How College Students Narrate Foreign Language Learning Experiences with Metaphors

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Literature has richly documented metaphorical studies, linguistic and higher educational. However, scanty efforts are found to explicitly explore into students’ use of metaphors in accounting for their college lives.

This study interviewed 4 college students, 2 Americans and 2 Chinese, inviting each of the 4 interviewees to account for his or her college life in general and foreign language learning experiences in particular. By so doing it hoped to hear the voices of students from two languages and cultures about foreign language learning, and to understand their ways in making sense of learning via metaphors.

It then analyzed the collected narratives, identified 4 embedded metaphors and discussed their implications to foreign language teaching and learning.

As a way of seeing or understanding one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.5), and as a “fundamental basis for everyday cognition” (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.1), metaphor has been heavily used in higher education (Liu, 2006; Liao & Liu, 2006; Liu, 2007). For instance, Lawley and Tompkins (2000) observe that “students are speaking in metaphor all the time.”(p.1) As a result, especially since the 1990s, there have been voluminous reports on college students’ use of metaphors for learning (for instance, Jorgensten-Earp & Staton, 1999; Bowman, 1996-1997). In addition, various online articles have emerged recently to showcase college students’ metaphors for learning: “Bad metaphors from stupid student essays” (www.mistupid.com/people/page027.htm), “Mixed metaphors to delight and amaze you” (www.calvin.edu/academic/engl/lang/mixmet.htm), “My experiences with language learning” (http://how-to-learn-any-language.com/e/guide/my-experiences.html), to cite only some.

Nevertheless, while the majority of metaphors are about learning in general, little has been documented on metaphors for disciplinary learning such as Nelson’s (1998) study that considers students of psychology major’s metaphors for learning (See my discussion of Nelson’s study in the subsequent section that reviews the related literature). Consequently, we are not clear about how undergraduate students describe with metaphors their learning experiences in separate majors.

The purpose of this study is to analyze college students’ metaphors for foreign language learning. The necessity to look into metaphors for foreign language learning are obvious. On the one hand, as a type of learning, it is “a highly complex process about which we know very little.” (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.1) On the other hand, researchers repeatedly assert it is helpful to understand learning via metaphors. For instance, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) contend:

In all aspects of life, we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. We draw inferences, set goals,
make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor. (p.158)

In a similar vein, Lawley and Tompkins (2000) argue:

Metaphor is not an occasional foray into the world of figurative language, but the fundamental basis for everyday cognition. Because metaphors describe one experience in terms of another, they specify and constrain our ways of thinking about the original experience. This influences the meaning and importance we attach to the original experience, the way it fits with other experiences, and the actions we take as a result. (p.1)

Unfortunately, “we reason and engage automatically without understanding the powerful metaphors shaping our interactions with each other and the world around us.” (Musgrove, 2006, p.1). For that matter, it is always the case that “there are metaphors we can learn by.” (Ponterotto, 1994)

Therefore analyzing college students’ metaphors on foreign language learning and probing into their implications may enrich our knowledge about learning in general and inform foreign language teaching and learning at college practice in particular. As the topic indicates, this is a narrative analysis. By narrative, I mean that narrative is considered as valid data, that narratives are collected for analysis, and that narrative approaches (Reissman, 1993; Casey, 1993) are adopted to understand and make sense of the data.

**Describing College Learning with Metaphor: Who and What are Missing**

**Diverse Metaphors for College Learners and Learning**

Literature documents a host of metaphors pertaining to college learner and learning. In an earlier study, for instance, Nelson (1998) reports college students’ metaphorization of learning as struggle, engagement, change, and satisfaction. Then using “Clean Language” questions, Lawley and Tompkins (2000, p.3) elicit a metaphor for learning from 10 adult students: planting flowers, playing cards, saving account, switching on a light bulb, eating, being a detective, peeling an onion, a quest, sculpting, wrestling. Probing into how students depict their general college learning experience in an article entitled “College student as learner: Insight gained via metaphor analysis,” Bozlk (2002, p.142.) collects metaphors such as college learner as baby, sponge, tide, duck, squirrel, camel, and so on. And focusing on metaphors on reading, Musgrove (2006, p.2) adds to the ever expanding list another 20 metaphors such as “reading is grafting, and the reader connects new text to another text read”, “reading is wrestling, and the reader struggles with the text”, et cetera.

