ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ

PHILOLOGIST

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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DEVELOPING METAPHORICAL STRATEGIC COMPETENCE: GROUPING STRATEGY[1]

Abstract: *Metaphorical vocabulary of the English language is often problematic for EFL students in terms of both their receptive and productive skills. One possible way of overcoming this difficulty is conscious development of learning strategies, which aid comprehension and production and lead to the autonomy of students. In order to ascertain the repertoire of strategies students use when coping with metaphorical meaning, research was conducted at the Department of English at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. The research lasted for one semester and was organised as follows: at the beginning of the academic year, the students who participated in the research (experimental group, N=20; control group, N=20), took the first test which comprised a variety of exercises intended to elicit metaphorical thinking. This was followed by an interview with volunteers (N=10+10). After one semester, during which both the experimental and control group attended the same classes with the same syllabus, the only difference being the structured input presented to the experimental group, both groups took the second test and participated in the interview. The qualitative analysis of the interviews was aimed at ascertaining the scope of strategies students use when dealing with metaphors, so this paper focuses on one of the established strategies – grouping. This strategy is based on students' ability to see the common denominator among different lexemes and phrases, which helps them identify the metaphor behind groups of words that, in turn, enables them both to understand the metaphorical meanings and to memorise them. This paper will demonstrate how, in time, the differences between the experimental and control groups grow larger and how, consequently, the development of strategic metaphorical competence results in students' autonomy.*

Key words: *metaphorical vocabulary, learning strategies, grouping, qualitative research, interviews.*

1. Introduction

Like many other linguistic concepts, metaphor has proven to be a useful tool in the field of foreign language learning. Its potential was elaborated by Lazar (1996), who claims that figurative meaning, which is inevitable in native speakers' lexicon, enables them to un-derstand and produce metaphorical expressions. Furthermore, she asserts that this is also a skill of great importance for foreign language learners, who should be able to deal with metaphoricity as their knowledge of the foreign language grows, develops and spreads. In a similar vein, Littlemore (2001) states that the introduction of metaphorical input in the foreign language classroom improves the linguistic production of foreign language learners, and generally increases communicative com-

petence since learners gradually become more successful at understanding metaphorical expressions in the foreign language.

As learners do not have the competence of native speakers, they will not always be able to process figurative meanings in the same way. Instead, they will surely benefit from the analytical, 'enquiring' approach called figurative thinking (Littlemore and Low 2006). It is defined as "the use of a query routine which assumes that an unknown expression might be figurative, or which asks what the implications of using a figurative expression might be" (Littlemore and Low 2006: 6). In other words, when non-native speakers encounter words or phrases they do not understand, they necessarily have to slow down if reading, or engage in an extensive process of online analysis if listening, and ask themselves a series of questions which will help them decipher the unknown segment of the sentence.

In order for non-native speakers to be able to understand figurative meaning, two different elements have to be connected and several inferences have to be made, whereby the decoding process includes discovering how the source domain and the target domain are interconnected. It is clear that foreign language learners have a difficult task to tackle and that they cannot achieve success without help from the teacher. There is general consent that foreign language teaching should focus on raising metaphor awareness by making students realise that metaphor is not just a poetic form, but a pervasive linguistic and conceptual mechanism. As with any theoretical linguistic construct introduced in foreign language teaching, the question arises: how much exposure to theory will benefit the students? Littlemore (2004) shows that the theory-based approach clutters the teaching process with unnecessary information, especially when learners lack specialised linguistic knowledge;

and that the practice-based inductive approach is more appealing to foreign language students, who correspondingly achieve a deeper understanding of metaphors.

In their detailed account of the inductive approach, Littlemore and Low (2006: 24-25) show that basic questions regarding the appearance, function or position of an entity can greatly help students to grasp the metaphorical meanings of words and phrases in the foreign language, especially in simple transfers of meaning. Other expressions, however, will remain unknown, often because students do not know the basic meaning of the word, or because the word itself is archaic or obsolete. The query routine includes simple, direct questions concerning the basic meaning of the words, and can point the students in the right direction. In addition, such questions can also trigger deeper understanding and information processing, during which students actively tackle the given topic, ask questions and make meaningful connections with other topics.

Radić-Bojanić (2012: 158-160) describes in detail how first-year English language students process metaphorical meanings found under the umbrella metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, showing that they rely on different kinds of information when trying to understand the said figurative meanings. In the case of animal metaphors, the students primarily focused on animal behaviour, which, in combination with extralinguistic knowledge, offered plausible explanations for the transfer of meaning. For instance, the phrasal verb *monkey around* was interpreted as playful behaviour similar to monkeys', whereas a shy, quiet woman dominated by her mother was described as *mousy*. This leads to a conclusion that sometimes query routines need to be modified or extended, in accordance with the metaphor in question and very often, metaphorical meanings

have to be processed with encyclopedic meanings in mind.

