

Facilitating Reflection on Implicit Learner Beliefs through Metaphor Elicitation

Joe Sykes

Akita University

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This qualitative study aims to develop and evaluate a tool which can be used to help learners autonomously reflect upon their implicitly held learner beliefs, with a view to promoting language learning practices appropriate to the individual and addressing any issues of learner beliefs which may be preventing effective learning. Metaphor was selected to serve this purpose. Metaphor is now widely acknowledged as a cognitive as well as a linguistic phenomenon. This has resulted in a wealth of research utilizing metaphor to investigate aspects of the subconscious, including implicitly held beliefs. In the case of teacher training, metaphor was used to facilitate reflection, which resulted in the development of the beliefs of the subjects. It is the purpose of this study to ascertain whether same can be achieved for learners. Through the use of metaphor elicitation, written explanations and interviews it was found that the metaphors produced by the participants were representative of their implicitly held beliefs and the process resulted in an increase in perspective consciousness in all of the participants.

Key Words: learner beliefs, reflection, metaphor

1 Introduction

Few would dispute that the beliefs we hold strongly influence our perception and judgment of events. Beliefs act as a filter through which we perceive the world and the events which we encounter (Bandura, 1986; Dewey, 1922; Hofstede, 1980; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Rokeach, 1968). The beliefs learners hold about language learning and the way they perceive the events in the language learning context are no exception. This becomes particularly evident when there is a conflict between the beliefs of the learner and those of the teacher. This point is demonstrated with the following anecdotal evidence from the author's experience.

“One day I was hauled into the Dean's office and asked to justify the methods I was using because students had been complaining that I wasn't teaching them English.”

An experienced proponent of Content Based teaching

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“I want to quit the course because I’m going to England soon and I want to study harder at home alone and finish the textbook before I go”

A Japanese adult English conversation student

The teachers in both of these situations were teaching according to well recognized theoretically grounded approaches to language teaching, content-based teaching in the case of the former and the communicative approach in the case of the latter. However, the learners in both cases demonstrate dissatisfaction with the chosen methodologies. Providing empirical support to these observations, Rowsell (1992) investigated adult ‘drop-outs’ from ESOL classes in Britain, Brazil, Canada, Hong Kong and the USA. The most common reasons given for dropping out were perceived irrelevance and unfamiliarity. It was argued that “the mismatch between classroom methods or content and the expectations of the learners was probably the main factor contributing to poor attendance and ultimate drop-out” (Rowsell, 1992, p.363).

With the currently ubiquitous learner-centered approach, and influence from cognitive psychology, language learners are now seen as autonomous agents who learn from their own experiences, make their own choices and respond to events as they perceive them (Meskill & Rangelova, 2000). Considering this, understanding learners’ perceptions of their learning experiences could be considered essential in achieving effective learning. Besides social/interpersonal issues of conflicting beliefs among individuals, beliefs are thought to have a strong influence on cognitive/intrapersonal factors, which may in turn hold consequences for learning. Learner beliefs have been proved to influence behavior (Horwitz, 1999), attitudes to the target language and its culture, motivation (Ciszer & Dornyei, 2005; Gardner, 1979, 2001a, 2001b; Gardner et al., 2004), strategy use (Oxford & Green, 1996) and attitudes to teaching methodologies (Rowsell, 1992). Learner beliefs are not intrinsically problematic. On the contrary, they are used by learners to mediate learning and guide behavior. However, as in cases such as those described by Rowsell (1992) and the author, it could be argued that learner beliefs can constitute an obstacle for teachers who are attempting to put theory into practice, and for this reason learner beliefs must be better understood.

2 Learner Beliefs

2.1 What are learner beliefs?

An understanding of learner beliefs are arguably essential to the successful implementation of any theoretically informed education. Perhaps the necessary first step in achieving such an understanding is to examine the nature of learner beliefs. Learner beliefs have been defined and investigated

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from various theoretical perspectives. Gabillon (2005) argues that these perspectives constitute a continuum with the cognitive perspective at one end and the socio-psychological perspective at the other. From a cognitive perspective, learner beliefs are autonomous properties of the mind, which are stable and resistant to change. On the other hand, from a socio-psychological perspective learner beliefs are considered to exist on both mental and social planes, and can be both stable and changeable. Within this continuum learner beliefs have been investigated under various rubrics and categories. For example: learners' metacognitive knowledge; b) mental and social representations; c) self-beliefs; d) control beliefs and e) attributions. While the boundaries between these are somewhat blurred and they often appear to be used interchangeably (Gabillon, 2005), an understanding of these concepts may facilitate an appreciation of the structure of learner beliefs and mechanisms involved in their formation.

