A Model for Teaching Metaphor

Denver Beirne
Asia University

Abstract
This paper outlines a model for teaching metaphor, informed by Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). The model was developed in response to the pervasiveness of metaphor and the accompanying confusion it can cause for learners in the ESL and EFL classrooms. This model initially teaches students the basic definitions and concepts that underpin the metaphors found in everyday communications. Then, learners are guided through activities to practice decoding, analyzing, and creating metaphors. This process deepens students' understanding of this type of language but also provides learners with a practical toolkit for autonomously deciphering novel metaphors in their future studies.

Keywords: Metaphor, figurative language, song lyrics, learning through music

According to Steen et al. (2010), metaphor accounts for 7.7% of general conversation, 11.7% of fiction, and 18.5% of academic texts. However, the study of metaphorical language remains largely an area for literature students and cognitive linguists rather than language educators. It is not a topic that tends to be covered in many ESL courses or textbooks. This seems strange given that a study of IELTS students found metaphors to be responsible for 42% of language learners' comprehension problems in lectures (Littlemore et al., 2011). The study used a small sample size and only targeted a few lectures, but it is indicative of an issue for students in this area. Moreover, this kind of finding has been replicated more than once (Littlemore, 2001; Littlemore et al., 2006; Low et al., 2008).

The lack of focus on metaphor could result from educators not realizing just how often metaphoric language is used and how confusing it can be for students. Learners, of course, understand the concept of metaphor, as it is a device employed across languages. The main issue is that metaphors are different in each language. Moreover, the assumptions and allusions underpinning the meanings in metaphors often differ. Thus, students in the Littlemore et al. (2011) study stated that they had difficulty recognizing when language was being used metaphorically. Furthermore, the problematic language still evaded understanding even though students knew each component word in the phrase. A lot of metaphorical language is conventional and ingrained and so can often be categorized as a 'turn of phrase', 'just something we say' or 'another meaning of the word.' As pointed out by Steen et al. (2010), educators, like everyone else, employ these phrases habitually, unconscious to the complexity of the non-literal messages effortlessly parsed by experienced speakers of a language, while language learners find communication containing these phrases confusing and are further perplexed if they know the meaning of the vocabulary in the utterance. However, if these lexical chunks are considered through a metaphorical lens, then some systematic understanding can be given to students, which can create a framework for dealing with these bizarre-seeming 'turns of phrase'.

Consider the following everyday words and phrases: *goal, handful, grasp (understand) bright (intelligent), cold (personality), connection* (between people), *reached a low point (in life), something in the air, break-up (a relationship), get up to speed, good vibration/vibe, change your mind, fire questions/fire away, conflict* (as argument or dispute). These might not seem metaphorical to many at first pass but if one stops to contemplate these terms it must be concluded that they are not in fact literal. Furthermore, if these lexical items are examined in more detail, then the metaphorical nature of their usages begins to surface. Take a sentence such as, 'Your goal should be to read two novels in English this semester.' The primary meaning of goal in most dictionaries is a physical goal, used in a game, into which a ball is placed. In the example sentence, there is no *literal*, physical goal; it is a figurative expression drawing on the imagery of the literal scoring of a goal in a sports game to give understanding and impact to the utterance. Some might object to this interpretation and conclude that this use of *goal* is just another meaning of the word, but this merely underlines the broader point; this is one common way words obtain their many related usages and nuances of context.

Furthermore, metaphorical interpretations can apply some structure to this type of vocabulary to help the student decode and cement the meaning of figurative words and phrases. Take, for example, the following phrases: *feeling down/low,* and *she's rising in the ranks*. If a student understands that 'highness' or physical rising has a positive valence and 'lowliness' or physical falling is negative, then new metaphors can be less tricky to comprehend. Thus, when the student encounters phrases such as *my heart sank*, *that's a low trick/blow,* or *that's below the belt*, she immediately understands that these are negative statements and so is a considerable way toward being able to comprehend new phrases like these in real-time. These are just a handful of examples of how metaphorical thinking can help educators highlight and consider the difficulties students encounter with language that may seem simple, but which is actually complex and multi-layered. For further reading, Chapters 5 and 6 of *Applying Cognitive Linguistics to Second Language Learning and Teaching* (Littlemore, 2009, p. 94–124) provide an extremely useful introduction to the importance of metaphor, and the closely related concept of metonymy, in the classroom.

