Enhancing the Role of Meaning in the L2 Classroom:
A Cognitive Linguistics Perspective

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From the Cognitive Linguistics (CL) stance, language is a dynamic interplay of complex subsystems composed of symbolic units, and meaning is the driving force behind form. Meaning arises from our physical experience (i.e., embodied cognition), and interacts with culture-specific ways of conceptualizing entities and events through language. As a usage-based model of language acquisition, CL has made significant contributions to second language (L2) pedagogy. Some of these contributions will be briefly discussed below to shed light on how CL research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has extended to Instructed SLA.

Several publications have put forth theoretical and empirical findings from CL at the service of L2 teaching (e.g., Littlemore, 2009; Tyler, 2012). CL advocates for the non-arbitrary nature of language, since meaning arises from physical perception and extends as networks to abstract domains. Certain experiences and perceptions of reality may be more relevant to one culture compared to another, and such selective relevance would be reflected in different languages. In other words, languages differ in how they reflect *conceptual representations*, that is, categorizations of experiences, entities and events. Hence, learning the conventional categories or conceptual representations of an L2 speech community is crucial for using the language in ways that match those of that community.

A useful approach used by recent studies to explore learners' conceptual understandings is conceptual metaphor analysis, which focuses on the human tendency to refer to abstract experiences in terms of those that may be physical. For example, a classic conceptual metaphor, which has been widely analyzed, relates abstract experience of Understanding or Knowing with the more physical experience of Seeing. Expressions such as *to shed light on the issue*, *a brilliant idea*, and *I see what you mean*, would systematically tie the physical experience of Seeing/Perceiving light to the more abstract experience of Understanding or Knowing (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). In this sense, speakers of English would conceptually represent Knowing or Understanding by evoking the experience of Seeing through metaphoric uses of language. SLA researchers have proposed that the ability to understand and use metaphoric language is crucial to all aspects of language use, namely that it is central to grammatical, textual, illocutionary, strategic and sociolinguistic competence (Littlemore & Low 2006). This preferred way of conceptually representing Seeing and Understanding in English may not be preferred in learners' L1s, and identifying the conceptual underpinnings of choices of forms like those exemplified above may pose challenges.

Some of these challenges may result in avoidance or overgeneralization, which are consequences that are not successfully remedied by only placing attention to the structural aspects of forms in the L2 classroom or by teaching units formulaically (Danesi, 2003). CL proposes that what is need is more focus on the conceptual underpinnings of language use. For instance, knowing when to use prepositions poses difficulties to learners, being that they can be used for several functions and contexts. Moreover, the patterns of use of prepositions in an L2 may differ from those of learners' L1s in subtle ways that learners may never identify on their own (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In cases like these, it has been proposed that mastering use in appropriate L2 contexts may only be achieved through explicit instruction (Ellis,

2008). L2 learners usually start by acquiring the use of prepositions in reference to spatial/physical scenarios, such as in *the eraser is in the cup* (where *in* generally indicates that an object is placed within a container). However, confusion in learners usually arises when they process metaphoric uses of prepositions, such as *you're in trouble*, where *in* would metaphorically indicate a person in some type of container. Why *in* is used instead of *at* or *on*, for instance, can be difficult to explain. However, CL has proposed a systematic way of understanding the metaphoric uses of prepositions, based on the idea that all metaphoric uses stem from their spatial/physical meanings, which have also been termed *core senses*. This understanding has given rise to teaching techniques and materials, such as diagrams and schemas, which have been tested in L2 classrooms with successful outcomes (e.g., Tyler, 2012). For instance, the CL approach to teaching the usage patterns of *at* starts by teaching the core sense of this preposition as the *co-location* of two objects. In this spatial scene where two objects are co-located, certain inevitable situations may arise, that is, there are reasons for this co-location. In some cases, the reasons are functional, whereby one object would serve a useful purpose to the co-located entity, as in contexts like *the musician is at the piano*. In other cases, being that the two objects or entities are close to each other, any force that one exerts on the other would be intensely perceived, hence giving rise to contexts like *she was at me all day to do my chores*. In addition to the functional and intensity senses, Tyler, Mueller and Ho (2011) taught five more senses of *at* that all stemmed from its core meaning to a group of advanced learners (*to* and *for* were also taught similarly in this study). In addition to explanations of these senses, the researchers provided diagrams representing the core spatial scenes of each preposition. Pre- and post-test results showed significant improvements in participants' understandings of when to use the prepositions *to*, *for* and *at*, that is, of their distributional patterns based on how abstract uses are conceptually represented by their core meanings.

The CL approach of enhancing meaning in the L2 classroom, by offering systematic understandings of conceptualization networks motivating patterns of use, is becoming increasingly more popular. Awareness of how learners' conceptual representations deviate from native speaker preferences of use may assist teachers in deciding where to place greater attention in the classroom (Odlin, 2006). Devoting special attention to teaching conceptual representations would promote what has been termed *conceptual fluency* (Danesi, 1995), namely learners' ability to use L2 forms to express L2 conceptualizations (and not those from their L1). Research along these lines continues to inform Instructed SLA, especially regarding structures with complex distributional patterns, whose teachability has been questioned. Although more research is needed, CL research to date suggests that learning these structures can be enhanced with systematic meaning-based pedagogical techniques.

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