

# Interpreting Metaphor in Use by Mandarin Teachers of English

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## Abstract

Metaphors capture and model teachers' understanding of teaching and learning, articulate and represent the image and role of teacher's ways of teaching, thus constructing the culture of teaching. This paper focuses on the analysis of metaphors derived from life-history narrative interviews with 17 Mandarin teachers of English, conducted as open-ended questions leading to discursive accounts of their learning and teaching experience, from their own school days through to their current practical classroom teaching and their future plans. A variety of metaphors were identified from the narrative accounts. These then were grouped according to the imagery conveyed and the ways of teaching being described. This reflects and informs the teachers' own conceptualization of their pedagogy in practice, which is impacted by the macro and radical changes of the wider socio-economic changes in China. The investigation suggests these metaphors be used as the basis for improving teaching and learning in schools and supports the facilitation of the emergence of new metaphors in a new form of pedagogy and a new culture of teaching through caring about teachers' work and life.

**Key terms:** conceptual metaphor; image; reform; development facilitation

## 1. Introduction

The essential thrust of conceptual metaphor theory, also known as cognitive metaphor theory, has been the argument that metaphor is primarily a conceptual construction, and indeed is central to the development of thought and cognition (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 1980). It became widely known with the publication of *Metaphors We Live By*, by Lakoff and Johnson, in 1980. Conceptual metaphor theory has since been developed and elaborated. Based on the cognitive force of metaphor, recent developments of conceptual metaphor theory have placed a renewed focus on metaphor through the point of view of discourse and culture (Kövesces 2005; Cameron & Deignan 2006). The inter-connectedness of metaphor and culture is emphasized by Kövesces (2005) in his book *Metaphor in Culture*, as “metaphors may be an inherent part of culture” when culture is thought of as a set of shared understandings that characterize smaller or larger groups of people. Similarly, Cameron & Deignan (2006) reveal that metaphor encodes cultural knowledge and is learnt through participation within particular socio-cultural groups, and is embedded in language and culture, thus reflecting, influencing and constraining people's thought and action. Linking up cognition and culture through a conceptual metaphor theory, in this paper, we attempt “to evoke what the metaphor brings to our attention” (Aspin 1984:35), with the aim of interpreting and critiquing the metaphors and/or metaphorical expressions naturally occurring in a life-history narrative study about what it is like and what it means to be a secondary school teacher of English in China. By so doing, we shall get to the roots of the metaphors and metaphorical expressions and explore what they really mean. The ultimate intention is to explore the meaning of education by reflecting on practices through teachers' metaphors from their narratives.

## **2. A Review on Metaphor in Education**

Metaphor in education as a feature of language use and a reflection of educational practice and culture is gaining increasing attention. Language interacts with changes in culture, society, polity as well as human cognition (Taylor 1984:7), and creates reality in its own image (Taylor 1984). Indeed, Greene (1973) emphasizes that metaphor can reduce a whole philosophy of education to a comprehensible image. Teachers use metaphors to articulate their practices and to conceptualize their pedagogy. Metaphor is language that directly compares seemingly unrelated subjects. It is a rhetorical trope that describes a first subject as being equal to a second subject in some way. This does not only occur primarily in language, but in cognitive practice, it constitutes an essential mechanism of thought and mind (Taylor 1984; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Cameron & Deignan 2006). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5) the essence of metaphor is “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”, with something that is more familiar, concrete and visible, as a way of comprehending experiences and giving order to human perceptions. Metaphor, as a phenomenon, involves both conceptual mappings and individual linguistic expressions (Lakoff 1993). This is further explicated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980): metaphor that is a set of mappings between two conceptual domains, the “source domain” and the “target domain”. The source domain is the actual physical world and people’s lived experience; target domains are the results of the mappings which are metaphorically structured conceptual systems.

We exemplify this notion with an educational metaphor created by Gardener (1989) who finds that education in China is regarded as a “race”. In this example, education is compared to a race, the aim being to describe education by taking the well-known attributes from the “race” as a competition. The “race” metaphor is the result of mapping onto the education domain, a concept that expresses his thoughts about and experience of education in China. Similar metaphors in contemporary discourse in China could be heard, for example, “Do not let the child fail at the starting point of the race”. This feature of metaphor builds on the relationship between language and cognition, which also manifests the educational culture in this particular context (Kövesces 2005; Cameron & Deignan 2006).