The concept of metacognitive knowledge is derived from Flavell's metacognitive theory and refers to the individual's beliefs about their own, or others', cognitive processes (Flavell, 1979). Mental representations, a term borrowed from cognitive science, are 'information bearing units' (Gabillon, 2005, p.236). They are thought to be connected to one another in the mind to form networks. This construct is seen as a property of the individual mind. However, social representations are seen as group ideas which are created collectively through the interaction of many minds (Riley, 1997). This view of beliefs emphasizes the influence of culture. The term self-beliefs has arisen from Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) in which these beliefs comprise a self-system which, with interaction with external influences, dictates an individual's behavior and are thought to be highly instrumental in a learner's successes or failures (Pajeres & Schunk, 2002). The term control-beliefs refers to the degree to which a learner feels that they are in control over the outcome of events. Within the domain of control-beliefs is locus of control, which distinguishes between internal locus of control and external locus of control. Internal locus of control attributes a high degree of control to the individual over the events that affect him/her and external locus of control refers to a belief that events which affect an individual are beyond their control (Maltby et al., 2007). Finally, the term attribution refers to the perceived causes of an outcome after an event occurs, either to themselves or to others. The difference between locus of control and attribution is that attribution refers to events in the past and locus of control refers to events in the future (Gabillon, 2005). It is the opinion of the author that all of these aspects of learner beliefs could serve to either impede or catalyze the language acquisition process, and are, as such, relevant to the present study.

With regards to the formation of learner beliefs, as with the nature of beliefs, there are two perspectives taken, the cognitivist perspective and the socio-cultural perspective. From the cognitivist perspective learner beliefs are constructed by the individual and each is considered a unique property of the

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individual. No consideration is given to the context from this perspective. On the other hand, from the socio-cultural perspective, learner beliefs are a result of the socio-cultural context which the learner is from (Gabillon, 2005). Of course both perspectives are mutually compatible and equally plausible. Therefore it could be said that learner beliefs are formed as a result of the experiences of an individual within a particular cultural context; in this case of learning a second language, educational experience could be assumed to be the primary influence. However each individual constructs their beliefs in a unique fashion. As such, there may be tendencies among individuals in a culturally homogenous group but individual variation will always be present. This may be responsible for issues such as those described in the first section, particularly if the teacher is from a different culture to the learners. In addressing such issues, the individualized aspect of beliefs necessitates a heuristic to ascertain what the learner beliefs are, thereby making them available for reflection and sharing. Considering the socio-cultural aspect of beliefs, such sharing could lead to development of beliefs. It is one aim of this study to determine whether this is the case.

2.2 Tools for investigating learner beliefs

The history of the study of learner beliefs perhaps begins with Horwitz (1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1999), who utilized her BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Instrument), which is essentially a questionnaire in which learner's select the extent to which they agree with statements about language learning on a likert scale. This instrument has been used in a variety of contexts with large samples of participants and has been widely regarded as a valid instrument for measuring learner beliefs. However, for the purpose of this study, there are a number of major weaknesses. The first of which is that it assumes that learner beliefs are accessible to the conscious mind, whereas it is often argued that many of our beliefs, and perhaps those which most strongly influence our behavior, lie below the level of conscious awareness. This has been demonstrated by discrepancies between stated beliefs and spontaneous behavior (Basturkmen et al., 2004; Tobin, 1990; Munby & Russel, 1990). From this perspective, the BALLI is limited to the investigation of explicit learner beliefs, whereas the most influential may be implicit. Furthermore, in a top-down approach such as this, the objective is to inform the pedagogical practices of the educator. This tacitly implies that any group of learners is homogeneous with regards to their beliefs, which, as discussed above, is unlikely to be the case, considering the diversity of learners. It may also be that the beliefs of the learners, from a theoretical perspective, are likely to impede their progress in language learning, as in the case of the learner quoted at the beginning who preferred to study speaking alone, rather than interacting in the target language. In a case such as this, adapting pedagogical practices to the beliefs of the learners may not result in

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improved language learning. Finally, developing curricula based on results of the BALLI implicitly assumes that beliefs are fixed, whereas more recent research has shown that many beliefs are fluid and subject to change (Pennycook, 2005). Considering these points, it was decided to seek out an instrument which provides access to implicit learner beliefs and mediates any issues relating to learner beliefs directly. The heuristic selected for the present study was metaphor.