Literature also evidences that students’ metaphors contain beliefs, and are beliefs. By beliefs, researchers consider them to be “a central construct in every discipline that deals with human behavior and learning,” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1988) or “personal myths” which resemble most myths about the human race addressed by psychologists and
educators such as Bruner, Piaget, Rogers, Socrates, and Kelly. (Harri-Augstein, 1985, cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, p.2)

**Who Metaphorizes and How They Do So**

Literature has it that most related studies to date report general college students’ use of metaphors. By “general college students”, I mean either 2-year or 4-year college and university students of any disciplines. For instance, with a purpose to merely elicit metaphors from the college students, Bozlk (2002) asks 49 students of a comprehensive mid-western university in a general education cluster course, namely a course packaging 4 courses: oral communication, college reading and writing, American civilization, and humanities II, to create metaphors for themselves as learners at 4 different points. The 1st 3 surveys are completed anonymously during class time, and the 4th survey at a class reunion pizza party, during an academic year. Bozlk’s manipulation of survey in such a way may find support from Breen’s (2001) who observes that “in the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and metacognitive knowledge that students bring with them to the learning situation have been recognized as a significant contributory factor in the learning process and ultimate success.” (cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, p.2) It should be noted that not all Bozlk’s students complete all the 4 surveys, that not all students answer the metaphor question, and that some answer it without providing a metaphor. For that reason, she finds only 45 metaphors in the 4 surveys.

Of course, not all studies center on metaphors generated by general education course takers. For instance, an earlier study by Nelson (1998) is such a deviance. Different from Bozlk, Nelson (1998) explicitly uses psychology students as sources of metaphors. In particular, she focuses on senior psychology students’ perspective on the transition from college senior to graduate. The study turns to 33 senior psychology students and obtains 35 metaphors.

Related studies also evidence that college students exhibit certain patterns in metaphorization. For instance, Bozlk (2002) finds in her study that students show an increasing ability and willingness to offer metaphors over the course of her 4 surveys. Her observation is later echoed by Musgrove (2006) who reports:

I studied how students’ attitudes towards writing interfered with or contributed to their chances for success in first-year composition. More recently, I’ve investigated how students depict their reading habits through drawing. My preliminary research revealed that students who had high ACT scores in reading, who self-reported positive attitudes toward reading, and who earned high grades in their composition classes tended to represent their reading habits metaphorically, and that students who had lower ACT scores, who reported negative attitudes, and who earned lower grades tended to represent their reading habits realistically. (p.1)

**Tools for Collecting Metaphors**

Related studies also demonstrate that researchers utilize diverse tools to collect metaphors or narratives for metaphorical analysis. Some of the tools include: portfolio with essays (Nelson, 1998), “Clean Language” questions (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000),
surveys (Bozlk, 2002), and “tell me your story” (Casey, 1993), to mention only a few.

Nelson (1998), for instance, asks that each student provide her a portfolio of evidence of actual personal progress toward their degree, and that each student include an original essay in their portfolio that identifies an appropriate metaphor for their college learning.

Another method of data collection, adopted by Lawley and Tompkins (2000), is the “Clean Language” questions method devised by David Grove. David Grove is a psychotherapist who in the 1980s detected that many of his clients naturally described their symptoms and outcomes in metaphor. He also discovered that when he enquired about these metaphors using the client’s exact words, their perception of their problems began to change. Hence Lawley and Tompkins see the “Clean Language” as a neat method of asking simple questions to elicit their subjects’ metaphors. A typical question they ask their students is: “That’s learning like what?” Apparently, their “Clean Language” questions are similar to Hagstrom et al’s (2000) cloze-test equivalent question “Teaching is like…” tool, which neither contaminates nor distorts the students’ metaphorical expressions. (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.2)

Similar to Nelson (1998) and Lawley and Tompkins (2000), Bazlk’s (2002) method is less inductive or solicitational, for she starts with a direct command with an eager purpose – elicit metaphors for learning from her college students. At 4 times in her one-year course, she straightforwardly asks her students to create their own metaphor that describe their college learning experiences. Instead of saying “tell me your story” (Casey, 1993), she seems to approach them by saying something like “tell me your metaphor” or “what is your metaphor” or “are you ready? what’s your metaphor now?” This is an economic approach, but it certainly presses the students hard. It is a method that, if it does not distort narrative research, at least conveys less thoughtfulness as compared with Caseys’s (1993) tool as is briefly portrayed below.

To Casey, few people care about hearing, not to say reporting and publishing her informants’ reactions and thoughts about school curriculum and classroom teaching in relation to social change. As a result, mainstream policies do not well reflect such people’s opinions and wills, and given a chance to voice their viewpoints, her informants seem kind of grateful and ready and eager to speak out what has been hidden inside their hearts since long. With such an understanding, and with an attempt to capture some ordinary female teachers’ voices on education in a social environment of change, Casey (1993) approaches these teachers by simply saying, “tell me your story”. Then and there, her informants turn out to be authors, leaving her, the researcher, as hearer who is there to contribute, rather than lead, the ongoing conversation.

