Abstract

This paper aimed to investigate the possible relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ metaphoric competence (MC) and their language proficiency. MC here is generally defined as the ability to comprehend and use metaphors in a given language as used in natural discourse. As a practical issue, and in the hope of laying the groundwork for a better understanding and addressing MC in the EFL classroom, the metaphorical competence of 60 male and female Iranian EFL students was assessed; and the scores on OPT were used to evaluate their general English language proficiency. The scores obtained from MC test and those of OPT were processed by SPSS 16.0 to measure the correlation between these variables. The results revealed that, the participants’ language proficiency is positively correlated with their MC. It can be concluded that participants with higher language proficiency will be more metaphorically competent as well.

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1. Introduction

Learning a second or foreign language (FL) is a difficult and laborious work. Being conceptually appropriate in a second language (L2) cannot be easy. Studies of metaphor have recently impacted the field of L2 acquisition in a number of ways. The present study relates to the hot debates that may be involved in the improving SLA and in programming speech of EFL learners in metaphorical ways which is an integral trait of native-speakers’ competence.
The study of metaphor has a long and rich history going back to the time of ancient Greece. In the traditional view, metaphor was viewed as decorative or fancy speech, a matter of language and linguistic phenomenon. Until the 19th century, metaphor was treated to be largely literary, divorced and isolated from the language of communication and the study of that was confined to rhetorical perspective, nice but not necessary. However, near the turn of the 20th century, the study of metaphor encountered a drastically intensive movement from a purely figurative device to a matter of thought and understanding and a fundamental aspect of discourse programming (Barlow, Fine, & Pollio, 1977).

However, since then, many theories and models were offered to compensate deficiencies of traditional views that undoubtedly the most influential has been the “conceptual metaphor” framework advanced by the linguist George Lakoff and discussed by his colleagues (Lakoff, 1987, 1990, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff and Turner, 1989) over the past decades. According to this approach “our ordinary conceptual system is basically metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is much a matter of metaphor” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p.3). According to these current views, metaphor is no longer at the margins of language; rather, “it is at the very heart of everyday mental and linguistic activity” (Harris, 1981, quoted in Lantolf, 1999 p. 42).

Metaphor research and study have received a great deal of attention by many philosophers, literary critics, psychologists, and linguists. Nevertheless, its relevance and application for the teaching of an L2/FL, pedagogical practice, and the design of teaching materials is only now becoming apparent.

2. Review of literature

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used to describe something it does not literally denote. From Lakoff and Johnson’s point of view (1980) “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5).

The late 20th century has witnessed a remarkable change in the study of metaphor, especially within cognitive sciences. The study of metaphor has been so abound that people have become more and more aware of its significance, where a plenty of proposals on metaphorical thought and language have been offered (see Gibbs, 1994 for a review).

Recently the cognitive approach to metaphor has grown into one of the most pompous fields of research in the social science and scholars begin to realize that the study of metaphor can be connected to many other subjects such as pragmatics, psychology, language teaching and linguistics (Hong-mei, 2010).

2.1. The cognitive view of metaphor

Many books have been written about metaphor, but Metaphor We Live By by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980 was a first attempt to systematically challenge all the aspects of the traditional view just mentioned. Indeed, in the conceptual metaphor theory, sometimes called the cognitive metaphor theory, the fundamental principle is the primacy of thought over language, i.e., metaphor is a cognitive rather than a linguistic phenomenon. Lakoff and Turner (1989) claim that metaphors have entailments that organize our experience and create necessary realities. They show this by simply taking concepts apart linguistically and revealing their underlying metaphorical structure (Danesi, 1995).

