THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN PEDAGOGICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract. Teachers use metaphors all the time, usually without noticing. We talk about “covering” material, “building” skills and students who are “falling behind”. This article argues that such expressions are far more than colourful speech. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, it explains why metaphors matter in pedagogical discourse: they help learners grasp abstract ideas, they quietly shape what teachers believe about their work, they affect classroom relationships and motivation, and they can become a practical tool for reflection in teacher education and in foreign language teaching.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, pedagogical discourse, teacher beliefs, explanation, motivation, reflection, language teaching.

Introduction

Think back to the last lesson you taught or attended. Chances are someone said “let’s move on”, “I’m lost”, “this builds on what we did yesterday” or “it finally clicked”. None of these phrases is literal. Nobody actually moved anywhere, nobody was physically lost, and nothing was built. Yet everyone in the room understood exactly what was meant. That simple fact is the starting point of this article.

In 1980 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published Metaphors We Live By, a short book that changed the way linguists think about figurative language. Their main claim was that metaphor is not a decoration added to ordinary speech but a basic way in which people think. We understand abstract things, such as time, ideas or emotions, by borrowing structure from concrete experiences we know from the body and the physical world. In their terms, a conceptual metaphor links a familiar source domain to a more abstract target domain, for example LIFE IS A JOURNEY or IDEAS ARE OBJECTS.

Education is full of abstractions. We cannot see knowledge, touch understanding or measure learning with a ruler. So it is hardly surprising that the language of teaching leans so heavily on metaphor. What is less obvious is how much those metaphors actually do. In

my view, they deserve the attention of every teacher, because they influence how we explain, how we judge, how we relate to students and even how we design lessons. The sections below look at each of these roles in turn.

Metaphors Make the Abstract Understandable

The most visible job of metaphor in the classroom is explanation. A physics teacher who compares electric current to water flowing through pipes, or a biology teacher who describes the cell as a small factory, is giving students a ladder they can climb. The new idea is attached to something they already know, and suddenly it stops being strange.

This is not a trick for weak students. Scientists themselves think in metaphors: genes are “read”, the immune system “defends” the body, the economy “overheats”. When teachers use such images, they are introducing learners to the actual thinking habits of a discipline. Lynne Cameron, who studied metaphor in real classroom talk, showed that teachers and pupils constantly negotiate meaning through figurative language, often building on each other’s images over several turns.

There is a catch, of course. Every metaphor fits only partly. Water does not leak out of a broken electric wire, and a cell has no manager. If teachers never point out where the comparison stops working, students may carry the wrong half of the metaphor with them for years. So the real skill is not just choosing a good image but knowing its limits and talking about them openly. Asking a class “where does this comparison break down?” can turn a simple explanation into a small exercise in critical thinking.

Metaphors Shape What Teachers Believe

Metaphors do not only reach students. They also work on teachers, and this is perhaps their most important and least noticed effect. The way we talk about learning reflects, and reinforces, the way we think about it.

Consider the familiar idea that knowledge is a substance poured into the mind. We say students “absorb” information, that their heads are “full”, that we need to “get the material across”. Paulo Freire famously criticised this picture as the “banking” model of education, in which the teacher makes deposits and the students simply store them. A teacher who sees learning this way may naturally lecture more, test recall more and value quiet, receptive

pupils.

Now compare a teacher who talks about learning as building, with “foundations”, “scaffolding” and students who “construct” their understanding. The word scaffolding, which came into education through the work of David Wood, Jerome Bruner and Gail Ross in 1976, suggests temporary support that is gradually taken away. A teacher who thinks in these terms is more likely to plan tasks step by step and to step back as students grow more confident.

Anna Sfard made this point very clearly in her 1998 article on two metaphors for learning. She contrasted the acquisition metaphor, where learning means getting and owning knowledge, with the participation metaphor, where learning means taking part in a community and its activities. Her warning was simple: each metaphor shows something real, and choosing only one gives a lopsided view of education. The lesson for teachers is that our favourite metaphors are never neutral. They come with assumptions about who is active, who has power and what counts as success.

Metaphors Affect Relationships and Motivation

Words used in the classroom land on real people. When a student is called “slow” or is said to be “behind”, the journey metaphor quietly places him or her on a race track, where someone is always in front and someone is always last. Very few teachers mean it unkindly, but students hear it, and they often start to see themselves that way.

Other metaphors send different messages. A teacher who describes learning as growth, who talks about ideas “taking root” and skills that “develop over time”, gives the message that ability is not fixed. This connects closely to Carol Dweck’s research on mindset, which suggests that students who believe their abilities can grow are more willing to face difficulties and keep trying. Metaphor is not the whole story, but it is one of the everyday channels through which such beliefs are passed on.

The same is true of how teachers describe their own role. A teacher who speaks of “battling” the class or “keeping them under control” is drawing on the image of war. One who speaks of “guiding” or “coaching” is drawing on images of travel and sport. Alison King‘s well-known phrase about moving from the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the

side” captures how a change of metaphor can go hand in hand with a change of teaching style. Students feel the difference, even if they could never name it.

Metaphors as a Tool for Reflection

Because metaphors reveal hidden beliefs, they can also be used on purpose. In teacher education it has become fairly common to ask trainees to finish a sentence like “A teacher is ...” or “Learning is ...”. The answers are often surprising. One trainee writes “a gardener”, another “a tour guide”, a third “a firefighter”. Discussing these images opens a conversation about values that a direct question such as “What is your teaching philosophy?” rarely produces.

Experienced teachers can do something similar. Listening to a recording of one’s own lesson and noting the metaphors used is a modest but revealing exercise. Do I mostly talk about “giving” information? Do I describe mistakes as “failures” or as “steps”? Small changes in language, made consciously, can gradually change the atmosphere of a classroom.

Why This Matters for Language Teaching

For teachers of English as a foreign language, conceptual metaphor has a double importance. It is not only part of how we teach but also part of what we teach. A huge amount of everyday English is metaphorical. We say “I see your point” because UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING, and “prices went up” because MORE IS UP. Phrasal verbs and idioms, which learners often find frustrating, become much less random once the underlying metaphor is made visible.

Research by Frank Boers and his colleagues has shown that learners remember figurative expressions better when teachers point out the conceptual metaphors behind them. Instead of memorising “run out of time” and “save time” as unrelated items, students learn that English often treats TIME AS MONEY or as a limited resource. Comparing these patterns with the learners’ own language adds another layer. Uzbek, Russian and English share some metaphors and differ in others, and noticing these similarities and differences helps learners avoid literal translation and develop a real feeling for the language.

Conclusion

It would be easy to dismiss metaphors as harmless figures of speech. The argument of this article is that they are much more than that. In pedagogical discourse they help students understand difficult ideas, they reflect and reinforce teachers’ beliefs about learning, they influence how students see themselves, and they offer a practical way into professional reflection. In language teaching they are also an important part of the content itself.

None of this means that teachers should police every word they say. Metaphor is natural and unavoidable, and that is precisely the point. Since we cannot teach without metaphors, we may as well choose them with some care. A teacher who notices the images in his or her own speech, uses more than one way of picturing learning, and helps students see where each image fits and where it fails, is not just speaking more precisely. That teacher is also teaching students to think more clearly about their own learning.

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