As Casey depicts:

The invitation to create a life narrative was an extraordinary event for women. … For ordinary women who had never expected to write an autobiography, the life history became a task with enormous personal meaning. And I became the intermediary, who could carry their intimate meanings into the public sphere. For this reason, and because the political nature of the project further reinforced the need for trust, the relationship between the research and subject was never, and indeed could not be, a formal one. … We often arranged to meet in the women’s own home, where she would serve me lunch, tea, or a bowl of ice cream. In fact,
while I ate, she would be interviewing me, deciding what we had in common, and established the nature of the dialog which would take place.
(Casey, 1993, p.17)

For me, in function, Casey’s handy and thoughtful tool, “tell me your story”, serves as both an invitation and an emancipation: An invitation in the sense that it not only triggers the narrator’s desire to tell, but also allows him or her freedom to include what to tell and how to tell; and an emancipation in the sense that it reads the mentality need of the informants and serves to emancipate, echoing with Freire’s (1970) use of the word, them as socially marginalized minds.

In sum, Nelson’s (1998) tool poses certain degree of freedom to the informants, but meanwhile appears somewhat idealistic by directing them to metaphor formulation, because for some informants, they may not even know well what metaphor means, not to say providing one. Then Lawley and Tompkins’ (2000) tool apparently sounds direct and leading, which is not encouraged among many qualitative researchers. After all, qualitative research wants to know more details other than metaphors solicited by the tool “teaching / learning is like …”. Hence in comparison, Casey’s (1993) tool seems to make more sense in that it well combines theory and practice, that is, using narratives to reflect the marginalized voices which embed, among other things, metaphors, in the informants’ encoded messages. And it should be a shared understanding that the informants are not caring about the kind of metaphors we as researchers aspire to find; they just care about embracing the granted chance to utter their minds and telling us what they have to tell.

Who and What are Missing

In spite of the fact that there has been growing evidence that college students today are engaged in the making of metaphors, many questions surrounding metaphors for college learning continue to baffle us. For one thing, we find now that metaphors for college learning range from the nature and type of metaphors, and to learner-and-learning describing metaphors yet we are not clear about the relationship between the metaphors researchers find so far. To put it another way, college students’ metaphors seem to cluster as a self-contained metaphor system (Kondaiah, 2004), yet few explicit studies address the issue. For another thing, the purpose of looking into college students’ metaphors for learning is to enrich our knowledge about learning and teaching (Kondaiah, 2004). However, not all the relevant studies relate their findings to teaching and learning. A third issue derives from the fact that form and patterns of contemporary college students’ metaphors are diverse and multifaceted, yet metaphors by students of various disciplines are not yet well documented, not to say well understood. In particular, “foreign and second language learner beliefs, so far, have been a neglected variable.” (Wenden, 2001; cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, p.2) Further, Rossiter (2003-2004) observes that English as a second language teaching and learning is perhaps one of the areas where storytelling is largely used. Nevertheless, she does not mention why the tool is used, who uses it, how and where they use it, and what we may learn from the stories.

Consequently, this study chooses to focus on a narrative analysis of college students’ metaphors for foreign language learning. As a pragmatian, I am particularly interested in collecting life stories in which college students narrate their own learning experiences with metaphors. On this basis, I wish to analyze the embedding themes in the form of
metaphorical expressions, and address the implications of such metaphors for teaching and learning.

“Tell Me Your Story”: Theory and Politics of Method

Narratives as Valid Data

The previous discussion shows that numerous and compelling ways exist in collecting college students’ metaphors for learning. Our choice in the ways to collect data depends on or reflects our views about the ways the world reality is represented, our understanding of methods, our knowledge about research, our purpose of research, and, to be more precise, our theory and politics of method. (Casey, 1993)

I depend on college students’ narratives for analysis, not only because “the use of stories is pervasive in adult education practice” (Rossiter, 2004, p.1), “telling stories about past events seems to be a universal human activity, one of the first forms of discourse we learn as children and used throughout the life course by people of all social backgrounds in a wide array of settings” (Nelson, 1990; Reissman, 1993, p.3), and “storytelling is particularly prominent in literacy, English as a second language, and transformative education,” (Cranton, 1997; Mezirow, 1990; cited in Rossiter, 2004, p.1) but also because “narrative is a fundamental structure of human meaning making.” (Bruner, 1986, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1996) As Labov (1997) forcefully puts it:

Narrative and the broader field of storytelling has become a keen focus of attention in many academic and literary disciplines. Credibility is rarely an issue here. The tellers were not known as gifted story tellers; people did not gather to hear them speak. They were ordinary people in the deepest sense of the word. They did not manufacture events or elaborate the experience of others. Their narratives were an attempt to convey simply and seriously the most important experiences of their own lives. They deal with the major events of life and death. (p.2)

“Tell Me Your Story!”