Generally, this approach helps students integrate the new meaning(s) of the word with the existing knowledge. Furthermore, it enhances the learning process and aids the retention of new information, ultimately resulting in students gradually achieving learner autonomy. To conclude, this method of vocabulary acquisition does not aim to replace other methods as a separate, special programme. Instead, it is supposed to be integrated with other approaches in foreign language teaching in order for both students and teachers to achieve better results (Boers 2000).

2. *Language learning strategies*

Another field in foreign language teaching, whose aims include achieving greater student autonomy, is the field of language learning strategies. This concept has become highly influential and widespread in foreign language acquisition because of the influence of the cognitive theory of language learning, which maintains that language learning strategies are one of the most important cognitive processes in foreign language acquisition (Pavičić Takač 2008: 26). An explanation of how language learning strategies contribute to language acquisition and retention must include a whole range of variables, from the social and cultural contexts to different factors that influence the choice and use of strategies. In any case, this approach sees foreign language students as active participants in the teaching process and as individuals who use a variety of mental strategies to organise the foreign language system (Williams and Burden 2001).

While using strategies, students select, acquire, organise and integrate new information (Weinstein and Mayer 1986). Therefore, it is considered that learning strategies which activate mental processes are more efficient and can become automatised following frequent use (O'Malley

and Chamot 1990). Complex cognitive skills like language learning strategies can be taught and learnt, which is a clear indication of their significance in the general effort to improve language learning. In the wider context of foreign language learning, this is a strand of the Language Awareness Movement, which is described by Boers (2000: 554) as a "broader pedagogical movement (…), where language learners are encouraged not only to perform in a language, but also to reflect upon its use and characteristics". Furthermore, Carter (2003: 64) asserts that this approach leads to "the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language", which ultimately results in the positive changes of students' attitudes towards language and learning, especially because students are active participants in the process (Radić-Bojanić 2008: 416). Carter (2003: 65) concludes:

"Initial research in language awareness has shown increased motivation resulting from activities, especially task-based activities, which foster the learner's involvement by promoting the inductive learning of language rules, which allows learners time and space to develop their own affective and experiential responses to the language, especially to its contextual meanings and effects".

This leads to the following conclusions: (1) language learning strategies are a conscious effort made by students, who invest time and energy into the language learning process, thus taking control over their own learning, which helps them build self-confidence; (2) strategies influence the success of the learning process, which becomes evident very quickly and students get confirmation that their effort is well-invested; (3) strategies are one of the aspects of individual learner differences because different students will use different sets of strategies, depending on their personalities and educational backgrounds; (4) strategies are thought to be very prone to changes, since they can be learnt and

practiced until they become automatised, i.e. until students become proficient and fast in their use.

This paper specifically discusses how students use one particular strategy, the strategy of grouping, when they encounter metaphorical vocabulary. This strategy relies on "classifying words, terminology, or concepts according to their attributes or meaning" (O'Malley and Chamot 1990: 119), or more precisely, "classifying or reclassifying what is heard or read into meaningful groups, thus reducing the number of unrelated elements. It sometimes involves labeling the groups, as well" (Oxford 1990: 58). All in all, the ability to notice a common denominator among a group of words or phrases is important in so far that it aids the retention of the items in this group and helps students deduce a general meaning or a general sense that binds the words together.

3. Research methodology

Since the research aims at investigating the use and changes in the use of the strategy of grouping with foreign language students, useful data cannot be collected through statistical analysis of test results, because the human conceptual system cannot be observed externally. For that reason the research relies on the naturalistic paradigm, which focuses on the behaviour of people in their natural surroundings (Tullis Owen 2008). One of the main tenets of this paradigm is that reality is subjective and socially conditioned (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 24-32), and that human communication should therefore be observed in its natural setting. Context is essential, with genuine knowledge about human interaction or mental processes best acquired not in controlled laboratory conditions, but in everyday settings, (Eisner 1991: 32-33).

Data collection in naturalistic research implies face-to-face interaction between researcher and informants. The re-

searcher is considered to be the most important instrument in data collection, which can be conducted by observation (in which researchers make notes about what they see) or by questionnaires and interviews (in which researchers make notes about what informants tell them). Qualitative interviews are considered to be one of the most effective qualitative methods, because the richness and depth of information obtained. They can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured, but all of them are open because informants can reply to the questions in any way they want and can talk for as long as they want (Schensul 2008).

