Metaphor Interpretation of a Short Story Used in a Classroom : "the Bird and the Cage"

การตีความความหมายอุปลักษณ์จากเรื่องสั้นที่ใช้ในกรณีศึกษา "the Bird and the Cage"

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Abstract

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor is a figure of speech which refers to something else that is not literally true. It is something abstract which is difficult for students to understand. This study of metaphor interpretation of a short story used in a classroom aimed to look closely at the 32 of 2nd year English major students' strategies of metaphor interpretation of English and study the relation of cultural background between Thai and English enhancing them to work out the interpretation. The metaphors in this study were words, phrases, and expressions in the story "the Bird and the Cage" by Paulo Coelho (2010).

The results showed the strategies taken by the students to work out the metaphorical meanings corresponded to several theories : denotative meanings, contextual clues, imagination with miming, and cultural experiences of both Thai and English. Cultural background allowed the students

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to link the differences between their native language and English to enhance deeper understanding of metaphors. It is important for a teacher of English to teach students to understand the similarities and differences of culture of both languages, so they can apply this kind of figurative language to daily communication creatively and effectively.

Keywords : Denotative Meaning Figurative Language Metaphorical Meaning

บทคัดย่อ

อุปลักษณ์เป็นการสื่อความหมายในลักษณะเปรียบเทียบระหว่างสิ่งหนึ่งกับอีกสิ่งหนึ่ง โดยอ้างถึงอีกสิ่งที่ไม่มีความหมายตามคำที่อ้างแต่อย่างใด ซึ่งการตีความทางอุปลักษณ์นั้น มีลักษณะเป็นนามธรรม และยากต่อการเข้าใจโดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งกับผู้เรียนที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษา (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) การศึกษาครั้งนี้ศึกษาวิธีในการตีความความหมายอุปลักษณ์ ของนักศึกษาวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ ชั้นปีที่ 2 จำนวน 32 คน และศึกษาการตีความของ นักศึกษาเพื่อหาความสัมพันธ์ทางวัฒนธรรมของทั้งภาษาอังกฤษและภาษาไทย โดยเลือกคำ วลี และสำนวน จากเรื่องสั้นเรื่อง "the Bird and the Cage" ที่เขียนโดย Paulo Coelho (2553).

จากการศึกษาพบว่าวิธีการตีความความหมายอุปลักษณ์ของนักศึกษามีการประมวล ความรู้จากหลายทฤษฎี; แปลความหมายตรง ตีความตามบริบท ตีความตามจินตนาการ และตีความโดยอ้างอิงเข้ากับประสบการณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมของทั้งภาษาไทยและภาษาอังกฤษ พื้นฐานทางวัฒนธรรมมีส่วนในการเชื่อมโยงความแตกต่างของทั้งสองภาษาเข้าด้วยกัน ซึ่ง ช่วยให้นักศึกษาเข้าใจความหมายอุปลักษณ์ได้ดียิ่งขึ้น จึงมีความจำเป็นอย่างยิ่งที่ครูผู้สอน ภาษาอังกฤษ จะฝึกให้นักศึกษาเข้าใจความแตกต่างระหว่างวัฒนธรรมทั้งสองภาษา เพื่อให้ เกิดการสื่อสารอย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ

คำสำคัญ : ความหมายตามตัวอักษร ความหมายโดยนัย ความหมายอุปลักษณ์

Introduction

To understand each other while communicating, we need to know the meaning of words or phrases in the sentence that someone is saying. When we listen and interpret the meanings, it requires both knowledge and understanding of the culture and traditions of that language. Also there is an emotional interpretation of the situation at that time, including the social status of the speakers. In addition, a word that we use sometimes does not have just one meaning, but it implies other meanings in its particular context. Denotative meaning (Denotation) is the direct meaning of a word from a dictionary (Mangewa, 2019). Connotative meaning (Connotation), on the other hand, is the emotion that a word generates in addition to the actual meaning. Mangewa (2019) stated that connotation is an implied meaning that is associated with a word in addition to its literal meaning. Connotation can be another meaning that is used in communication. Sometimes it has parts of literal meaning and comparative meaning which is called a metaphorical meaning (Figurative/ Metaphorical Meaning). Saralamba (2011) stated that metaphorical meaning refers to one thing by mentioning another thing and has a new meaning derived from that comparison. It is when people use a word or phrase that does not have its normal literal meaning. People can use metaphors to convey more interesting meaning and make it more dramatic that literal language which simply states facts.