Purpose

Given the findings that metaphor is both pervasive and confusing for learners, it is evident that students need additional help to understand this type of language. However, attempts to find guidance on a systematic teaching of this kind of metaphoric view of vocabulary proved fruitless. Therefore, this became the goal: to develop just such an approach, based on the findings of metaphor research and the existing literature on the subject. Initially, it was clear that students would need an explanation or definition of metaphor, some examples, some practical activities, and assessments. The model has expanded somewhat since the initial idea, but the emphasis is still firmly on simplicity and on understandability of what could be a difficult concept for students. Since initially planning and developing the materials, the procedure has been refined and updated to better meet the goals described below. This remains an ongoing part of the process.

Goals

There are two goals for this method of teaching metaphor:

1. To help students understand the metaphors they will encounter during these classes.
2. To give students a toolkit to decode the metaphors they will encounter in the future.

Procedure

This metaphor content was implemented in a communicative language class of first-year English majors, which typically contained between 15–25 members. All members of the class had iPads and access to Wi-Fi. This metaphor element was taught as part of a music unit, one of three topic units covered in a semester. The music unit also covered some more simple introductory activities such as surveys and discussions on topics such as favourite artists, preferred formats for listening to music, and music listening habits, as well as lessons on some other figurative and poetic language used in songs, including idiom, rhyme, and alliteration. The final project asked the students to create and teach a short lesson (30 minutes) to the other students, demonstrating and using the tools and skills that they learned in the unit. However, the focus of this paper is specifically on the metaphor section of the unit, which took around eight *koma* (class sessions) to complete.

Figure 1

A Model for Teaching Metaphor
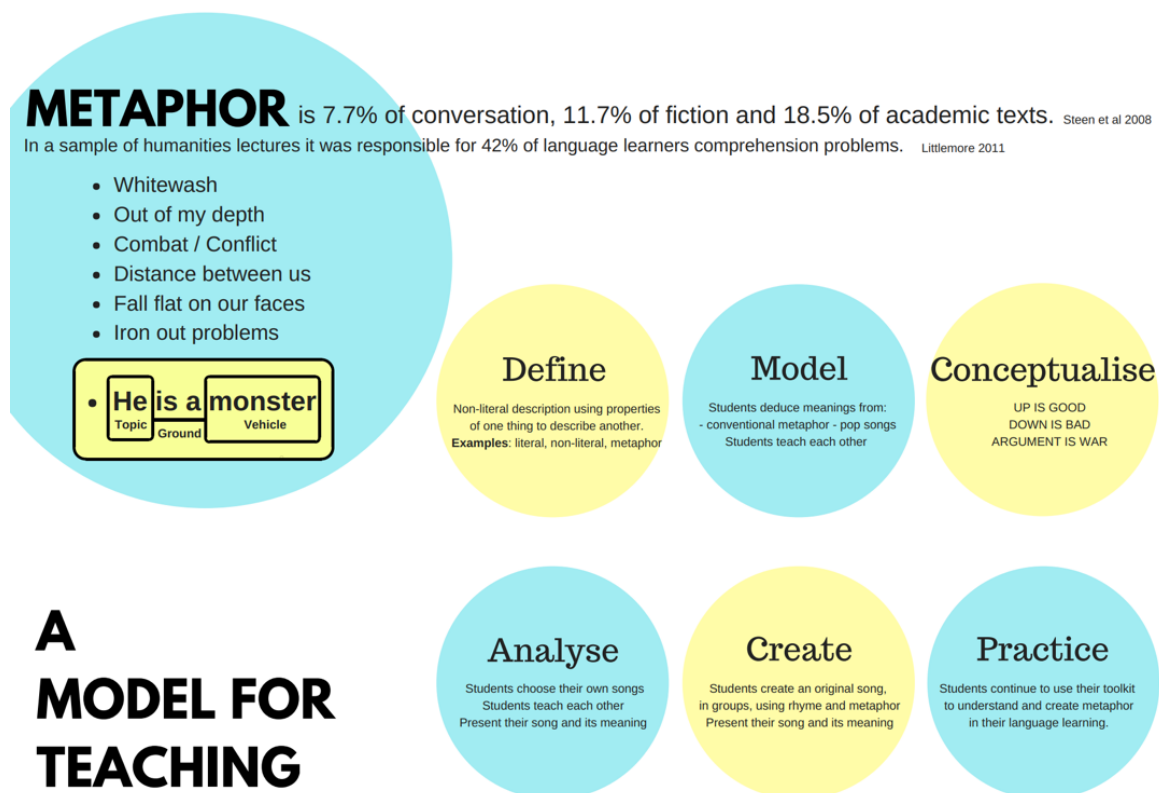
The model is split into the following six stages, which are outlined and described in Figure 1 and the bulleted list below:

1. Define
2. Model
3. Conceptualize
4. Analyze
5. Create
6. Practice

Each of the six stages of the model is described in more detail below, along with the specifics of how it was actually put into practice in the classroom.