3 Metaphor

3.1 The nature of metaphor

Metaphor has been used to address issues of belief and the subconscious in a number of fields, such as psychotherapy; business; health and education (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). This work was done following a paradigm shift, led by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and their Cognitive Metaphor Theory, in which metaphor began to be seen as a cognitive phenomenon, rather than purely linguistic, as was previously thought. What follows, is a theoretical validation of the use of metaphor for the present study.

At the centre of the cognitive metaphor theory is the conceptual metaphor, which is thought to exist at a cognitive level and is distinguished from the linguistic metaphor, which is thought to play a substantial role in daily discourse. It is claimed that any linguistic metaphor is the linguistic realization of an underlying conceptual metaphor. Linguistic metaphors such as, “I don’t think this relationship is going anywhere”, “Our marriage is on the rocks” and “We’ll just have to go our separate ways” could be seen as the linguistic realization of the conceptual metaphor: “*LOVE IS A JOURNEY*” (italics represent the metaphorical elements of linguistic metaphors, in accordance with the conventions of Cognitive Metaphor Theory. UPPERCASE represents conceptual metaphors).

A conceptual metaphor is a result of the conflation of two conceptual domains, the source domain and the target domain. In the above conceptual metaphor, JOURNEY is the source domain, i.e. the domain from which we draw in order to understand the target domain, in the case of above, LOVE. From this point of view, the source domains generally consist of relatively concrete concepts, based on our physical experience of the world, whereas the target domains are generally more abstract concepts. Using the example above to illustrate this view, the concept of LOVE is more abstract than a JOURNEY (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kovesces, 2002).

It is claimed that, associated with any conceptual metaphor is a set of mappings. Mappings are the correspondences between constituent elements within the two conceptual domains (Kovesces, 2002). To exemplify this point, the mappings associated with LOVE IS A JOURNEY are said to be:

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Figure 1. The mappings of LOVE IS A JOURNEY (Kovesces, 2002, p.7)

Source: JOURNEY		Target :LOVE
The travelers	→	The lovers
The vehicle	→	The love relationship itself
The journey	→	Events in the relationship
The distance covered	→	The progress made
The obstacles encountered	→	The difficulties experienced
Decisions about which way to go	→	Choices about what to do
The destination of the journey	→	The goals of the relationship

Following this view it is argued that metaphor facilitates and even shapes abstract thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kovesces, 2002) and, of specific value to the present study, perhaps the nature of implicit concepts – which could be said to constitute part of the cognitive component of the belief system - can be inferred from linguistic metaphors.

One important point to make is that conceptual metaphors highlight one of many possible ways of perceiving a phenomenon. It is this simplification of experiences which makes metaphor such an effective cognitive tool in facilitating efficient comprehension of the world. However, besides empowering and enabling, metaphor can also constrain our thinking (Wertsch, 1995; Thornbury, 1991), perhaps leading to issues of conflicting perceptions in the classroom, such as those presented at the beginning of the paper.

Much work has been done to support and build upon cognitive metaphor theory since its inception. The Neural Theory of Language (Narayanan, 1997; Johnson, 1999; Grady, 1997) has attempted to ground the theory in the physicality of the brain and body. The premise of which is that all conceptual metaphors can be linked back to our most fundamental physical experiences, resulting in conceptions such as AFFECTION IS WARMTH rooted in our earliest experiences of affection, such as being held closely by a parent (Grady, 1997). It is argued that these primary metaphors are established early in life, are fixed and manifest themselves physically in the neurology of the brain (Narayanan, 1997; Johnson, 1999; Grady, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

It is appealing that the cognitive metaphor theory accounts for the linguistic, cognitive and neural. However, the assumption that our conceptual metaphor system is fixed and constricted by our bodily experience is disputed by Cameron and Deignan (2006). They adopt a Vygotskian socio-cultural theory. Due to inconsistencies in everyday language, found by means of discourse analysis and corpus linguistic research, they argue that the Cognitive Metaphor Theory does not fully account for the nature of metaphors in authentic discourse. These weaknesses are seen as a result of the assumption that the link between cognition and language is unidirectional, which does not allow for socio-cultural influences. An emergentist

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framework, viewing the metaphor system as a complex dynamic system - in which cognition, affective factors and discourse experience interact and are in constant flux - is adopted to account for these discrepancies. Such a system demonstrates self-organizing behavior and can exhibit either gradual change or sudden drastic changes in which new patterns emerge. This theory allows for the influence of socio-cultural factors on the metaphor system (for a more detailed explanation please see Cameron & Deignan, 2006). Also pointing to inconsistencies in the conceptual metaphor theory, Casasanto (2007) examines the relationship between linguistic and conceptual metaphors experimentally. It was concluded that the relationship between cognitive domains cannot necessarily be inferred from metaphors in language. However, the relationship between the two cannot be ignored. As the emergentist theory suggests (Cameron & Deignan, 2006), the relationship is perhaps more complex than previously thought. Therefore, these theories will be tested empirically.

