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The crucial role of the eclectic approach and conceptual fluency in advancing chinese students' language competence

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Abstract

This paper delves into the importance of an eclectic approach and conceptual fluency in enhancing students' language learning in the Chinese context. The Chinese students observed by the author often reach a stagnation point in their advancement, wherein they produce grammatically correct language that lacks creative use of language, such as the effective use of metaphors. This paper argues that an eclectic approach focusing on conceptual fluency, which is frequently neglected in language classrooms, can improve students' language beyond the grammatical "well-formedness" of sentences. Multiple studies have also confirmed the benefits of integrating conceptual fluency into language teaching. The paper culminates in cross-linguistic and categorization tasks designed to enhance metaphor awareness. Language teachers are encouraged to focus not only on grammar and communication but also on developing students' metaphorical competence and conceptual fluency.

Keywords: eclectic approach, conceptual fluency, language learning, conceptual metaphor, language proficiency, teaching activities

Introduction

After teaching English for six years in China, I noticed that learners of English often reach a point where their progress stalls. This means they can construct sentences with grammatical accuracy, but they struggle to incorporate creative language usage, such as conceptual metaphors. The absence of this particular language aspect becomes an obstacle that prevents them from realizing their full linguistic potential.

Regardless of how many years the students have spent learning English, they always express themselves by utterances such as "*I am happy,*" but never learn other metaphoric expressions such as "*I am feeling up,*" "*My spirits rose,*" "*I am walking on air,*" "*on top of the world,*" "*jumping for joy,*" or "on cloud nine." Even when conceptual metaphor is introduced in lessons,

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it is typically treated as a mere decorative element of language, reserved for use in poetry and literature. There also seems to be limited emphasis on developing conceptual fluency in language classrooms. Integrating this vital language aspect into language curricula is overlooked.

What constitutes a good teaching approach? What constitutes a suitable language learning method? How can we measure the effectiveness of a teaching approach and the success of language learning? These are crucial questions that teachers and education decision-makers must reflect on.

Eclectic Approach

There is no single effective approach or method that can be used in the language classroom to yield good results for all learners. Using one particular teaching method will improve some language aspects at the detriment of other language aspects. For example, focusing solely on grammar can be detrimental to speaking skills and linguistic competence. Focusing on speaking skills alone may be detrimental to grammar. Focusing solely on grammar and speaking can also be detrimental to other language skills and competencies, which are considered vital to language proficiency.

An eclectic approach is a pluralistic and consistent approach that involves a variety of learning activities and methods that correspond to the requirements of the learners (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Gao (2011) states that the principles of the eclectic approach require teachers to have a comprehensive understanding of teaching theories, pedagogical methods, learners' needs, accessible materials, and the acquisition of language. This enables the teachers to design lessons that address practical constraints (e.g., mixed proficiency levels, resource limitations) and activities that improve real-world communicative competence.

Therefore, the best approach a teacher can adopt and utilize is an eclectic approach. This is a holistic approach to language teaching that utilizes and combines different methods and approaches depending on the learning objective and the students' learning differences and needs. This approach is comprehensive in that it takes into consideration all language aspects, including those that are often overlooked in the classroom. One of the language aspects that is rarely addressed in the language classroom is conceptual competence.

Conceptual Fluency

The true indicator of language proficiency is not how many words students know and how well-formed the sentences are. The true indicator of language proficiency is conceptual competence (Danesi, 1992). Conceptual competence is the ability to understand and produce conceptual language (for example, metaphors and idioms). Some teachers would object and say that using metaphors is not important because it is merely a tool used in poems and literary works. However, this is not true. Conceptual metaphors are very pervasive in our daily language. An average person produces about 3000 new metaphors per week (Pollio et al., 1977). Conceptual language is a powerful element in discourse, and literal thinking is, in fact, a limited communicative behavior.