In this study, I utilize Casey’s (1993) tool, “tell me your story”, for collecting narratives for analysis, because it is easy to use on the researcher’s part, easy to understand on the storyteller’s part, and, most importantly, provides the storyteller much space or freedom for deciding for himself or herself what to tell and how to make sense of the events in their story. As Casey (1993) lucidly indicates the advantages of her tool:

For ordinary women who had never expected to write an autobiography, the life history narrative became a task with enormous personal meaning. And I became the intermediary, who could carry their intimate meanings into the public sphere. For this reason, and because the political nature of the project further reinforced the need for trust, the relationship between the researcher and subject was never, and indeed could not be, a formal one….We often arranged to meet in the woman’s own home, where she would serve me lunch, tea, or a bowl of ice cream. In fact, while I ate, she
would be interviewing me, deciding what we had in common, and established the nature of the dialog which would take place. (Casey, 1993:17)

I do not duplicate every procedural item such as telling my narrator how long the interview lasts, for I see this as pressing for them, or using their own home for the interview, for I see our topic as a non-politically sensitive one that can be talked about in any convenient place and time. In fact, my 2 American narrators feel comfortable to talk to me face to face, while one of my Chinese narrators prefers emailing me her story and one invites me to his chatroom on the Internet. But in overall, Casey’s (1993) tool “tell me your story” helps me successfully collect the stories for this study.

Foreign Language Student as Author

As the above analysis portrays, foreign language students are marginalized and their voices are seldom heard in metaphor studies. Personally I attribute this to the impact of the deeply rooted teacher-centered tradition under which the rarely heard students’ voices on learning have resulted in ineffective ways and low outcomes in foreign language teaching.

In all, 4 students participate in my interviews, 2 American college students of Chinese as a foreign language and 2 Chinese college students of English as a foreign language. All the 4 students are recommended as voluntary interviewees by my colleagues. Chinese students are interviewed because they represent the largest student population of English learners and analysis of English learning without referring to this large population is a regrettable, if not incomplete, thing. The same degree of importance can be said of the reliance on American students’ stories in learning Chinese, for, on the one hand, Chinese has become a first foreign language in America, and, on the other hand, since American students of Chinese take up the largest student population of Chinese as a foreign language, it is an incomplete thing to overlook stories by American students. For the 2 American students, one, named Jiawei (for confidential purposes, I mention his Chinese name given by the teacher, which is, in nature, a pseudo name unidentifiable), has studied Chinese for two years in America; the other, named Lola (also an assigned Chinese name), has studied one year in America and one year in China. For the 2 Chinese students, one, named Zhuzhu, has studied English in China for 3 years; the other, named Maomao, apart from 2 years’ study in China, has spent one year on an exchange program in the U.S.. Though narratives provide depth for understanding the informants, on the one hand, and are biased and lack generalizability just like any research (Casey, 1993). As Peshkin (1988) well puts it when analyzing the subjective nature of research: “Subjectivity is not a badge of honor, something earned like a merit badge and paraded around on special occasions for all to see.” (p.17) Nevertheless, Peshkin continues: “One’s subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and nonresearch aspects of our life.”

Therefore I believe that the stories by these 4 college students provide a firm basis for both identifying prevalent metaphors about learning, and for perceiving cross-cultural interpretations as well as native-and-non-native environmental learning experiences for learning foreign languages.

Treating my storytellers as authors (Casey, 1993; Nelson, 1988; Reissman, 1993), I
have not only limited my speech in the interview to “tell me your story” sentence, and confined my role from an interviewer to a listener, but also valued what they tell as the only source of data for my analysis. Such a positioning of my researcher role and research-storyteller relation persists not only in the process of story collecting, but continues also in the stage of analysis, during which period I concentrate exclusively on how the 4 college students make sense of their foreign language learning using metaphors.

**Intertextuality**

I am fully aware that subjectivity is always present in research (Peshkin, 1988; Casey, 1993) in the sense that all researchers choose to explore one topic rather than another, and make use of one tool for data collecting and analysis rather than another. I am also aware that it is such subjectivity that helps render the research unique. In this way, in the present study, I value my subjectivity in looking into how college students describe their foreign language learning experiences via metaphors as contributing to the ongoing dialog in and adding knowledge to studies on learning metaphors and on how students learn or should learn. Meanwhile, I attach my focus to spotting out the embedded themes and metaphors. My tagline is: Let the narratives speak for me.

In the process of transcript analysis, I constantly encounter a tension in the text that spans between what to cover and what not, first on the part of the narrator and then researcher. The good thing is that narrative researchers honestly and boldly acknowledge such tension: storytellers opt in their inclusion of things and people, and the way or order in presenting them, in their story. The choice to tell and the choice to omit events and people are respectively referred to as selectivity and silencing (Casey, 1993); often times, slippage or contradictions within and among texts also occur. At all such points, I consciously refer and co-refer to the texts in order to come up with a compelling theme and metaphor for the theme. Indeed intertextuality is a powerful method to match up texts or parts of a text in order to discover selected, silenced, and slpped themes, utterance features such as repetitions, hesitations, word choice, use of metaphors, and sequencing of accounts and so on and so forth (Casey, 2007).