2.2. Metaphor and second language learning and teaching
In recent years, some researchers have explored metaphor as a significant part in foreign language teaching and learning and believed that the findings of their research may have pedagogical implications for L2 teaching and learning. Beck (1982) saw that the conceptual system described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) has application in education, in general and in language study and culture understanding, in particular. In their arguments, Littlemore and Low (2006) assert that “metaphor is involved in any area that language learners need to use, understand or learn...” (p.64). Cameron (1996) confirms that metaphor can help children’s acquisition of languages and enrich their expressions. Xiaobo (2002) and Yumiao (2006) look into the application of cognitive metaphor study into English vocabulary teaching and point out the significance and importance of raising language learners’ metaphor awareness. The significance of metaphor for comprehension and acquisition of vocabulary is so crucial that Hoffman (1983) pointed out that the connotative meanings of words, however, are often more frequently used than denotative meanings.

Many researchers and linguists hold that the cognitive study of metaphor also has cultivated the area for language teaching. Shuwu (2002), in his article, gives a comprehensive summary of the study of metaphor, ranging from the theoretical study to their application to language teaching. He points out that it is one of the trends of modern study of metaphor to employ the finding of metaphor in cognitive linguistics in language teaching. Ortony (1984), after many experiments, states that the focus of metaphor study should be put on the exploration of the cognitive function of metaphor in language learning and teaching. Guerrero and Villamil (2002) suggest that metaphor might be used as a tool to increase self-reflection and critical awareness among working L2/FL teachers. They state teachers need to become aware of the powerful way in which metaphors shape educational beliefs and to critically examine the extent to which these metaphors reflect their beliefs.

2.3. The concept of metaphoric competence and L2/FL studies on metaphoric competence

In second language domain, emphasis is usually placed on grammatical or communicative competence to improve learners’ proficiency in the target language (Danesi, 1988). As the third competence, MC, following Chomsky’s linguistic competence and Hymes’ communicative competence (1972), has aroused the interest of a number of L2 researchers (e.g. Gardner and Winner, 1978; Low, 1988; Danesi,1993; Littlemore; 2001a; Littlemore & Low, 2006) leading the front is Danesi (1992) who states that MC functions as a beneficial supplement for the previous two competences and states metaphors and idioms should not be ignored in L2 curricula any more since they hinder L2 learners from reaching a native like production.

Metaphorical competence is an umbrella term which has been used to refer to an individual’s ability in comprehension and production of metaphors (Danesi, 1993; Low, 1988; Littlemore; 2001b; Littlemore & Low, 2006). Roughly speaking, metaphorical competence includes the ability to detect the similarity between disparate domains and to use one domain to talk about or to understand something about another domain. MC is believed to consist of metaphor awareness, and strategies for comprehending and creating metaphors (Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997). Tóth (1999, cited in Berendi, 2005) makes an attempt at the definition of metaphorical competence. In his view it is a complex competence, which develops gradually, and is constantly changing. It is based on the appearance and continuous expansion of the range of conceptual metaphors. The notion of MC is discussed by Low (1988), in his article, in which the focus is on alerting learners to the presence and effects of conventional metaphors and pedagogical approaches in ELT contexts. In that same article, he attempted to set out a series of skills that learners need to master if they are to achieve real skill with an L2/FL as MC.

Research in the area of MC indicates that there is not sufficient number of studies on this aspect of pedagogy and
even the empirical study about MC is comparatively later and weaker. The present setting in this regard demands much more research, so the present researcher intends to work on the following research question:

1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency and their English metaphoric competence?

3. Method

3.1. The participants

Twenty-five males and thirty-five females, all in all 60, Iranian learners majoring in English Literature at Arak University, Iran, participated in this study. Regarding the goal of the research, the participants were selected from the freshman and junior students and then have been classified to low and high proficiency groups, respectively. The rationale behind choosing the participants from two levels of proficiency was to study the relationship between their English proficiency and their figurative language competence, MC.

3.2. Instrumentation

In this study, two tests were administered: to measure the participants’ language proficiency, a version of Oxford Placement Test (2001) was used. On the other hand, to assess the metaphor proficiency level of the participants the researcher used English Conventional Metaphor Proficiency Test (ECMPT). The test consisted of six sections, each of which contained 15 test items related to one of the six types of variation that has been reported by some researchers to exist between metaphors in two languages (e.g., Kovecses, 2003). The test enjoyed high validity and reliability. Its reliability was reported to be 0.76 by Nour Mohamadi (2010).