Verbal fluency encompasses both grammatical and communicative proficiency, whereas metaphorical competence is a crucial aspect of conceptual fluency (Danesi, 1995). Danesi further adds that conceptual fluency is the ability to understand concepts through their source domains in the L2 (second language). Littlemore and Low (2006) stated that conceptual fluency is the ability to create and understand metaphor-based utterances that are crucial in everyday communicative situations. Failing to focus on conceptual fluency can result in students being unable to understand or produce conceptual metaphors.

As a teacher of English for years, I have observed that learners of English often reach a stagnant stage, where they do not progress beyond the grammatical well-formedness of sentences. That is to say, students produce grammatically well-formed sentences that lack creative use of language, such as the effective application of conceptual metaphors. This language feature, which students' language lacks and, therefore, hinders them from reaching their full linguistic potential, is referred to as conceptual fluency (Danesi, 1992).

Chinese Students' Conceptual Fluency

Research found that the most common mistakes students make when communicating with others are negative conceptual transfers (Danesi & Grieve, 2010). This means that students use the conceptual system of the Chinese language and apply it to the English language, which can produce misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication. For example, a Chinese person would say: "她脾气很大" (*ta pi qi hen da*/ she has bad temper). Some Chinese students could literally translate this as "*she's got big gas in spleen*" which is unfathomable to speakers of English.

For this reason, students must focus not only on words but also on how concepts are expressed in English. For example, in English, anger is conceptually conceived of as a hot liquid in a container; that's why people say in English, "*he boiled with anger/ it makes my blood boil/ I want to blow off steam*." This suggests that grammatical mistakes do not hinder communication, as does a lack of conceptual competence in the target language. Figure 1 illustrates this mistake.

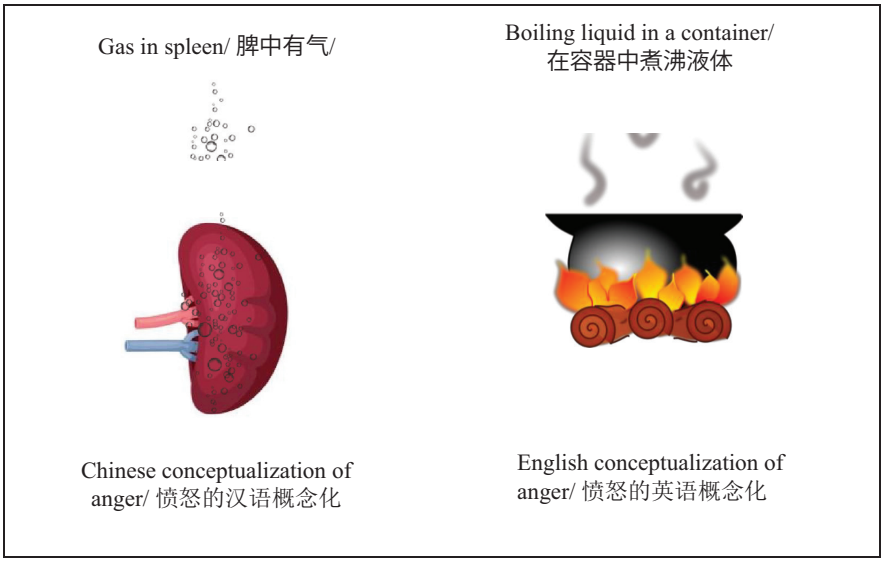


Figure 1 *Conceptualization of concepts*

Table 1 shows that to achieve higher scores in English tests, for example, band 7, 8, or 9 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test, students must focus not only on producing grammatically correct sentences but also on creating creative sentences that incorporate conceptual metaphors and idioms. As can be seen from the IELTS speaking band descriptor below, higher bands require learners to be able to produce and understand idiomatic language, a vital lexical resource aspect that not only supplements fluency and coherence in the target language but is also essential for engaging in successful linguistic and cultural communication.