Teaching metaphors can be seen as “archetypes” of teachers’ thinking and teaching knowledge. They have explanatory power and the ability to structure information, articulate and conceptualize teachers’ experiences and illuminate understanding (Martinez, Saulea and Guenter 2001). Metaphor has been emerging in the literature in education as a theme and a way of generating meaning in the study of teachers’ thinking and its development (Carter 2001; Munby and Russell 1990; Connelly, Clandinin and He 1997). Therefore, metaphor as a way of conceptualizing is a valid source for gaining insights into teachers’ thoughts and feelings regarding their teaching. These conceptualizations can inform teachers with their own folk pedagogy and make sense of their beliefs (Tobin 1990; Stofflett 1996; Bruner 1996). In addition, metaphors may bring into sight issues to be studied and then improved. Identifying the use of metaphors by teachers in a specific context allows us to reflect on the way they teach and learn, and the way they view their roles and purposes in the classroom (Zhao 2007). This can be further linked to teacher education by reflecting upon their beliefs and negotiating the nature of their roles in the classroom. Hence, they can explore and reconstruct new metaphors with new concepts of teaching as an alternative route of teacher development, which subsequently leads to improvements in practice (Tobin 1990; Stofflett 1996). An individual’s creation of a metaphor can be a result of the attempt to find meaning in life within a specific context (Stofflett 1996). A cluster of metaphors as understandings from groups of people in a particular context maps the culture of their practice. In this case, teachers’ metaphors from secondary schools in China can show how the teachers make sense of their experience through the discourse of their narratives.

### 3. The Context of Analysis

The data source is the biographical narratives, in which metaphors and metaphorical expressions are naturally grounded, of 17 Chinese secondary school teachers of English, from a medium-sized city in the central region of the People's Republic of China. The narratives are about their life-history in terms of learning experiences, teaching practices and future plans. The life history narrative interviews were carried out in Chinese, then later transcribed and translated from Chinese into English. The narrative yielded a rich field of metaphor-laden discourse, with a wide range of metaphorical expressions naturally anchored in teachers' accounts of learning and teaching experiences. For instance, a teacher described her feeling about the level of control teachers had over students as follows: "It is like grasping sand in your hand, if you squeeze too tight, it hurts your hand, and if you loosen your grip, the sand slips through your fingers". These expressions emerged as interesting and creative articulations of the participant teachers' experiences, everyday interactions, personal practical theories, thinking, feeling and imaginations about teaching and learning. They form a culturally-colourful manifestation of pedagogy. As such, metaphors, as an analysis tactic, also have an immense and central place in the development of conceptualizing practice (Miles and Huberman 1994). It is worthwhile to point out that the participants are of different ages and at diverse points in their teaching careers, and are under different personal circumstances in their teaching, for instance, the ages of the teachers in the study range from 22-55, and their years of teaching experience from 1-30. They produced their own metaphors which demonstrated the individual's situated conceptualization and understanding of their own practices and the system in which they work. Similarly, metaphors can show the shared understandings of their teaching practice in China's educational context.

The analysis was started by reading through all the narrative manuscripts repeatedly to spot the metaphors and metaphorical expressions in their narrative discourse. Nearly 100 metaphors and metaphorical expressions were identified and then coded by highlighting them with different colours in a word document. Then the sentences within which the metaphors resided were put together for further examination. The next level of the analysis was to see what theme the metaphors stream into and then to frame them into categories. The focus of this paper is on those highly conceptual metaphors such as: the image and role of teachers; ways of teaching, learning and views on knowledge. What follows is the interpretation and critique of the metaphors and a discussion on how these metaphors could be incorporated in educational reforms and teacher development in the Chinese system.

### 4. Interpretation of the Metaphors in the Context of Teachers' Life History

In the narratives, teachers were exerting efforts to make sense of their experience of teaching and their understanding of it, regarding who they are, what they do and think, and how they feel about their work, by turning to the use of metaphors, which evoked vivid images of themselves and their work as a teacher. Davidson (1978 in Aspin 1984) argues that metaphor is the dream work of language, and like all dream work, it requires interpretation. The interpretation in this analysis, however, is grounded in the teachers' own narratives of understanding of educational life experience of teaching and learning, and of what is taught and learnt.

