

Culture: the bridge between cognition and communication

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En la búsqueda de caminos para ayudar a nuestros estudiantes a superar la distancia entre el aprendizaje de una lengua y el uso eficaz de ésta, tenemos evidencia de que existe otra herramienta que puede ser explotada con este mismo objetivo. La misma relación que existe entre la lengua y la cognición por un lado, y entre la lengua y la expresión cultural por el otro, ha sido demostrada a través de diversas investigaciones. Ambas, la lengua y las propiedades cognitivas expresadas en ella son metáforas. La mayoría de los estudiantes en las aulas de lengua extranjera piden que se les involucre en la cultura de la lengua que aprenden y la mayoría de los profesores reconocen la dificultad a la que se enfrentan cuando intentan satisfacer esta necesidad. El delicado problema que enfrenta el maestro de lengua es cómo enseñar la lengua y cultura extranjera sin negar la lengua materna. Sin embargo, el uso de la técnica "comparación-contraste", que incorpora elementos tanto de la lengua primaria como de la lengua meta, nos proporciona una alternativa, ya que se trata de una técnica que centra su interés en la diferencia y no en lo mejor o lo peor. Nuestra investigación muestra que, siendo la mayoría de las lenguas ricas en metáforas, los ejercicios que orientan la atención del estudiante hacia este elemento, pueden resultar en una forma interesante y eficaz de enseñar la lengua y la cultura en el salón de clase.

In the search for ways to help our students bridge the gap between learning a language and using the language effectively, there is evidence that another tool exists that might be exploited for this purpose. Research has demonstrated the intimate connection between language and cognition, on the one hand, and language and cultural expression on the other. Metaphors are both language and the reflection of cognitive properties expressed in language. Most students in foreign language classrooms ask for insight into the culture of the target language and most teachers recognize the difficulty facing them when they attempt to do so. The delicate problem the language teacher faces is, of course, how to teach forcing language and culture without denigrating the native language. However, using the comparison-contrast technique, which incorporates elements of both the target language and the primary language, the focus is on difference, not on better or worse. Our research has shown that whereas most languages are rich in metaphors, exercises that focus student attention on this element, can be an interesting and effective teaching aid in the classroom for teaching both language and culture.

As intercontinental ties have strengthened during the past decade and the demand for foreign language instruction has accelerated, it has become apparent that cultural awareness is an important part of the language acquisition process and should be exploited in language teaching programs. In view of recent research which has demonstrated the intimate connection between language and cognition on the one hand, and language and cultural expression on the other, the present research into metaphoric use as a vehicle for teaching culture was undertaken. This discussion begins with a brief presentation of recent theoretical advances, followed by the research itself and the results.

Culture as well as language is not static and both undergo a continual process of change that reflects events in the society at any point in time. We use language to express what our senses absorb from the world around us, based on what is important or not. Verbal and nonverbal expressions are the way we instigate and maintain contact with other living beings in our world, and are also based on our concepts in a culturally appropriate way. However what is appropriate for Spanish-speakers might not be appropriate at all to English-speakers because the concepts and cultures are different as has been shown in research by Kaplan (1972: 245) and Collins & Gentner (in Holland & Quinn, 1987: 266).

Also relevant to any discussion on cognition, language and culture are new advances in neurophysiological research. This has demonstrated that both language and information are stored in "convergence zones" in a networking system in the human brain (Neville, 1991: 76; Damasio, 1990:79). They found that not only are nouns and verbs stored twice in different areas (once as nouns and once as verbs) but also that in the case of a second language (L2), neither it nor the concepts for its use appear to be stored in the same areas as the first language (L1). L1 and L2 are both kept separate and distinct in the brain (Paradis, 1989: 74). They have also demonstrated a connection between visual imagery, language (naming) and abstraction (concepts of known, unknown, differences and similarities). At the same time linguists such as Lakoff & Johnson (1980), Langacker (1987), and Quinn (1991) have been investigating the use of metaphors. Quinn feels that metaphors name and put words to the cultural model and capture the existing social-cultural understanding of cognition. We believe, therefore, that metaphors comprise the language bridge between cognitive concepts and language use. Culture, then, is the bridge between cognitive concepts and social interaction. It is both a cognitive process and an organizing tool between mental concepts (cognition) and social actions including language use in context.

