we’re interested in publishing short reports of research (up to 2,000 words) if they give useful insights into research methods / involve reflections on the process of research and not just the findings and/or if they are reports of teacher-research (research into your own practice).

However, we’re also interested in other genres and types of item! Letters, pictures, news items, cartoons (as you’ll see!), reflections, stories, reviews, reports – or all of these combined! Anything that provides new insights into, ideas for, or information about ELT research!

You can contact the editors via: resig@iatefl.org. We’re also looking for new colleagues for the editorial team – please get in touch if you’re interested in helping out!
So, what’s all this then?*

I’ve come to tell you all about metaphor.

That implies you are some kind of expert.

For the purposes of this exercise, yes.

Touchy! But go on...

Well, let’s imagine that nouns represent ideas. Some of these nouns are ‘concrete’ nouns... the idea which they represent is a physical object. For example, the word ‘chair’ represents the thing which is a chair.

Keeping up?

Still with you?

Good! Concrete nouns are easy to understand because we can experience them with our senses. We can touch, taste, smell, hear and/or see them. Abstract nouns, however, cannot be experienced directly by the physical senses, and are therefore harder to communicate.
So, we sometimes explain these abstracts in terms of concretes, in order to understand them more clearly?

You're pretty sharp! OK, give me an example.

Technically, that's a simile, but I suppose it'll do...

Then what do you suggest?

It sounds as though these metaphors can run pretty deep.

Absolutely! In fact, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor is all-pervasive. In using it to communicate our ideas, it shapes those ideas. Schön suggests the same when he talks about generative metaphor. This is something I want to come back to...

How about Forrest Gump! “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get.”

“Time is money... That's a good one. We can spend it, save it, run out of it...

It sounds like something we should be discussing. By the way, why are you the only one who gets drawn?

I don't know what you look like, do I? Let's get back on track.

“Back on track”... That's a metaphor, right?
I told you, everything is a metaphor. Now I want to explain how it’s relevant to language teaching.

About time… we are already on page three.

I’ve been going slowly for your benefit.

Thanks, but I think I’m already ahead of you. You’re going to tell us about those “a teacher is an orchestra conductor” exercises we did in teacher training, aren’t you?

Not exactly, but kind of. I want to outline a few studies first. Then I’ll tell you about what happened in my classroom. And at the end I want you to think about why that is interesting and where we can go with it.

The researchers combed narrative texts, case studies and commentary from teachers, researchers and educational theorists for both explicit and implicit metaphors for language teaching and learning.

Anything we can do with that?

Actually, yes. The researchers suggest that metaphor can help us come to a greater understanding of our beliefs and thus avoid conflicts between teachers, students and administrators.

Then we have de Guerro and Villamil’s study in which teachers were asked to provide metaphors. They came up with nine conceptual categories for “teacher” and corollaries for learners.
My study, if we can call it that, followed a similar methodology. It was a classroom activity that threw up a few interesting responses. That's why you are reading a comic book rather than an article in a peer-reviewed journal, for now, anyway.

Teacher as Nurturer
Teacher as Leader
Teacher as Utility

Tour Guide, Pilot, Coach
Signpost, Dictionary, Map

God the Controller
God the Nurturer

What I'm wondering is... do the metaphors students select correspond to their attitudes towards autonomy?

I would imagine that those who see the teacher as a utility would be predisposed towards self-directed study.

So I think you can wrap that up.

Maybe not... it certainly feels right, but I still have a few concerns...

I asked students to give reasons for their choices too. A metaphor can have many aspects, so we need to know which they are focusing on.
Although metaphors do seem to be connected to beliefs, there are often differences between what people think and what they do.

Because of systemic resistance?

And some of these metaphors become so entrenched that they leave little room for any other metaphor.

Sometimes yes, but also through a lack of self-awareness or self-discipline.

Example?

The digital native/digital immigrant metaphor has been very alluring. Even though it is oversimplistic (and in some ways just plain wrong) it is such a compelling metaphor it’s been influencing policy decisions.

How about mixed metaphors?

Yes, there were a number... and I think that’s quite healthy, perhaps the point to a more nuanced view of education.

I’d like to know not just what metaphors tell us about beliefs, but if they can tell us anything about practice.

Specifically, I’d like to explore the connection between metaphors for learning and autonomous learning.
ARE YOU WAITING FOR SOMETHING?

YOU JUST WANT SOMETHING FOR YOUR MONDAY MORNING CLASS, DON'T YOU?

DO TEACHERS EVER REALLY WANT ANYTHING ELSE?

THANKS!

SIGH... OK. I'LL CHUCK A COUPLE OF WORKSHEETS ON MY WEBSITE

BUT I THINK THIS IS ABOUT MORE THAN JUST A CLASS ACTIVITY. FIRST, WE NEED TO UNCOVER THE METAPHORS

. . . THEN, IF NECESSARY, WE CAN SMASH THEM.

. . . AND FINALLY, REPLACE THEM WITH OUR SHINY NEW CONCEPTS

THE METAPHOR IS A CATALYST FOR POSITIVE CHANGE...

SO, ANY QUESTIONS?

I THINK I SEE MYSELF AS A ROADIE

WELL, THERE IS ONE OBVIOUS ONE... WHAT IS YOUR METAPHOR FOR TEACHING?

I SET UP ALL THE GEAR, TUNE THE GUITARS, AND THEN LEAVE THE STAGE READY FOR THE ROCK STARS

BYE!