

Featured Article

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“I don’t like bad weather, but I still like camping”: Learners’ metaphors and learner autonomy

Darren Elliott, Sugiyama Women’s University



(Originally presented at the 48th annual meeting of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL), Aston University, Birmingham, UK on September 4th, 2015. This article is adapted from an online post at <http://www.livesofteachers.com/2015/09/03/my-teacher-is-a-watering-can-metaphors-and-autonomous-learning/>)

Abstract

In order to make sense of abstract thought, humans have developed a rich facility for metaphor. These metaphors are loaded with meanings to be unpacked and interpreted. Research into education has a strong tradition of metaphor analysis, utilising metaphors for education to categorise differing attitudes towards the learning process. This work suggests the potential of metaphors as a shorthand for attitude systems. If this promise can be realized, then researchers will have a powerful tool at hand. This study seeks to test the hypothesis that learners’ metaphors for learning may reveal something about their perspectives and attitudes, with a particular focus on learner autonomy. In this study, the researcher assessed the propensity of Japanese university students for autonomous language learning using surveys developed by Shimo (2008) and Murase (2015). The same students were asked to complete short sentence fragments ‘A teacher is ...’, ‘A student is...’, and ‘A classroom is...’ using metaphors, in writing. The complete sentences were subject to content analysis and followed up with one-to-one interviews.

Literature

The analysis of the metaphors employed by teachers and/or learners is a well-established technique. Herron (1982) and later Nattinger (1984) attempted to put language teaching methodologies into metaphorical contexts. Herron suggested that the grammar translation method was equivalent to gymnastic training—both require exertion and practice in order to attain proficiency. Nattinger’s disquiet in attempting to apply a computational metaphor to the relatively new methodology (at that time) of communicative language teaching perhaps reflects the computer’s place in society at that time; as computer technology has become entangled with human life, the human brain as computer metaphor has become dominant.

The relationships between metaphor, thought and society are fluid. As some work to express complex systems or ideas with metaphors, others analyse the metaphors we use to find out what lies beneath. Oxford et al. (1998) undertook an extensive survey of teacher and researcher narratives, and organised teachers’ conceptions into four major philosophical viewpoints on education; social order, cultural transmission, learner-centred growth and social reform. Education as social order, for example, contains metaphors in the teacher as manufacturer subset suggesting a focus on efficiency, uniformity and end product. de Guerrero & Villamil (2002) categorised the teacher’s role by metaphor into nine groupings that appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Metaphors of the Teacher’s Role

| Category | Example | Counterpoint |
|--|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| teacher as co-operative leader | movie director | learner as active participant |
| teacher as provider of knowledge | TV set | learner as recipient of knowledge |
| teacher as challenger or agent of change | lion tamer | learner as object of change |
| teacher as nurturer | gardener | learner as developing organism |
| teacher as innovator | explorer | learner as resistor |
| teacher as provider of tools | tool carrier | learner as constructor |
| teacher as artist | potter | learner as raw material |
| teacher as repairer | mechanic | learner as defective individual |
| teacher as gym instructor | aerobics trainer | learner as gymnast |

Research has shown that the favoured metaphors people use reflect their attitudes and perceptions. For this study, I wanted to test the connection between metaphor and learner autonomy. The challenge was to measure autonomy. Learner autonomy is multidimensional and dynamic (Benson, 2013) and thus very hard to measure effectively. I drew on two previous studies, both of which took place in higher education in Japan.

Shimo (2008) attempted to discover if the level of self-perceived learner autonomy was linked to language proficiency. From a working definition of learner autonomy as the capacity to take responsibility for one's own learning, she created a survey which assessed three domains; orientation for reflecting on learning processes, orientation for enhancing learning opportunities and orientation for reflecting on language abilities. The resulting eighteen question tool was a useful starting point for my study. Murase (2015) developed a far more imposing questionnaire of 113 points, in an attempt to measure autonomy across four dimensions; technical, psychological, political-philosophical and socio-cultural, which are explained in more detail in Table 2.

Table 2
Dimensions of Learner Autonomy

| Dimension | Definition | Example Statement |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| technical | the ability to set goals, plan learning and study independently | <i>I set achievable goals in learning English.</i> |
| psychological | motivational and affective factors | <i>If I worry about learning English, I know how I can cope with it.</i> |
| political-philosophical | attitudes towards authority and hierarchy | <i>Students should always follow their teacher's instructions.</i> |
| socio-cultural | orientation towards other learners and cultural differences in learning | <i>If I am doing something different from other students, I feel worried.</i> |

Methodology

For this preliminary study, I melded elements from both questionnaires to focus on the learner's orientation to others (other learners and teachers), self-awareness, and the technical capacity to practice independent learning. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was administered in Japanese to five classes of second-year English majors at a Japanese women's university. Students were asked to mark their level of agreement with a series of statements on a five point scale. The statements were grouped into four categories which broadly correspond to the domains used in Murase's measurement (2015). The Lickert scores were given numerical values, with higher scores indicating an orientation towards autonomy in that domain.