It appears reasonable to conclude that, as with beliefs, metaphors exist on both, a cognitive and a socio-cultural plain. While the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor holds a degree of validity, rather than the conceptual metaphors system being grounded solely in our physical experience, it is perhaps more likely that it is formed on the basis of experience in general, initially physical experience perceived through our senses and then, as we develop linguistically, our linguistic/socio-cultural experience. As such, the emergentist theory of metaphor (Cameron & Deignan, 2006) in which the link between the cognitive and the linguistic exists, but the manner in which they interact is of a highly complex nature and influenced by physical, socio-cultural and affective experience, may provide the highest degree of validity. If our cognition is, in part, constructed metaphorically, it seems reasonable to assume that beliefs are, to some extent, metaphorically constructed. As such, the linguistic metaphor has been seen as an appropriate heuristic for investigating issues of belief.

3.2 Applications of metaphor

Indeed, research has been conducted, utilizing metaphor to investigate learner beliefs. While, extensive research using metaphor to investigate teacher beliefs has been conducted, at the time of writing only three authors could be found to have focused exclusively on the metaphoric constructions of learners (Bozick, 2002; Oxford, 2001; Ellis, 2001, 2002). Bozick (2002) and Ellis (2001, 2002) investigated learners' conceptions of the language learner and Oxford (2001) investigated learners' conceptions of the language teacher.

Although some reference is made to the benefit of consciousness-raising in learners and researchers through metaphor analysis in the work of Ellis (2001), the research conducted thus far investigating learner beliefs by means of metaphor, as with other research on learner beliefs, has taken the

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top-down view of the learner as an object of research, rather than participants in a process of discovery, perhaps reflecting the metaphor of ‘learner as container’ and ‘learner as machine’, dominant among researchers (Ellis, 2001, p.85). This serves to reaffirm the divide between researcher, teacher and learner, or theory and practice. As Ellis (2001) suggests, in order to unite these perspectives and empower the learner it is indeed necessary to include the learner in the process of reflection, which is the aim of the current study.

The use of metaphor to facilitate reflection is not a new concept. A number of claims to the benefits of using metaphor to facilitate reflection have been made in the field of teacher education. The process of reflecting on the roles of teachers and learners has been found to broaden the perspectives of what teaching entails and help to reconceptualize problematic situations in student teachers (Marshall, 1990). Tobin (1990) demonstrated how metaphor can be used to change belief systems of teachers, perhaps validating the emergentist theory of metaphor. Sillman et al. (2003) document the case of a 5th year teacher who had continuously used metaphor as a means of reflection and a means of making his implicit perceptions of teaching available for collaborative learning with peers. Research conducted by Oxford et al. (1998) demonstrated that reflection, facilitated by metaphor, can promote consciousness perspective, which could perhaps mediate issues caused by divergent beliefs of teachers and learners. In most cases of research into making implicit teacher beliefs explicit, there lies an agenda of facilitating reflection on the part of the teacher for the purposes of promoting development (Marshall, 1990; Sillman et al., 2003; Tobin, 1990; Oxford, 1998).

This begs the question of whether benefits, such as those attained by teachers, could be attained by learners reflecting on their own metaphors. This question will be addressed empirically, the procedure of which will be described below.

4 The Current Study

The aim of this research was not to provide generalizable data on learner beliefs. Rather it was an exploratory inquiry into the validity of metaphor in facilitating reflection, providing a tool with which learners can autonomously address any issues of belief and generate data on the beliefs of the learners in their specific context. With this aim in mind the research questions were:

- Q1: Can metaphor be used to investigate implicit learner beliefs?
- Q2: What are the effects of reflection on learner beliefs through metaphor elicitation and discussion?

4.1 The participants

This study was conducted in a private language school in Japan. The sample

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consisted of 3 intermediate students. An ethical analysis was conducted ensuring acquisition of informed consent, anonymity and an equitable cost/benefit balance. All participants were adults sharing Japanese as their L1 and all were of an upper intermediate level (using the in-house assessment system). There existed a diversity of educational and vocational backgrounds and age. For the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms are used in place of their real names. Takanori is a 30s self employed computer engineer, who had spent 6 months studying in the USA, 3 years prior to the commencement of the present study. Naeko is a 30s self employed crafts worker, who had lived, studied and worked in Australia for 2 years, 10 years prior to the commencement of the present study. Finally, Kyoko is a 40s employee of a family rice wholesale business, who at the time of the present study had never been abroad.

