SLANG AND METAPHORS
IN THE PROCESS OF TEACHING ENGLISH
AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The article focuses on teaching slang and metaphors, which are an integral part of any language, and based on the analysis of language learners' beliefs and attitudes. The interpretations of "slang" and "metaphor" are given; the functions which they have in a language are examined and illustrated by examples representing the way they are used in speech by native speakers. The most common and effective techniques applied for teaching students slang and metaphors are analyzed.

Introduction

Today, a foreign language is understood as a kind of storage, a translator, a part, the environment, and the shape of the culture. Foreign language teaching involves active interaction with the target language culture, without which a person is not able to fully master the language and achieve mutual understanding with the native speaker. During training the student's mind is forming the picture of the world, full of certain concepts and realities that are specific to this very language. The purpose of training is precisely to teach

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students how to think using these concepts, extracting them from their memory and using them in the process of communication, thereby participating in the dialogue of cultures.

Foreign language teaching as well as language acquisition is believed to be affected by cognitive technologies [1]. According to Bakhtin, the language comes to life through specific statements realizing it, as well as the life becomes a part of the language through concrete utterance [2]. And, indeed, language learning by considering only formal linguistic resources without regard to its cultural component will make the learning process unproductive. The important point here is the integration of language structures (vocabulary, grammar) with extralinguistic factors which include the use of slang and metaphors in real situations by native speakers.

The knowledge of these factors and their use in speech help to understand and develop socio-cultural values of the foreign language. The main problem here is to provide students with this knowledge. To discover students' attitudes and expectations on learning slang and metaphor we have carried out the study of language learners' beliefs.

Before giving the results of the study it seems important to review the concept and functions of slang and metaphor.

Slang as a lexical aspect of the language

Very heterogeneous lexical and stylistic phenomena are often included into the notion "*slang*". Scientists explain its etymology in different ways. Hotten considered the word "slang" as the one used by gypsies [3], some linguists thought it had originated from the Scandinavian language (Norwegian slengja kjeften – "to sling the jaw", "to abuse with words", "slengjenamn" – "nickname") [4]. Partridge assumes that this word is the Past Participle form of the verb "to sling" ("Slang is language slung about") and gives such examples as "to sling words", "to sling the bat" [5]. So the original meaning of the word was equal to "the abusive language" thus implying its negative effect.

In the most general form, slang is interpreted as a specific lexical unit which is beyond the limits of the literary spoken language as well as beyond the dialects of the national language, including, on the one hand, specific words and phraseological units of the professional language, social jargon and criminal argo and, on the other hand, widespread and comprehensive emotional and expressive words and phraseological units of the non-literary language [6]. From this point of view slang is a bilateral phenomenon which can be used not only to abuse people but also, and this is the most important thing, to communicate within a professional or a social group, therefore expressing positive feelings and emotions.

Functions of slang

Paying attention to the opinion of such linguists as Partridge and Homyakov, we have singled out the following functions of slang.

1. It gives speech a novelty effect, for example, the word *"sadventure"* is interpreted as "a sad adventure or an adventure undertaken by a sad person or sad people". *"I thought we'd have a good time but it turned out to be a sadventure"* [7].

Here the combination of two words *"sad"* and *"venture"* influences the speech indicating something new which must be paid attention to.

2. It introduces elements of a joke, for example, the slang word "*nosecicle*" means "frozen snots dangling from noses, created during cold weather". *"People shoveling snow need to watch out for nosecicles"* [7].

The word has elements of a joke as it is derived from the word "icicle". Instead of the root *"ice"* the root *"nose"* is used.

3. It makes speech emotional: emotions can cover a wide range from good to bad ones and very often even one word helps to express a person's feelings.

For example, the word *"sadghetti"* is used when "one eats spaghetti all alone, while also being sad and depressed". *"How was dinner last night?"* *"I had sadghetti..."* [7].

4. It possesses expressiveness and evaluation, for example, the word *"alpha"* is used to name "the head animal in a pack, and by extension, an unofficial leader. Often used sarcastically of someone who wants to lead a group". So initially the word implies a negative attitude to some person. *"George wants to be alpha, but no one takes him seriously"* [7].

Although there are some military groups in different countries which fulfill special tasks and are called "Alpha" and they are considered to be rather well-prepared and professional. So in this case the word has a positive evaluation.

