Metaphors we work by: EFL and its metaphors

Scott Thornbury

When teachers talk about teaching and learning they perhaps reveal more than they realize about their beliefs and values. It is these beliefs and values, often embodied in personally significant images, that provide valuable insights for teacher educators. This article reviews current thinking on the uses of metaphor, and suggests ways in which awareness of, and experimentation with, teachers' metaphors for teaching might usefully be incorporated into training programmes.[1]

Introduction

I don't think the message got through there.
I got lost in the amount of information.
It was quite difficult to hold on to both structures.
You start to see how it falls into place.
I couldn't process it.
One should've focused on the bits of grammar.

A small group of EFL teachers had recently been subject to a first lesson in Japanese, with a view to experiencing the role of the student at first hand. The class had been videoed, and the above comments were a few among the many that were occasioned by a viewing of the video a day or two after the lesson.[2] No specific rubric had been established for the video viewing: the idea had been that it would simply aid recall of the lesson. In the event, the metaphors that the teacher-students used to report their experience were perhaps more revealing of their *teaching* styles than of their individual *learning* styles.

Use of metaphor

Teachers, like other professionals, resort to and depend on the use of metaphor when it comes to verbalizing their experience: metaphors help them to see what is invisible, to describe what otherwise would be indescribable:

> Theories of learning are dependent on metaphors, because they are centrally concerned either with mental acts and conscious processes or with operations of mental mechanisms below the level of consciousness, all of which are describable only by metaphorical means. (Elliott, 1984: 38)

Theory-derived metaphors with a strong and intuitively attractive explanatory power become part of the shared *folk theory* of teachers: the *monitor model* (Krashen, 1982) is an example. Teachers talk about *monitor under-* and *over-using* with the same authority that they once used to talk about *habit-forming* and *reinforcement,* without ever having read Krashen or Skinner, and without really needing to, since the

metaphor is powerful enough not only to speak for itself but, directly or indirectly, to influence their classroom practice.

Much metaphor use, however, is attributable less to specific theories of learning than to a shared imagery with which we make sense of the world: it is no less influential in terms of practice, however. 'Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3). It is claimed, therefore, that:

> one fruitful way to begin to understand the substantive content of teachers' thinking is to attend carefully to the metaphors that appear when teachers express themselves. (Munby, 1986: 201)

Munby, for example, identified in a study of one teacher's talk about teaching, a recurring metaphor of *lesson as moving object.* A related image of *learning as a journey* occurs frequently in the commentary on the Japanese lesson:

1 She lost me then.
2 I got lost in the amount of information.
3 Which route did you follow? (i.e. using cognates or mnemonics)
4 We wouldn't have covered so much stuff (if . . .)

Learning as a mechanical or computational process is another frequently occurring metaphor:

5 I couldn't process it.
6 You could just switch off.
7 You were getting so much input.
8 I turned off during the drills.

A glance at any current book on language learning theory confirms that this family of metaphors is extremely pervasive. Stevick's (1980) model of language learning—the *Levertov Machine,* for example, incorporates not only *input* and *output,* but a *generator,* two *governors*, and a *monitor.* 'A concern with exploring [such] analogies, or similarities, between men and computational devices has been the most important single factor influencing post-behaviourist cognitive psychology.' (Boyd, 1979: 360)

A related, but less mechanistic, metaphor is that of *learning as puzzle-solving*:

9 We were trying to figure it out together.
10 You start to see how it falls into place.
11 Now what can you sort out?
12 You start playing with the language.

Metaphors for language

Each of these three metaphors for learning—*the journey, the machine,* and *the puzzle*—shares a common view of language: that of *language as matter or a commodity*, amounts of which you can get lost in **2**, or you can process **5**, or which falls into place **10**, and which can be played with **12**.

Other examples that occurred suggest that grammar itself is both material and atomistic:

13 One should've focused on bits of grammar.
14 I like little doses of grammar.
15 Did you get the negative? When did you get it?

This metaphor is particularly striking when associated with images of holding and grasping:

16 I couldn't hold on to the beginning of the sentence.
17 It was quite difficult to hold on to both structures.
18 We were motivated to grasp things and put them together.
19 I'd like to really get a grip on this.

And one more for good measure:

20 Will I be able to spit it out in real life?

The metaphor of *language as matter* is extremely widespread in recent learning theory: language, for example, can be *chunked* and *segmented;* in a more fluid form it can be *filtered* and *blocked;* as a commodity it can be *picked up* or *acquired;* it even *fossilizes* on occasions.