4.2 Method

The research questions are addressed using three sources of data: metaphors produced by the learners; a supporting explanation of the metaphors, written by the learners; and interview transcriptions. With regards to collecting metaphor data, there are two common approaches. The most commonly used being the analysis of naturally occurring discourse, such as learner or teacher journals (Thornbury, 1991; Marshall, 1990; Cameron & Deignan, 2006; Cameron, 2007; Dooley, 1998; Munby & Russell, 1990; Oxford et al., 1998; Parson's et al., 2004; Tobin, 1990; Huang & Ariogul, 2006; Ellis, 2001, 2002). The other commonly used method of metaphor collection is the deliberate elicitation of metaphors by providing a cue, such as "A language learner is" (Argaman, 2008; Bozik, 2002; Leon-Carillo, 2007; Carter, 1990; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000, 2002; Levine, 2005; Marshall, 1990; McGrath, 2006; Zapata & Lacorte, 2007). Although both approaches have their merits and their limitations, it was decided to employ the elicitation method. However, there were some concerns regarding the validity of this method. Inferring from Lakoff & Johnson's (2003) proposal that ones ritualized behavior can offer a window into ones implicit belief system, perhaps it could be argued that metaphors which arise naturally in discourse better represent implicit beliefs. When explicit attention is on issues other than belief, one is more likely to use ritualized language that reflects ones implicit beliefs. On the other hand, perhaps if explicit attention is paid to beliefs, as may be the case when metaphors are deliberately elicited, one is more likely to call upon explicit knowledge of what is commonly believed or what is felt should be believed. Despite this, I propose that the deliberate elicitation of metaphors offers a more reliable method of collecting metaphors, as it can be ensured that all participants produce metaphor and metaphor identification is not an issue (whereas this has been found to be problematic and a concern for validity when using naturally occurring data (Cameron & Low, 1999)). Furthermore,

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due to the nature of the school in which the research was conducted – an English conversation school - there was resistance among many of the learners to complete extensive written work. Therefore such an imposition would have constituted an excessive intrusion, as would the extensive recording of conversations. The elicitation method chosen was similar to those used by other researchers (Guerrero & Villamil, 2000, 2002; McGrath, 2006; Zapata, 2007; Leon-Carillo, 2007), in which participants were provided with the cue, “A language learner is (like)...” (From a cognitive perspective, similes are considered to be metaphoric and appropriate for this purpose).

This particular approach, while popular in the field of teacher education, has rarely been employed in the investigation of the beliefs of ESOL learners (McGrath, 2006). I postulate that the reason for this may lie in the belief, as Dong (2004) points out, that learners need assistance in developing metaphoric competence, assistance which is usually absent. This concern necessitated assistance in acquiring a degree of metaphoric competence. This was achieved through completion of a worksheet which utilized a step-by-step approach, starting with identifying similarities between two tangible objects, gradually moving towards more abstract concepts. Having demonstrated a degree of metaphoric competence, participants were asked to complete homework, which was to complete the cue, “A language learner is (like)...”, supported by a written explanation. In the following lesson, participants were asked to share their metaphors and ask each other questions about their meaning using either L1 or L2. Following this, inferences were made as to the beliefs which the metaphors represented. For the sake of validity, the author was assisted by two other researchers.

In preparing for the interviews a number of points had to be considered. These points essentially hinged on issues of validity and reliability. As Kitwood (1977) argues, in terms of interviews, validity and reliability are inversely related and by maximizing one a deleterious effect is suffered by the other. This point can be illustrated by the supposition that the highest validity is achieved by ensuring an atmosphere in which the participants are as relaxed as possible and given the freedom to express their deepest thoughts. On the other hand in order to maximize reliability, a controlled and highly structured interview schedule is necessary, negating the naturalness necessary to achieve maximum validity. Considering this, it was decided to aim for the middle ground and use a semi-structured interview schedule. The interview was recorded, transcribed and coded.

4.3 Results and discussion

Below are presented the metaphors produced by the participants (in italic print, in accordance with the conventions of cognitive metaphor theory),

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followed by the written explanation which they provided with the metaphor. The learners' writing has not been edited. Following this are inferences made by the author and the supporting researchers. Finally, the interview data is presented and cross-referenced with the metaphor data.

