Zanjan University
English Language Department

The Relationship between Creative Thinking and Metaphor Recognition in Iranian EFL Learners

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE
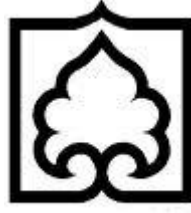
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دانشکده علوم انسانی

ارتباط بین تفکر خلاق زبان آموزان ایرانی و توانائی آنها در تشخیص استعاره

توسط

سمیه پیری

پایان نامه

ارائه شده به اداره تحصیلات تکمیلی به عنوان بخشی از
فعالیت های لازم برای اخذ درجه کارشناسی ارشد

در رشته
آموزش زبان انگلیسی

از
دانشگاه زنجان
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ارزیابی و تصویب شده توسط کمیته پایان نامه با درجه: ....

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1. Preliminaries

As a species-specific faculty of language users, creativity seems to be indispensable to the wide range of language uses which vary from slogans and everyday conversations to the most sophisticated texts in literature. Creativity as one of individual differences in language learning was found to contribute to the language learning success of EFL students (Danesi, 1986).

Rubin (1975) and Naiman, Stern and Todesco (1978) were the first researchers who attempted to study individual differences in language learning to identify the traits of successful language learners. The aim of these mid-1970s researchers was to persuade other students to follow the route of the superior language learners. Their assumption was that there was a single right way to learn a language.

It soon became evident that language learning is too complex and that different learners with different backgrounds are all likely to be successful to differing degrees. According to Skehan (1989) researchers have not been so much interested in characterizing the "ideal" language learner since then, but in exploring individual differences in the complex process of language learning. They began to study a vast repertoire of factors which have increasingly

emerged in researchers' studies ever since. The aim of this thesis is to contribute further to this new array of research into individual differences in foreign language learning.

Numerous variables have been confirmed to contribute to foreign language learning, such as learner's cognitive ability, personality, attitude, age, gender, motivation, context of education, social and cultural factors, etc. As it is impossible to study all these factors in one thesis, it was decided to focus on the influence of only one factor on students' approaches to a specific aspect of foreign language learning (i.e., metaphor recognition).

The factor of creative thinking was chosen as one of the variables since such a factor cannot logically be reduced to a special trait of talented people without any relevance for the huge number of average people learning foreign languages. It is rather a psychological variable which is present in everyone and accordingly its influence on language learning cannot be disregarded (Albert, 2010). Guilford (1950) maintained that the underlying components of creativity (such as imagination, flexibility, fluency, etc.) have normal distribution in human populations and is probably a significant factor in foreign language learning.

Along with exploring its effect on language learning, this study relates creative thinking to another factor of successful language learning, i.e. recognition of metaphorical sentences. As metaphors are an ever-present feature of language, they cannot be considered as a peripheral aspect (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). We comprehend metaphors which are literally false, but metaphorically meaningful and even amusing. The main question to investigate in this study is how a language user can distinguish a metaphor from literal

language and dismiss the literal meaning of a metaphor to understand the meaning of this aspect of figurative language.

1.2. Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

Creativity has been one of the most appealing topics for many studies throughout recent decades. However, it is interesting to know that its scientific study is a rather new endeavor which began in the second half of the twentieth century (Pereira, 2007). The schools of thought emerging early in the twentieth century, such as structuralism and functionalisim, were not particularly concerned with the study of creativity (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). Guilford (1950) stressed this neglect and invited psychologists and other scholars to pay particular attention to creativity. The trace of creativity is more prominent in the modern approaches to foreign language learning where the creative problem-solving capacities of learners are highlighted (Littlemore & Low, 2006).

On the other hand, metaphors have been a matter of interest ever since Plato's philosophical explorations. Metaphors have been so pervasive in our language, literature, art and culture that it is impossible to communicate effectively without making use of them. Metaphors constitute a substantial part of any language. Hoffman (1983) has estimated that a typical English speaker utters over 3,000 metaphors per week. The ability to recognize any piece of language as metaphor is essential to those who learn English as a foreign language. This is because metaphors are thought to contribute to several aspects of communicative language competence proposed by many different models of communicative competence (for example, Bachman, 1990 and Bachman & Palmer, 1996). According to Littlemore (2001), that's probably why figurative language, and metaphor in particular, has gained an increased research interest

in the last few decades. Nevertheless, "Surprisingly little is known about how metaphors are psychologically processed." (Gentner et al., 2001, p. 199)

Littlemore and Low (2006) have stressed that comprehension of metaphorical language can pose major problems for foreign language learners. "Learners, even at advanced levels, do not have the same tools for resolving this problem as a native speaker." (ibid, p. 23) That is because foreign language learners know fewer words and smaller number of prefabricated figurative items than native speakers; they have a limited network of semantic and pragmatic concepts and a less well-defined idea of context and cultural connotations (ibid).