The research presented in this article lasted for one semester and was organised as follows: two groups of twenty students filled in consent forms agreeing to participate in the research and did a test, which established the homogeneity of the research sample. After that, one group was designated as an experimental group, the other as a control group. Both groups attended the same English language classes at the B2 level of the CEFR, using the same coursebook with the same teacher. The only difference was that the experimental group was given structured metaphorical input during this one semester, which followed all the tenets of the inductive approach. After this semester came another test. Both tests consisted of a variety of tasks intended to elicit metaphorical thinking and strategy use, which were then reported by the students and recorded during the interviews. All interviews were done in Serbian, the students' native language, because they did not have to concentrate on accuracy when speaking English and could focus their undivided attention solely on their mental processes.

4. Strategy of grouping

During the first interview it was established that the students used the strategy of grouping even though it was not

used spontaneously. This use was either required in the formulation of the task in the test or the students were led during the interview by the author. Since the first test comprised three exercises whereby each had an underlying metaphor, i.e. the common denominator, it was interesting to observe and investigate how many students would actually be able to notice this and group metaphorical expressions accordingly, especially without any instruction or guidance. As it turns out, very few students were able to use the strategy of grouping autonomously (see example 1 below).

(1)

Author: When you look at all those adjectives in the box, do you happen to see what they all have in common?

S7-E1: *Weather*.

Author: Have you just noticed that now, or earlier, while you were doing the task?

S7-E1: Well, I saw earlier that it's all … *cold* … that's what I saw.

Most of the other students from both groups were able to see the connecting factor for all the metaphorical expressions only after the author had asked them one or more questions, which gradually led the students to see the binding element (see examples 2 and 3 below).

(2)

Author: Why don't you try to find one key word in each of these questions? One word that would foremost influence the answer you wrote down.

S5-K1: Aha, OK, I see. In the first question, it's *head*, in the second it's *foot*, in the third it's *heart*, *mouth* and *nose*. Well, the key word is *man*.

(3)

Author: Well, what was most important for me in the task were the adjectives. These adjectives are also connected somehow, with one common meaning. Can you see what it is?

S8-E1: Well, I don't know, it all seemed to me to be connected with emotions and some traits, so something that is, I would say, abstract, but…

Author: Try to cover column B with your hand. Just read the adjectives.

S8-E1: *Breezy, cold, dull, foggiest, frosty, hazy, icy, stormy, sunny, warm*.

Author: What do they remind you of if you're not thinking about nouns?

S8-E1: Well, maybe it's… some states or conditions. Although this is similar to gradation, from one to the other.

Author: There is no particular order, the adjectives are put in the box randomly.

S8-E1: Well …. *they all related to weather*.

What can be concluded on the basis of the qualitative analysis of the interviews at the beginning of the research is that students from both the experimental and control groups were equally unskilled when using the strategy of grouping, which confirms the initial homogeneity of the sample, important for establishing the validity of results at the end of the research. Furthermore, interviews show that the students are not very proficient at query routines and cannot easily apply the strategy of grouping; the query routine in this case is primarily performed by the interviewer/ researcher. The students merely answered the questions that were posed and this helped them arrive at correct answers and recognise the overarching metaphor. In other words, the students cannot be considered to be autonomous, independent learners who confidently and without help process figurative meanings.

If the second round of interviews conducted after the input period is analysed, the following can be established: (1) both groups of students were found to be using the strategy during the interview; (2) only the students from the experimental group reported that they also used the strategy of

grouping while doing the exercises in the test. This is clear evidence that the structured metaphorical input in the experimental group led to the internalisation of the strategy of grouping, which increased the autonomy of students and improved their test results. To illustrate the claims regarding the analysis of the second interview, a few examples will be presented and considered below.

One of the tasks from the test tackled the issue of orientational metaphors, more precisely the metaphor GOOD IS UP / BAD IS DOWN, with its realisations in the form of metaphorical expressions like *lift the spirits*, *be on the way up*, *bottom of pile*, *fall from power*, which could be grouped into two groups, 'positive and up' and 'negative and down', for easier understanding and use. However, not all the interviewed students were able to spot the common denominator and elaborate on it. In example (4) it can be seen that a student from the experimental group uses the strategy of grouping quite easily and even offers three groups of expressions ('at the bottom', 'on your way up', 'on top'), and the author asks very few questions and needs to offer very little guidance.

(4)

Author: Now, if you had to group all these expressions into two groups, how would you do that?

S4-E2: Well, ups and downs. That's how I saw it. *Be down in the dumps* and *bottom of the pile* would be when you have reached the bottom.

