



Space and Time: Do they Matter to ESL Teachers?

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Introduction

Cultural differences in the conceptualisations of space and time between the English-speaking countries and the native cultures of ESL learners cause difficulties for non-native speakers of English. This paper aims to unravel how cultural differences contribute to ESL learners' difficulties in these two aspects. This, in turn, can generate recommendations for more effective teaching of these two aspects.

Explanations from different perspectives have been proposed on the difficulties of non-native speakers in learning the grammatical elements of the English language that are related to space and time. The first perspective is exploring how cultural elements constitute the differences in the conceptualisations of space and time between different cultures, particularly between the English-speaking and other cultures (e.g., Hinkel, 1997; Li & Thompson, 1990). Given the relative lack of attention given to these two notions in the past two decades from this perspective, the available past research was mainly from the 1980s to 2000s.

There have been other attempts to discuss how space and time are conceptualised in the English language (e.g., Tyler & Evans, 2003) and specific cultures such as the Chinese culture (e.g., Huang & Zürcher, 1995). These attempts which explore space and time of particular cultures did not make specific references on the comparison of English-speaking and the native cultures of learners, and therefore no recommendations on resolving the difficulties of learners' ESL could be generated from these findings. More than a decade ago Tyler and Evans (2003) called for more attempts on specific cultural comparison. In recent years extensive contrastive studies have been conducted on comparisons of the conceptualisations of space and time between specific cultures (e.g., Filipović & Jaszczolt, 2012a, 2012b; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2016).

The metaphorical approach which has been emerging in the past decades provides more promising results through its more systematic account. However, despite the repeated claim that there are metaphors that are universal and those that are culturally specific (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), research that focuses specifically on the cultural differences, for example, between English-speaking and Chinese cultures, especially those that cause difficulties for Chinese ESL learners, has been scarce. Tyler and Evans (2003), Tenbrink (2007) as well as Filipović and Jaszczolt (2012c) comment that findings from the metaphorical and cognitive approaches so far have not been able to provide clear explanation of non-spatial senses. Tenbrink (2007) after reviewing past research on reference systems concludes that no systematic picture can be drawn on their relation to space. Therefore, another aim of this paper is to determine the adequacies of the metaphorical approach in informing us about the difficulties of ESL learners.

Another observation of the review that has been taken so far is that past research on ESL learning related to space and time are descriptive in nature, i.e. empirical evidence on the differences between the English-speaking culture and other cultures was reported. In addition, in past research linguistic elements were selectively studied and there has been a lack of a systematic theoretical basis. These result in the piecemeal nature of the findings. Nevertheless, the above preliminary review shows that space and time do matter for ESL teachers. However, in most ESL classrooms, lexis and grammar (e.g., prepositions, adverbs) related to space and time are taught directly, without any reference to their metaphorical meanings and their underlying conceptualisations. In addition, most ESL curricula regarding the teaching of prepositions are prescriptive in nature. There is a need for providing recommendations for curriculum planners and teachers to devise better ESL instruction to help learners overcome their difficulties in learning elements that are related to space and time.

The remainder of this paper contains three parts. In the next section, a review of the ESL research on space and time and the metaphorical perspective will be provided. After discussing the pedagogical implications, a conclusion will be drawn.

Literature Review

ESL Research on Space and Time to Date

ESL research has focused on the difficulties posed by culture on the learning of language elements that are related to space and time from different perspectives. Prominent findings of past research are given in this section.

Prepositions are notoriously difficult for ESL learners (e.g., Littlemore & Low, 2006), and this can be related to the differences in the conceptualisations of space (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) between cultures. Gießler (2012) points out that spatial prepositions are very common as indicated by their numbers in the corpora of American and British English. More specifically, the percentages of prepositions of space in American and British English of the Brown Corpus are 12.21% and 12.34% respectively (Mindt & Weber, 1989). Hinkel (2004) also identifies the gaps between grammar textbooks and the demands of academic writing for university level students and points out that the tense uses that are essential for academic writing are far more than those introduced in grammar textbooks. We can see the importance of tenses in ESL learning.

Prepositions related to space are rich ingredients in constructing phrasal verbs. Findings of Gießler's (2012) research indicate that adopting a three-dimensional approach to teaching is more effective in helping learners to learn prepositions and phrasal verbs. The reason is that the conceptualisation of space is part of our nature in categorisation, and we conceptualise space in terms of our experience based on our human body (Johnson, 1987).

It has been repeatedly found that the inflected nature of the English language has been posing a big challenge to learners whose mother-tongue is non-inflective in nature, such as Chinese and many Asian languages (Hinkel, 2004). Hinkel (2004) found that for ESL learners whose native language is non-inflective in nature (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean), the simple past tense is an easier tense to acquire. She also found that even after many years of ESL learning, non-native English speakers studying at the university level had difficulties with the use of tenses in their academic writing, and they exhibited patterns of tense use that are different from that of native speakers, such as the more frequent use of past tense and avoidance of the present perfect tense. In her earlier empirical study (Hinkel, 1992), it was found that Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Arabic possessed different terms of reference of time regarding the words 'right now', 'present', and 'past', which she attributed to cultural differences.