Having taught the EFL students for more than 5 years, it seems to the researcher that the students understand the primary meaning of a word in a dictionary. They use words to communicate along with the situation according to their levels. There may be a lot of difficulties for student to interpret these kinds of meaning. However, it is important that the students in higher education level should understand the comparison or metaphor. As stated by Lakoff

and Johnson (1980), metaphor is a conceptual system and is related to the system of thinking. That is to say the language used in everyday life is in the form of a metaphor called "conceptual metaphor," and it is related to the thinking system of the user. They also added that the use of language in the form of metaphors occurs in a natural way, and inherits from the experience of that language user.

Foreign language students encountered difficulties understanding metaphorical expressions every day. According to Littlemore (2004), metaphors consist of a source and a target domain. Metaphor comprehension could involve an appreciation of differences between those two domains. In order to comprehend the metaphors, we could not only be able to perceive the correlation between the source and target domains, but could also be able to practice the differences between them.

Language is a part of the human culture created for communication in everyday life, including experience, emotions, and feeling of the people through the process of communication and the art of language creation for communication. Metaphor is one of the most popular ways to describe the language more clearly.

When people talk, they often use comparative or metaphorical ways which can illustrate what they want to say better than inventing examples to describe the meaning of what they are talking about. Al-Hasnawi (2007) stated that interpreting metaphor is not a direct translation of the meaning of a word. Al-Hasnawi suggested that interpretation should be made by cognitive metaphor using knowledge management process or meaning analysis through the process of knowledge, thought, comparison and experience and culture of the language. These are the approaches of an interpretation of the similarities and differences of their own language.

In addition to understanding the use of words for communication, knowledge of vocabulary is fundamental to reading, for an overall understanding of the subject. Using all kinds of short stories can help students to acquire all kinds of knowledge, such as investigation, science, love, history, culture, and religion. The language used in the stories has been written in English in everyday communication. They are also reading for pleasure, not as stressful as the textbooks. Reading for pleasure can add imagination to readers, increase reading ability and recognition of the characteristics of the language used in the stories. Furthermore, students can get information from reading, understanding history, social attitude, personality of the characters, including differences of customs and beliefs from what they have read.

Using stories in teaching English can implicate many aspects of importance. Carter and Long (1991 : 2-3) described these aspects (as : 1) increasing cultural understanding described in the stories that can help students or readers see and understand cultural differences. The differences can help in improving the ideas, 2) emphasizing the language used in the narrative, which can teach students vocabulary and sentence structures, and 3) increasing the students' or readers' personal advancement; when they understand, they can have a factual assessment of culture, think in a broader way, understand the society as a whole, have a broader vision, accept different things, and focus on the use of extensive vocabulary. All of those three aspects are important for understanding the usage of words and culture, including the developing of ideas and creativity of each person.

In order to have a broader understanding of the meaning of metaphorical meaning, the researcher chose the intermediate level of the story, "The Bird and the Cage," a part of Eleven Minutes, written by Paulo Coelho (2010) for students to read. The researcher used the technique of teaching vocabulary

in order to help students understand, and use the language appropriately according to the meaning and words for communication in society, rather than focusing on student understanding of the forms and grammar.