But how appropriate is this metaphor? How closely does it reflect what language actually is? Reddy (1979) has argued that the metaphors we use to talk about human communication encourage us to see communication in a misleading way, which is 'leading us down a technological and social blind alley' (1979: 310). In other words, a persuasive and persistent metaphor can have a degenerate effect on conceptualizing, inhibiting the development of fresh insights. It has been argued that the reifying of grammar has a similarly distorting effect on the way it is taught:

> A language can be treated as a set of fixed forms and routines which can be isolated, in grammatical and functional terms, and taught separately. However, such a treatment . . . will provide an extremely misleading perspective on what it is that language users actually make use of and, consequently, what the target repertoire ought to be.
> (Tarone and Yule, 1989: 11)

Nevertheless, the way in which teachers talk about language (as the Japanese-lesson conversation shows) still enshrines a view of language that is essentially atomistic. Rutherford (1987) has attempted to shift the focus from a *mechanic* to an *organic* metaphor of language, by adopting the term *grammaticisation:*

> The process of *grammaticisation* is perhaps the characteristic of language than most aptly suggests for us the metaphor of language as an organism. (1987: 41)

By describing and naming language systems in process terms, Rutherford is attempting to introduce a new metaphor:

> New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin

> to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 145)

Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies. (ibid.: 156)

A related *process vs product* metaphor of writing, which makes much of the ambiguity of the word *writing* itself, has already had a profound effect on the way writing is taught. A concomitant shift in the teaching of grammar to match Rutherford's new metaphor is probably a long way off: the paradigm shift with regard to writing has taken at least twenty-five years, by some accounts, to reach the classroom (Hairston, 1982).

Moreover, if the metaphor of *language as a commodity* is an obsolete one, its metaphorical corollary—that teaching language is *the conveyance of commodities* from teacher to learner—persists, (despite attempts to identify a *communicative* metaphor, for example Nattinger 1984); this must be equally degenerate, especially in its implication that learners are receptors or consumers, hence intrinsically passive. Such images have far-reaching consequences:

> When the word *teacher* in common language is meant to indicate a person who transmits knowledge to someone else, we have an example of language structures which influence our practical theory .... Through their influence . . . they affect our actual practice.
>
> (Handal and Lauvas, 1987: 11)

Teachers' images

Teachers' metaphors, then, offer an insight into the images teachers hold of teaching and learning:

> The image is a brief, descriptive, and sometimes metaphoric statement which seems to capture some essential aspect of [the teacher's] perception of herself, her teaching, her situation in the classroom or her subject matter. (Elbaz, 1983: 137)

These images in turn significantly influence her practice. Elbaz proposes a three-tier model of professional knowledge structure, over which 'images constitute the main ordering feature' (ibid.: 143):

> An image . . . is something one responds *to* rather than acting *from*. If the rule pushes us along with a demand for assent, the image pulls us toward it, inspiring rather than requiring conformity. (ibid.: 134)

To teachers in their classrooms, then, it is the *image* of teaching that has potency, not the *theory* of teaching: theories are only as persuasive as the images they evoke, and only that which is *intuitively* attractive (i.e. consistent with one's image) is given much credence in the methodological market-place. Schumann (1983) insists that theories and models of learning are themselves metaphors and that our response to them is essentially an aesthetic one: a view that some may find frivolous and trivializing. Are teachers simply methodological fashion victims,

'ready to believe anything and anyone with a kooky new idea?' (Blair, 1982: 12). What is the status of 'theory' in teacher education, and of the research on which it is based?

Metaphors and change

As I have argued elsewhere (Thornbury, 1991), images—and the metaphors that help identify them—far from trivializing the search for alternative approaches, offer teacher educators a valuable tool: they are a powerful—perhaps the most powerful—force for change, and should be of critical interest to those whose business is educational change. For a start, any innovation that fails to take account of the images of those affected by it is likely to fail or, at best, sit uncomfortably on the shoulders of its stakeholders. Resistance to change may simply be a case of mismatched, clashing images; it has been claimed, for example, that, 'while ostensibly about standards, much of the recent public debate about education has been about images' (Eraut, 1982: 7). Closer to home, two contrasting articles that appeared in a recent edition of the *ELT Journal* (Underhill, 1989; Atkinson, 1989) seem to me to be less at odds over the validity of humanistic classroom practice as such than over the *image* of the teacher that humanism evokes; just as, on orthodox training courses, much fun has been had (I would be the first to admit) at the expense of the 'touchy-feely' teacher.

Metaphors in training

'Getting in touch' with teachers' images of teaching and learning, then, would seem to be an important task for the teacher educator. On pre-service training courses the image of teaching that a trainee brings to the course is probably *all* that he or she brings, and is useful as both a starting point for further development, and as a gauge by which development can be measured; while on in-service courses, a teacher's 'block' may be traceable to a failure to match his or her images of teaching with the practice of teaching: 'for example ... does the teacher hold quite *progressive* images side by side with rigid and restrictive rules of practice?' (Elbaz, 1983: 135).