The metaphors and written explanations, presented below, were produced by Takenori.

An English learner is like an explorer of a new island

Explanation: A learner of English needs to make a map of where they are going to go, then they need to find ways of surviving by developing skills

From this metaphor, it was inferred that this learner had a relatively autonomous view of language learning, indicating an internal locus of control and perhaps an awareness of the importance of metacognition in language learning.

Learning English is like making a new circuit

No explanation

A language learner is like a new bacteria or virus

English spreads and breaks through barriers in the brain

Both of these metaphors appear to refer to the neural processes which occur during the course of language acquisition. The first suggests an affinity with the connectivist model of language acquisition. The second seems to be less specific about the manner in which it occurs.

A language learner is like a marathon runner

Explanation: It is a long road to learning a language, but you have to keep going. It gets easier as you train and improve

This metaphor suggested an appreciation of the necessity of perseverance in language learning. However, as the written explanation demonstrates, it gets easier as competence increases.

The data below was produced by Naeko.

A language learner is like a climber

Explanation: Learn at your own pace never give up

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As the supporting explanation suggests, this metaphor appears to reflect a belief in the importance of the perseverance in language learning. It could also be argued that “Learn at your own pace” reflects a degree of learner autonomy.

English is like a silver spoon

Explanation: If you don't use English, your English will get rusty easily. Need to use English everyday and polish (improve) (study).

The meaning of this metaphor becomes apparent in the explanation provided. This demonstrates a belief that an L2 must be used to be maintained.

The following data was produced by Kyoko.

An English language learner is like a flying penguin

Explanation: Penguin has a dream that some day I could fly away to another world with my new wings.

This metaphor offered clues to the motivations of this participant. As the written explanation suggests, English is seen as a means of providing opportunities. The use of penguin, rather than a bird that can already fly, perhaps reflects an appreciation of the challenges involved in learning a second language. Although rather tenuous, perhaps it could be argued that this the use of a penguin in this metaphor demonstrates issues of self-efficacy.

An English language learner is a day dreamer

No explanation

The lack of written explanation for this metaphor makes drawing valid conclusions problematic. However, perhaps, as in the metaphor above, this metaphor demonstrates English as been seen as providing opportunities for life improvements.

Learning English is like sticky gum

Explanation: When you step on the chewing gum you can't get rid of it easily.

It was inferred from this metaphor that learning English was an addiction for this participant, perhaps signifying a high level of motivation. However, it also suggests a desire to quit studying English, but the resolve is lacking to do so. This could signify an external locus of control.

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To summarize the findings so far, from Takenori's metaphors and written explanations, it was argued that he was a reasonably autonomous learner, with an appreciation of the metacognitive aspects of language learning and interest in the neural processes involved in language acquisition. He also demonstrated a belief in the importance of perseverance, but suggested that language learning required less effort as competence improved. Naeko's suggested that she also attributes importance to perseverance in language learning. She also stated that it was important to learn at your own pace, arguably demonstrating a belief in the importance in learner autonomy (regarding pace, at least). Finally, it was inferred from Kyoko's metaphors and written explanations that she believed that English could provide opportunities for a better life. Also, to her it appears that learning English is something of an addiction which she may be tired of in some way, but cannot quit.

In order to address the research questions, – 1) Can metaphor be used to investigate implicit learner beliefs? and 2) What are the effects of reflection on learner beliefs through metaphor elicitation and discussion? –, the findings above were cross referenced with data collected in the interviews.

Below, data taken from the interview transcripts is presented in order to address the first research question, “can metaphor be used to investigate implicit learner beliefs?”. There were a number occasions in which the participants explicitly stated that their metaphors did reflect their beliefs about language learning. However, in accordance with the paradigm of this study - learner beliefs often lie below the level of conscious awareness – this was not considered to be sufficient evidence. In an attempt to see below the level of conscious awareness, inferences were made. Each metaphor produced by the participants will be addressed individually.

An English learner is like an explorer of a new island

Explanation: A learner of English needs to make a map of where they are going to go, then they need to find ways of surviving by developing skills

This metaphor, produced by Takenori, found a certain degree of support in the interview data. As was stated above, it was inferred that this metaphor represented a relatively autonomous view of language learning and perhaps an awareness of the importance of metacognition in language learning.

Interviewer: ..so why did you start to study in America?