Objectives of the Study

1. The strategies the students used to interpret the meanings of metaphors in the target language (English)

2. The relation of the cultural background between the students' native language and English.

Methodology

The experimental class consisted of 32 students majoring in English at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Huachiew Chalermprakiet)University : 6) male (18.75%) and 26 female students (81.25%). The sample was selected because they had the required qualifications. They were able to use English at the pre-intermediate to intermediate level. They were able to communicate with simple words and simple compound sentences. Their ability in using vocabulary was usually in literal (denotative) meaning. From the inquiry before starting activities in class, students could understand the meaning by comparing English to Thai. The process and steps of data collection were the researcher studied the story, The Bird and the Cage, which the writer used ordinary figurative language telling the story, had students read it and the researcher chose 9 words and expressions that had metaphorical meanings. The following were the techniques the researcher used to study the students' strategies in interpreting the metaphors :

1. Teacher explained the differences of denotation and figurative language : metaphors and practice on examples of metaphors.

2. Students read the story, 'the Bird and the Cage' and expressed their understanding of the denotative, connotative, and metaphorical meanings.

3. After reading the story, students looked up the denotative meaning of the 9 words.

4. Students interpreted the metaphorical meaning of those 9 words.

5. Examine the metaphorical meanings interpreted by each student.

6. Interview the students to understand how they interpreted the metaphors.

7. Discuss the metaphor interpretation strategies that were employed by the students.

Findings

1. Strategies the students used to interpret the meanings of metaphors in the target language

From the students' interpretations of the 9 words, this table showed the meanings and explained the strategies that the students used to work out the metaphors.

Table 1 The Results of Students' Metaphorical Interpretation

Words	Metaphorical Meaning	No. of Students Interpreted Each Word Correctly	Percentage (%)
bird	- freedom	30	93.75
wings	- weapon, tool - power - ability - energy	12	37.5
fly, flight	- freedom - goal - happy	19	59.37
trap	- deceiving - jealous - trouble, problem - obstacle	11	34.37
set up a trap	- plan things secretly	4	12.5
put in a cage	- uncomfortable, was controlled - to show that you're the owner of something	7	21.87

Words	Metaphorical Meaning	No. of Students Interpreted Each Word Correctly	Percentage (%)
feathers	- beauty - warmth - beautiful love	19	59.37
lose their gloss	- getting older - not charming - lose inspiration - meaningless	23	71.87
Death came knocking at the door	- dying, dying person - lose, death - Death is approaching.	10	31.25

From Table 1, 7 instances of metaphor interpretation by students can be described as (follows :)

1.1 'Bird,'

Students found out the meaning the word 'bird' very quickly. The approach they used to work out the meaning seemed salience. They started by directive meaning first, and reflected on the bird's character of flying. Then they looked closely at the context, they worked out the meaning of its metaphor.

This implied that they had employed some kind of imagination and its character including the activity the birds do in order to help them understand

the metaphor. The students tended to think about abstract concepts with corresponding physical processes. For example, they thought of a motion of a bird flying higher in the air, and moving forwards was the gestures that they accepted in employing the metaphor of the word 'bird.'

1.2 'Lose their Gloss'

Some students learned that the meaning of 'lose their gloss' was dry and inferred it as the drought. However, when asked to explore the metaphor in depth, they were able to deepen their understanding of the expression. When the students focused their idea on the contexts surrounding and on the truth of life, a long and desperate bird in a cage, they appeared to have activated their knowledge of the target domain, and filled the expression to the source domain. That was from the charming and meaningful life, turning to the desperate, and had nothing to wait for at the end.

1.3 'Fly, Flight'

The students could work out the meaning of 'fly and flight' as freedom and goal easily. They interpreted those as 'journey, goal, freedom because flying was from one place to another. The approach they used to work out was using their knowledge of the target of the destination. They said it totally meant from the origin to the destination.

Interestingly, some students were using some miming during interpreting which they said it could help them work out the meaning of the metaphor. This suggested that they were trying to employ some kind of imagination. According to theory of embodied cognition, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) stated that cognitive processes were deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the world. The mime of the students showed that they were experiencing some motion and it helped them to work out the metaphorical meaning of the words.

1.4 'Feathers'

The students were able to work out the meaning of 'feathers' quickly because of the presence of the contextual clues. They knew from the participation of the people in the story revealing about beauty of love and the warmth of the mind which was the meaning of life. Also, they referred the meaning to the appearance of the feather, as in Thai expression : Fine features make fine birds. It could be seen that the cultural basis of their Thai language played crucial role here to work out the interpretation.

