

“LESS IS MORE”: NARRATIVES AND METAPHORS FROM AN ELT GROUP OF PROFESSORS

RODRIGO AVELLA RAMIREZ*

Centro Estadual de Educação Tecnológica Paula Souza (Ceeteps), Programa de Pós-Graduação em Gestão e Desenvolvimento da Educação Profissional (sigla), São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

Recebido em: 11 set. 2019. Aprovado em: 26 set. 2019.

Como citar este artigo: RAMIREZ, R. A. “Less is more”: narratives and metaphors from an ELT group of professors. *Cadernos de Pós-Graduação em Letras*, v. 19, n. 3, p. 131-143, set./dez. 2019. doi: 10.5935/cadernosletras.v19n3p131-143

Abstract

This article addresses the issue of narratives and metaphors in teacher education. Narratives produced by a collaborative study group of four English language teachers in a public university of São Paulo-Brazil are collected and analyzed. The professors in the study group met twice a month, for eight months, to discuss and share their lived professional experiences. The theoretical background is the one that considers the discourse as the privileged locus of metaphors, Cameron and Deignan (2006), Steen *et al.* (2010), Musolff and Zinken (2009), among others. The rounding off of the article takes account of the role

* E-mail: roram1000@hotmail.com
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8468-2851>

of the metaphor in fostering the construction of applicable knowledge to those involved.

Keywords

Narrative inquiry. Discourse. Teacher development.

INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the issue of narratives and metaphors in teacher education. More specifically, how narratives and metaphors are interwoven and how they can contribute to teachers' professional development. Narratives produced by a collaborative study group of four English teachers in a public university of São Paulo-Brazil are analyzed in light of the emergence of a particular metaphor. The rationale for developing such study lies on the premise that teachers are producers of knowledge in their workplace and should be regarded as the linchpin of educational reform. These professors met twice a month, over eight months, and shared their lived professional experiences. I intend to present an account of the group discourse from my perspective as both participant/observer and group leader focusing on the metaphor "less is more," which emerged during the group reflections and discussions.

Field texts (narratives, life histories, case studies), collected over 15 group encounters, lend themselves to an examination of our lived professional experiences. The narratives in which teachers talk about their professional practices were significant because they are much more than good narratives, they are ways of communicating intentions, judging values, and reflecting, all in the context of a lived experience.

Narrative excerpts, which contain metaphorical expressions related to the concept of "less is more" receive special attention and are shown and commented. The rounding off of the article takes account of the landscape created in these meetings by reflecting on the role of the metaphor in fostering the construction of applicable/viable knowledge to those involved. What reflections have been made by the collectivity that have a direct implication on each teacher's pedagogical practice? Which learning experiences can be multiplied to those who were not in the study group?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

When one speaks of metaphor, the first idea that comes to mind is the Aristotelian conception of the entry, that is, a figure of speech, of extraordinary use, used almost exclusively by poets. Specific discussions about metaphorical language are not current discussions. Aristotle’s Rhetoric already affirmed that metaphor is to give something a name that belongs to something else, emphasizing the character of change of direction at the lexical level.

Nevertheless, in the twentieth century, new perspectives arise regarding the use of metaphor and its field of action. Motivated by a growing interest in cognitive sciences, linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark L. Johnson (1986) present the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) formulated in the late 1970s, which emerges as a counterpoint to the rhetorical tradition view and, in 1980, publish the book *Metaphors we live by.*” In it, the authors show that the language we use in our day-to-day life is fundamentally metaphorical, we think metaphorically, and these conceptual metaphors are explained by language and help us in understanding and explaining more abstract concepts.

Far from merely adding to rhetorical flourish to pieces of information, metaphors are viewed as being “conceptual in nature” and essential for the creation of social realities: “a metaphor may thus be a guide for future action”. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies (LAKOFF; JOHNSON, 1986, p. 156).

Lakoff and Johnson (1986) take a view that radically departs from the classical conception, postulating that human reasoning is structured in terms of metaphorical mappings. In this way, they consider metaphor a central part of human cognition.

The theory of conceptual metaphor, starting from the new theoretical and philosophical framework introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1986), served as motivation for the development of a surprising number of researches on metaphor, which, as a whole, formed a study area already known as “Metaphorology” (STEEN, 1994).