By what means, then, can trainers and teachers-in-training make these images accessible for change and development, on the one hand, and *effect* change and development on the other? A two-staged approach suggests itself, where *awareness-raising* precedes a stage of active *experimentation*.

Awareness-raising

The Japanese lesson mentioned earlier suggests a means of sensitizing trainees to the significance of how they talk about teaching and learning. Foreign language lessons have long been a feature of pre-service and in-service courses; by monitoring the post-lesson talk (with or without a video to aid recall) the metaphors teachers use to describe their experience can be collected and subjected to scrutiny. One way of doing this is to appoint a 'metaphor monitor' to each small discussion group, his or her task being to note down any metaphors/images that are mentioned. (It is important, of course, that this rubric is not revealed to the groups

themselves in advance of the discussion, otherwise self-consciousness can set in.) Alternatively, the discussion could be recorded.

Questionnaires offer a 'way in' to teachers' images (see the Appendix for some question types), and are a useful focus for group discussion. Inherent in any such attempt to make the implicit explicit, however, is the tendency of those being questioned to say what they *think* they think (or, worse, what they think they *ought* to think). Nevertheless, even at this level, such a discussion can serve to clear the air and direct attention at aspects of the teacher's role that other discussions do not reach.

The use of teaching-practice diaries (or logs) has been described elsewhere (see, for example, Murphy-O'Dwyer, 1985; Thornbury, 1991); frequently, teachers' accounts of their classroom practice (and that of their colleagues) yield valuable insights into their perceptions and values, and can be a fruitful basis for dialogue between trainer and trainee.

In addition, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that patterns of *ritualized behaviour* are worth studying for what they reveal of 'our implicit and typically unconscious conceptions of ourselves and the values we live by' (1980: 234). Since, as Maingay (1988) has observed, 'much of what a teacher does in a language teaching classroom is ritual behaviour rather than principled behaviour' (1988: 119), might not the detection and analysis of teaching 'rituals'—for example, lesson openings—provide insights into a teacher's image set? This is an area where video might be used to good effect.

Finally, the question raised earlier concerning the status of research must be addressed: the use on training programmes of such ethnographic research instruments as diaries and questionnaires, in conjunction with interviews (e.g. of the personal construct type propounded by Kelly, 1955) suggests possibilities of small-scale, action research on the part of both trainers and trainees. For example, I recently had a group of teachers-in-training devise questionnaires with the object of identifying the range of teaching *styles* among the course participants, using Barnes's (1976) distinction between *transmission* and *interpretation* teachers. This, in turn, formed the core of a project option connected with the compulsory classroom observation component of the course. In other words, the possibilities for research that are engendered by a concern for teachers' images not only have spin-off in terms of further awareness-raising, but help contribute much needed data to a research area that 'has paid insufficient heed to what one might call teachers' beliefs and repertories of understanding' (Munby, 1982: 201). At the same time, such research helps answer the charge that these concerns are frivolous.

Experimentation

Schön (1979) has argued that, through the discovery of new metaphors, new perceptions, explanations, and inventions are generated. He charts the progress of one such *generative* metaphor, which emerged not out of abstract conceptualizing, but 'because the researchers were immersed in the experience of the phenomena' (1979: 259). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) offer a similar, experiential prescription for change. They

recommend 'having experiences which can form the basis of alternative metaphors; developing an *experiential flexibility* . . . [and] engaging in an unending process of viewing your life through new and alternative metaphors' (1980: 223). How can such lofty ideals be translated into practice?

One approach is simply to change the *language* we use to talk about language learning (witness *grammaticisation)* on the Orwellian principle, perhaps, that such neologisms 'impose a desirable mental attitude upon the person using them' (Orwell, 1949: 302). Or, more productively—if the proliferation of such terms is any measure of their effectiveness—old words are used to make new distinctions, hence *use* and *usage; learning* and *acquisition; training* and *development;* and so on.

More radically, some writers have challenged the way we view existing concepts by relabelling them with terms borrowed from other domains completely. Thus Curran (1972) chose *knower* and *client* in preference to teacher and student; while Dubin and Olshtain (1986), using similar means for different ends, advocate *director* and *player*. On the principle that 'any particular way of looking at things is only one from many other possible ways' (de Bono, 1970: 63), it is possible to envisage a teacher-training (or development?) programme whose central principle might be the 'trying on' of new metaphors for teaching and learning; a course where *imagination* might have as much validity as *theorizing* as a predictor of classroom practice. Rather than, for example, asking 'What would be the effect if I did this instead of that?', a more generative approach to problem-setting might be: 'What would be the implications if I thought of learning as, say, *empowering*? or *mythologizing*? or as *the sonata form*? or as *barter*? or as *government*? or as *dance*?' These images may not *reflect* reality but—in possibly unforseeable ways—they might lead to it: it was Columbus's 'kooky' image of the world, after all, that led him where it did. The image pulled him to it.