An example is that while reading Maomao’s narrative, I do not only attend to the slippage and silencing phenomena such as foreign language learning in China, foreign language learning in the U.S., memorizing and exams, challenge, culture, among the many themes that he touches on, but also, as a researcher, I opt to include and exclude things resonant with my research focus. Actually the interviews have resulted in a rich amount of materials that suffice for writing several articles, but for the purpose of the current discussion, I have focused on only the salient metaphors these college students use in describing foreign language learning.

**Metaphor, Metaphor, and Metaphor!**

Lawley and Tompkins (2000) point out, “we generally use common and well understood experiences as the basis for complex and abstract information, and there is a consistency and logic to the metaphors each of us use.”(p.3) They further argue that “students are speaking in metaphor all the time”, quoting Susan R. Robinson of Birkbeck
College, University of London, who claims that everyday conversation makes use of at least 4 metaphors per minute. (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.3) As a linguist, I understand that this is not an exaggeration; rather I understand that we do not realize the metaphors we use, because while some of the metaphor are obvious, some others are hidden or embedded in language, as in “I’ve lost my way”, ‘I can’t digest all this information’, ‘There’s not enough in the bank”, et cetera. (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.3)

Now that understanding metaphorical discussions is the primary purpose of this study, how then can I best locate and identify them from among my collected stories?

Lawley and Tompkins (2000) have given a helpful hint, when they assert that “one thing we know for sure is that people learn in different ways. How can we have a sense of the way our students learn – just by listening to what they say? A very practical approach is to take note of the metaphors in their language.” (p.1)

To determine where to locate the metaphor, Lawley and Tompkins (2000) resume:

There is a very simple way to discover your students’ metaphors for learning – just ask them: And when you’re learning, that’s learning like what? Whatever answer they give can be further developed by asking: And is there anything else about that ‘X’? And what kind of ‘X’ is that ‘X’?
[Where ‘X’ is the metaphorical or symbolic part of the answer to the original question.] (p.2)

For reasons I indicate above, instead of leaning myself on a straightforwardly inductive and solicitational tool like Lawley and Tompkins’ (2000), I resort to Casey’s (1993) tool “tell me your story” to collect data for metaphor analysis. However, Lawley and Tompkins’ (2000) tool does prove handy for identifying metaphors from the collected narratives and I embrace it without reserve.

Of course, in addition to reflecting on and using Lawley and Tompkins’ (2000) operational illustration for locating metaphors, in the course of transcript analysis, I also find myself from time to time referring to the definition of metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lawley and Tompkins (2000), and Ortony’s (1998) three attributes about metaphors: vividness, compactness, and expressivity (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.1).

**College Students’ Metaphors for Foreign Language Learning**

“Chinese is Hard”

One metaphor I find in Lola’s narrative is “Chinese is hard.”

Casnig (2006) categorizes metaphors into broadly two types, living and dead. A living metaphor, according to him, is one that is still in active use, while a dead metaphor is one that has been used so often that it seldom or no longer impresses the reader as a metaphorical use. Hence “the internet is an information highway” is a living metaphor, whereas “I am open to suggestions” is a dead metaphor. Hence in Casnig’s concept, “Chinese is hard” is a dead metaphor!

But it is interesting to note that Lola employs this metaphor when describing her Chinese learning experience. This is how she tells her feeling:

I study Chinese at college. I think Chinese is hard. I often review my
grammar. At the start, I write my characters very slow. But after I practice sometime, I am doing it a bit faster now. Yeah, I like to do practice. I often practice my Chinese with Mali.

As a native speaker of Chinese, and a speaker of a few other languages, I would say that as a distant language from the Indo-European family of languages, Chinese is indeed different, if not hard, to learn. But like most of my American students, Lola tells me that Chinese is hard. Notice “hard” is the word she chooses to describe this oriental language. Hence Lola’s metaphor, to me, is both expected and understandable.

It is also interesting to observe that Lola’s metaphor mitigates its force with her use of the subsequent adverb “fast” in the discourse, and such a mitigation occurs gradually after she is in Beijing, on a one-year study-abroad program. Also the mitigation is obvious in her changing tone, attitude, and concept in narrating her learning experience in Beijing. She says:

In Beijing, we have to work very hard. I mean very very hard. Every day the teacher asks us to learn 80 to 100 words. That is hard. But I learn fast. I soon develop a liking for my teachers there. Also we have only six students in the class; so we have to speak a lot. Only Chinese is allowed. This is hard, too. But this is extremely helpful…

“Language learning as lots of work”

A second metaphor I find is “language learning as lots of work” from another American student Jiawei’s account of his Chinese learning experience.

