

Review of the Application of Metaphor Theory to Second Language Acquisition in China

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Received: July 11, 2025 Accepted: August 16, 2025 Online Published: August 19, 2025

Abstract

Metaphor, once as a literary device, is now considered as a pervasive phenomenon of human thought process and most importantly, a cognitive tool for human beings to conceptualize the world. In recent years, research into the application of metaphor theory to Second Language Acquisition (hereafter SLA) in China has increased gradually, with most papers concerning mainly the feasibility of its application to SLA. Thus, this paper aims to review the current literature in that area from two aspects over the last two decades and proposes several possible avenues for future studies. Delving deeper into this dimension, the review establishes the metaphorical mechanism as a more effective framework for explaining SLVA and L2 reading comprehension.

Keywords: metaphor theory, metaphorical mechanism, metaphor awareness, second language acquisition (SLA)

1. Introduction

By definition, SLA refers to the subconscious process of acquiring another language in addition to native language and is used as umbrella term for SLA and FLL (Foreign Language Learning) in the light of common usage (Ellis, 1999)[1]. SLA research originated in the 1950s or 1960s and developed as an independent discipline at the end of 20th century (Larsen-Freeman, 2002)[2], after Selinker published his landmark article *Interlanguage*, in which he defined interlanguage as an indispensable path for second language (L2) learners to pass through before they can speak the target language as authentically as native speakers. For several decades thereafter, SLA research flourished in the multi-levelled, multi-sided and pluralistic direction around the world, especially in the foreign countries. To be sure, foreign scholars put effort into exploring SLA at the theoretical and empirical level and made a great contribution to SLA research.

A little later than western countries, SLA research with English as L2 were initiated by such representative linguists as Hu Zhuanglin and Hu Wenzhong in China in the early 1980s. Undoubtedly, there exists a certain gap between foreign countries and China in terms of SLA research methods and academic achievements. Therefore, domestic scholars should develop some new SLA theories, thus providing tailor-made learning strategies for Chinese students and foreign language teaching methods for Chinese teachers. Before introducing a new SLA theory with Chinese characteristics, researchers have applied foreign SLA theories to Chinese FLL and Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) amid various constraints, including theoretical complexities and practical difficulties.

Theory is based on practice and serves practice the other way around. Similarly, SLA theories built on SLA can be applied in SLA as practice. Apart from SLA theories applied to SLA, there are other linguistic tools such as Dynamic System Theory and Sociocultural Theory accounting for some learning phenomena when Chinese students pick up a nonnative language other than native language. Among these linguistic tools in use, I select one of them, that is Metaphor Theory, for the following review. In doing so, I shall first introduce the Metaphor Theory, then review Metaphor Theory applied to SLA in China, and finally discuss the implications of research before arriving at the conclusion. Last but not least, one thing I want to emphasize is that L2 in this article refers to English as one compulsory course for most Chinese students.

2. The Metaphor Theory

The past several thousand years have witnessed a growing number of studies on metaphor from being a figure of speech, a research subject combining other disciplines such as linguistics, psychology and anthropology, to being a branch of cognitive science. During the developing process, there emerge metaphor theories concerning how metaphor can produce, work and function. Metaphor, as the basic cognitive approach of human being, is a thinking tool used to understand abstract ideas. Specifically, metaphor consists of tenor, vehicle and ground. The mapping

from vehicle to tenor can be done based on the resemblance between them. In light of metaphorical mechanisms, several linguists put forward different views. Richards (1965)[3] mentioned that there was a finite tension between the tenor and the vehicle. This is to say, the vehicle can be mapped back onto the tenor only when there must be some association between them. Grice (1975)[4] looked at metaphor from the perspective of cooperative principle and thought that the metaphorical expression is made as a conversational implicature intentionally by speakers. Lakoff and Johnson (1980)[5] found that metaphor can also be a kind of cognitive mechanism when people conceptualize the surrounding world. In the case of metaphorical functions, there are various classifications. For instance, Low (1988)[6] said that metaphor can function as an indirect approach to discuss the tenor, a proof that all sorts of things can be connected within the scope of our understanding, a method to extend ideas and so forth. Shu Dingfang (2000)[7] discussed the rhetorical, linguistic, poetic, cognitive, social, paronomasia functions that metaphor may perform. From the aforementioned discussion about metaphorical functions, it may be not difficult to understand that these functions can be applied to second language learning that need finding similarities between two things for a better understanding.

