Metaphor-based Instruction in EFL Business Classes: The case of 1st year MA Business Students at Laghouat University-Algeria (2011-2012)

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Abstract
This research work sets to test empirically the theoretical grounds on which cognitive linguistics-inspired metaphor teaching is based; using congruent quantitative assessment of the subjects’ performances in the experimental group and the control group in a sequence of studies. Metaphor awareness hypothesis has been tested to show its effects on learners’ achievements in acquiring, integrating and recalling specialized vocabulary. The groups who participated in the study were first year MA Business students at Laghouat University. The variables were, further, controlled throughout the study to arrive at accurate conclusions about the introduced material. The findings of the study confirm that metaphors are part and parcel of business discourse and establish, therefore, the relevance of implementing metaphor-based instruction in business classes. It also provides linguistic evidence in support of the CMT claim that subjects’ awareness of metaphorical expressions increases their potential for vocabulary acquisition. This additional channel for vocabulary teaching may be considered as essential to a better understanding of business discourse.

Indexing terms/Keywords
Business English, cognitive language teaching, Conceptual Metaphors, ESP.

Academic Discipline and Sub-Disciplines
Education/ Teacher Education

SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION
Teaching Practice

TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)
Experimental research

INTRODUCTION
Teaching language for specialized purposes is a new field compared to more traditional approaches to teaching English. It accommodates subject-matter and methodology akin to learners’ perceived and felt needs, interests and wants. Hence, learners’ cognitive abilities and strategies of learning constitute departure points on which linguists and language teachers model and plan their teaching practice. Among others, cognitive, constructivist and neural theories of language description are all accommodated into English for Specific Purpose (ESP henceforth) teaching so as to keep abreast of recent changes in the field.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
Students enrolled in a business course, at Amar Telidji University, Laghouat, demonstrate a low level of linguistic competency in English. Witness, their inability at reading and comprehending texts in the field of economics. The weak entry profile of the vast majority of learners in the target language signals the need to bring remedial action to the situation by both syllabus designers and practitioners. Subsequently, the implementation of new teaching techniques that provide room for enhancement activities and motivate students to learn specialised vocabulary are given prime importance at the department of economics, Laghouat University. Henceforth, this still-fresh area of inquiry contributes its part to pointing out at the usefulness of metaphor teaching in business classes as an additional channel for vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, the central problem of this study is to determine what influence, if any, the use of metaphor-awareness raising in Business classes has on learners’ acquisition and retention of vocabulary.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES
1. To what extent can conceptual grounding help Business English learners acquire and use new vocabulary items?
2. What are the effects of conceptual metaphor awareness on students’ comprehension of texts?
3. What are the effects of metaphor awareness raising activities on students’ mid-term retention of metaphorical language?
1. Integrating conceptual grounding into the teaching of vocabulary improves learners' capability of vocabulary recall and use.

2. Conceptual metaphor awareness improves students' reading comprehension.

3. The use of cognitive linguistics-inspired metaphor teaching in Economics Master class at the University of Laghouat increases learners' mid-term retention of metaphorical language

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Because of its conceptual nature, metaphor teaching is a thriving field of study that seeks to establish a viable methodology, accounting for both learners’ language processing abilities and their targeted instructional communicative strategies. Besides its functional value in discourse, metaphor’s semantic and pragmatic functions might be exploited in classes which are in line with the communicative approach of language teaching nowadays. Possibly, the findings of cognitive and neural theories and the corpus-based approaches to metaphor description in business discourse can provide the building blocks for specialized language teaching.

Initially, ample evidence has been given by cognitive linguistic research for metaphor in the field of education. Littlemore (2004) investigated the kind of training students’ needed to use metaphor-based strategies for vocabulary acquisition. The latter proved that: ‘metaphor-based vocabulary guessing strategies are likely to involve the psychological process of associative fluency, analogical reasoning and image formation’ (267). The experiment aimed at testing foreign language learners’, studying at a British university, tendency to use metaphor-based vocabulary guessing strategies. Both group-based and individualised approaches were used. The participants were asked to brainstorm the possible meanings of the presented visually-enhanced metaphor input. The outcomes of individual performance majored the group-based approach due to the training provided particularly with regard to interactive images.