Jiawei impresses me as a hard working student. When offering his college life narrative, he says without thinking: “at college, we study a lot in the classroom. In fact we come to the class every day,” implying that in the Age of Internet, much learning is still delivered or achieved in the classroom.

And to him, foreign language learning demands a large proportion of time and work. As he tells:

There (in the classroom) we practice writing Chinese characters and Chinese grammar. We come to the classroom around 12. We practice our speaking. Once a while, we watch a movie. But last week we had a test. We have tests from time to time. But last week’s test was a bit hard for me. I like characters. We have two teachers, one is Shi Laoshi and the other is Mo Laoshi.

Jiawei seems to be citing things he experiences every day in the classroom. But his description does suggest a busy college life and Chinese learning assumes tremendous work.

It is interesting that Jiawei’s metaphor largely resonates with Lola’s in the sense that both the “language learning as hard” and “language learning as lots of work” suggest one theme – the property of the Chinese language and its content level of difficulty.
“Foreign Language Learning as a Movie Story”

A third metaphor I find is from Zhuzhu’s narrative, in which she indirectly says that “foreign language learning is a movie story”. This helps me realize that like many young men and young women on campus, Zhuzhu adores movies. In fact, she straightforwardly begins our interview by telling me that she used to cry her heart out at the touching scenes in movies and then forget the story soon. But when hearing that I am interested in listening to her own stories about college life, she says: “My college life is just like a movie with touching stories, yet different from movie stories, my college life stories are forever kept in my mind.”

Even during the interview, I notice immediately that Zhuzhu is a good storyteller, in the sense that she commands my interview question right away, attaching focus on the word “story”, and is succinct and logical by providing me three stories. To be frank, I am struck by both her three stories themselves and the way she narrates them.

The first story tells how in the spring of her freshman year her less-than-40-year-old friend Zhong all of a sudden is diagnosed with an incurable chronic disease and how her comforting call starts him thinking. His friend tells her over the phone, regretfully: “I have passed half of my life but I am still staying in college to prepare myself. When can I realize my dream of being an expert in forestry? I have to hurry up.” In response to her friend’s regret, Zhuzhu says, “From then on, I began to spend most of my time on study.”

Zhuzhu’s second story tells how in the spring of her sophomore year a girl student has leukemia and how helpless she is when finding herself busy all the time without being able to go to the bank to withdraw some money to donate to her classmate, who soon passes away and she herself is left a remorseful girl. In regret, she recalls: “I know the girl would not have survived even if I donated my money. But after that, I began to be active in various social activities that care for others.”

Zhuzhu’s third story takes place in spring of her junior year, in which Zhuzhu narrates how another “nice girl student” from whom she borrows the book *Jane Eyre* suddenly passes away. She tells how she and her classmates regret over having neglected taking care of her because they are all busy with passing exams. Hence with emotion, she recalls: “After that day, all the classmates, including me, try to cherish all the valuable things around us. We act like brothers and sisters.”

Notice that at the end of each story, Zhuzhu finds some revelations. Had I not interviewed her, I would have trusted them as prefabricated ones. Then towards the end of her narrative, Zhuzhu reaffirms me by saying “Today, I am no longer in fever of the touching movies, because I am the heroine in the movie of MY College Life.” Unfortunately, Zhuzhu does not go on elaborating on foreign language learning, but she implies that, just like learning other subjects or courses, foreign language learning is a movie story and each person is the hero in the story. I know that Zhuzhu makes her sense of both her college and foreign language learning.

“Language Learning as the First Step”

A fourth metaphor is provided by Maomao, who is a senior Chinese student of English. He has studied English for 12 years, including 3 years in elementary school, 3 years in middle school, 3 years in high school, and 3 years in college. In his second year
at college, he enrolled in an exchange student program to study at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse.

Recalling his English study in China over the years, he does not seem satisfied, for he says, “In China, the main task of learning English before college has so much to do with memorizing and examination.” Even at college, foreign language learning still abounds with problems, as he recalls, “the study in college resembles the life of high school – memorizing more words and taking more exams such as CET 4 and TEM 4.” As a result, “till now I feel that I have not yet mastered enough knowledge to communicate effectively with the people from the United States.”

Then he describes how he embraced the one-year stay at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse as an opportunity and how it has changed his views about English learning. He says:

But it suddenly changed after I obtained a chance to be an exchange student to study in the University of Wisconsin –La Crosse for one year. For me, it was nothing [other] than a wonderful opportunity to testify [test] my English learning in China.

Like any student who is excited about the chance to improve himself in the English native environment, Maomao continues:

I vividly remember the day I came to the United States. My chest was filed with ambitious expectations, an innate love of adventure, and pleasant spirits. Standing in front of the gate in Baiyun International Airport, I remember sweat moistening my palms, soaking the edges of my red passport and airplane ticket.