Band	Fluency and coherence	Lexical resource
9	• speaks fluently with only rare repetition or self-correction; any hesitation is content-related rather than to find words or grammar • speaks coherently with fully appropriate cohesive features • develops topics fully and appropriately	• uses vocabulary with full flexibility and precision in all topics • uses idiomatic language naturally and accurately
8	• speaks fluently with only occasional repetition or self-correction; hesitation is usually content-related and only rarely to search for language • develops topics coherently and appropriately	• uses a wide vocabulary resource readily and flexibly to convey precise meaning • uses less common and idiomatic vocabulary skilfully, with occasional inaccuracies • uses paraphrase effectively as required
7	• speaks at length without noticeable effort or loss of coherence • may demonstrate language-related hesitation at times, or some repetition and/or self-correction • uses a range of connectives and discourse markers with some flexibility	• uses vocabulary resource flexibly to discuss a variety of topics • uses some less common and idiomatic vocabulary and shows some awareness of style and collocation, with some inappropriate choices • uses paraphrase effectively

Figure 2 *IELTS speaking band description*

Cambridge English Language Assessment: assets.cambridgeenglish.org

Conceptual Fluency's Role in Improving Students' Language

We can start focusing on all language aspects, including conceptual fluency. Conceptual metaphor is, therefore, a vital and essential component that needs to be used in language classrooms and integrated within language syllabi. Teachers should not just focus on the students' grammatical well-formedness but also on their creative use of language and their metaphoric competence. Incorporating conceptual metaphors can aid in vocabulary acquisition and retention (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008), as they provide a conceptual framework for organizing the lexicon (Pérez, 2019).

Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the influence of employing conceptual metaphors as a teaching aid. Kövecses and Szabó (1996) conducted a survey to examine the impact of metaphorical awareness on foreign language learners. Their findings revealed that learners guided and supported to use a metaphor-based approach performed 25% better than those who did not receive such instruction and assistance.

Picken (2005) also reported that raising the awareness of conceptual metaphors was beneficial for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in identifying metaphors, both in the short and long term. Pérez (2019) conducted a study as part of a project on *Innovation and Teaching Development*, which aimed to improve students' metaphoric competence. The researcher used principles of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to organize and teach the language content. The teaching sessions included: an introduction to conceptual metaphors, a reading of the entry 'Metaphor' from the Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, matching activities, a debate, a classification task, describing photos, ordering tasks, multiple-choice tasks, underlining, sentence completion, and other activities.

The findings, evaluated through classroom interaction and practice, a final test, and a post-test examination conducted six months later, unequivocally validate the efficacy of using conceptual metaphor as a teaching tool. The researcher also administered a student opinion questionnaire, which confirmed not only the effectiveness of the innovations but also the students' satisfaction with the teaching approach. These results lend support to the notion that conceptual metaphor serves as a crucial teaching tool that can significantly improve the language learning process (Picken, 2005).

A cognitive approach to teaching vocabulary, like metaphor-based teaching, can have a significant positive impact on language learning. The metaphor-based teaching method enables learners to group vocabulary according to conceptual domains, thereby simplifying the learning process (as stated by Boers, 1999). Additional research and evidence from Kövecses and Szabó (1996), Boers (2000), Picken (2005), Littlemore and Low (2006), Danesi and Grieve (2010), and Pérez (2019) all suggest that making use of a cognitive linguistic framework does effectively help language learners to acquire vocabulary and metaphors, and also to retain them in memory over the long term. The following are some activities that can enhance students' conceptual awareness.

Conceptual Metaphor Awareness-Raising Activities

The teaching of metaphor can be integrated within language instruction and taught through the introduction of activities that raise awareness about conceptual metaphors. For example, cross-linguistic activities in which students identify metaphorical equivalents in their L1 courses can be used to compare the use and meanings of metaphors in L1 and L2. This will make the comprehension process of the conceptual metaphor at hand easier (Pérez, 2019). This activity draws on the contrastive analysis theory and cognitive linguistics, encouraging learners to analyze and understand the cognitive processes behind language structures and metaphors.