3.3. Procedures

In order to accomplish this study, two steps were followed. ECMPT (2010) was administered to the participants following the administration of OPT (2001) by a week interval. The participants were asked to answer all the questions. For each correct answer, score value 1 was granted. The time allocated for OPT was 60 and 90 minutes for ECMPT.

After collecting the data, the participants’ responses were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) software version 16.0. Various statistical analyses including both descriptive and inferential were used to analyze the data.

4. Results

4.1. Performance on English language proficiency test

There were 60 English Literature students in their first and third academic years involved in this study. OPT was administered to the participants to measure their language proficiency level. The descriptive statistics of the test for the low and high proficiency groups is as below: The minimum scores obtained by low and high proficiency participants are 20 and 32 respectively. The obtained maximum score of the former is 44 and 58 for the latter. The mean of the test for the low proficiency group is 34.07 with the standard deviation of 6.6. Median by the value 33.5 and mode by 33 are not too far away from the mean, but they do not coincide either. The mean of OPT for high proficiency group is 48.43 with the standard deviation of 7.7. Median by the value of 48 is near to mean than mode by an index of 40.
4.2. Performance on English metaphor proficiency test

ECMPT was employed to assess the level of the Iranian EFL learners MC. In what follows, the results of the descriptive statistics of the test administered to low and high proficient participants will be explained. Minimum score of this test is 16 and the maximum score is 44 out of 90 for low proficient participants. The scores of ECMPT ranged from 27 to 73 for the high proficient ones. The mean of the ECMPT score for the low and high group is 31.7 and 52.3, respectively, accompanied with the standard deviation of 6.51 and 10.96. The scores obtained from ECMPT administered to high proficiency group enjoy higher mean than all the other tests and its distribution is more scattered.

Due to the fact that the statistical procedures used in this study required the normal distribution of gathered data, in order to see the normality of the tests scores the Kolmogorov-Smirnov was run to confirm the normality of distribution. The results of this analysis showed that the P-value for all the tests are greater than .05 which means that the sample was drawn from a normal distribution. However, a point that worth mentioning here is that, the scores of participants in the ECMPT display a normal distribution but at the relatively lower level, indicating that L2 learners’ MC is yet to be developed.

4.3. The relationship between participants’ ECMPT scores and their scores on OPT

In this part, we try to find any relationship, if possible, between the scores of OPT and ECMPT in each proficiency group. In order to compare the low proficient participants’ scores obtained from the two tests, based on the normality of the scores and their dependency, paired sample t-test was run. With a mean difference of -14.3 and the standard deviation of 9.2 and also the t-value of -8.5 with 95% confidence interval of the difference we conclude that between the two groups of scores there are meaningful differences.

In another analysis, paired samples t-test was applied to the OPT and ECMPT scores of the high proficient participants to find out their relation, in which the results showed that the obtained scores differ with each other with the mean difference of -10.66, standard deviation of 7.73 and the t-value of -7.55. Hence, we conclude that between the two groups of scores there are meaningful differences and the ECMPT scores are higher than OPT scores in the high proficiency group.

4.4. The results of the participants’ performances on similar tests

In this section, the differences of the two groups of participants’ performances on similar tests are presented to see the probable distinction between the higher and lower proficient participants and consequently the probable effect of their language level on their metaphoric competency.

4.4.1 The differences between low and high proficiency participants’ OPT scores

In order to find any relation between the obtained scores from the OPT test, since the scores enjoyed normal distribution and the participants’ scores were independent from each other, independent sample t-test was applied. The results of this analysis revealed that there is a significant difference between the scores obtained from OPT in the low and high proficiency groups. Inclusively, with 95% confidence interval and with the mean difference of -7.63, standard deviation of 1.69, and t-value of -4.50 we conclude that for OPT, the high proficient participants performed better and obtain higher scores than their low proficient counterparts.
4.4.2 The differences between low and high proficiency participants’ ECMPT scores

In order to see whether participants at various levels develop MC, the scores from the test given to them compared and subjected to statistical operations. Indeed, the participants’ scores on ECMPT displayed unlike performances. Their performances showed the mean difference of -5.93, standard deviation of 2.44, and the t-value of -3.60. So we can conclude that, like OPT results, the high proficient participants obtained higher and greater scores for ECMPT than the low group.