3. The Application of Metaphor Theory to SLA in China

Following the brief introduction of Metaphor Theory, I will continue this article by reviewing the application of Metaphor Theory to SLA in China. Both Metaphor and SLA are placed within the domain of language cognition, thus making it possible to apply the former to the latter. So, in this section, I will summarize how Metaphor Theory was applied in SLA, including the process of vocabulary learning and reading comprehension.

3.1 *The Application of Metaphor Theory to Vocabulary learning*

Metaphor is a prevalent phenomenon in our daily life and can be embodied in people's behaviors and languages, be it a means of cognitive thinking or a figure of speech. Language and way of thinking is closely related, given that language is the main vehicle for self-expression, to be more exact, the embodiment of thinking. However, this kind of cross-concept mapping is not always noticeable to the L2 learners when they are learning new English words. Certainly, Metaphor can be considered as a way of thinking to decode the deep meaning of some English vocabularies L2 learners in China. For example, every word has its own central meaning and gains its own peripheral meaning by means of metaphorical extension, hence the existence of polyseme. Based on the aforementioned view, Shang illustrated the cognitive acquisition mode of one metaphorical noun, verb and position preposition as examples, with an aim to extend the vocabulary depth and width of English learners. Zhang (2006)[8] urged other scholars to pay more attention to the mental aspect of word learning in addition to SLVA in the classroom setting, lexical bundle acquisition, lexical access, SLVA theory construction, function of the "noticing" construct in the process of SLVA and case studies on SLVA, after providing a thorough overview of Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition (SLVA) in the past ten years from five aspects, that is, incidental and intentional SLVA, SLVA strategies, width and depth of SLVA, influence of mother tongue on SLVA and corpus-based word memorization. Following that, many authors began to discuss SLVA from the metaphorical angle. Some metaphorical factors were analyzed in the process of vocabulary learning, including prototype category theory, similarity or relevance under metaphorical mechanism and image schema, all of which can promote word retention. Zheng (2009)[9] pointed out that enhanced metaphor awareness can be beneficial to vocabulary memorization and thus cultivate students' creative thinking ability, while calling for recompilation of textbooks and dictionaries so as to accord with vocabulary cognition rules.

Different from the previous scholars who focused on theoretical deviation, Wu (2013)[10] gave examples to explain how students can memorize vocabularies after grasping the rules of phonetic metaphor, morphological metaphor, semantic metaphor and logical metaphor, from easy to difficult. Similarly, Fang and Wang (2015)[11] detailed three stages that English learners may go through during the vocabulary acquisition, namely initial stage, transitional stage and formation stage. That, to some extent, increased the feasibility of constructing second language vocabulary cognitive system. The subsequent empirical study showed conceptual metaphor theory can facilitate a better retention of English words about sports compared with traditional SLVA ways such as rote learning. By putting herself in students' shoes, Li (2016)[12] called for learning English vocabularies independently on the basis of metaphor theory, as well as stressed the significance of learner-centered environments. Another researcher first summarize the common path to SLVA and then underlined the importance of metaphorical cognitive mechanism for word memorization by exemplifying the causes of polysemy and briefing metaphoric structures. Different from other scholars, Shi (2021)[13] updated related research perspectives by viewing learners' L2 proficiency as a continuum spanning high school English, college English, undergraduate English majors, graduate (MA) English majors, and doctoral-level English majors, thus delineating the entire process of second language metaphorical meaning acquisition. In sum, the period of 2006 to 2021 witnessed a

growing number of articles designed to verify the practicality of application of metaphor theory to SLVA either in the theoretical way or in the empirical way and thus to contribute to second language vocabulary teaching practice.