Taking this interconnectedness of cognitive processes, culture and language use into consideration, we find that this is part of the difficulty that our students have when trying to learn English. It is also part of the problem we have when trying to explain English to them. We also know now that the cognitive base for English, their L2, is different and separate from the cognitive base that they have for their L1. We can translate words from one language to another but the cognitive properties of such words, the cultural base, is something that must be approached separately.

Harkening to what linguist and curriculum specialist Graham Low (1988: 125) proposed, that metaphors should be integrated into language learning curriculums in a variety of ways, it was decided to investigate metaphors as a vehicle for teaching culture, especially since Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 3) had demonstrated the intimate connection with culture and cognition. Additionally, cross-cultural research by Hiraga (1991: 5) gave added impetus and encouragement. Hiraga compared selected Japanese and English metaphors and found both similarities and differences in cultural meaning within similar metaphors (see Figure 1).

This suggested our methodology which was comprised of two stages. The first stage consisted of providing participants in this research with English metaphors and examples of their use, then guiding them in comparing the metaphors to specific cultural characteristics. In this way, the thread of culture that is interwoven in language use is demonstrated and the activity additionally provides a tool for searching for other cultural aspects that are interrelated.

The second stage consisted of having the participants provide Spanish metaphoric examples to the English metaphors which had been previously discussed. These were to be: 1) similar in concept and expression, 2) similar in concept but different in expression, 3) similar expressions but different concepts and 4) different concepts and different expressions (as was done by Hiraga, 1991: 5). At this point the participants then looked for cultural threads inherent within the Spanish metaphors which they, themselves, had provided. A final stage consisted in comparing and contrasting the two cultures as revealed in their respective metaphors.

The corpus of English metaphors to be used was developed based on Condon (1990: 86-91) and his discussion of differences in basic social-cultural concepts between the United States and Mexico that seemed to lead to problems in cross-cultural understanding and interaction. The most problematic were the concept and use of time, the direct or indirect manner used in speaking about or to others, and the expression of individualism. Additionally, metaphors from Lakoff & Johnson (1980) that appeared to reflect what Condon discussed, as well as others that expressed definite cultural characteristics that might be problematic were also selected (see Figures 2 and 3).

In all, sixty participants took part in the research: twenty-nine in one session consisting of twenty-three women and six men and thirty-one in the second session consisting of twenty-six women and five men. Of the sixty participants, all are active teachers, twenty have been teaching between fifteen and twenty years, fifteen have been teaching between five and fourteen years, and twenty-five have been teaching less than five years. In a follow-up survey of the sixty participants, the results of the research into using metaphors as a vehicle for teaching culture were as follows:

1. The twelve bilingual teachers among the participants stated that even they had not realized that metaphors were part of culture. In the classroom they had been teaching "sayings" (*dichos*) without reference or connection to culture or cultural elements.

1. Similar concepts, represented in similar expressions:

METAPHOR: TIME IS MONEY

You're wasting my money.
 He's living on borrowed time.
 That flat tire cost me an hour's time.
 (The same in both languages.)

2. Similar concepts, represented in different expressions.

METAPHOR: LIFE IS A GAME

English: Life is a baseball game.
 You are off base to tell him that.

Japanese: Life is a sumo (wrestling) game.
 That politician has a lot of grit (never gives up, like a sumo wrestler).

3. Similar expressions, but different metaphorical concepts.

METAPHOR: SWEET IS GOOD English
 SOUR IS BAD.

SWEET IS BAD Japanese

English: You are a very sweet person (very nice).
 That car is a lemon (mechanic has to fix it a lot).

Japanese: That guy is sweet (immature, spoiled, not likeable).

4. Different metaphorical concepts and different metaphorical expressions

METAPHOR: ENGLISH: IDEAS ARE IN THE MIND
 JAPANESE: IDEAS ARE IN THE STOMACH (BELLY).

English: I'll keep your opinion in mind.
 He can't make up his mind (can't decide).

Japanese: Decide your belly quickly
 Please come with your belly closed (decision made).

(Ponterotto, 1994: pg. 5)

Figure 1. Language and Cognitive Concepts in Metaphor. Hiraga's comparison between Japanese and American metaphors (Ponterotto 1994:5).