#### 4.1 The Role and Image as Teachers

It is perceived that teachers' perceptions of their professional roles are closely linked to their self-images and their impact on the ways that students are taught and the achievement of their students (Ben-Peretz et al 2003). As shown in this analysis, metaphor provides a fertile avenue to envision teachers' image and role, and possible relationship to their students. Interestingly, a metaphor such as "teacher<sup>3</sup>" – "teacher cubed" from a

very experienced teacher at the age of early retirement, itself gives an image of a veteran teacher who has taught a few generations, which serves as a prime example that metaphor is highly structuring language, which can condense life-long experience into an image and evoke crystal-clear understanding.

A “slow bird” metaphor from a teacher frames an image of a beginner teacher having no teacher training as she started teaching, who feels vulnerable and concerned with her experience, as is illustrated by herself:

*“I believe I can learn from doing things. I feel like a slow bird. I have a different starting point compared to my peer group and other colleagues, that is to say, I do not have teacher training experience, so I have to catch up by working harder.”*

A few younger participant teachers used “sister” to refer to their roles as teachers in relation to their students, as in this account:

*“They all regard me as their sister, I think. But also because of that, no one is afraid of me. Sometimes they don’t listen to me, or don’t take what I say seriously.”*

As also mentioned and explained by the participants, the teacher is not taking an authoritative role, because some novice teachers such as those in their early years of teaching are not yet familiar with their role as a teacher in the classroom. This expression may also show the caring role some teachers have and their relationship of rapport with their students, which may impact on teaching and student learning in other ways.

Metaphor as language changes with the development in education and society. For instance, the metaphors describing the school head-teacher as “manager” and teachers as “workers” reflect an old view or conceptual mapping, which has almost disappeared (Berliner 2001:86). This might be the case in “developed” countries or areas. However, in the current study about teachers, metaphor of this kind is, to some extent, used by many Chinese teachers in perceiving themselves as “manager”, or “worker” anchored in the narratives. For example, two teachers used exactly these same metaphors:

*“I need to transit from my role of student to become a teacher. A teacher is a manager, an organizer”.*  
*“I felt like a robot when correcting students’ homework and felt correction is useless. After working like this for 12 years, I felt like a skilled worker in this field.”*

“Ferryman”, in some way, along with the “housekeeper” metaphor resembles the “worker” metaphor as expressed by two other teachers:

*“The teacher is a ferryman, year after year taking people (students) from one side to the other, the teacher remains on the river without a sense of high achievement.”*  
*“He (the narrator’s teacher) was becoming a housekeeper... I have an account book in my mind about my students.”*

The “housekeeper” metaphor is used by a teacher to describe what his own teacher was like, when he talks about what he knows about his own students, he referred to the metaphor of “account book”, which indicates an image of a “housekeeper” for himself as a teacher in the school and in the classroom.

This cluster of metaphors, to some extent can be seen as the teachers' own conceptualizing of their roles and their image as a teacher. In this sense, the way teachers experience teaching, their articulation of their work and role, is depicted by the use of metaphors, such as their thinking, and description, of themselves as "ferryman" and "skilled worker".

On the one hand, these metaphors also bring some problems of teaching practice to shore, as they indicate that some teachers' work lacks professional character, and teachers need to be fully engaged intellectually in their work as educators. On the other hand, these metaphors map the reality of the tedious and repetitive work teachers do in schools, such as correcting student work, and teaching the same textbooks for examinations until exhaustion sets in, like a 'burning candle', a widely known metaphor for teachers in this society. It consumes and demands an enormous amount of energy and time which might be spent on other educational activities. This may result in teacher fatigue and burn-out. Consequently, it affects the quality of teaching and student learning. As a result, it also gives rise to questions such as: what is the teacher efficacy if they work like this? What should be done so that teachers can act as professional educators?