1.5 'Set up a Trap'

The students began by picking up on the word 'trap,' the salient one, which people used to capture or retain something. Then the considered the next one, 'set up,' which people always do this action quietly. They inferred to the knowledge of target domain as the winner or owner of something. The source domain of this was the hope or wish for something. If the students could draw their attention of language systematically, their ability to interpret the meaning would enable them to work more autonomously and to process the target language at a higher level.

1.6 'Put in a cage'

The students began by picking up on the word, 'cage,' first. They showed their understanding that 'If something was in a cage, there would be no freedom.' When asked to reconsider it and use the contextual clues to help, they tried to work out the meaning again by corresponding to all the possible meanings, including the denotation and the contexts. They finally worked out the meaning. If you put something in a cage, you wanted to show that 'you are the owner of something.'

1.7 'Death came knocking at the door'

When the students interpreted the meaning of 'Death came knocking at the door,' they tried to work out on the word 'death' first. They considered the source and target domains of this idiom as the last period of life and the death. When considering the phrase 'came knocking at the door,' they mentioned Thai belief of death. It is believed that the Angel of Death would come if it is someone's appointed time to die. Some students even imagined the Angels standing and waiting in front of the door, and asked 'What would you feel if you were the only one who experienced this incident?" Fear was the feeling they answered. Apart from the students' knowledge on literal meanings, contextual clues, and imaginary, Thai expression took very crucial roles in interpretation this idiom

2. Relation of the cultural background between the students' native language and English

From the observation and the interview of how the students interpreted their metaphors, the cultural background allowed them to link the differences between their native language and English to enhance deeper understanding of metaphors. If students understand the culture of both languages, they would be able to draw similarities between their native language and English, so they can remember and retain the concepts. Likewise, if they could work out the differences between the two cultures, they would also be able to relate the concepts together.

Discussion

The most important quality which language learners should have was the vocabulary based on denotative meanings which would enable them to deepen their understanding corresponding the source and target domains.

The next strategy was the ability to pick up the contextual clues in which the word or expression occurred. In other word, the contextual clues were suggested as the strategies employed by students in metaphor interpretation. If the students could not pick up the contextual clues, they looked for the salient quality of the source domain.

Also imagining and miming could enhance students' understanding and could make things clearer. The students perceived that the abstract concepts of expression corresponded to physical processes. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) stated that imagination worked well with miming in order to help them work out the metaphor.

Knowledge on cultural background played an important role behind the expression interpretation. The ability to draw similarities and differences of L1 and English could help students interpret the concepts correctly. As shown in Findings 1.4 and 1.6, students interpreted the English metaphor by contrasting the meaning with their experience and belief in Thai, such as 'feathers' into 'beauty,' and 'beautiful love' by linking to some characteristics of the feather, as in the Thai (expression :) fine features make fine birds. Also, the sentence, 'death came knocking at the door' has its metaphorical meaning as 'death, dying, a dying person, or death is approaching,' is related with Thai belief. It is believed that the Angel of Death would come to someone when it is their appointed time to die. This is consistent with Al-Hasnawi (2007) who stated that metaphorical interpretation should be translated from the real world and linked it to the culture. For example, we could interpret it from the similar or different state of our language.

Summary

In this study, the strategies taken by the students corresponded to several theories of metaphor interpretation : denotative meanings, contextual clues, imagination with miming, and cultural experiences of both Thai and English. It would be obvious to say that the students needed to use more than one strategy in order to work out the meanings of the metaphors.

The cultural background knowledge is important for students to relate many ideas and to elaborate the ideas together even though some of the students found it difficult to do. As an English teacher of EFL classroom, it could be a good idea to learn about the cultural basis of your students' native language and English before teaching them in class. If the students understand the similarities and differences of both languages, they would be able to work out the meanings of metaphor appropriately and they can apply this kind of figurative language to daily communication creatively and effectively.

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