4.5 The correlation between the research variables: metaphorical competence and language proficiency

The only question of this study was investigating the possibility of any significant correlation between MC and language proficiency by Iranian EFL learners. In order to reach to a comprehensive conclusion and answer this question, first Pearson Product Moment correlation was run in each language level, i.e. low and high, to see the relation between the research variables. In the next step the correlation was run between the two groups of participants’ OPT scores on the one hand and their MC scores on the other. The results of these analyses are set forth in the following tables. As it is evident, table 1 displays the strong relationship between the variables. The correlation coefficient (r = 0.77, p = 0.009) uncovers that there is a positive relationship between MC and language proficiency for the low proficiency participants, and as a result we might strongly affirm that participants with lower proficiency, handle metaphoric expressions to the extent that their language knowledge assists them. (OPTL and ECMPTL, respectively, stand for the language proficiency and metaphor proficiency test administered to the low group.)

Table 1. Correlation coefficient between MC and language proficiency for the low proficiency participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OPTL</th>
<th>ECMPTL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>0.770**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

In table 2, we can see the correlation between MC and language proficiency of the high proficiency group, in which the correlation was significant at the 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient (r = 0.72, p = 0.00) shows that participants’ MC, as their scores indicated in the test, is substantially and positively correlated to their English language proficiency level, which suggests that learners’ MC may presumably vary along with English proficiency. (OPTH and ECMPTTH mean the language proficiency and metaphor proficiency test administered to the high group, respectively.)
Table 2. Correlation coefficient between MC and language proficiency for the high proficiency participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OPT_H</th>
<th>ECMPT_H</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OPT_H</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.720**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECMPT_H</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>0.720**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

In another analysis, the correlation between low and high proficient participants OPT scores on the one hand and their ECMPT scores on the other has been calculated. As it is tabulated in table 3, the correlation was significant at the 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient (r = 0.78, p = 0.00) also uncovers a positive relationship between MC and language proficiency for the two groups of participants, and as it is statistically significant, a strong correlation is obtained. As a result, we might strongly affirm that by increasing the proficiency of the participants, evident from their OPT mean scores, after passing several courses in university, their MC would be increased as well.

Table 3. Correlation coefficient between participant’s language proficiency and their MC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OPT_L &amp; H</th>
<th>ECMPT_L &amp; H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OPT_L &amp; H</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.782**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECMPT_L &amp; H</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>0.782**</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

4.6 Discussion

In general, the findings of this research appear to be consistent with the anticipated results. The findings indicated that the higher proficiency group outperformed the other level in comprehending metaphors. Hence, it is within a compelling reason to conclude that the participants’ proficiency level and metaphor comprehension are positively associated. That is, the more participants improve their proficiency level, the better they are able to infer that a literal interpretation of a metaphor is inconsistence with the surrounding semantic context of the metaphor.