5. It names things and phenomena (a nominative function), for example, nowadays it is very popular to take photos of yourself and they are called *"selfie"* There have appeared various combinations with this word such as *"morning selfie"* that means that "someone posts a selfie to any social media in the morning, but puts on makeup and takes a shower before doing so, they then take the selfie and say whatever hipster crap they use" [7].

6. It makes speech familiar, for example, the expression *"Grandma fooler"* implies "a gift from someone that isn't name-brand or quite what you were expecting. The name is due to the fact that usually, grandmas are not up to speed on what is popular. This is usually not good, but sometimes, it turns out ok". *"Friend: Did you get an iPod for Christmas?*

You: I got an MP3 player, but it was a Grandma fooler" [7].

If people use words, phrases and expressions with a specific meaning and understand each other, they are quite familiar with each other and can do it.

7. It implies some sense, for example, there is an expression "*to drink things through*" which means "a time-honored tradition of thinking things through while drinking a beverage". "*You're psycho so there's no point in us meeting to drink things through*" [7].

The phrase is formed on the analogy of the phrasal verb "*to think through*" used in the literary language meaning "to consider the facts about something in an organized and thorough way" [8]. So the slang expression "to drink things through" implies doing several things: drinking, thinking, discussing and making conclusions.

8. It adds elements of a language game, for example, the expression *"hate watching"* is interpreted in the following way "When the pleasure you get watching something on TV comes from your hatred of it". *"So I was hate watching this liberal/conservative talk show the other day, and the host wouldn't stop talking about healthcare!"* [7].

This example demonstrates the ability of native speakers to use words and word combinations which have a negative evaluation in the literary language *"hate"* – "to dislike someone or something very much" [8], with the positive implication in slang. Thus speakers play with words and create something new.

So, on the whole slang has communicative functions making our speech emotional and expressive.

Metaphor as means of cognition

The metaphor is a fundamental property of human mind. The metaphor is associated with a number of cognitive operations – assimilation, conversion, storage and transfer of knowledge.

Though we got used to perceive metaphors as means of imagery in literature, poetry, etc., we often use this stylistic device unconsciously and automatically in our everyday communication in order to make our speech more expressive, emotional or just express our ideas in a full way. And as the metaphor is an integral part of our thoughts which helps us understand and interpret the world according to Lakoff and Johnson, it becomes an essential element in ESL teaching and learning [9]. Without knowledge of the basic English language cognitive framework, students may misinterpret or even not understand the meaning of certain metaphors which are often present in the phraseology, idioms, proverbs and sayings. To understand both explicit and implicit meanings of the words is essential for natural communication and understanding of the foreign language and culture.

Metaphors pervade all language and communication, especially "dead" ones, e.g. *the "leg" of the table, the "eye" of the needle* are common expressions which represent metaphorical extensions of parts of the body. Such metaphors are rooted in the language and it would be impossible for a person to speak without using such metaphors at some point, whether consciously or not. Unlike "dead" metaphors, "novel" metaphors combine some concepts in new or unusual ways. Effective communication in a second language involves the ability to use both "novel" and "dead" metaphors. Furthermore, what is a dead metaphor to a native speaker is a novel metaphor to a language learner when he or she encounters it for the first time.

Metaphors express the national identity of the language, because they are directly correlated with the extralinguistic reality, so it seems important to involve them in second language acquisition. In order to help students learn metaphors more efficiently and improve their communicative skills as well as to encourage critical thinking, feedback and motivation during the ESL course, we introduced metaphor-based tasks in the ESL classroom and tried to study learners' attitude towards this kind of activities.

The main questions we tried to analyze concern learners' perceptions of metaphors in ESL learning, the effect of metaphor in learners' communication on the development of their critical thinking skills, and teaching techniques that help to master basic metaphorical images of the language.

While looking for the most efficient ways of teaching slang and metaphors we have done the study trying to find out what students think about learning these linguistic phenomena.

The study

The study included different sides of ESL learning, among which there were problems of using metaphors and slang in ESL teaching and learning. The purpose of the study was to identify learners' beliefs, attitudes and learning outcomes in the process of studying English as a second language.

Participants. The study was conducted among 50 first-year students doing the General English course (B1 according to CEFR) at Tambov State Technical University, Russia (2014/2015 academic year).

Method. The students were interviewed with the questionnaire where they had to define their attitude to 20 statements concerning their language learning beliefs about learning metaphor and slang during mastering the foreign language. The answers could vary from "strongly agree", "agree" and "neutral" to "disagree" and "strongly disagree".