Next, the same students were asked to complete four sentences with metaphors; A teacher is like ____, A language learner is like ____, A classroom is like ____, Language learning is like ____. They were also asked to give reasons for their metaphor selection. Finally, the students were invited to semi-structured interviews. The first part of each interview related to their language learning experience and attitudes, and in the second part they were asked to select pictures which best matched their metaphors for learning. These pictures were generated from the learners' questionnaires.

Discussion

The larger data set (the first two questionnaires) is still under analysis, so here I would like to focus on just one of the students who agreed to be interviewed, 'Melanie'. In Figure 1 we can see the raw data from the learner autonomy measurement questionnaire. Melanie appears to have a very strong orientation to learning with others (social) and her motivation seems to be fairly strong (affective), but she still expresses a level of dependence on the teacher (hierarchical).

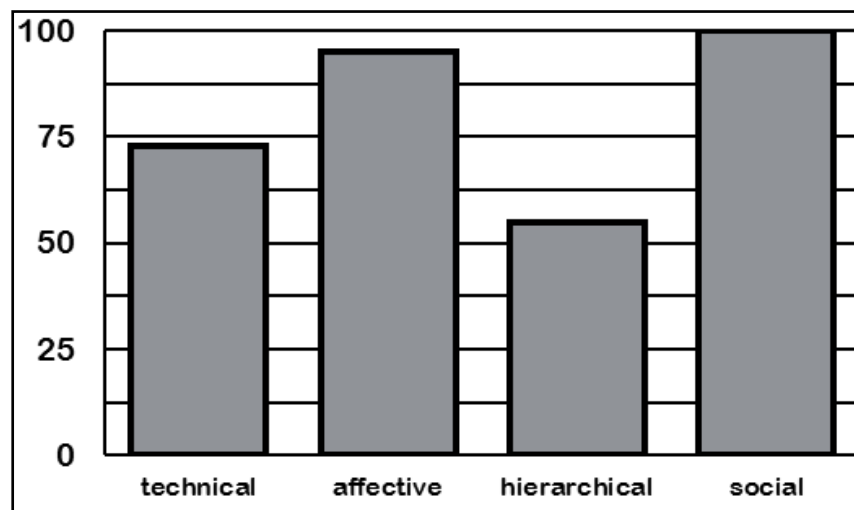


Figure 1. Melanie's Results

The interview began with some general questions to get a sense of Melanie's motivation for learning English, her study habits, and her ideas about the roles of teachers and learners. Here are some of her comments.

"To find my opinion, and say my opinion strongly, is my main purpose."

"I have to decide which skills I should use, depends on time."

"Teachers stimulate us. They help us get a wider prospect."

"The teacher has to find a real passion to students and help students."

Next we looked at a selection of pictures, generated from the student questionnaires. To describe the teacher, the first picture she selected was an image of god, taken from Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam'.

“Sometimes I think they are a kind of god. They are very... I respect them so sometimes I believe all their opinions. I understand all their opinions don't suit me. I too much believe them sometimes.”

This metaphor is in line with her hierarchical measurement, although there is a certain level of self-awareness that wasn't previously apparent. Both indicate a strong respect for the teacher which at times prevents her from thinking critically about her own learning.

Talking of the class, she showed how important the social aspect of learning is for her. She selected a picture of a family enjoying a meal together.

“We have a chat group, and we always ask questions. They never ignore me so it's very warm. If I have a mistake, they don't laugh. They accept me.”

Her metaphors for learning are intriguing. She comes across as very optimistic, which reflects her strong 'affective' score on the measurement. But it seems that she sees positive and negative situations as something to be borne or muddled through, out of her control. This bears out the lower score she received for technical autonomy on the measurement. She first selected a tangled ball of string.

“Sometimes I get some problems, but I try to solve them. I can solve them very slowly. In this ball, I have one jewellery. I overcame many problems. I know in this ball there is one thing which is very good, so I can find it.”

She also chooses a picture of a campsite.

“Sometimes I couldn't stand, because I studied really hard but I couldn't get enough result, so sometimes I have to stand. But sometimes the weather changes and it's sunny.”

“I have never hated learning language. (Campers) don't like bad weather, but they still love camping.”

Melanie scores highly in the affective domain. She is a positive and resilient learner, so although she may not always have the tools to get through difficulties, she has the character to bear them.

She is at pains to point out what learning is not, for her. She indicates a picture of a battlefield.