Additionally, Low & Littlemore (2009) tested the relationship between conceptual metaphors and classroom management language. Two groups of learners studying at British universities were provided with the phrasal verbs (skate over/on, run over/about) and tested on their interpretations through a questionnaire. The results revealed the following teaching implications. Conceptual metaphor awareness should be integrated in classroom language management particularly for teachers or learners planning to study abroad. The Non-native learners group outperformed their native counterparts because of backward transfer from their first language. Ultimately, a need for more concern about contrastive analysis between the first language of the learners and the target language is of paramount importance in teaching metaphors.

In another publication, Littlemore & Low (2006), recite the experiments that are likely integrated in teaching vocabulary items (idioms, particles and metaphors) and which further contribute to increasing non-native language learners’ figurative thinking. Exhaustive teaching-learning experiments are provided to guide instructors. Learner-activities account for implicit metaphor instruction where learners are required to analyse the motivational aspect of the expressions through carefully-built guessing activities. Teacher-led instruction, conversely, involves teachers-guided instruction. In other words, activities used are restricted to a limited set of already-chosen conceptual metaphors. They are relevant to drawing students’ attention to basic senses of the words besides the appropriate visual support. In another teaching model, Littlemore & Low (2006), integrate both learner and teacher-led models in a unified version. Both learners and teachers are active agents in the construction of meaning during courses. The input can be chunks of language or whole texts. Central to each model is the ‘querying routine’ which is a hook to language acquisition at large. (Littlemore & Low, 2006:27-34).

The empirical evidence provided by Liang Xiaobo (2002) and Gong Yumiao (2006) on the pivotal importance of cognitive metaphor study on vocabulary acquisition adds impetus to the study of metaphor. Important to mention is the application of metaphor awareness in teaching Business English students at Spanish universities. M. Sacristán (2004) confirmed the effectiveness of metaphor as a learning device for L2 Business learners then concluded that it should be part of any English for Specific Purposes syllabus. Learners were first instructed on the Lakoffian definition of metaphor and its distinction from the linguistic metaphorical expressions through sets of examples from Business English textbooks. The latter reinforces Charteris-Black’s emphasis on drawing the dividing line between figurative and literal meanings. (... in the case of vocabulary language teaching, if there is no clear-cut boundary between literal and figurative meanings, and the literal meanings of words are extended to provide figurative meaning, there are implications for second language learners who may not be able to distinguish between such literal and metaphorical uses (Charteris-Black, 2000:153).

As stated clearly by the pioneers of cognitive semantics (Gibbs 1994, Lakoff & Johnson 1980) meaning is motivated rather than conventional. Conceptual metaphors are based on human beings experience with the outside world. That is, meaning is embodied in our bodily existence, the physical environment or other people of the same culture. Obviously, ever since their creation, people developed standards to measure the world. They also explored similarities between things and formed metaphors with familiar parts of the body organs. Later, they succeeded in forming strong and complex words. For example, ‘the mouth of a river (tunnel, a pocket, a bottle), ‘the tongue of a bell (fire)’ among others (Sun, 2010:177).
Through increased awareness of the etymological origin of lexical items, learners will get a clear view of language description and processing. In other words, teachers might introduce words in compound chunks of language rather than isolated lexical items. An expression like ‘insubstantial arguments’ can be explained through recycling its more concrete collocates so as to clarify the etymological nature of ‘substance’ might be provided then the idea of framing abstract concepts follows the explicit explanation, arriving finally at drawing a balloon representing the argument and the supporting ideas. Systematically in lexicon can be achieved thence. Furthermore, awareness of the core meaning of abstract concepts through metaphor awareness answers a two-folded question in the language classroom, how language is constructed and how the mind structures meaning accordingly. Metaphor, on the whole, allows language users ‘to understand the nature of language as a series of strata that carries frozen within it clues to the nature of learning’ (Holme, 2004:123-126).