And like many non-native students of English, the excitement transits to a moment of challenge. Maomao depicts his arrival at La Crosse like this:

It is after I began my study in that university did I realize that I still have long way to go. For the first two days in class I was unable to make sense of what the professors’ talking for the reasons that they talked much faster than the way I was used to in China. In addition, the discipline they taught differed from my Chinese professors.

Notice that a few strategies that he uses to cope with the situation and fit himself in quick at La Crosse may be useful to all other students. He says:

It seemed that there was nothing I could do but studied harder than ever, so I tried my best to pay a visit to my professors during their office hours and they could explain to me in person what the points were in those subjects. Of course, preparation for lessons before class and review were significant as well.

Towards the end of my interview, Maomao helpfully summarizes his points, using the metaphor that “foreign language learning is the first step”. He elaborates on his viewpoint by saying that:

Learning a foreign language, of course, is not to pass examinations. By mastering the language, one should communicate more effectively with
others from various cultures. Learning a foreign language is the first step. The other step should be learning the culture of the foreign language. It could be the culture or thinking pattern that makes it difficult for international students to have successful communication with the locals which should arouse the attention of other English learner[s].

**What We Learn and Where We are Going From Here**

**What We Learn**

As my purpose in this study is to identify how college students describe foreign language learning with metaphors, by now I find from the analysis of my collected narratives four salient metaphors: foreign language learning as a movie story, a first step, hard, and lots of work.

Apparently, each metaphor denotes and connotes something different from the other, reflecting student differences as individuals and diverse perspective and beliefs about and towards learning from their own experiences. To use Lawley and Tompkins’ (2000, p.3) words, “the different metaphors reveal the diversity of students’ representations for how they learn or their diverse learning styles.” (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.3)

In addition, this seems largely to coincide with previous claims on metaphors for college learning that contend learning, inclusive of foreign language learning is “a highly complex process” (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.1), and that “learners bring to the language classroom a complex web of attitudes, experiences, expectations, beliefs, and learning strategies” (Benson, 2001; Benson & Lor, 1999; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Oxford, 1992) (cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, p.5). Hence, it makes sense to say that:

…second or foreign language students hold strong beliefs about the nature of the language under study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies. Identification of these beliefs and reflection on their potential impact on language learning and teaching in general, as well as in more specific areas such as the learners’ expectations and strategies used, can inform future syllabus design and teacher practice in the course. Pedagogy has the capacity to provide the opportunities and conditions within which these learner contributions are found to have a positive effect upon learning and may be more fully engaged. (Breen, 2001; Arnold, 1999; cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, p.2)

In what follows, I would like to briefly address some implications of the four detected metaphors and recommendations for future research.

**“Foreign Language Learning is Hard”**

This is a common metaphor people use in talking about their experiences of foreign language learning. But the degree of hardship may certainly vary from person to person.
Reality tells that while there are many who succeed in learning foreign language, others find themselves fumbling their way through all the time. Researchers expound such a reality either in terms of language aptitude and motivation (for instance, Schunk, 1991), or the proper functioning of our inherited Language Acquisition Device (LAD) (Chomsky, 1957), or critical learning period (Lenneberg, 1967).

Apparently, Lola’s metaphor implies that motivation and ways of learning may also make a difference. Her changing attitude and concept about Chinese in Beijing imply that a culturally immersing method, and better still, studying in the native environment, is a working solution. This, to a large extent, coincides with Maomao’s story in learning English.

Hence, the “foreign language as hard” metaphor implies that “administrators should put more effort into evaluating and shaping student perceptions of the college experiences, emphasize change as development rather a struggle and ease student transition from freshmen year,” (Nelson, 1998) that students should realize that:

…metaphors embody and define the intangible and abstract, but this process inevitably constrains perceptions and actions to those which make sense within the logic of the metaphor. Metaphors are therefore descriptive and prescriptive. As students become aware of their own metaphors for learning they can recognize how these limit or liberate them. In this way they can learn from their own learning process… (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.4)

and that for teachers,

…it also pays to know your own preferred metaphors because they have such an influence on the way you teach. Once you are familiar with your preferences you can begin to stretch yourself by employing new metaphors. For some students your new metaphors will say the same thing in a different way - -but other students will need to engage in a different class of mind-body processing. In addition to teaching the subject matter you will be training your students to process information via a variety of metaphors. The result will be an enhanced ability to think more creatively. (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000, p.5)

Specifically, teachers should help overcome the students’ fear in learning foreign languages, design their teaching in a graded way, and help the students develop their definition of language learning.