“It’s not a battle. It doesn’t hurt me.”

Conclusions

This is very much a ‘research in progress’. Considered as such, the initial findings are promising. The raw data suggest that there are links between students’ capacity for autonomous learning and the metaphors they use to conceptualise the learning experience. At this stage, I would like to hone the autonomy measurement tool to establish a more even balance between items testing each of the four domains described by Murase (2015), which I recast as technical, affective, hierarchical and social domains. To be more thorough, it may be beneficial to observe the subjects learning in action (in class and out of class) to see if what they believe they are doing tallies with what they are actually doing. As for the metaphor analysis, triangulating the interviews with written reports or other data may open up a richer view of the students’ metaphorical framework. I see value in exploring metaphors with learners in order to open up their perspectives on the learning experience. Metaphors allow learners to express quite complex ideas with fairly simple language, and also to reach understandings which are beyond their linguistic level in other terms. I believe that metaphors are a shortcut to mutual understanding between teacher and student, and in future research I would like to identify this more explicitly.

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About the Author

Darren Elliott has been teaching English for over a decade, mostly in Japan with a stint in UK higher education in the middle. He has taught at private conversation schools, businesses and universities and has even been allowed to train other teachers. His blog, “the lives of teachers,” can be found at www.livesofteachers.com.

About the Learner Development (LD) SIG

The Learner Development SIG is a network of around 200 members from all over the world who have an interest in developing and researching practices that aim to support autonomous learning and teaching. We share a commitment to exploring connections between:

- our experiences as learners & our practices as teachers
- learners’ experiences inside & outside the classroom.

We offer chances to get connected with other teachers, students and researchers through:

- our bilingual newsletter Learning Learning
- email, our discussion list, and other online resources
- local area get-togethers in different parts of Japan
- a forum (and great party!) at the annual JALT conference
- links with similar groups in other parts of the world.

Our research-based publications include *Autonomy You Ask!* (2003) and *More Autonomy You Ask!* (2006), *Realizing Autonomy* (2011), *Learner Development: Different Cases, Different Interests* (2014) and *Collaborative Learning in Learner Development* (2014). We also provide grants to support research, conference participation, and SIG membership.

Appendix

Questionnaire (English Translation)

This questionnaire will not affect your grade for the course, so please answer honestly. Your responses will be used for research purposes. Your identity will be kept anonymous during analysis, and when the results are published. Thank you for your cooperation.

Please write your student number here.

| | | | | | | | |
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| | | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|

These questions are about your English language learning in general, not only for this class. Please check the box which matches your feeling about each statement.

| | | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|----|---|-------------------|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|
| 1 | I am usually willing to read in English outside class (for example, I read English books, websites, newspapers and/or magazines). | | | | | |
| 2 | I make long-term plans for studying English. | | | | | |
| 3 | I set long-term goals for studying English. | | | | | |
| 4 | I make short-term plans for studying English. | | | | | |
| 5 | I set short-term goals for studying English. | | | | | |
| 6 | I usually think about what English skills I want to improve (for example, reading, writing) | | | | | |
| 7 | I am aware of which skills I need to improve. | | | | | |
| 8 | I am able to study English without teachers. | | | | | |
| 9 | I look back on my mistakes in written homework, tests and quizzes. | | | | | |
| 10 | I check the things from my studies which I don't understand. | | | | | |
| 11 | I try to be in touch with English outside the class. | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|----|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| 12 | I am usually willing to write in English outside class (for example, social media updates, notes in my schedule). | | | | | |
| 13 | I usually consider whether my studying methods are effective for me or not. | | | | | |
| 14 | I usually seek opportunities to speak English outside class. | | | | | |
| 15 | I study English outside class with materials I have chosen myself. | | | | | |
| 16 | I usually think about whether my English learning materials are useful or not. | | | | | |
| 17 | I usually think about why I made mistakes in speaking, writing or class activities or exercises. | | | | | |
| 18 | Students should negotiate the course content with the teacher. | | | | | |
| 19 | I am aware of the goals of the classes I am taking. | | | | | |
| 20 | What a teacher says is always correct. | | | | | |
| 21 | It is not the teacher's job to motivate me to study. | | | | | |
| 22 | I want my teacher to explain everything I don't understand. | | | | | |
| 23 | I I am doing something different from the other students, I feel worried. | | | | | |
| 24 | I find it useful to study with other students. | | | | | |
| 25 | I sometimes adopt what other students are doing into my own learning. | | | | | |
| 26 | If I study with other learners, I also learn from them. | | | | | |

After you have completed this questionnaire, please return it to your teacher or to XXXX You can put the completed questionnaire in XXs mailbox in room XX, or deliver it to his office (XX).