On the whole, what redeems crucial in cognitive linguistics research on conceptual metaphor is establishing systematicity in figurative language through enhancing metaphor awareness. Achard & Neimeier (2004) affirm that enhanced metaphor awareness involves recognition of metaphor as a common ingredient of everyday language; the recognition of metaphorical themes behind many figurative expressions; recognition of the non-literal nature of many figurative expressions; recognition of possible cross-cultural differences in metaphorical themes (...)’.

It is through exposure to the underlying metaphorical concepts that learners’ communicative competence increases. Advanced learners are likely to achieve proficiency in the target language when their ‘verbal fluency coincides with the conceptual fluency demonstrated by a native-speaker of the language’. Accompanied by the formalist linguistic competence and the functionalist communicative competence, the new perspective linguists and language teachers long for in the classroom is the conceptual fluency. However, the effect of the latter on advanced learners’ language proficiency is beyond the scope of this paper. (See Danesi, 1992 & Low & Littlemore, 2006).

Another perspective through which metaphor studies gain ground in language instruction is the activation of source domain awareness. The experiments conducted by Boers (2000) with French university students revealed various results. The participants in the control group were given a list of English expressions to describe upward and downward trends in economics. The experimental group, however, were made aware of the literal or original meaning of the expressions. Interestingly, the experimental group outperformed the control group in the retention of the studied lexis. A second experiment was conducted to test Dutch college students’ retention of form and meaning. Students in both groups were asked to figure out the meaning of ten idioms in English using the dictionary. While the control group were given the supplementary task of identifying the context in which the idioms take place, the experimental group were asked to look for the etymological origin of the expressions. The findings confirmed the usefulness of drawing attention to the etymology of idiomatic expressions in metaphor teaching. (Ibid: 213)

In line with cognitive linguistics-inspired metaphor teaching, some strategies were added to the list of the aforementioned experiments. According to Boers (2004) three ways can be exploited in an FLA context for the acquisition of conventional figurative expressions. By referring to the literal or original meaning of idioms, the explicit imagery behind idioms can be exploited by the learner. The latter provides cognitive efforts and enhances recall and processing of information independently. Second, grouping idioms under common metaphoric themes through the use of capital letters proves to be useful for categorising and organising vocabulary for learners. Indeed, well structured vocabulary facilitates retention and recall of vocabulary items. Along these lines, another type of experiment conducted by Boers (2000) with Dutch-speaking secondary school pupils in which idioms were listed according to ‘metaphoric themes’, as identified by Kovescs (1986), supported the claim. Another set of multi-word verbs organised under the headings of orientational metaphors presented to French-speaking university students revealed successful vocabulary retention results (Achard & Neimeier, 2004: 213-214).

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In pursuit of the endeavor to accomplish the main experimental study, two groups of students were randomly assigned. Indeed, equal comparability between the two groups on the level of English language proficiency through a placement test could not be achieved due to the time constraints. However, the age and the gender factors were controlled as the two groups contained nine female participants in each. The present study follows the logical sequence of experimental designs. In such an experimental design, the participants are randomly assigned and they are tested before and after the treatment. In the following study, however, the pretest served as an information-provider of the students’ level of proficiency. As an attempt to reduce the confounding variables, the two groups were randomly chosen among the whole population which consists of 195 students based on the number of subjects, their gender and age factors, thus forming 11 percent of the whole population.