This particular study adopts a strand of metaphor research that started in the late 1990s and 2000 onwards, which places a renewed focus on the language of metaphors, taking into account the development of discourse, that is,

an emergentist discourse approach to metaphor. Not only does the discourse shift take on ideas from cognitive theory about metaphor in thinking, but it also connects the conceptual with the linguistic, in theory, and empirical work.

An emergentist perspective on metaphor connects metaphor behavior at the levels of the corpus and of on-line processing. The talk of individuals in interaction is seen as a prime locus of change in the language of a speech community. [...] we have identified the metaphoreme as a unit of analysis in an emergentist framework that combines the linguistic, the cognitive, the affective, and the socio-cultural. [...] the metaphoremes is not a discrete entity condensed out of language that can be used as a building block in a traditional linear systems view of language in use. rather, it is a bundle of relatively stable patterns of language use, with some variation, that, for the time being, describes how people are using the lexical item (CAMERON; DEIGNAN, 2006, p. 686).

According to Carroll (2005), one of the most important characteristics of studying a discussion group is the potential of building knowledge together, through the exchange of information in a conversation, which leads us to the premise defended in this work that the experiences of the teacher can be a source of knowledge, and it must be considered that this knowledge, socially constructed, is mediated by the teacher's discourse.

[...] if teachers are not critically conscious, if they are not awake to their own values and commitments(and to the conditions working upon them), if they are not personally engaged with their subject matter and with the world around, I do not see how they can initiate the young into critical questioning or the moral life (CARROLL, 2005, p. 459).

The term discourse has several meanings, being conceptually quite complex, and thus, a single, clear, and objective definition of discourse is not conceived. However, this work adopts the term discourse as referring to a system of symbols, signs, and meanings through which a particular group understands a specific theme, once

Following Michel Foucault, John Dewey, and Michael Bakhtin, among others, we are convinced that professional and cultural discourses shape not just the way teachers describe their experiences but the way they have those experiences as well. Professional discourses shape teacher's beliefs about curriculum and pedagogy (CLANDININ; ROSIEK, 2007, p. 423).

In light of the above, it can be affirmed that in analyzing a discourse, we are referring to texts and textual genres in their social contexts.

When we study discourse, we examine the way in which the text creates meanings and reflects the vision and ideology of its writer and its society. In this sense, discourse is always part of social action: all the text and an instrument of communication allocated in a social context, being influenced by it and, at the same time, influencing it, we are referring to texts in their social contexts (CALDAS-COULTHARD, 2014, p. 99).

Language acquires protagonism as a locus of metaphor by considering that language in use, or discourse, is not only the universe of linguistic manifestations of conceptual metaphors but of cognitive and pragmatic articulations and even of the emergence of new conceptual metaphors, that is, metaphoremes, according to Cameron and Deignan (2006). Nonetheless,

Fortunately, the current scene of metaphor studies, heavily focused on speech figured in discourse, in no way discards the cognitive aspects inherent in metaphor. Instead, it seeks to create systematic articulations between cognition and discourse, emphasizing the inseparability of these two instances. The metaphor is both linguistic and socio-cognitive in nature, and discourse promotes and enables this articulation and, at the same time, it depends on it (VEREZA, 2010, p. 208).

Cameron and Deignan (2006, p. 675) also highlight the interdependence between language and thinking by stating that

In the case of metaphor, we argue that the ideational content of a metaphor is not processed separately from its linguistic form, but the two are learnt together, stored together and produced together in on-line talk. Metaphorical language and metaphorical thinking are therefore interdependent, each affecting the other in the dynamics and dialogic process of talking-and-think.

Mussolf and Zeiken (2016, p. 4) also refers to discourse as a privileged locus for the analysis and understanding of metaphors by claiming that

Metaphors seem to play a vital role in keeping discussions going, at least in the discourse genres of the English-speaking world, such as science, education, and public discourse. The bottom line is: metaphor understanding in the real world might not be a matter of milliseconds passing until an individual study

participant responds. it might rather be a matter of dialogue, of engagement in debate.