A. DIRECT IS DESIRED/GOOD

B. INDIRECT IS NOT DESIRED/BAD

1. Can't you give me a direct answer?
2. When you complain go direct to the top.
3. Go direct from start to finish.

C. INDEPENDENCE IS STRONG, ADULT (Good)

D. DEPENDENCE IS WEAK, CHILD-LIKE (Not good)

1. He can take care of himself.
2. She's acting like a child.
3. Do you need someone to hold your hand?

E. TIME IS VALUABLE. A THING

1. Don't waste my time, hurry up.
2. Time is money.
3. You're late. Did you lose track of time?

F. GOOD IS UP, TOP

G. BAD IS DOWN, BOTTOM

1. He's going up the ladder of success.
2. She's at the bottom of my list.
3. Sally is up today (feeling good), but Paul is down (feeling bad).

H. GOOD THINGS MOVE IN A STRAIGHT LINE.

I. BAD THINGS ARE CURVED OR CROOKED.

1. Don't beat around the bush, get to the point.
2. Give me the straight truth.
3. She is bending the rules.
4. His business is crooked (dishonest).

J. ORDER IS GOOD, CLEAN IS GOOD

K. DISORDER IS BAD, DIRTY IS BAD

1. Are the papers all in order? Good!
2. This house is an awful mess! (It needs cleaning).
3. You are talking out of order (Saying the wrong thing at the wrong time).
4. He's telling dirty jokes (Jokes about sex).

Figure 2: Selected English metaphors for cultural concepts.

CONCEPT	EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTS IN:	
	UNITED STATES	MEXICO
TRUTH	1. Objective/Real	1. Objective/Real 2. Interpersonal
A friend in an ugly, bright orange dress	"Wow! That's an interesting dress, kind of bright isn't it?"	" <i>Que bonito vestido, y que lindo color!</i> "
A party at a friend's house. "Will you come?"	"No, I have something else planned."	" <i>Gracias. Claro que sí. (aunque no tengo pensado ir)</i> "
TIME	Monochronic	Polychronic
Buying something at a store	"Time is money, don't waste it." First come, first served. Clerk waits on one person at a time.	" <i>Hay mas tiempo que vida.</i> " All people are important. Clerk waits on several people at the same time.
A party invitation states 8 pm-1 Opm	Arrive at 8 pm punctually (arriving on time shows respect for person and time) then Will leave promptly at 10 pm even if having a great time (leaving on time shows respect)	May go to several parties on same night. Expected to arrive an hour or so after 8 pm. (arriving at <i>all</i> shows respect) then Will stay until whenever everyone else begins to leave. (Leaving when everyone is having a good time may disappoint the host and others)
PERSON	Individualism	Individual
Meeting someone for the first time	"What do you do?" (work) (you are what you do and what you have accomplished)	"Where are you from?" (barrio, town) (Interest in "you" as a person as well as any group you are a part of)
On doing things alone or living alone	"I can take care of myself" I can do it better by myself. Children leave home at age 18+ and are expected to do so I'll never be a burden on my children. (The old live alone or in special housing or institutions)	" <i>Vamos juntos así nos divertimos más.</i> " " <i>Todos vamos hacer el trabajo juntos.</i> " Children often live at home until marriage, and many times live at home after marriage. Parents expect their children to take care of them when they're old or ill, and often move into house with them.
Holidays, family visits	Get together on holidays such as Thanksgiving & Christmas	<i>Domingo es día para la familia, y los días festivos</i>

Figure 3. Differences between the United States and Mexico on three separate cultural concepts. (Adapted from Condon 1990:85-93).

2. Forty-eight of the participants observed that the exercises helped, not only as a technique, but led to a broader reflection on their own language and its metaphors as well as providing a more in-depth understanding of metaphors generally and the inter-relationship with culture.

3. All of the participants stated that the approach was unique, and that it led to an appreciation of the differences between cultures rather than to any sense of criticism of one culture over the other. As we have stated elsewhere (Greathouse & Otero, 1994) this is an important ingredient in second language classroom dialogue in that it promotes learning the second language rather than fostering a rejection of it.

4. Seven of the twenty-five teachers who had been teaching less than five years, and nine who had been teaching between five and fourteen years stated they were not aware (!) of metaphors and had received no training in either their use or position within the semantic structure of language.

5. Of the sixty participants, only thirty-one tried to include culture in their classrooms and this consisted principally of a discussion of holidays. Only one institute reportedly had tried to incorporate a culture class into their curriculum and it was a one-sided focus on the United States. However, there was unanimous agreement among participants that culture should be offered along with language in second language programs of whatever language.

6. Fifty-four participants felt they had a broader understanding of English-speakers in the United States after participating in the research. The majority of these indicated an interest in applying the technique in their own classrooms.

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