Abstract

The explicit use of metaphor in the EFL classroom has been documented to enhance the communicative skills of learners (Cameron & Low, 1999; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Low, 1999; Littlemore & Low, 2006). ESP learners with a technical background, however, are not usually trained on the presence of metaphor in their knowledge field, or on its use. The aim of this paper is to analyze the unprompted use of metaphor in the verbal responses given by a group of Spanish civil engineering undergraduates when depicting visuals related to their area of expertise. The responses of the students were obtained from a questionnaire completed in the classroom which was later crosschecked with the answers given by a group of professional civil engineers. This was done to compare the occurrence of metaphor as a descriptive verbalizer in the academic and the professional contexts. The results confirm the use of general metaphor in both groups, and the use of field-specific metaphor particularly in the professional engineers (in order to avoid confusion with the engineer students) group, which appears to suggest the evolving character of metaphor in the civil engineering discourse community. We conclude by highlighting the dynamicity of metaphor in the civil engineering context. From a pedagogic viewpoint, it would be advisable to concentrate on metaphor as a learning feature by considering three main dimensions: conceptual, linguistic and visual. This could be carried out by offering students corpora-driven examples of metaphor visibility in the different civil engineering genres, addressing non-verbal elements, such as sketches, drawings, designs and pictures where metaphor may be used. The theoretical framework for this study draws from conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual integration theory combined with a multimodal approach to metaphor (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Deignan, 2005; Steen, 2007; Fauconnier & Turner, 2008, Forceville, 2010; Kress, 2010).

Keywords

Metaphor in engineering, academic and professional communication, multimodal approach, conceptual metaphor, engineering English.