Findings. The results of the study show that students understand the importance to analyze how the language works, and not only grammar structures, word formation, etc. but also imagery of the language (i.e. metaphors, idioms, phraseology, fixed expressions, slang). Though they admit that do not have a high level of metaphor and slang awareness, they realize the necessity to learn and practise them in their communication. And this understanding is the first step on the way of mastering a foreign language. The second step is to interpret the notions "slang" and "metaphor" and their functions in the language. And the next step is to teach them in a proper and efficient way. These three steps are shown in Fig. 1.

The first step of understanding the importance to master slang and metaphors while learning the language was analyzed as a part of our study where students showed their reaction to these linguistic phenomena. Now let us examine ways of teaching these linguistic phenomena.
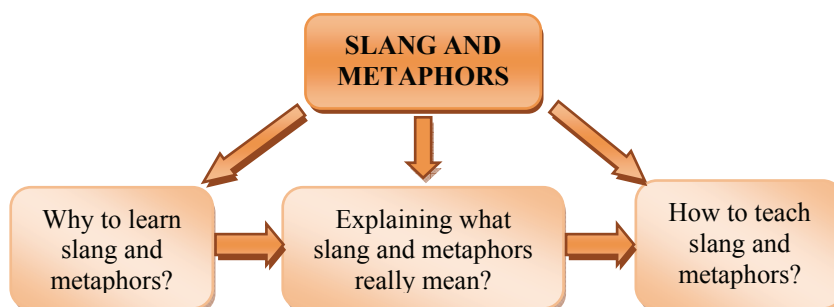

Fig. 1. Slang and metaphors acquisition in the process of ESL learning

Methods of teaching slang

Having analyzed the main functions of slang, we came to the conclusion that it is impossible to teach students English without paying any proper attention to those lexical layers which form the language on the whole, and slang, in particular. Certainly teachers cannot cover all those spheres where slang is used and there is no need to do it. Students may not come across such words at all. So, first of all, some survey should be carried out to find out in what spheres students can have problems with understanding slang words while listening or reading English and then concentrate on them. Secondly, giving some material teachers can single out slang words and teach them. What methods can be used in this case?

1. Underlining slang words in texts and asking students to guess their meaning according to the context. If it is quite difficult, some more examples can be given which will illustrate the use of the words in different situations. This will also help students to remember the words better and use them appropriately.

2. Matching tasks narrow down possible meanings of the slang words and encourage students to choose the most suitable variant.

3. Mind maps are a good way to learn the words by heart as well as different forms of charts. The graphic presentation of the material helps to structure the knowledge that students have and to add more information to it.

4. Using games and performance activities can turn the process of learning into fun, and as known, people remember everything much better in this way. For example, students can be divided into groups and asked to draw pictures illustrating separate slang words or expressions. Groups exchange their drawings and guess what word or phrase is basic for pictures. It is also possible to write slang words and expressions on cards, ask students to choose some card one by one and act out the slang word.

5. Using authentic and real-life materials to introduce slang words and practice them. These can include songs, TV advertisements, films, video clips etc.

6. Practising the use of slang words and expressions in speech. For example, there can be role games, meetings, conferences, shops and so on, where it is possible to imagine yourself to be a native speaker and play your role in the situations.

7. Retelling the stories where slang words and expressions are used is also considered to be a good strategy to know how much students have learned and to increase their comprehension. Older students can benefit from retelling stories because it allows students to learn to organize and describe events, which enhances reading comprehension [10].

Techniques for teaching metaphor

Today teachers pay more attention to teaching of strategies for comprehending and producing metaphors in ESL acquisition [11 – 13].

Metaphor can be a helpful tool for improving reading skills, as it may develop learners' critical evaluation of the text, encourage them to express their opinions or foster debate on some problems, enrich problem-solving tasks and make them more interesting for the students.

The problem is that many teachers treat metaphors in a special way which leads ESL learners to think that they lie outside everyday life and are not a necessary element of ordinary speaking and writing style. Some teachers do not use metaphor teaching techniques in their curriculum underestimating their value in mastering the foreign language and thinking that it will be hard for students to memorize them. The difficulty of teaching and learning metaphors lies in the fact that there is often a partial or complete mismatch of metaphors describing a particular concept in different languages. For example, the English expression *to make a mountain out of a molehill* has a different metaphorical image in Russian – instead of English images of a mountain and a molehill we have the images of a fly and an elephant (literally, to make an elephant out of a fly), although the meaning is the same, i.e. greatly exaggerating something. So, the metaphorical image from the native culture may interfere with the language learning process in the context of metaphor awareness. That's why metaphors should be an integral part of vocabulary instruction; otherwise it may prevent learners' communicative ability as a whole.