Takenori: Why?..... mmmmm..... actually I er thought if I study English in Japan I thought there's a limit

Interviewer: Mmmm right

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Takenori: Actually also learning a language is not only just kind of grammar or vocabulary language is also a little bit culture or... I have to feel

Interviewer: Arr I see

Takenori: It's hard to explain but I want to feel

Interviewer: right... Feeling the language in its real setting

Takenori: yeah and also I learned the pronunciation in the US lots of people are coming the US cos pronunciation is different

This extract shows that as a learner Takenori has to a large degree taken responsibility for his own learning, by recognizing limitations to studying in Japan and taking steps to overcome them. Also evident was a degree of metacognitive awareness in his statement about language learning being more than just grammar and vocabulary, demonstrating a desire to seek out opportunities to interact in the target language and use it in its cultural context.

Learning English is like making a new circuit

No explanation

A language learner is like a new bacteria or virus

English spreads and breaks through barriers in the brain

A language learner is like a marathon runner

Explanation: It is a long road to learning a language, but you have to keep going. It gets easier as you train and improve

These metaphors, referring to the neural processes involved in language acquisition, found no support in the interview data, as was the case with the marathon runner metaphor. However, all participants were long-term English learners, which arguably indicates an appreciation of the perseverance necessary to learn a second language.

The following discussion refers to data taken from Naeko's interview.

A language learner is like a climber

Explanation: Learn at your own pace never give up

As mentioned above, perhaps the perseverance demonstrated by the long history of English learning provides support to this metaphor. The degree of learner autonomy, suggested by the "Learn at your own pace"

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phrase was supported in the interview data, to a certain extent. When considering the “learner as a worker” metaphor, she said:

Naeko: Mmmm this relationship is like a worker have to do like have more pressure but er but you know a learner have to be more... have more freedom.

Perhaps it could be argued that the reference to learner’s being free suggests a degree of learner autonomy, although, admittedly, the connection is a little tenuous.

English is like a silver spoon

Explanation: If you don’t use English, your English will get rusty easily. Need to use English everyday and polish (improve) (study).

This metaphor found substantial support in the interview data. There were numerous references to the necessity of regular use to prevent backsliding.

Interviewer: ...so why do you study English now?

Naeko: err I’m studying English now keep my English level

Interviewer: Mmm

Naeko: I don’t wanna lose my English skill

Interviewer: Right

Naeko: ..for me vocabulary is the most important its easy forget and then yeah if I don’t use..

Naeko: I believe you know erm ..continue studying is very important

Interviewer. Mmmm OK

Naeko: And never give up (laugh)

The following discussion refers to data taken from the interview with Kyoko.

An English language learner is like a flying penguin

Explanation: Penguin has a dream that someday I could fly away to another world with my new wings.

The inferences made about this metaphor – a belief in English as a means of providing opportunities and a possible lack of self-efficacy – found little support from the interview data. However, there was one reference to English affording her the chance to visit her daughter who will shortly study in America.

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Learning English is like sticky gum

Explanation: When you step on the chewing gum you can't get rid of it easily

Evidence of the addiction signified by this metaphor was found in the interview data. Several references were made to not being able to stop studying English.

Kyoko: so.. when I started studying for the first time I... had lots of motivation.

Interviewer: Uhuh mmm I see

Interviewer: and a really strong will... now if I.. it's part of my life..... If I devote this strongly.. I will be tired so I... keep continue.. keep studying slowly comfortably

Kyoko: if I stop if I stop doing I have I have I have nothing

Interviewer: Mmmmmm I see

Kyoko: what I want what I think want to do is just keeping it very slow and..

To summarize the findings from the interview with regards to whether the metaphors, produced by the participants, reflect their implicit learner beliefs, in most cases evidence could be found in the interview data to suggest that they did. Of course there are always validity issues when dealing with the subconscious. However, in combination with previous studies and the theoretical development, the results were considered to be valid.

The interview also provided some evidence to address the second research question, "What are the effects of reflection on learner beliefs through metaphor elicitation and discussion?".

Naeko: ... and this one actually (referring to the second metaphor) is er in my dream when I slept and thinking about this homework it suddenly came up

Interviewer: right oh really when you were asleep

Naeko: mm when I was asleep

Interviewer: oh right that's interesting yeah I think metaphors are a big part of dreams

Naeko: (laugh) so... yes.... So metaphor mm

Interviewer: so erm yeah

Naeko: very deeply

This extract was considered to indicate that, for Naeko at least, the process of producing metaphors facilitated a high degree of reflection, which

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caused her to dream about the nature of learning English. Takenori and Kyoko did not provide such evidence. However, a potentially valuable by-product of this process was an apparent increase in perspective consciousness (Oxford et al, 1998). All three participants indicated that they had a heightened perspective consciousness.