This phenomenon has actually drawn the attention of the government and educational agencies and researchers in some countries like Britain (e.g. Butt and Gunter 2005). Pathfinder project has been carried out to reform and transform the educational workforce by introducing and allocating more teaching assistants and reducing teachers' clerical and administrative tasks, promoting technology use so that teachers could engage more in educating activities and enjoy more experimentation with exploring teaching strategies. As a result, teachers' job satisfaction has risen dramatically in recent years in the UK. The implications for Chinese education to modernize and remodel the role of the teaching workforce and transform the teacher image from a "ferryman" or a "worker" to an educator to facilitate learning is illuminating. This also suggests that teachers need to be developed to perform a more active agency in education in order to conduct their work as educationalists and shift their role from "ferryman" and "housekeepers" to educators and public intellectual. As a matter of fact, one of the teachers in the study has also challenged the traditional image of teacher as "candle" who suggests that teachers should seek a more appropriate metaphor for their role which indicates that they do a job to light up others while not necessarily burning out themselves. Exploring teaching and constructing new metaphors can be a meaningful experiment through teacher education and professional development.

#### **4.2 Ways of Teaching and Learning and Views on Knowledge**

A range of metaphors used by teachers referring to teaching, learning and knowledge are put together. For example:

*"In senior school, we listened to teachers. In class, there was little interaction between students and the teacher. The teacher talked, and we took notes. Piles of notes were produced. At that time, vocabulary and grammar were stressed... That is transmission."*

*"We did not encounter English initially until we entered secondary school. There were no tape recorders, and we studied English merely in the class, one 45 minute session a day. There was so much stuff. It was transmitted into us; we contained it and did not know how to use it. It was a real sense of pouring it into us."*

These metaphorical narratives about how English was taught to the participant teachers in secondary school uncover a paradigm of a teaching tradition as transmission and learning by rote. This notion is also captured in metaphors that tell what it is like in more current teaching practice, such as 'teaching rigidly to the textbook is

like “flogging a dead horse”’, “copying” textbook to the blackboard; learning is “picking up shells”, which also indicates that knowledge is perceived to be a solid object, students as receivers and containers. It is noteworthy that knowledge was viewed as concrete stuff, as “shells”.

These expressions echo and constitute a “transmission” and “banking” model of education (Freire 1988) which suffers from the absence of constructive elements in teaching and learning. There is little space for teaching as “scaffolding” or learning as discovery and experimental process, which gives enjoyment to both teaching and learning as exploring. This is also in line with the role and image metaphors of teachers as demonstrated earlier. One other possible interpretation for these metaphors may be the nature of teachers as a work force, not seeing and perceiving their work as facilitating and exploring, but doing hard labor as implied in “transmitting”, “copying”, “picking up”, “flogging” and “pouring”, which does not reflect the role of teachers as intellectuals in education and their work as teaching and educating.

In this study, the metaphors used were not specially solicited or constructed for examination; on the contrary, they were naturally anchored in teachers’ narratives. They have the highest potential to reflect the “real mental reality” of the state of their minds, and therefore, reflect closer to the truth of phenomena in the study. The participants in the study drew on a wide time frame in their life history for their narratives, from secondary learning to their current practice, and they also referred to a broad pool of people when they gave their life-history accounts. Some of the above metaphors are used to describe and conceptualize the participants’ past learning experience, which, to some extent, reflect ways of teaching and learning about a decade ago. These narratives, especially, tell how the participant teachers were taught, unfolding the participant’s personal comprehension and point of view, which present only their personal knowledge of teaching and learning, which is termed as “case knowledge” in the literature (Carter 1990). For example, the metaphorical expression of “study is like swallowing dry steamed bread” was used by a participant to tell about his secondary learning experience, while it is embedded in his experience as an element of the wider culture of teaching practice. Another metaphor from a novice teacher viewing learning as “picking up shells” is a description of her contemporary teaching practice. Why do teachers teach the way they do and how can they break the cycle from teaching the way they were taught? Educators at all levels may pay some attention to these issues and teachers continuing professional development would have much work to do with these questions.

On the other hand, transmission itself is not a problem. What matters is what and how knowledge is transmitted. Part of teaching by nature involves imparting knowledge. However, it becomes problematic when it is dominant and prevailing in the culture of pedagogy for a long time. Though transmission pedagogy seems pervasive in the culture of education in China, it must be pointed out that, although metaphors provide graphic and figurative illusions that convey points of view, they still can only capture a part, but not the whole, of the phenomena (Weade and Ernst 1990). Other ways of teaching, such as the communicative and constructive view of teaching is making headway in the system. One of the veteran teachers in the study pointed out that teachers should use a drop to generate and facilitate a bulk of knowledge, which demonstrates a view of teaching as facilitating. Teachers at different stages in their career may experience teaching differently. At the beginning of teaching, some teachers, feel “rigid”, like “flogging a dead horse”. With growth in teaching, a sense of “flow” and “facilitating” comes into being in teaching. This may signal a direction for teacher education and professional development toward a more interactive and constructive vision of education.