These examples are typical among the myriad research on exploring how cultural differences in space and time contribute to difficulties of ESL learners. However, most of them adopted a narrow focus of a

cognitive linguistic approach or descriptive comparison. Echoing these earlier attempts, Gießler (2012) advocates a cognitive linguistic approach to the teaching of prepositions of the English language.

As mentioned at the outset, a recently emerging perspective in research on the notions of space and time in language is the metaphorical approach that is based on a more systematic theoretical framework. The contribution of the findings of the metaphorical approach to our understanding of ESL learners' difficulties will be introduced in the next section.

Space and Time from a Metaphorical Perspective

The concept of metaphor can be traced back to the writing of Aristotle, who viewed a metaphor as the application of a name to other than its original use. An example is 'Time is money', which connotes the underlying meaning that time is a valuable resource and is equivalent to money. Black (1993) focuses on the creation of new meaning of metaphors that in using a metaphor, a meaning other than the original sense of a word is created by the user. Belonging to the conceptual domain, conceptual metaphors are always regarded as allowing us to express the inexpressible (Ritchie, 2006) and are the foundations of abstract concepts. Conceptual metaphors are ubiquitous in all languages and are a communication tool that facilitates comprehension, retention and future recall (Cameron, 2003). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who conducted the first extensive study of conceptual metaphors, a conceptual metaphor is the use of a concept in one domain to express and a concept of another domain for the purpose of communication. An example is love in English which is very often used to refer to a journey. From the perspective of the metaphorical approach, ideas or meanings are objects which are to be put into a container of linguistic expressions. This implies that the ideas expressed are independent of the speakers and contexts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Conceptual metaphor is extremely useful in ESL teaching, as it facilitates learners' understanding of figurative language of the target language that is alien to ESL speakers. The value of conceptual metaphors in ESL teaching has been receiving empirical support (e.g., Yasuda, 2010). Conceptual metaphors originated from sensorimotor experience which is universal for all human. Therefore, there are some metaphors that are universal across cultures (e.g., Kövecses, 2005). At the same time, there are some metaphors that are culture specific. Extensive empirical support (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2003; Maalej, 2004) on this view has been found. Boers (2004), on the other hand, views the choice of metaphor as not arbitrary but is influenced by cultures.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), there are some metaphors that are universal regarding space. For example, 'up' in most cultures is considered as good or positive, while 'down' is bad and negative. Territoriality, on the other hand, is another human instinct and it gives rise to some universal metaphors. These universal metaphors, according to them, are part of human nature and are products of our intuition. Chen and Lai (2013) provide empirical evidence on the common representation of 'anger' in the English and Chinese language. In their study, it was found that Chinese had similar descriptions of anger as members of the English-speaking culture. They attribute the similarity to the universal physical responses experienced by all human beings in anger, for example, internal bodily heat. Other research also indicates a similar representation of people of other cultures such as the Japanese and Hungarians (see Chen & Lai, 2013).

However, at the same time, there are some spatial metaphors that are culture specific (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, in the English-speaking cultures human beings are viewed as having control over the physical environment and the surrounding, such as plants and animals. Therefore, 'man' and 'control' are conceptualised metaphorically as being positive and good. In some cultures in the East, balance or centrality are more important. This results in different sets of metaphorical systems between different cultures. Differences among metaphors that are commonly regarded as universals, for example, the body (Sharifian, Direven, Yu, & Niemeier, 2008) and time (Hinkel, 1997; Li & Thompson, 1990) have also been reported. This conclusion shares the views of researchers in cognitive linguistics and

psycholinguistics (e.g., Filipović & Jaszczolt, 2012c), that both universal cognitive and culture-specific traits constitute special and temporal configurations.

The conceptual metaphor approach has been criticised as ignoring the social aspect of the use of language (e.g., Low, Todd, Deignan, & Cameron, 2010) and decontextualises language use (Deignan, 2008a, 2008b). Filipović and Jaszczolt (2012d) point out that in studying space and time in language, non-linguistic aspects such as pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic competence need to be taken into consideration. Moreover, findings from discourse and corpus approaches that are contradictory to the conceptual metaphors have been found (e.g., Zanutto, Cameron, & Cavalcanti, 2008). Given these inadequacies, more recent research turned to the empirical direction by researching the English language itself through the analysis of discourse and the use of corpora or linguistic metaphor, i.e. the linguistic manifestations of conceptual metaphors (e.g., Cameron, 2003; Littlemore, Chen, Koester, & Barden, 2011; Steen et al., 2010).