Define
Students are introduced to the concept of non-literal language in this stage, with examples, pictures, and illustrations. Some screenshots of some of the slides are shown in Figure 2 for illustration.

Figure 2
Example Presentation Slides for Introducing Non-Literal Language

Next, students were given the following written summary explanations and examples.

- Metaphor is non-literal. A metaphor is an imaginative description of something.
- Literal: means it is a real fact, event, or a real description. E.g., He is tall.
- Non-literal: Something that didn't happen or is not true in the basic meaning of the words. She is hot (attractive). He is cool (attractive).
- A metaphor uses the (main) features of one thing to describe another.
- Example: Bolt is a giant (uses the main feature of the giant to describe Bolt).
- Example: Hitler was a monster (uses the scary and evil behavior of a monster to describe Hitler).
- Example: Emma is a rose (uses the feature of the flower's beauty to describe Emma).
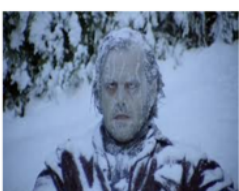
Here, students often asked how they could spot a new metaphor 'in the wild'. In response, they were guided with the advice that if a word or phrase is confusing (i.e., the student understands most or all the constituent words in a phrase but not the phrase as a whole) then it is likely to be a metaphor. This is the case especially if the student thinks the term is being used non-literally, and descriptively.

Model

For this phase of the process, students are put into groups, and each group is assigned four conventional metaphors to decipher. The activity uses a list in a shared Google Doc, which the whole class can see and amend in real-time. An excerpt is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Example Metaphor Collaborative Analysis Activity

	Metaphor	Explanation (what feature of the subject is used to describe the object?)	Meaning
Eg	The school was a zoo	A zoo (object) is full of wild animals. Can't be controlled. Lots of noise and no rules.	The school (subject) is noisey and full of wildness, like a zoo.
1	America is a melting pot		
2	Her voice was music to his ears		
3	Life is a roller coaster		
4	Their home was a prison		

Students decode the meanings in their groups and write a short explanation about which feature is being used to make the description, as shown by the example in the first row of Figure 3. The answers are then reviewed as a class, with each member given the responsibility to explain at least one of their group's metaphors. Students, therefore, share

their ideas and teach each other while practicing speaking and listening skills.

The basics of this activity are then repeated in a further group activity where each group chooses a song and explains one of its metaphors. After the explanation activity, there is a homework task where students individually create their own original metaphor in a shared Google Doc. In the final part of this stage, the metaphors are reviewed with the whole class, and students use a Google Form to vote for their favorite original metaphor. The top five students are awarded class points (which contribute toward their class participation grade).

Conceptualize

The theory at the heart of this approach, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), states that metaphor is not just a particular turn of phrase but a fundamental way of storing and understanding non-literal ideas. It hypothesizes that circuitry in the brain that evolved to deal with understanding physical phenomena has been re-purposed for abstract and conceptual information. Thus, when humans handle conceptual information, it is packaged and understood in physical terms. Consequently, this may be why so many metaphors use physical language to describe abstractions such emotion, intelligence, or morality; as in the following examples: *he went to **pieces***, *she **crunched** the numbers, she is an **upright** member of society*. These physical representations of conceptual information are systemic according to the theory, and so when they are expressed as metaphors, they exhibit discernible patterns—essentially, overarching or connecting categories. Although it is not necessary to detail this theory for freshman English students, it is beneficial to introduce the learners to the idea that metaphors can be categorized into overarching groups or themes and that this can help in understanding the metaphors' meanings.

In the theory, each category or conceptual metaphor is formalized as *X IS Y;* for instance: *UP IS GOOD*. However, this can be explained in more general terms to students; for example, the conceptual metaphor *UP IS GOOD* is described in the following manner: things that are high or rise often have a positive meaning in English (according to the theory). Next, students are given some examples of actual metaphors that one might find in speech. It should be noted that not every metaphor fits these conceptual categories perfectly, for example, *head in the clouds* could be seen as somewhat negative. The reality is complex and interlocking; however, these 'rules' can be thought of as heuristics or 'rules of thumb', and many instances can be found for each conceptual metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) foundational book *Metaphors We Live by* gives many examples of conceptual metaphors and their linguistic instantiations. Listed below are a few examples from a longer factsheet given to students.