For visual learners, charts can be used to illustrate the differences that exist between the source language and the target language. This helps the learners access the information easily and assists them in dealing with L1 interference. This activity combines the analytical aspect of contrastive analysis (memorizing differences) with cognitive linguistics (conceptual understanding of language). By combining elements of both the traditional Grammar-Translation and the contemporary Communicative Language Teaching approaches to teaching, the activity exemplifies the characteristics of the eclectic approach, where the best elements of several approaches are selected for a more comprehensive learning experience.

Other activities, such as identifying and categorizing metaphors in a text, describing a picture, and creating a story using metaphors, can be used. The activities can help in acquiring vocabulary, as well as understanding and producing metaphors. This can complement the traditional way of teaching, which is based on memorization, and it can act as an aid for organizing and teaching vocabulary systematically (Pérez, 2019).

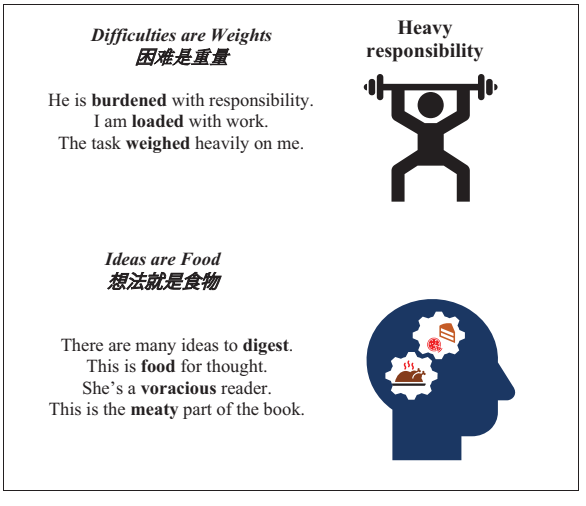


Figure 3 *Examples of conceptual metaphors in teaching materials*

Another activity that can be used to increase metaphorical awareness and competence is the categorization task. Students must categorize sentences and expressions according to the conceptual metaphor column to which they belong, as shown below. This task is grounded in cognitive linguistics, which maintains that metaphors are not simply rhetorical but fundamental to human thought and language. The activity also relates to Task-Based Learning as students are given the task of classifying metaphors, thus encouraging active learning. For auditory learners, listening to examples of metaphors in speech and discussing them can help improve their knowledge of conceptual metaphors, which is an area of difficulty for second-language learners.

It can also increase cultural sensitivity because different cultures employ metaphors in varying ways. This activity combines the theoretical foundation of cognitive linguistics with the task-based practical approach. The act of categorization involves memorizing different types of metaphors and mentally understanding how they function in language. By combining all of these different theoretical and practical elements, it shows the eclectic procedure of using different strategies to reach the goal of language learning.

I feel down/ she is down/ my spirit is up/ be on top of the world/ feel elevated/ low life / he is into a hole/ she lifts me up

GOOD IS UP	BAD IS DOWN
my spirit is up	*I feel down*
be on top of the world	*she is down*
feel elevated	*low life*

Figure 4 *Conceptual metaphors categorization activity*

There are several other interesting activities that could be used to teach conceptual metaphors, including a guessing game where two pictures are shown for the students to guess the expression of the conceptual metaphor. Guessing games can promote interaction and communication between the learners, and they represent the ultimate in Communicative Language Teaching. Guessing games also incorporate elements of Total Physical Response, as they often involve bodily gestures or movements to provide clues.

They can be linked to constructivism, where students actively build meaning through guessing and feedback. For kinesthetic learners, the physical movements within the guessing activities can be helpful and can encourage the learners because of the enjoyment and competition elements they provide. These activities can also benefit and cater to students with different proficiency levels because the clues can be adjusted according to the level of the learners (advanced learners can be given difficult clues, and beginners with easier ones).

Guessing games combine the communicative aspect of Communicative Language Teaching with the active and physical learning of Total Physical Response. Guessing games also blend a play-based learning style with constructivism's more organized approach to learning. Through

the use of these different elements, they openly demonstrate the eclectic method of blending various teaching strategies to create a dynamic and productive learning environment. Language teachers need not only to continue their language teaching, which aims to improve students' grammatical and communicative competence, but also to initiate pedagogical interventions that can enhance other language aspects, such as their metaphorical competence and conceptual fluency.