Author: Good.

S4-E2: And there are, sort of, three groups: when you are climbing and you are at the top, when you have totally made it in life, achieved your life goals. So, when you're at the bottom, when you're climbing and when you're on top – a path in life, I would say.

Author: Good. How is that connected with something being up and something being down? I mean, physically up and down, like the light bulbs above us and the carpet under our feet.

S4-E2: Well, everything that is down is somehow subordinate. For example, you are walking on the floor, so it's … And everything that is more beautiful and pure is higher up, elevated. Unknown to us. And we always fantasise about something that is higher up, that we can't see. So we idealise what is higher up. It's all great, and the things lower down we can reach so they're not so interesting for us.

On the other hand, example (5) illustrates an answer typical of the control group, where the author asks a whole range of questions intended to lead the student towards the strategy of grouping, yet the student fails to notice the vertical dimension (up and down). Instead, the only possible grouping of the expressions from the task that the student offers are two very general groups of positive and negative meanings.

(5)

Author: If you found this task in a book and it said: Put all these expressions into different groups according to their meanings, how would you group them?

S7-K2: … Well, maybe some positive and negative ones. For example, this *feel low* …

Author: Ok, let's try this. Don't tell me what they mean, just list positive and negative ones.

S7-K2: Well, maybe with some feelings. For example, I don't know, well, yeah. Like positive and negative. Well, that.

Author: OK, try and list all those phrases that you'd put in the positive group and all those in the negative group.

S7-K2: The positive ones are *lift the spirits, be on the way up, rising star, rise to the top* and *up and coming*. And maybe *move up the ladder*.

Author: OK. And negative?

S7-K2: The negative ones are *bottom of the pile, fall from power, feel low* and *be down in the dumps*.

Author: Good, excellent, really good. Can you perhaps see what all these phrases in the positive group have in common and also all the phrases in the negative group?

S7-K2: Well, I don't know, maybe it's, maybe they all represent some emotions, or not really emotions but the states in which people can be found.

When analysing the query routines the students from both groups employed, it can be noticed that the control group again showed a fairly high level of dependence on the questions of the interviewer/ researcher, and sometimes even these questions were not enough for them to fully process metaphorical meanings and utilise the strategy of grouping.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion it can be established that the progress of the experimental group is evident, not only through the test results, but also much more from the analysis of the second round of interviews. Namely, it was established that the experimental group used the strategy of grouping both during the test and during the interview with an increased sense of awareness and with an increased autonomy, unlike the control group students, who continued to rely on the guidance and questions posed by the author during the interview.

This clearly shows that the strategy of grouping was internalised after one semester of structured metaphorical input, which brought students from the experimental group one step closer to learning autonomy and successful, independent action during the comprehension and, consequently, use of metaphorical English vocabulary.

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РАЗВОЈ МЕТАФОРИЧКЕ СТРАТЕШКЕ КОМПЕТЕНЦИЈЕ: СТРАТЕГИЈА ГРУПИСАЊА

Резиме

Метафорички вокабулар енглеског језика често представља проблем ученицима кад су у питању и продуктивне и рецептивне језичке вештине. Један од начина превазилажења овог проблема јесте свесно развијање стратегија за учење, које помажу при разумевању и производњи, те временом доводе до аутономије у учењу. Да би се установио репертоар стратегија које студенти користе приликом тумачења метафоричких значења полисемних речи, спроведено је истраживање на Одсеку за англистику Филозофског факултета у Новом Саду. Истраживање је трајало један семестар и организовано је на следећи начин: на почетку школске године студенти који су учествовали у истраживању (експериментална група, N=20, контролна група, N=20) урадила је иницијални тест, који је садржавао различите вежбе које су захтевале метафоричко размишљање. Затим је уследио интервју с добровољцима из обе групе (N=10+10). Након једног семестра наставе, током којег су и експериментална и контролна група похађале наставу по истом плану и програму, с тим да је експериментална група била изложена структурисаном метафоричком инпуту, обе групе су урадиле други тест и други интервју. Квалитативном анализом интервјуа утврђен је низ стратегија које студенти користе када се суоче с метафоричким значењем, те се овај рад усредсређује на једну од тих стратегија – груписање. Она се ослања на способност студената да виде заједнички именитељ међу разним лексемама и синтагмама, што им помаже да идентификују метафору која се налази у основи преноса значења метафоричких израза. Истовремено, ова им стратегија помаже да разумеју метафоричка значења и да их запамте. Рад ће показати како се временом разлике између експерименталне и контролне групе продубљују и како последично развој стратешке метафоричке компетенције доводи до аутономије у учењу.

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