Iranian EFL Learners’ Cognitive Styles and Their Explanations of Conceptual Metaphors

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ABSTRACT

The current study aims to investigate Iranian EFL learners’ cognitive styles and their explanations of conceptual metaphors, offering a possible range of individual differences in metaphor processing. 71 participants were asked to explain some established conceptual metaphors that are commonly used in English. Then, their cognitive styles were classified into “analytic” or “holistic” and “imager” or “verbalizer” by means of cognitive styles test. Data analysis revealed that 29 participants (40.85%) explained the three conceptual metaphors by making structural correspondences between source and target domain. Moreover, 20 participants (28.17%) explained at least one of the metaphors by applying elements which were not part of the source domain. The results of the experiment revealed that learners with “holistic” cognitive styles were more likely to blend their conception of the target domain with the source domain in comparison to participants with “analytic” styles; also, “imagers” were more likely than “verbalizers” to refer to stereotypical images to explain the metaphors.

KEYWORDS

Analytic, Cognitive Style, Conceptual Metaphor, Holistic, Imager, Verbalizer

INTRODUCTION

Rubin (1975) and Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978) were the first researchers who attempted to study individual differences in language learning to identify the traits of successful language learners. The aim of these researchers was to make other students to follow the route of successful language learners. Their assumption was that there was a single right way to learn a language.

It soon became evident that language learning is too complex and that different learners with different backgrounds are all likely to be successful to differing degrees. According to Skehan (1989), researchers have not been so much interested in characterizing the “ideal” language learner since then, but in exploring individual differences in the complex process of language learning. They began to study a vast repertoire of factors which have increasingly emerged in researchers’ studies ever since. The aim of this study is to contribute further to this new array of research into individual differences (namely individuals’ cognitive styles) in foreign language learning.

The notion of metaphoric competence was first introduced by Low (1988). He investigated pedagogical approaches in introducing conventional metaphors in language teaching contexts. His emphasis was on the “…discoursal and pragmatic aspects of metaphor rather than literary uses…” Having identified the significant role of conceptual metaphors in language use and language learning,
he concluded that “...how things in life are related in systematic ways we can at least partially comprehend through the complex structure of conceptual metaphor…”

According to the Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) seminal work on conceptual metaphor, our basic conceptual system “is fundamentally metaphoric in nature”. In this theory there are two levels of metaphor: conceptual and linguistic. The conceptual metaphors “are super-ordinate, epistemic and semantic mappings that take the form of TARGET DOMAIN IS/AS SOURCE DOMAIN. Linguistic metaphors are motivated by conceptual metaphors and are the realizations that appear in everyday written and spoken forms.” Bailey (2003, p. 60) For example, the metaphor “LIFE (target) IS A JOURNEY (source)” is a conceptual metaphor from which many linguistic metaphors can be derived such as “we’re on the right /wrong track” (note: conceptual metaphors are written in capital letters to make them distinct from linguistic metaphors).

Although a lot of research has been carried out into the processing of conceptual metaphors (see Gibbs, 1994), there is a lack of research study investigating them in relation to specific traits, skills or different cognitive styles.

Das (1988) defined cognitive styles as “an individual’s characteristic and consistent approach to organizing and processing information”. People are consistent in their cognitive styles across time or different kinds of tasks (Guilford, 1967; Pask, 1988). Among different cognitive style dimensions which have been always treated as continua (Moran, 1991), Riding and Cheema (1991) have indicated that there are just two major, superordinate cognitive style continua: the “analytic / holistic” continuum and the “verbalizer / imager” continuum.

The analytic / holistic dimension refers to information processing either as separate components, or as large integrated units. The holistic individuals prefer to study the whole picture, phenomenon or context, while the analytic individuals study separate parts of phenomenon (see, e.g., Oxford & Anderson, 1995, p. 204).

The verbalizer / imager dimension refers to an individual’s preference for thinking either in words or in pictures (Riding & Douglas, 1993). Ernest in 1977 showed that the verbalizer / imager dimension can have a significant role in individuals’ different cognitive functions.

A lot of valuable studies have already been carried out into people’s cognitive styles in the environment of e-learning and multimedia learning (see for example, Clark & Mayer, 2016; İpek, 2010, 2011), but - to our knowledge - hardly any mention has been made of the relevance of different learning styles to the processing of conceptual metaphor in this environment. The researchers especially focus on learning a new language in distant and virtual environment and on how learners’ cognitive variables can influence their success in achieving the instructional goals. The researchers attempt to narrow down our study to the learning of conceptual metaphors in a new language which are believed to shape our thinking, act, and communication (Lakoff, 1990). They are seen in everyday language use although we do not even notice them. So, they worth particular attention from the pedagogical view point and the authors try to explore possibly effective cognitive variables in processing these kinds of metaphors. One of the distinct characteristics of this study is to record the subject’s reaction times when they take Riding’s (1991) computer-based Cognitive Styles Analysis (CSA) to measure their positioning on the holistic / analytic cognitive style continuum.

The ways in which metaphors are processed have been shown to be related to the cognitive style dimensions (Littlemore, 1998). However, there is a lack of empirical research into the relationships between cognitive style dimensions and processing of conceptual metaphors. In this article, the researchers aimed at examining the possibility of such relationships.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Metaphor is “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5); for Lakoff and Johnson metaphor is a matter of thought and not language. Metaphor was traditionally used as something decorative in literary contexts; however, in recent years, cognitive psychologists and linguists have challenged this notion.
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