Figure 5 *Examples of the guessing game*

Eclectic Design of Activities

The exercises documented in this paper were designed through the application of eclectic principles to build a rich and fruitful learning context. Recognizing that every teaching approach has a subset of strengths, the design process involved intentionally selecting and blending components from multiple pedagogical approaches. For comparisons between languages (mainly English and Chinese in this paper), the awareness-raising exercise combines elements of contrastive analysis, which emphasizes language differences, with elements of communicative language teaching.

In this way, students not only examine the structural differences but also discuss real-life language use, connecting theory to actual communication. Categorization of metaphors, however, has its foundation in cognitive linguistics, which examines how metaphors shape our understanding of the world. It also utilizes task-based learning principles, wherein students are tasked with classifying metaphors specifically. This combination calls for more cognitive processing on the part of the learners and active participation.

Guessing games, on the other hand, incorporate aspects of communicative language teaching to promote learner interaction and utilize elements of total physical response, particularly when physical movement is employed to share clues. This eclectic combination supports a range of learning styles, allowing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners to be taught effectively through the exercises.

Framework for an Eclectic Approach to Teaching Conceptual Fluency

To effectively integrate conceptual fluency into English language instruction, educators can benefit from a structured, yet flexible framework grounded in the eclectic approach. This approach draws on multiple pedagogical traditions to meet the diverse needs of learners and address the conceptual challenges faced by Chinese EFL students.

Table 1 *Framework for eclectic approach*

Core principles	Design criteria for activities	Implementation guidelines	Assessment considerations
Learner-Centeredness: Instruction is tailored to students' cognitive, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. **Methodological Flexibility:** Teachers draw from cognitive linguistics, communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based learning (TBL), and contrastive analysis. **Conceptual Depth:** Emphasis is placed not only on linguistic form but also on the underlying conceptual systems that shape meaning in the target language.	Activities should be selected or designed based on the following criteria: **Cross-Linguistic Awareness:** Activities should highlight differences and similarities between L1 and L2 conceptual metaphors to reduce negative transfer. **Cognitive Engagement:** Tasks should promote deep processing of metaphorical language through categorization, visualization, and analogy. **Multimodal Input:** Use of images, stories, and real-life contexts to reinforce metaphorical meaning. **Progressive Complexity:** Activities should move from recognition to production, allowing learners to internalize and creatively use conceptual metaphors.	A three-phase instructional cycle can guide the integration of conceptual fluency: **Phase 1: Awareness-Raising** Use metaphor identification tasks and cross-linguistic comparisons. **Phase 2: Guided Practice** Implement categorization tasks, matching exercises, and controlled production. **Phase 3: Creative Application** Encourage students to create stories, dialogues, or visual metaphors using target expressions.	Include metaphorical competence in speaking and writing rubrics. Use reflective journals or metaphor logs to track students' evolving understanding. Assess both comprehension and production of conceptual metaphors in context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the teaching of English in China faces a significant challenge, where students often plateau in their learning, struggle to progress beyond basic grammatical accuracy, and lack conceptual fluency. The eclectic approach emerges as a valuable alternative to the traditional grammar-translation method, which remains prevalent in many language classrooms in

China. An eclectic approach provides a holistic way of combining various teaching methods to meet learning objectives and address students' diverse needs.

Conceptual competence, specifically the ability to understand and utilize conceptual metaphors, is an integral part of genuine language proficiency that also requires attention and integration. Research findings clearly show that integrating conceptual metaphors into teaching can significantly improve language learning, vocabulary acquisition, and retention. Teachers should actively incorporate activities to raise students' awareness of conceptual metaphors, such as cross-linguistic comparisons and categorization tasks. By doing so, they can help students break through the learning bottleneck, enhance their overall language skills, and achieve greater communicative effectiveness, ultimately enabling them to reach their full linguistic potential.

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