Lazar admits the importance of vocabulary building skill in understanding and creating figurative extensions for a word in English [12]. In our opinion, working with metaphors encourages both learners' critical thinking and language learning. The critical thinking process consists in cross-cultural metaphor analysis, i.e. analyzing and comparing linguistic and cultural reality of the foreign and native languages and extracting the adequate meaning for this or that metaphor.

To overcome these difficulties, it is necessary to provide the classroom foreign language with authentic texts containing metaphors from modern books, magazines and newspapers. We should encourage our students to use all the available contextual clues when working out the meaning of new and unfamiliar metaphoric vocabulary. The study and comparison of the topics covered in the home and foreign media at the same time can serve as a source of study of national values, patterns of everyday life, and it will contribute to breaking the stereotypes and creating a more holistic view of the world as a cultural space. Our experience shows the efficiency of active involvement of students in pair and group work, project work, etc., including working with proverbs and sayings. At the same time it does not prevent the work with dictionaries of idioms, slang and phraseology.

The adopted teaching strategy is closely connected with students' level. For elementary learners the acquaintance with metaphor can begin with common conceptual metaphors which represent the same meaning in both foreign and native language, e.g. *the rat race, to digest the info,* etc. The teaching techniques at the first stage may include matching the definition with the metaphor or two halves of the sentence, or filing the gaps. Grouping is seemed to be an important factor that helps students to organize and memorize vocabulary in a more effective way. The metaphors should be also practiced in speech in the form of dialogues or some group work activities, or while doing some writing productive work.

At a more advanced level students may be asked to paraphrase some statements using metaphors which help them expand their vocabulary and practise speaking skills. Another effective technique promoting metaphorical

extension is introducing pictures of items to the students for which they do not know the word in the target language, and asking them to describe these pictures to a partner who will have to guess this item. In order to complete this task, both students have to use their "metaphoric" imagination.

One more productive technique (for more advanced students) involves drawing the students' attention to the fact that argumentative texts are often based on one or two conceptual metaphors, such as *"the society is a sick body"*. They can then be given a number of short texts, asked to identify the conceptual metaphors and to explain their meaning. An extension of this activity involves asking the students to describe the same concept using alternative metaphors, and to consider the implications of these metaphors. This technique can also help them to develop their critical thinking abilities.

Metaphors can also be used for vocabulary building. The research has shown that raising metaphoric awareness in this way improves vocabulary retention [14]. Students can be presented with a central, conceptual metaphor (such as *"the science is a moving vehicle"*) and asked to come up with as many possible manifestations of the metaphor as possible, e.g. *the science is a high-speed train*. They might then be asked to think of meanings for expressions such as *"a rocket scientist"*, *"ideas hamster"*, *"cash cow"*, which are used in the appropriate context.

Another way of introducing and practising metaphor usage is advertising products which may be helpful for developing both language and communicative skills. Students can be asked to prepare a colorful presentation about some product using imagery devices and other students should discuss it, give some recommendations and opinions. Or the teacher can take any advertisement (from the Internet, a newspaper, etc.) and introduce it to the students for discussion (e.g. What does the author of the advertisement want to say by using this/that image/phrase/slogan/logo?). Doing such activities learners expand their metaphoric vocabulary and train their critical thinking.

Conclusion

The process of teaching a foreign language is rather complicated as teachers must pay attention not only to developing students' main skills in such types of the communicative activity as Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, but also to providing knowledge about extralinguistic factors including the use of slang and metaphor without which it is impossible to understand the culture represented by a foreign language. Special teaching techniques help to do that.

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Сленг и метафора в процессе обучения английскому языку как иностранному

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Ключевые слова: задания на знание метафор; когнитивная структура; коммуникативные функции; лексическая единица; метафора; метод обучения; сленг; социально-культурные ценности; убеждения обучающихся;

Аннотация: Рассмотрена проблема обучения сленгу и метафоре, которые являются неотъемлемой частью любого языка, на основе анализа убеждений и взглядов обучающихся. Трактованы понятия «сленг» и «метафора»; даны описания функции, которые они выполняют в языке, приведены примеры, демонстрирующие их использование в речи носителей языка. Проанализированы наиболее распространенные и эффективные методы, применяемые в обучении сленгу и метафоре.