After weeks of observation, the first study was conducted following structured lesson plans that were handed to the teacher three days beforehand. Subjects in the experimental group were notified about their integration in an experimental study a week before to insure co-operation and presence. The first intervention centered on business competition where intersection between business, war and sports is the main conceptual metaphor underlying competition among world’s most famous brands. The treatment took two sessions; the first one was devoted to the lesson in question and another session to the week-delayed posttest.
The second study, on the other hand, spanned two other weeks. Business cash flow liquidity was highlighted through complementary intersections between money and water. The text was adopted from BEC Vantage Intermediate in a form of an email where vocabulary relevant to business inflows and outflows was emphasised. A writing assignment was implemented following a focused written expression course a week after the introduction of the second experiment. In the third study, however, another text modeled on business competition was introduced after two months. The driving need to test vocabulary mid-term recall justifies the implementation of the third study. Observation in the second study was achieved through analysis of students’ output in the writing assignment. Conversely, the third experiment was tested in the form of meaning-focused exercises in which students were required to explain the meaning of the underlined metaphorical expressions.

During the course of the study, the control group received their regular vocabulary instruction, whereas, the experimental group received training on the underlying conceptual-metaphors in context. Both groups set for the same tests alternatively to exclude participants’ exchange of insights about the instructions received. The tests took one hour and a half respectively. That is, whole sessions were devoted to testing due to the delayed complete group presence. Important to mention, further, is the continued presence of the researcher prior to the experiment and during its implementation. Observation records were filled in and were considered as additional information resources of students’ interaction with texts and the respective vocabulary. On the whole, the pre-defined study was a first attempt at examining the effects of conceptual metaphor awareness integration in business classes. Although, the absence of typical longitudinal experimental design is noticed, the present study is an initiative for a larger scale experiment that might be designed in subsequent studies.

**THE EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE**

A set of structured plans for the introduction and the implementation of the studies was a priority in the empirical study. Pre-defined stages took place to insure structured instructional design. In the table below, an outline of three experimental studies is provided.

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<th>Table 1. An outline of the three experimental studies</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1st study</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Week</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data</strong></td>
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<td><strong>No of participants</strong></td>
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**THE MEASURING INSTRUMENTS**

The instruments used during the three experimental studies were administered to check vocabulary acquisition and later recall. The tasks implemented after each study constituted of close gap-filling tasks, sentence completion and a writing assignment exercise. The first mid-term examination and the observation grids were also used as information resources.

**GENERAL INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS**

The three studies were conducted to test the general hypothesis that conceptual metaphor awareness contributes to vocabulary acquisition and retention. The results of the three studies confirm the general hypothesis through comparing the mean scores obtained by the two groups. In the three studies, the experimental group students surpassed the subjects of the other group. The dependent variable, in this case, students' scores in the assigned close and written tests, is the main distinguishing measurement of the impact of the independent variable. It aims, also, at answering the questions posed in the study. The effect of conceptual grounding on vocabulary acquisition which the first research question tackles has been tested in the three studies. In other words, learners in the experimental group have been continuously instructed about relating the learned expressions to how their bodies function in the language they speak. The results positively answer the first question and, further, contribute to the teaching of conceptual metaphors. The attribution of a lexical item to the etymological origin can be a facilitator to the acquisition of language and its construction in the mind. Thus, it is part
of both the lexical approach to language and the neural-blending theories that seek to explicate the learning of language and its production as such.

Indeed teaching conceptual metaphors to students opened insights into the dual processing of items by explaining the motivational aspects of the words. As stated earlier, words are better understood and retained when they are dually-coded in a meaningful context. The improvement of students’ achievement in the tasks in the three studies justifies the general hypothesis stated earlier and affirms findings in the domain of cognitive linguistic-inspired metaphor teaching. First, Boers’ (2000) findings that grouping lexis under source domains provides systematically in learning a foreign language is fostered in the first study. He, further, adds that the inclusion of metaphor awareness into business English discourse teaching provides opportunities for understanding the abstract domain of economics. Conversely, the outcomes of the third study posed problems for learners’ capacity to interpret the studied metaphoric expressions related to competition. Second, the contribution of conceptual metaphor awareness to general text comprehension adds confirmation to the Natural approach to language acquisition and the input enhancement hypothesis. The best way to do as such is through teaching the lexicon as part of reading texts relevant to the level of the learners.