3.2 The Application of Metaphor Theory to L2 Reading Comprehension

Words constitute a sentence, sentences form a paragraph and paragraphs make up a passage. Moreover, understanding a passage requires not only decoding every word, but also getting to know the context constructed by words. Alike, L2 reading involves a complex process, shifting from L2 to L1 (First Language). However, reading a L2 passage may not so difficult in that metaphor is pervasive in works, so having a good command of metaphor theory can solve this reading problem. To this end, Chinese researchers mainly discussed the application of metaphor theory to English reading teaching. Dong and Yang (2003)[14] claimed that the application of ideational grammatical metaphor to scientific discourses increased the reading complexity and then offered teachers three suggestions, namely enabling students to be familiar with the world outlook of western countries, cultivating students' metalinguistic ability and encouraging students to produce nominalized sentences. In her thesis, Liu (2009)[15] investigated whether more attention paid to the cohesiveness and coherence of conceptual metaphor during the English reading teaching can improve students' reading ability based on the analysis of specific achieving forms and applications of those two text functions. More specifically, Tang (2010)[16] suggested that teachers can exploit students' metaphoric thinking, thus strengthening their problem-solving skills such as association, analytical judgement and analogical reasoning in the process of reading L2 materials, along with warning readers of culture differences between China and the West represented in the textbook. Huang (2011)[17] distinguished herself from other scholars who focused on the reading comprehension of L2 learners as a result of demonstrating that metaphor was conducive to the cultivation of students' L2 reading sense, thereby promoting their correctness, accuracy and elegance of linguistic performance. Huang (2012)[18] summarized the previous findings about the application of metaphor theory to L2 reading and pointed out that the metaphoric thinking played an important role in developing students' pragmatic competence and ability of language creativity, as well as ability of discourse comprehension and appreciation ability.

The above-mentioned authors took college students as research participants, and other writers chose different objects. Lu (2010)[19] noticed that metaphor occurred frequently in high-school English textbook and analyzed how high-school teachers can apply metaphor theory to L2 reading teaching from four aspects, including enhancing students' metaphor awareness, applying metaphor theory to vocabulary learning, enabling students to understand and grasp thoroughly English articles in virtue of cognitive metaphor. By the same token, Hang (2017)[20] focused on the L2 reading teaching in high school and explored the possible ways to improve students' reading ability based on conceptual metaphor theory respectively in the lexical and textual level. For instance, those feasible approaches can be the cultivation of metaphorical thinking and the construction of metaphorical concepts. In a different manner, Zhang and Li (2019)[21] drew readers' attention to adult college students by discussing the application of metaphor theory to L2 reading learning and teaching in three perspectives, namely the clarification of the relationship between reading and vocabulary, guidance for L2 learners on how to extend the vocabulary stored in the brain through metaphor and the embodiment of metaphorical mechanism in the L2 reading teaching. To conclude, I think that L2 textual learning that comes after SLVA is more complicated, but become easier by making out the metaphoric thinking hid in between the lines as the aforementioned researchers said.

4. Implications for the Future Research

In the case of research on the application of metaphor theory to SLVA, scholars made great efforts to justify the participation of metaphorical mechanism in the process of word retention. Be that as it may, they might miss several points. Firstly, researchers failed to consider how much time and effort will be invested in improving students' metaphor awareness for the ultimate goal of better memorizing L2 vocabulary. This is a practical problem facing L2 teachers. Secondly, researchers neglected to provide tailor-made learning strategies for different levels of L2 learners to apply metaphor to word memorization. As I noted above, the current studies obscured research participants, without any mention of learners' proficiency in English. Thirdly, vocabularies are not categorized in the study on application of metaphor theory to SLVA. L2 learners can bear straightforward figurative expressions in mind more easily by raising their metaphor awareness than complex ones. Therefore, the question of how metaphor awareness can influence L2 learners' retention of vocabularies at various levels of difficulty invites further research.

In terms of the application of metaphor theory to L2 reading comprehension, SLA scholars have already investigated high-school students, undergraduates and adult college learners and put forward the corresponding suggestions for L2 learners and teachers. However, two things are well worth thinking. For one thing, the question

whether students' difficulty in L2 reading comprehension is a reading problem or a language problem should be clearly defined in further study. In the aforementioned articles, researchers all claimed that L2 learners had a limited capacity for L2 reading due to their poor comprehension ability instead of their lack of L2 literacy. As far as I'm concerned, the two reasons above are possible in that lacking the L2 lexical knowledge is the common failing among Chinese L2 learners, especially science students who are adept at text understanding, with the logical reasoning and analysis as their common tools. For another, more attention should be given to L2 reading learning in the future in that there are papers as mentioned above mainly concerning L2 reading teaching. After all, students have enough after-school time to learn but limited time to be taught. Moreover, the conversion of research participant from teacher to student may bring additional gains.

5. Conclusion

SLA researchers have been inquiring into the cognitive dimension of SLA process since the establishment of SLA discipline. In recent years, they go more detailedly into this dimension and find that the metaphorical mechanism can better explain the process of SLVA and L2 reading comprehension, thus being a shortcut L2 learners can take to learn efficiently and effortlessly. In light of this, I reviewed some research articles on the application of metaphor theory nearly in the past two decades to SLA and then pointed out some future research directions. And I hope that paying more attention to possible gaps that I have discussed in the fourth section will recruit our collective efforts to advance a bit this SLA research.

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