Indeed, participants with higher language proficiency may be considered to have greater familiarity with English metaphors than participants with lower proficiency. A possible explanation for this may be that the low proficient participants tend to spend less amount of time on metaphor studies. The high proficient participants, on the other hand, are more aware of the need to follow a future career, and they begin to enhance their English skills and especially learning metaphorical expressions that accordingly enhance their MC which is as important as communicative and grammatical competences (Littlemore and Low, 2006).
Many projects and research, as mentioned in the review of literature, along with this research, manoeuvred on the concept of MC and its essential role for knowing a L2. Yin and Hong (2004) postulate the significance of cultivating metaphorical competence to students. They believe that if language learners’ MC correlates with their language proficiency, the acquisition process could be accelerated. NourMohamadi (2010) also found similar results that, parts of MC of L2 learners are positively correlated with their proficiency. Hashemian and Talebi Nezhad (2007) in their study revealed that it is possible to enhance L2 learners’ CF and MC in a classroom setting. Azuma (2005) also showed the strong correlation between EFL students’ knowledge of English vocabulary and their metaphorical competence, and indicated that the issue of metaphor and culture would be a new focal point. However, Johnson and Rosano (1993), on an analysis on the relation of cognitive style to metaphor interpretation and second language, found that on academic measures of English proficiency, native speakers scored better than L2 students, but there were no differences between cognitive sophistication in metaphor interpretation or on a measure of metaphor fluency. They also pinpointed that although language proficiency appears not to be a major factor in determining complexity level in metaphor interpretation, linguistic and cultural factors might well influence the content of metaphor interpretations. Furthermore, Danesi argues that gist of the work on metaphor has shown that MC “is closely linked to the ways in which a culture organizes its world conceptually” (Danesi, 1995 p. 5). So, to ignore metaphor means to ignore a large segment of the native speakers’ competence and since this competence requires a certain level of cultural sophistication, its acquisition requires time and effort to develop.

Finally, we may come to this point that, this positive relation between proficiency and MC may rightly warrant the pedagogical approach that introduces MC into real teaching practice. Research in this area revealed that by raising L2 learners’ awareness of metaphorical concepts through integrating metaphorical language in L2 syllabus, L2 learners can be both linguistically and communicatively proficient and also develop their metaphorical competence (Danesi, 1992).

5. Conclusions

Based on the obtained results of this study, some conclusions can be derived which are briefly summarized as follows: MC and language proficiency correlate with each other significantly, that is, L2 learners who enjoy high language proficiency can comprehend and produce metaphors as well. Indeed, the results of this study are indicative that once L2 learners have reached a reasonable and acceptable level of L2 proficiency, we can say that they are able to understand and produce metaphorical language (or expressions) so far as MC is concerned. Moreover, concerning the findings for the research question, it may be concluded that MC can be used as a factor to determine the general proficiency of the EFL learners. Moreover, the Oxford dictionary of English idioms (1993) states that the “accurate and appropriate use of English expressions which are in the broadest sense idiomatic is one distinguishing mark of a native command of the language and a reliable measure of the proficiency of foreign learners” (p. x). The essential message of this paper may be the bidirectional relationship between MC and language proficiency; in which the increase or decrease in one can influence the other.

5.1. Implications of the study

The findings of the present study are of practical as well as theoretical importance to the EFL practitioners in the teaching of metaphors to the EFL students. The first and foremost implication of this study might be that metaphor instruction could be inserted into EFL programs for L2/FL learners at all levels of English proficiency. Metaphorical competence seems to be part of a native speaker’s linguistic knowledge, and language teaching should develop this competence of metaphorical understanding and discourse programming in L2 (Boers 2004). Moreover, cognitive linguistic holds that there have been some suggestions for operationalizing metaphor awareness, i.e., breaking it up into more specific aims, such as word formation, semantic changes of words, as well as collocation of words which
can be turned into particular exercises for the classroom. Another implication is that metaphors serve as a tool for people to know different cultures. Due to the fact that metaphor is a kind of common language phenomenon and a major part of people’s ordinary, and conventional way of conceptualizing the world, it reflects different cultural models used in different languages. The widespread use of metaphor in different cultures is so pervasive that speakers and writers often resort to metaphorical expressions to convey their ideas, however, its structure and application are culturally determined; hence, understanding English metaphors demands a solid familiarity with cultures and special attention should be paid to the understanding of metaphor in cross-cultural communication.

The concluding implication of the conceptual metaphors to L2 learners is the ease of understanding many language phenomena that are normally hard to understand. For example, English learners find expressions like I’m feeling up, my spirits rose, and you’re in high spirits, expressions used for expressing feelings and emotions, difficult to understand since most of them do not know why they are used in this way. Of course, with the help of conceptual metaphors, teachers can help their students to explore the internal meaning of different metaphorical expressions and concepts rather than receiving knowledge passively and rote mechanically.

References