Kyoko: Mmmmmmmmm..... each one (metaphor) has a
different... meaning

Interviewer: Mmm

Kyoko: each one.....can say one point

Naeko: I think everyone has a different feeling of.. you know.. of
English

Interviewer: yeah right and the learning process

Naeko: (laugh) yes sometimes people doesn't like or have a
pressure to learn English so.. and also their environment

Interviewer: ar yeah

Naeko: it reflects this kind of expression (laugh)

Interviewer: yeah yeah cos I think really Kyoko's er.. so yours
and Takanori's had some similarities but Kyoko's seem
quite different from yours

Naeko:.. I think her personality as as well like you know she's
very serious and er good student

Takenori: yeah actually her.. her metaphor is maybe.. shows her
personality

Interviewer: right OK yeah.. yeah actually Naeko's said the
same thing.. yeah... so I think hers are more different to
than your twos' from each other

Takenori: Yeah this one Naeko's metaphor is kind of more
practical

Interviewer: right

Takenori: based on the real things but er Kyoko's are a little different

Takenori: and er the others (metaphors) are.... Are ... the others
are mmmmmmmmm.... mmmm....mmm... maybe they
depend on the learning style

As Oxford et al (1998) suggest, perspective consciousness can be seen as remedy to dissatisfaction caused by issues of contrasting perspectives, similar to those presented at the beginning of this paper. However, this perspective consciousness did not appear to result in a transformation of beliefs, as had occurred in the research on teachers beliefs.

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In summary of the findings from the interview data concerning the effects of the process of producing and discussing metaphors, in the case of one participant, strong evidence was found to show that high degree of reflection was attained. Also, all three participants showed evidence of having developed a degree of perspective consciousness. There was little evidence to suggest that there been any development in their beliefs resulting from the process.

5 Conclusions

With regards to the first research question, “Can metaphor be used to investigate implicit learner beliefs?”, evidence was found to suggest that they can. Admittedly, the metaphors, which were produced, can only be claimed to indicate what was at the forefront of the consciousness of the participant at that particular time, a ‘snap-shot’ of their implicit belief system and the sample size was insufficient to provide generalizable data. Nevertheless, it could be argued that these results add to the body of research which serves to corroborate the Cognitive Metaphor Theory. As such, it could provide a valuable tool with which teachers can generate context specific data, allowing them to move away from the ‘one size fits all’ approach of a methodological paradigm based on generalizable research, which can result in pedagogy which is inappropriate to the context (Kumaravadivleu, 2001).

With regards to the second research question, “What are the effects of reflection on learner beliefs through metaphor elicitation?”, evidence was presented that a deep level of reflection was facilitated in one of the participants. In the case of all three participants, perspective consciousness was evident. Admittedly, it is unclear whether this existed prior to the study, however, clearly the process focused the attention of the participants, which promoted consciousness awareness. This perspective consciousness, potentially mediates issues caused by the divergence of teacher and learner beliefs, similar to those outlined at the beginning of this article. However, contrary to the findings of research on teachers beliefs and emergentist metaphor theory, no explicit evidence of a broadening of perspectives regarding the role of the learner was demonstrated. There are a number of possible reasons for this: such development of beliefs is not possible within the parameters of the present study; as Marshall (1990) postulated, development of beliefs through metaphor elicitation cannot occur without sufficient theoretical knowledge and one-on-one guidance; or perhaps a development of beliefs had occurred, but could not be detected by the heuristic utilized in the present study. In order to clearly identify the conditions under which the development of beliefs can occur, systematic longitudinal study would be necessary. Although the tool evaluated in the current study cannot unequivocally claim to promote development of learner beliefs, it demonstrably provided a means of identifying and reflecting on beliefs. From a theoretical perspective, these are the conditions necessary for

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belief development. Metacognitive development in learners is not possible without access to, and the opportunity to reflect on their implicitly held beliefs. The tool developed and evaluated in this study provides just such access and opportunities.

More work is necessary to fully understand the relationship between metaphor, implicit learner beliefs and the effects of reflection. However, the empowerment of learners to autonomously reflect upon their own learning in a critical way could be seen as an important step to becoming an autonomous language learner. This is because it enables them to address any issues relating to learner beliefs which may be preventing successful language acquisition. In such a case, distinctions between researcher, educator and learner become less pronounced and learners are placed where they belong... in the centre.

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Joe Sykes
Akita University
1-1 Tegata-Gakuenmachi,
Akita City, Akita Prefecture,
010-8502, Japan
Tel: 18-81-889-2463
Email: joesykes@gmail.com

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