Despite the strengths of the metaphorical perspective in explaining how the conceptualisation of space and time from the English-speaking culture perspective contributes to the difficulties of learners in their ESL learning, several issues remain. Firstly, the theorists and researchers of the metaphorical approach undertake their theoretical development and research solely from the perspective of the English-speaking cultures. An increased understanding of metaphors in the English language undoubtedly helps teachers and curriculum planners to improve teaching. However, without knowledge of the native languages of ESL learners, the increased understanding can only be of a limited value. The second limitation of the metaphor research is that no specific recommendations on ESL are provided. Even if some recommendations are made, they often lack comprehensiveness and very often are preliminary ideas, such as raising learners' awareness of metaphors (see Littlemore & Low, 2006). Littlemore and Low (2006) provide three approaches to the teaching of figurative language and recommendations on how to use figurative thinking to enhance the four language skills. Again, their ideas lack detail and comprehensiveness. These recommendations are proposed from the perspective of the English-speaking culture and no consideration is given on the native cultures of ESL learners, and therefore may not be able to assist learners belonging to specific cultures to overcome their difficulties. In addition, little is known on the effectiveness of these recommendations, as there has been little evaluative research on these proposals on teaching. As pointed out by Littlemore and Low (2006), the metaphorical approach is eclectic and slippery, and this young discipline is hardly based on a systematic theoretical foundation.

Pedagogical Implications

Instead of implementing pedagogical recommendations in a piecemeal manner, for example, on the teaching of tenses for university level academic writing (Hinkel, 2004) and teaching the three tenses of present progressive, past simple, and past progressive at the beginning stage (Hinkel, 1992, 1997) as suggested by ESL scholars, there is a need to provide ESL learners an overall orientation of space and time of the English-speaking culture. The most direct way is to provide a brief outline of the major differences between, for example, the Eastern and Western cultures in the conceptualisation of time (such as the beginning of a day) and the directions as well as the connotations of different directions for Asian ESL learners. Hinkel (1992), based on her empirical findings, points out that extensive ESL instruction can only narrow the gap in conceptualisations of time between native and non-native speakers to a limited extent, as learners relied heavily on their native referential construct in their ESL learning of temporality (Dietrich, Klein, & Noyau, 1995). Therefore, she suggests the teaching of the English conceptualisation of time before the actual instruction of tense in order that non-native speakers can become familiar with the conceptualisation of time of the English-speaking culture (Hinkel, 1997). The simple, linear, and successive conceptualisation of time and its related causal relationship of the English culture (Tenbrink, 2007) can be introduced to ESL learners. In space things co-exist. ESL learners should be taught the relations between objects that are emphasised in the English-speaking culture.

In addition to these suggestions, the use of novel approaches instead of prescriptive instruction approaches on the lexical and grammatical elements related to space and time are recommended (e.g., Wolff, 2011). The integration of language and contents of subject not only raises learners' motivation but also increases learners' understanding of how space and time are conceptualised in the English-speaking culture, as well as the differences with that of their native linguistic cultures. The limited effectiveness in changing ESL learners' conceptualisations of space and time does not imply that the direct grammatical instruction and the training of form are to be abandoned. It is recommended that the training of form is to be harnessed with conceptual teaching. The focus and training of form has been found to be popular even among teachers who regard themselves as practising Communicative language teachers (Spada, 1986). This shows that ESL teachers are receptive to the teaching of language forms.

As described earlier, the metaphorical approach suffers from some inadequacies. However, metaphors are valuable in overcoming the difficulties of ESL learners in their learning of ESL elements pertaining to space and time. The metaphorical approach is based on the assumption that self-understanding is a process of negotiation and re-negotiation of personal meanings based on experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This makes the metaphorical approach highly consistent with the Communicative Approach, in which learners' subjective meanings is a key element in teaching. Explicit instruction of conceptual metaphors has been found to be effective in ESL vocabulary learning (e.g., Yasuda, 2010), reading comprehension (Boers, 2000), and in English for Specific Purposes such as engineering (Roldán-Riejos & Mansilla, 2013). Echoing the earlier attempts that focus on the difficulties of ESL learners, Littlemore, Chen, Koester, and Barden (2011) identified that a lack of understanding and misunderstanding of metaphors are two influential factors that cause difficulties in ESL learning. An implication is that direct instruction of metaphors is essential. However, no concrete directions and teaching models are available to date.

Conclusion

The results of this research indicate the piecemeal research on ESL learners' difficulties in learning elements pertaining to space and time in ESL. They also suggest how the cultural, cognitive and metaphorical approaches treat space and time and how native speakers of English use metaphors to create new meanings, but not how ESL learners could overcome their learning difficulties. The main conclusion of this research is that there is a need both to extend the metaphorical approach in terms of theory and research. At the same time, practical recommendations based on the findings on both cross-cultural comparison research and the metaphorical approach need to be devised.

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