“Foreign Language Learning as Lots of Work”

None of us can say for sure how much time it is needed for one to learn a foreign language. But we should all know for sure that there are strategies that may help improve our learning efficiency. In other words, teachers should try to help their students avoid wasting time on unnecessary items while focusing on items that persistently challenge learning. Hence instead of asking the students to do this and that, good teachers should direct them to do something more essential. This metaphor implies using that the least possible time to learn the most possible in a foreign language is a general mentality
among the learners. Therefore, on the one hand, it is vital for both instructors and material developers to reflect on what the students’ learning needs are and what and how much content they should include for their particular groups of learners to learn. On the other hand, it is necessary to consider the cognitive level and availability of time on the part of the learner. Many students complain to me that that some teachers make them learn things that have no applied value, or areas and subject matters both beyond their syllabus requirements and their understanding level. Some other students complain about their heavy workload in the form of previewing, reviewing for their lessons, period quizzes, tests, and assignments. A few students tell me they spend around 20 hours a week on their foreign languages. In this way, they do not have time for other courses. “Lots of work” has thus been a responsible factor for diverging the foreign language students who often embrace their first semester as a honeymoon semester, find themselves lagging behind in the second semester, and from the third semester onward grow passive and even rebellious to their foreign language courses and teachers. Indeed this metaphor, along with the others, suggests that it is high time for foreign language teachers to speculate on our taken-for-granted past practice.

“Foreign Language Learning as a Movie Story”

Zhuzhu’s ability in telling me three stories in an intense manner certainly impresses me a lot in that she has a good command of topics. But what is more important is that her metaphor “foreign language as a movie story” implies two things: First, social relations in a contemporary Chinese college are shaped by the way learning is organized. The stress on intellectual development, usually by way of memorization and examination, seems to have weakened the traditional value of collectivism, which grows prevalent in China, or the traditional value has given way to individualism in an era that encourages personal success. This is an embedded issue that should be attended to by educators at large. Second, Zhuzhu’s metaphor implies that everybody is, and should be, his or her own master of life. As such, foreign language learning, as a part of college life, is but an incident in a movie, and all learners are, and should be, the heroes and heroines in the learning. Hence Zhuzhu’s interpretation of the learner’s role has not only implied a critique to those who downplay the learner role, but also conveys a belief that it is the learner, instead of the instructor, who should be responsible for making learning, including foreign language learning, happen.

“Foreign Language Learning as a First Step”

The “foreign language learning as first step” metaphor carries implications for both learners and teachers at large. The message is clear in two senses: First, China’s foreign language teaching at large still remains on the level of language knowledge imparting, which, to Maomao, is obviously a demerit and will turn out to be detrimental in upcoming students’ communication. Second, all foreign language learners should consciously expose themselves to the cultural ways of saying and doing things in the target language. While study-abroad, as in Maomao’s case, may be a good solution, not all students in China may have access to it, hence instructors should find ways to combine language learning with culturally proper use in their everyday instruction.
Where We are Going from Here: Recommendations for Future Research

There is a Chinese saying: “Gong yu shan qi shi, bi xian li qi qi”, meaning we should sharpen our tool in order to do things efficiently. This study has confined itself to using Casey’s (1993) “tell me your story” tool for collecting college students’ narratives on foreign language learning and her intertextuality frame for analyzing metaphors for foreign language learning experiences. While this Caseyan tool works effectively for collecting data, it may not be economic, since a narrator may not directly provide the researcher a metaphor, or even if he or she offers one or more than one in the story, it will take the researcher much time to analyze, let alone transcribe, the script. Hence it will be interesting for future research to try to use diverse tools for collecting narratives. As far as I can see, emailing, blogging, online chatting, and other emerging ways and modes of communicating can be supplementary tools for collecting personal life stories. This is my first recommendation.

My identified metaphors also suggest that college students not only create metaphors but also some make better metaphors than others. This means that metaphorizing is a type of competence and can be explored under the framework of competence theories such as pragmatic competence (Bachman, 1990; Kasper, 1997). This is another aspect that I did not look into in this study. Hence to gain further understanding into how college students describe their language learning experiences, it will be interesting for future studies to discuss metaphorizing within the framework of pragmatic competence and factors affecting the students’ metaphorizing competence. This is my second recommendation.

As a third recommendation, I see it necessary to reach broader types and levels of narrators and look deeper into subject areas in foreign language learning in order to identify more metaphors and, on the basis of which, to probe into the ways to teach and learn. For instance, it is useful for teachers and researchers to locate metaphors students habitually use to describe listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating, presenting, Internet surfing, before they prescribe strategies for effectively developing the students’ relevant skills. Also, it is also desirable to collect and examine metaphors that college students of various levels, such as low, intermediate, and high, or freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, employ in describing their foreign language learning. Only after we identify a sufficient number of metaphors they utilize can we offer more effective ways to help them improve their fluency and proficiency, as well as their correctness and appropriateness in foreign language use.

References


