

Second Language Learning: Discovering an Unknown Path into a Brand New World

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Twenty-six learners of English enrolled in an MA course were asked to give the metaphors which they think best capture the essence of their learning experience so far. Their metaphors tell how English learning had introduced them to a brand new world and, once they were inside it, led them to a seemingly endless series of new discoveries. The unpredictability of these discoveries had been like ‘reading a magic story’. Students had often faced challenges but had also derived satisfaction from overcoming them. The metaphors connect more strongly with ‘intrinsic’ motivation than with the more utilitarian concepts of ‘extrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ motivation. This might reflect the composition of the learner group, who had all chosen to specialize in some form of English study in their previous education. However that may be, they encourage us to create space in our teaching for the humanistic dimensions of imagination and creativity, even in courses where the explicit aim is to serve a specific pragmatic purpose.

Key words: metaphor analysis, personal enrichment through English learning, humanistic aspects of teaching, motivation

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a British Council project reported in Hann et al. (2014), learners of English were asked how English had affected their wider lives. For most learners, the experience had gone ‘beyond utilitarian values’ and provided ‘a sense of personal enrichment’. This belief in the potential of learning English to provide personal enrichment is also an important factor motivating many teachers to invest time and effort into their work.

But personal enrichment is not easy to pin down and discuss in precise terms. It is more easily supported by personal conviction than by hard evidence. What evidence we *can* gather must come from the learners themselves and even then, ‘enrichment’ is an elusive concept.

2. THE EXPRESSIVE POWER OF METAPHORS

It is partly in order to explore elusive concepts such as this that people sometimes turn to analysing metaphors. In the words of Punter (2007), “where a concept, an idea, an emotion may be hard to grasp in language, then a metaphor, an offering of perceived resemblances, may enable us the better to come to grips with the issue in hand” (p. 13). In this way, metaphors can act as a window onto students’ thoughts and feelings about their learning which would otherwise be hard to define.

In Littlewood (2012) and Su (2015), metaphors were used to describe a range of aspects of how groups of advanced learners had experienced second language learning. In the present article, metaphors are used for a more specific purpose, namely, to explore the concept of ‘personal enrichment’ mentioned above.

3. THE LEARNING CONTEXT

With each new intake for a language development course which forms part of an MA in Language Studies programme in Hong Kong, I ask the students (most of whom have recently graduated with a language-related degree in Hong Kong or Mainland China) to give the metaphor which they think best captures the essence of their second language learning experience so far. The main purposes are to stimulate discussion of their own language learning and to foster a spirit of community and creativity within the group.

With the 2020 cohort, amid the COVID19 restrictions, we could not have any face-to-face interaction to prepare for the project. Initially I had doubts as to how successful it would be. In this respect I had underestimated the resilience and autonomy of the students, as well as the impact that learning a language had had on their lives.

The students were asked to complete the sentence frame ‘Learning a second language is like because’ Many of us have learnt that the word ‘like’ in this statement means that it should be classified as a simile rather than a metaphor. However, underlying each linguistic simile is a student’s *conceptual* metaphor, which is our focus of attention here.

There were 26 students in the group and some students sent two metaphors, so there were 30 metaphors in all. In this article I do not plan to carry out a systematic analysis but to select 16 representative ones and group them under four sub-themes related to the purpose of this article, namely: to express some of the sources of personal enrichment that learning a second language had brought into students’ lives.

4. HOW HAD SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING ENRICHED THESE STUDENTS’ LIVES?

In this section I hand the floor to the students and, except for the subheadings and minor adjustments to ensure cohesion, use their words to express how second language learning had enriched their lives.

Students had discovered a brand new world

- Learning a second language is like discovering an unknown path because it will lead you to a brand new world you have never met before.
- It is like opening a new window and you can take a peek into a different world.
- It is like looking out through a telescope, because it allows us to see a larger and farther world.
- It is like taking the Mayflower to America, because it is the only way to reach another new land and explore new things.

The further they had progressed, the more they had discovered

- Learning a second language is like a forest, because the deeper you go the more you discover.
- It is like flying in the sky, because you cannot find the end.
- It is like climbing a mountain because everyone starts from the bottom and the higher one gets the more one can see.
- It is like building a bridge because it links you with a wider community.

The experience had been exciting and often unpredictable

- Learning a second language is like playing in a theme park, because there are fun, thrills, challenges and eye-openers.
- It is like diving in the ocean because it is both exciting and unpredictable to explore a new zone.

- It is like taking an adventure, because you will experience setbacks and you will also experience joy.
- It is like reading a magic story because you always stay curious to know what will happen next.

They had earned satisfaction while overcoming challenges

- Learning a second language is like going on an adventure because you will face a series of challenges.
- It is like a rainbow because you should suffer from a storm to enjoy it.
- It is like getting up in the morning because people always struggle at first.
- It is like climbing a mountain, because it requires us to move forward step by step and it is not easy to get to the top.

5. CONCLUSION

These metaphors link in concrete ways the experience of learning language with our actual or imagined experience of the world of action and perception. They can also be seen as ways of describing motivation: taken together, they characterize many aspects of ‘intrinsic motivation’ or the ‘imagined self’. To summarize the perceptions that they reflect:

- Learning a second language had introduced the students to a new world and enabled them to look inside it.
- As they had progressed, they had made more and more new discoveries, which it sometimes seemed would know no end.
- This newness and unpredictability had made learning a second language into an exciting experience.
- Students had often faced challenges on this journey of discovery but in overcoming them, they had derived a sense of satisfaction.

The metaphors seem to connect more strongly with intrinsic motivation than with the more utilitarian concepts of ‘extrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ motivation’. That might be a result of the method used for eliciting them or of the composition of the MA group, who had all chosen to specialize in some form of English study in their previous education. However that may be, they also encourage all of us to create space in our teaching for the humanistic dimensions of imagination and creativity, even in courses where the explicit aim is to serve a specific pragmatic purpose.

As I was preparing to conduct this project, I had listened to a talk about the joy and inspiration that music can bring into our lives. These words kept coming to my mind as I

read the metaphors used by the students to describe their learning experience: enjoying music and learning another language do, indeed, share a capacity to bring joy and inspiration into people's lives.

Applicable level: Tertiary

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