Conclusions about the level of learners were drawn to determine the level of difficulty for the learners’ high, average or low, in metaphor instruction. High-level students in both groups the control group and the experimental group had difficulties neither in the first test nor in the second gap-filling exercises. All the lexical items in the first and the second tests were successfully filled in. The average level students, however, in the experimental group accomplished the tasks successfully than their counterparts in the control group. The mean score of the average level students in the first gap-filling exercise reached (X=8, 8) by summing up the total number of scores obtained by the average level metaphor group students and dividing it by the number of the students. The low-level students, indeed, had lower achievements in the test. The mean score was, hence, (X=6, 87). It should be pointed out that the testing procedure that classified the levels of proficiency followed the regular academic evaluation. That is, both continuous assessment of students and the formal final examination were counted. Through the mean scores of the three-level groups of learners in the experimental group, one can conclude that average level learners are prone to the inclusion of metaphor awareness in acquiring vocabulary as the advanced level students. The finding is in full agreement with Boers’ (2000) experiments with intermediate-level learners. However, this study is different from it in the classification criteria followed. Instead of a standardized placement test, this study took as reference the formal standard measurement in the Algerian University. In the table below, the aforementioned mean scores of the three groups of learners in the first gap-filling exercise are provided. Their achievements in the second study, however, were excluded from the analysis because of the limited number of students who returned the test. Only two students from the high level were present, six average level and four low level students.

Table 2. The metaphor groups’ mean scores according to level of proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of proficiency</th>
<th>Mean scores</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High level</td>
<td>9,33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average level</td>
<td>8,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level</td>
<td>6,87</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The last research question which is concerned with the effects of conceptual metaphor awareness on students’ medium term retention of vocabulary has been answered in the third study. The results of the interpretations of the metaphorical expressions were insignificant compared to the results of the first two consecutive studies. The mean score of the experimental group decreased from 7, 28 to 5, 9. The last hypothesis, thus, has been disconfirmed. Metaphor awareness has no significant effects on learners’ mid-term retention of vocabulary items. Data gathered from the second study’s written assignment aimed at testing the productive-oriented vocabulary. The test the researcher used might be invalidly scored but it revealed the impacts of metaphor awareness on the productive use of lexis. The mean score of the experimental group was near to that of the control group with only 0, 65 of difference between the two means. Productivity of the studied lexis has been tested only once during the study but it is in accord with Grundmann’s empirical study. He tested the productive-oriented vocabulary items in the same writing assignment with German business learners. The same outcomes were arrived at; however, the difference lies on the learning context and the level of the subjects. The main concluding remark about the productive use of vocabulary can be the difficulty attributed to its applicability in learning a language as ‘productive vocabulary is more elusive, more difficult to learn and possibly more fragile’ (Waring, 1997). On the whole, the results of the experimental study are sketched out in the graph below which recapitulates the two groups’ achievements in the tests.
CONCLUSION

On the whole, conceptual metaphor theories provide a solid ground under which teaching and learning vocabulary items in the target language might successfully take place. Through enhanced awareness of metaphor in the foreign language classroom, teachers elaborate on the mobility and pervasiveness of the latter in everyday communication. By doing so, students can creatively understand the motivation behind metaphor construction through relating it to basic human experiences in the world. Additionally, the shared quality of the human race facilitates understanding universally-shared metaphors. Conversely, individuals belonging to different societies and cultures may express ideas differently and create what is termed culture-specific metaphors. To avoid misunderstanding, teachers might resort to highlighting differences between how learners express ideas in their mother tongue and that of the target language. Of special interest, is the incorporation of the aforementioned techniques into an integrated planning for conceptual metaphor teaching in a Business classroom where English is considered as a foreign language.

REFERENCES


