

Metaphors for L2 Teachers and Students

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Abstract

Some of the most worthwhile activities for promoting experiential growth are those that encourage us to reflect on our own beliefs. This poster presentation offers several examples of how metaphorical thinking activities can be used to promote critical thinking skills and foster self-reflection among both new and experienced language teachers as well as their students. These activities are designed around concepts such as dialogical reasoning, argument and persuasion, and inquiry and integration, while including teaching strategies such as collaborative teaching, scaffolding, collaborative apprenticeship learning, inquiry-based teaching, and guided student-generated questioning.

Introduction

Careful readers will recognize the ambiguity of the title. Is this paper about metaphors for use by L2 teachers and students or metaphors to describe L2 teachers and students? The answer is both. The main assertions here are that metaphors have a place in the second or foreign language classroom and can promote critical or deeper thinking among both language teachers and language learners. We begin by looking at some of the rationale for adopting metaphor as part of our language-teaching arsenal. We move on to some definitions for metaphor and related concepts. Finally, we look at some simple activities to promote metaphorical thinking.

Rationale

Do metaphors have a place in the second or foreign language classroom? If so, when is the best time to begin and how should we approach this? Before pursuing these questions, it might be helpful to consider how metaphors might:

- a. promote deeper involvement with the target language,
- b. promote language development,
- c. promote critical thinking,
- d. provide insight into beliefs/attitudes,
- e. highlight connections, relationships, etc., and
- f. build or strengthen various bridges (e.g. ignorance to enlightenment)

Viewed from this perspective, metaphors certainly do have a place in the L2 teacher's toolbox

of strategies and approaches. Despite the long running debate in our field concerning learning versus acquisition, helping our learners toward deeper involvement with the target language and keener perceptions of its intricacies will empower them to swim in the language more confidently.

It might be useful at this point to consider the nature of the beast we call critical thinking.

The purpose[s] of critical thinking [are] ... to achieve understanding, evaluate viewpoints, and solve problems. Since all three areas involve the asking of questions, we can say that critical thinking is the questioning or inquiry we engage in when we seek to understand, evaluate, or resolve (Maiorana, 1992).

Teachers will recognize the importance of developing critical thinking skills and may want to explore this more with their learners. The descriptions in Appendix 1 provide a good springboard for discussion in this area. At the same time, learners may also like to know why critical thinking is important? One short answer is that critical thinking skills help us (1) better understand the world around us, (2) make informed decisions, and (3) take control of our own lives.

In my introduction to metaphor and critical thinking, I like to introduce the related concept of lateral thinking as proposed by Edward de Bono, i.e. sometimes no amount of digging in the same spot will help you find the answer. I share with my learners his story of the small boy who is repeatedly offered the choice between a dime and a nickel and continues to choose the nickel. When a helpful onlooker points out to him that he is choosing the larger of the two but that the other one is worth more, he replies, “I know that, but if I take the dime they may not continue to make the offer.”

Metaphorical Thinking Activities

I would like to move now to some simple activities to acquaint learners with metaphor and begin experimenting with metaphorical thinking in the target language.

What is metaphor?

In this activity, students are asked to define the word “metaphor.” The teacher can give a few examples from literature or songs and then individuals can work on their own definitions before sharing with a partner or small group. The best attempts can be written up for public display and then compared to teacher provided definitions, e.g.

Understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another. (John Searle)

The teacher can also introduce dictionary definitions of metaphor and related terms (Appendix 2). I like to conclude this activity with a discussion of how metaphors are related to critical thinking, i.e. creating unique metaphors is an everyday exercise in critical thinking.

Unique metaphors

This activity goes something like this.

- (1) Learners are introduced to some common metaphors related to life such as, life is a journey, life is a struggle, life is a box of chocolates, life is a precious possession.
- (2) In pairs or small groups, learners brainstorm for support for or elaboration on these metaphors.
- (3) Learners are then asked to come up with their own unique metaphors. A short list of sentence starters like those introduced in Pughs, Wolph-Hicks, Davis and Venstra (1992) can get the ball rolling.

Sentence starters

war is ____, happiness is ____, love is ____, time is ____, an idea is ____, health is ____, an argument is ____, understanding is ____, learning is ____, control is ____

Metaphor task chain

For this activity, teachers will need a box of familiar office and/or household items. Teachers can continually add to this box for future classes.

- (1) The teacher models the activity by choosing an item from the box and drawing comparisons to concepts (e.g. light bulb = idea)
- (2) The class is called upon to help list up and defend similarities and/or support
- (3) In pairs, groups or individually, students choose their own item and explore connections with concepts (e.g. wisdom, aging, heartache)
- (4) Short presentations and voting on the best metaphors can act as a culminating experience.

Make an analogy (source: Online Writing Lab)

Describe activities from column A in terms of an activity from column B.

A
playing cards

B
writing essays

changing a tire
selling
walking
sailing
skiing
plowing
running the office

growing up
growing old
rising in the world
studying
meditating
teaching
making peace

Animal and bird similes (source: unknown)

In this activity, students are asked to share and defend similes based on the following prompts.

slow as a ____
wise as a ____
happy as ____
strong as ____
funny as a ____
gentle as a ____

Conclusion

Many language teachers will already be using metaphors in their classrooms. For those of you who are not, I hope you now recognize the value of inviting metaphors into the L2 classroom. For all readers, I hope this short paper has planted some seeds for further professional development. The bibliography below might get the germination of those seeds started. By the way, how many metaphors did you find in the above discussion? I tried to sneak in a few.

References

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Appendix 1 - Critical Thinking (Source: John Chaffee in *The Thinker's Guide to College Success*)

Critical thinking involves:

Thinking Actively by using our intelligence, knowledge, and skills to question, explore, and deal effectively with ourselves, others, and life's situations.

Carefully Exploring Situations by asking--and trying to answer--relevant questions.

Thinking for Ourselves by carefully examining various ideas and arriving at our own thoughtful conclusions.

Viewing Situations from Different Perspectives to develop an in-depth, comprehensive understanding.

Supporting Diverse Perspectives with Reason and Evidence to arrive at thoughtful, well-substantiated conclusions.

Appendix 2 - Related Terms (Source: Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

Simile - a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by like or as (as in cheeks like roses)

Analogy - 1: inference that if two or more things agree with one another in some respects they will probably agree in others, 2 a : resemblance in some particulars between things otherwise unlike : SIMILARITY b : comparison based on such resemblance

Metaphor - a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in drowning in money); broadly: figurative language