Received June 1990

Notes

1 This article was presented as a paper at the ALAA/ALS Conference, Macquarie University, Sydney, September 1990.

2 The Japanese class had been set up as a component of the MA TEFL course at the University of Reading; I am grateful to the staff at CALS for their encouragement in the preparation of this paper.

References

Atkinson, P. J. 1989. 'Humanistic approaches in the adult classroom: an affective reaction'. *ELT Journal* 43/4: 268–273.

Barnes, D. 1976. *From Communication to Curriculum.* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Blair, R. W. (ed.) 1982. *Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching.* Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Boyd, R. 1979. 'Metaphor and theory change: what is *metaphor* a metaphor for?', in Ortony, A. (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Curran, C. A. 1972. *Counseling–Learning: A Whole-Person Model for Education.* New York: Grune and Stratton.

de Bono, E. 1970. *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step.* New York: Harper and Row.

Dubin, F. and **E. Olshtain.** 1986. *Course Design.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Elbaz, F. 1983. *Teacher Thinking: A Study of Practical Knowledge.* London: Croom Helm.

Elliott, R. K. 1984. 'Metaphor, imagination and

conceptions of education', in Taylor, W. (ed.) *Metaphors of Education*. London: Heinemann.
Eraut, M. 1982. 'What is learned in in-service education and how? A knowlege use perspective'. *British Journal of In-Service Education* 9/1: 6–14.
Hairston, M. 1982. 'The winds of change: Thomas Kuhn and the revolution in the teaching of writing'. *College Composition and Communication* 33/1: 76–88.
Handal, G. and **P. Lauvas.** 1987. *Promoting Reflective Teaching*. SRHE: Milton Keynes.
Kelly, G. A. 1955. *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. (2 vols.) New York: Norton.
Krashen, S. 1982. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.
Lakoff, G. and **M. Johnson.** 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Maingay, P. 1988. 'Observation for training, development or assessment', in Duff, T. (ed.) *Explorations in Teacher Training*. Harlow: Longman.
Munby, H. 1982. 'The place of teachers' beliefs in research on teacher thinking and decision making, and an alternative methodology'. *Instructional Science* 11: 201–225.
Munby, H. 1986. 'Metaphor in the thinking of teachers: an exploratory study'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 18/2: 197–201.
Murphy-O'Dwyer, L. M. 1985. 'Diary studies as a method for evaluating teacher training', in Alderson, J. (ed.) *Evaluation*. Oxford: Pergamon.
Nattinger, J. R. 1984. 'Communicative language teaching: a new metaphor'. *TESOL Quarterly* 18/3: 391–407.
Orwell, G. 1949. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Secker and Warburg.
Reddy, M. J. 1979. 'The conduit metaphor—a case of frame conflict in our language about language', in Ortony, A. (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rutherford, W. E. 1987. *Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching*. Harlow, Longman.
Schön, D. 1979. 'Generative metaphor: a perspective on problem setting in social policy', in Ortony, A. (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Schumann, J. H. 1983. 'Art and science in second language acquisition research'. *Language Learning* 33/5: 49–76.
Stevick, E. W. 1980. *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
Tarone, E. and **G. Yule.** 1989. *Focus on the Language Learner*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Thornbury, S. 1991. 'Watching the whites of their eyes: the use of teaching-practice logs'. *ELT Journal* 45/2: 140–146.
Underhill, A. 1989. 'Process in humanistic education'. *ELT Journal* 43/4: 250–260.

Appendix

Three possible questions for awareness raising:

1 These are some of the synonyms listed under *to teach* in Roget's *Thesaurus* (1962; 1982, Harlow: Longman). Which best matches your own view of teaching?

to instruct	*to inform*	*to enlighten*
to guide	*to indoctrinate*	*to coach*
to nurture	*to cram*	*to instil*
to stuff with knowledge	*to lick into shape*	*to mould*
to open the mind		*to nurse*

2 In your opinion, the teaching of language is most similar to the teaching of which of the following? (Choose one only.)

maths	*history*	*swimming*	*the piano*
chemistry	*carpentry*	*typing*	*law*

Why?

3 In your opinion, which of the following jobs would best prepare a person for language teaching? (Choose one only.)

sports coach	*actor*	*social worker*
tour group leader	*lecturer*	*sales person*
driving instructor	*nurse*	

Why?

The author

Scott Thornbury has been a teacher and teacher trainer in Egypt, Spain, and England, and currently directs the RSA Cambridge Diploma in TEFLA programme at International House, Barcelona. He has recently completed an MA in TEFL at the University of Reading, and is interested in, among other things, tracing the development of teachers' practical knowledge through their use of imagery and metaphor.