Gentner, Bowdle, Wolff and Boronat (2001) have confirmed that *metaphor recognition* is the initial stage in metaphor processing. As they have maintained, "A thorny problem in metaphor has been how people distinguish metaphors from literal statements so that they know to initiate metaphoric processing." (ibid, p. 236)

Creativity is a cognitive mechanism that can contribute to the psychological processing of metaphors. Modern approaches to metaphor "Claim that metaphor interpretation is essentially a creative process which is not dependent on pre-existing similarities but which results in the emergence of similarities." (Vega Moreno, 2007, p. 84)

This study tries to investigate the relationship between one of so far neglected individual variables, namely creative thinking, on a noteworthy aspect of learning a foreign language, which is students' metaphor recognition.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Metaphor used to be considered as one of the nonessential devices mostly used by poets and creative people (Steen, 1994). However, it is now

viewed as a primary component of language owing the ideas of some cognitive

linguists like Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Their inspiration holds that expressing

abstract ideas is impossible without resorting to the corresponding concrete

concepts and that is why our conceptual system is largely metaphorical in

nature. Research into metaphor reveals new aspects of language and it leads to a

better understanding of the process of language learning (ibid). In the realm of

applied linguistics, acquiring such perception might lead to a broader outlook of

language teachers and can modify their thought and actions in classrooms.

Hoffman (1983) has highlighted the metaphorical aspect of language by

claiming that a majority of words use connotative (metaphorical) meanings

more frequently than denotative meanings. Moreover, metaphors are

conceptualized differently in different languages (Littlemore & Low, 2006); so,

using them appropriately in communication will be extremely complicated for

foreign language learners. As Danesi has claimed, "The true sign that the

learner has developed communicative proficiency is the ability to metaphorize

in the target language." (Danesi, 1986, p. 9)

Furthermore, creativity is imperative in foreign language learning

schools and universities, especially with recent growing demands of modern

methods for authentic activities and problem solving tasks which call for

flexible and innovative engagement with materials in creative ways (Littlemore

& Low, 2006). If classrooms are planned to develop creativity of students, they

will be correct places for both education and marvel. Holme has maintained

that "Linguistic creativity is a function of successful language use. Metaphor

formation, whether of real or imagined originality, underpins such creativity."

(Holme, 2004, p. 28)

1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study has focused on investigating the following three questions:

Q1. Is there any relationship between EFL learners' creative thinking and their abilities to distinguish metaphors from literal sentences?

Q2. Do learners with different degrees of creativity perform differently in recognizing certain types of metaphors and literal sentences as well?

Q3. Is there any significant difference between the performances of male and female learners in distinguishing metaphors from literal sentences?

The first question is the main focus of this study and the rest are the subsidiary questions of the study. According to the above mentioned questions, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

$H_0 1$. There is no relationship between EFL learners' creative thinking and their abilities to distinguish metaphors from literal sentences.

$H_0 2$. The performances of EFL learners with different degrees of creativity are not significantly different in recognizing certain types of metaphors, and literal sentences.

$H_0 3$. There is no significant difference between the performances of male and female learners in distinguishing metaphors from literal sentences.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

1.5.1. Creativity.

"At the simplest level 'creativity' means bringing into being something that was not there before and has been brought into being." (Awang & Ramly, 2008, p.19)

1.5.2. Creative thinking.

Creative thinking is a kind of problem solving in which something new

or original is created. "Creative thinking is the process which we use when we come up with a new idea."(Torrance, 1988, p. 47)

1.5.3. Metaphor.

"Metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else." (Burke, 1945, p. 503) It is one of the major figures of speech "In which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a similarity between them." (Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1995)

1.5.4. Literal sentence.

"The term 'literal' has been contrasted with the poetic, with nonconventional usage, with context-based meaning, and with language in which 'truthfulness' or 'falseness' cannot be ascertained." (Katz, Cacciari, Gibbs & Turner, 1998, p. 24) In a literal sentence, one concept is not understood in terms of another concept (Steen, 2007).

1.5.5. Conventional metaphor.

The expressions which are often used in metaphorical senses, and which are frequently associated with their figurative rather than literal senses are referred to as *conventional metaphors* (e.g., *That argument is a war).* However, less conventional expressions have little metaphorical senses. "Conventionality refers to the strength of association between a metaphor vehicle and its figurative meaning." (Jones & Estes, 2006, p. 19)

1.5.6. Novel metaphor.

Less conventional or *novel* metaphors have less metaphorical sense or figurative meaning than conventional metaphors. In Novel metaphors (e.g., *That*

submarine is a fish), topics and vehicles are combined in new or unusual ways

(Jones & Estes, 2006).

1.5.7. Apt metaphor.

Aptness which is sometimes referred to as "metaphor goodness" or

"sensibility" is a measure of how good or apt, metaphors appear (Tourangeau &

Sternberg, 1982) or how pleasing the comparisons made by the metaphors are

(Katz et al., 1988). In apt metaphors (e.g., *Time is money)*, the comparisons are

gratifying and the metaphorical expressions look good and appropriate.

1.5.8. Recognition.

In studying the processing of metaphors, Gibbs (1994) has made a

fourfold distinction between comprehension, recognition, interpretation and

appreciation. He has also expressed that *"Recognition* refers to the conscious

identification of the products of comprehension as types. For example, the

meaning understood by a reader of a particular utterance may be consciously

recognized as metaphorical." (ibid, p.116)

1.6. Delimitation of the Study

Several social, contextual, cognitive, personality and motivational

factors are involved in creative thought of individuals (Gardner, 1993).

Nevertheless, this study has focused on the underlying cognitive aspect of

individuals' creative thinking.

Among numerous aspects of metaphoric competence, metaphor

recognition in written contexts is the central point of this thesis. Along with

various stages leading to the ultimate appreciation of metaphorical expressions,

the major endeavor is exploring the stage in which individuals distinguish