Changes in this field can be envisaged through the participants’ narratives. One recurring change is the change of textbooks, which have undergone three rounds of changes, in which the content is added to and changed with time, requiring a more communicative view of teaching (Zhao and Poulson 2006). The continuity

of the culture of teaching is adequately demonstrated and explained elsewhere through the narratives of an inter-generational case (Zhao and Poulson 2006). Across four decades of teaching practice, the “status quo” of teaching has remained virtually unaltered, consisting of teaching from the book, transmission, and rote learning, as reflected in the metaphors.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of this cluster of teachers’ metaphors produced a web of the participant teachers’ mapping of their imagery practices of teaching and learning. It corroborates the literature in that the language of narratives is closely linked to their experiences, thoughts, and minds; metaphors as blueprints of cognition of teachers’ teaching and learning are deeply grounded in their experiences and personal life history which shape and reflect their practices as part of the wider culture of education. They also frame their puzzles and problems in metaphorical words. In particular, they provide a house of teachers’ personal practical knowledge about their roles as teacher and ways of teaching, as well as experiences beyond classrooms. Teachers identify themselves as “housekeepers”, “workers”, “ferryman”, which, although distant from the teacher’s role as educator and intellectual in one way, communicates their own understanding of their identity as teacher in another way, and serves as a starting point for reflection and change. In this situation, teachers’ identity may need transforming and redefining in order to get closer to their function as teacher and educator, which may call for an identity project in education and society to reconstruct the teacher identity. In a similar vein, Carter (2001) points out in her study of teacher knowledge with metaphor, some possibilities for enhancing teachers’ professional development and identity. Metaphors can be used as conversational tools for deliberate reflection about what it means to teach and as currency for conveying understanding about teaching. They may also be one way to allow teachers to confront their own conceptions of teaching and to critically examine their views about accomplishing the work of teaching. That is to say, metaphors can be used as a tool (Munby and Russell, 1990), to promote and encourage practicing and prospective teachers to become more reflective and constructive practitioners in education (Schön 1979).

In the case of the current study about Chinese secondary teachers’ teaching or curriculum metaphors, we have the opportunity to envision where they are now in their understanding of teaching and education. Despite the radical developments in the economic realm in China, the educational system stays relatively stable, a situation which calls out for substantial change and dynamic development. This study calls for attention to be focused on, and signals a direction for professional development toward a more active and constructive paradigm of education. Teachers as the main actors in education need to perform a more active role to catch up and update their knowledge and their beliefs and skills of teaching. It is revealed in this analysis that the teachers are eager to learn more to “recharge” themselves to adapt to teach in a changing time. “The old tricks” they “copied” from their own teachers need to be replaced with new skills of teaching. Hence, we argue that the analysis of these metaphors can facilitate reflection on teaching practice and these are metaphors that we should not live by. From “worker” and “housekeeper” to an educator, from “transmission” to “facilitation” could be implemented as a “master switch” to transform the culture of education and change teachers’ beliefs and roles, then construct and conduct new, and more appropriate metaphors, such as teacher as facilitator, researcher and mentor to improve the quality of their teaching and student learning (Tobin 1990). Metaphor evolves and changes in the dynamics of language use between individuals and the wider socio-cultural context, and this adaptation leads to the emergence of certain stabilities of form and content for a new pedagogy. Change of metaphor requires not only evolution at the rhetorical domain, but also in what and how teachers experience

learning and teaching, which is the source and root domain of their conceptualization for their work. Public educators in all ranks may undergird the effort to change and reform in practice and then bring about the change with language, to bridge the gap between “ferryman” and educator, “transmitting” and “facilitating”.

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Both language teachers and learners can understand the conceptual differences between English and Mandarin prepositions to assist their teaching and learning. From the interview and questionnaire, I found Taiwanese students tend to directly accept what their teachers provide to them. This paper deals with conceptual container metaphors in the novel *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. The study is based on the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we Live by*), as well as on its extended versions which have contributed to the study of conceptual metaphor in literary texts, as proposed by Werth (*Text Worlds*) and Tsur ("*Lakoff's Roads*"). The focus is on container