UP IS GOOD
- I'm floating on air
- I was on a high
- I'm on cloud 9

DOWN IS BAD
- She was so down
- My heart sank
- The stocks went through the floor

- I dropped the ball

ARGUMENT IS WAR
  - She demolished each of his points
  - They're always in conflict over this new process
  - They fight all the time

Analyze

Students choose a song to analyze for metaphors, new vocabulary, rhymes, and idiomatic language. They then try to use this new knowledge to understand the general meaning of the song, using the example worksheet (Figure 4).
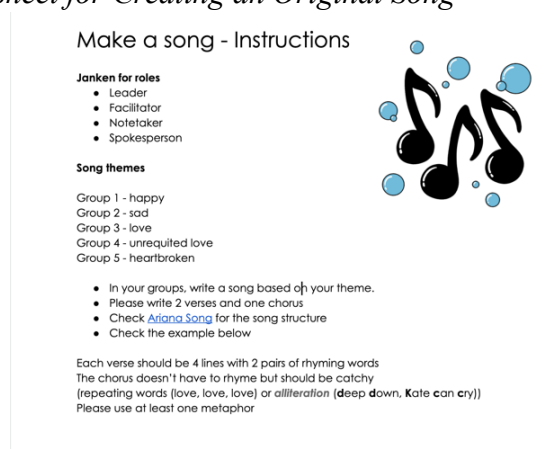
Figure 4
Song Metaphor Analysis Activity Worksheet

Next, students present their findings to the class, the best of the new vocabulary and metaphors are collected and added to a shared set in the Quizlet digital flashcard application. This enables students to learn through the interactive games available in this application. Finally, these selected terms are used in the class's weekly vocabulary quiz.

Create

In this stage, students create a simplified version of an original song in groups. The song must contain at least one metaphor, some rhymes, and some alliteration, as the instruction sheet explains (Figure 5). When these songs are complete, the students read their songs to the class. Then the class votes for their favorite using a Google Form, and each team is then allocated class points according to their position in the ranking.

Figure 5
Example Instruction Sheet for Creating an Original Song

Practice
By this point, students should have internalized the *defining* stage of the model. Therefore, they can be expected to run the *modelling*, *conceptualizing,* and *analyzing* stages by themselves (formally or informally) to help them understand new metaphors. Consequently, learners now have a toolkit for their ongoing learning.

Conclusion
This process can be challenging for language learners, especially if they are freshman students. However, giving learners the freedom to choose their own materials in terms of the songs they analyze does seem to help their motivation and engagement. It has also proved essential to furnish students with clear examples, structured activities, and constructive feedback.

In the first iteration of the process, the materials were not as thoroughly developed, and so it did prove difficult for some students. It was necessary to spend some time re-explaining definitions, giving further examples, or helping students to decode metaphors. Therefore, it became clear that some of these examples and explanations needed to be written into a more detailed and visual definition phase. Consequently, the slides and worksheets were refined after each cycle to incorporate some of the generalizable instruction given to individual students. The inclusion of visual images helped enormously to cement the concept in students' minds, as did the summary definition of metaphor and the worked examples in the worksheets. This process of refinement was an important part of developing the model and this interactive method of adapting these materials is described in more detail a reflective piece (Beirne, 2021).

A potential stumbling block for some students is the complexity of language used in many songs. This connects to the point made earlier in this paper about the seeming simplicity or mundanity of many metaphors that are in actual fact surprisingly complex when analyzed. Therefore, it is advisable for the instructor to check each student's song to make sure learners have chosen material that at least has a layer of meaning that seems to be within the learner's grasp. In undertaking this activity, students are generally enthusiastic about gaining deeper understanding of the meanings in the songs they have listened to in English and this successful decoding gives students a real sense of

achievement. It is important to note that some students do still require additional assistance on their path to understanding. Therefore, it's imperative to allow appropriate time and space for students to arrive at their own (sometimes guided) conclusions and thus develop skills that are transferable to understanding new metaphors when encountered independently.

This iteratively developed model has thus become a process that seems to expand students' awareness of the layers of meaning in metaphors, songs, and English communication more generally. The experience has shown that it is possible to see the influence of this increased understanding in students' future writing, speaking, and questioning. Furthermore, from a teaching perspective, it has demonstrated how linguistic theory can be applied effectively in the classroom.

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