In a project that is guided by an epistemology of practice in which the teacher is regarded as a reflective professional, it is worth emphasizing the central role that the concept of reflection acquires. Reflection is not considered as an individual and isolated act, to reflect

[...] implies the conscious immersion of man in the world of his experience, a world full of connotations, values, symbolic exchanges, affective correspondences, social interests and political scenarios. Academic, theoretical, scientific or technical knowledge can only be considered as an instrument of reflection processes if it is significantly integrated [...] into more generic thought patterns activated by the individual when he interprets the concrete reality in which he lives and when he organizes his existence. Reflection is not a pure knowledge, but a knowledge contaminated by the contingencies that surround and permeate one's own life experience (PÉREZ-GÓMEZ, 1992, p. 103).

According to the author, the increasing social and educational complexity of education should make the teaching profession less individualistic and more collective, whose distinguishing feature is the ability to learn to reflect collectively on its practice.

METHODOLOGY

With a focus on the production of teacher knowledge in their teaching practice, and having, as a methodological axis, the narrative inquiry. Narrative Research explores the stories that are lived and told. These stories are, in turn, the result of the combination of social influences on the individual, social influences on the environment beyond the individual trajectory. Clandinin and Connelly (2000 *apud* CLANDINI; ROSIEK, 2007, p. 170) conceptualize the narrative inquiry when they state that

[...] a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling,

reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people’s lives, both individual and social.

Clandinin and Connelly (2015) create the three-dimensional space metaphor of narrative research through which narrative researchers use a set of terms to think about their research. Narrative investigation occurs precisely because of the creation of three-dimensional space, defined by the set of terms: interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present, future), and situation (location).

I have sought information in Clandinin and Connelly (2015) in their analysis of the “landscapes of teacher professional knowledge.” These authors, through teachers’ narratives, seek to understand how the professional environments are constituents of their professional knowledge. The landscape metaphor of the teacher’s professional knowledge enables the contextualization and understanding of his practical knowledge. The idea expressed by this metaphor allows teachers to speak about a situation (place), continuity (time) and interaction (space), which configures the three-dimensional space of the narrative, the authors point out that

Understanding professional knowledge encompassing a landscape requires a notion of professional knowledge as comprised of a wide variety of components and influenced by a wide variety of people, places, and things. Once we see the landscape of professional knowledge as consisting of relationships between people, places and things, we consider it both a moral and intellectual landscape (CLANDININ; CONNELLY, 2015, p. 5).

Through narratives, it is possible to highlight the types of learning, the strategies used to learn. With that put, one can affirm that the main objective is precisely to recognize oneself, to learn with our strengths and weaknesses.

Considering the theoretical approach employed in this work, the research undertaken was based on discussions and reports of four participating English language professors. The collection of the transcribed data was obtained through the discussion of articles on education and applied linguistics, and case studies brought by the participants regarding their teaching practice and life histories. The meetings occurred twice a month over eight months, totaling 16 meetings, the last four of them being individual with a focus on the teachers’ life history. It should also be noted that all the participating teachers were volunteers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Present in teacher's narratives is the recurrent use of the conceptual metaphor "less is more," which makes it possible to perceive the joint construction of a landscape of professional development. Some of the following sections are analyzed according to the set of constituent terms of this three-dimensional space: situation-place, continuity-time, space-interaction.

Here in college we always have many surprises because planning does not provide for so many different situations. A good example, I brought a lot of technology, let's say like that, to help, but it ended up messing up. the student was lost, did not know where to look, to the projector, to the book, to me. Then, in the other class, I only did printing material, and at the end of the class they said: "Oh, teacher, it got a lot better this way, the simpler the better" (Prof. Jo March – meeting 3).

The teacher's account highlights the dimension of interaction, her story emphasizes the student's challenges to relate to the variety of didactic resources available in that class.

This term, I took a material, which is quite old, I got it with a peer teacher, this material here (Thousand Pictures for Teachers). They are pictures to develop vocabulary, they are really very simple. I felt that they have managed to appropriate the key issue, which is the action in process; I saw that this practice, very simple, worked out pretty well (Prof. Dashwood – meeting 5).

The report of this other teacher also highlights the issue of didactic material, but the focus of this narrative is temporality, the teacher mentioning "this term," makes evident previous experiences that served as the basis for her decision making.

We need to work on a way to measure the learning of the subject that does not give so much work for the teacher to correct. We have many classes and some are very large, this is not frequently taken in to account by police makers, director of studies, authors, publishers, and I daresay even some teachers (Prof. Dashwood – meeting 11).

The same teacher emphasizes now the interaction dimension when stressing the impact that the amount of classes and number of students have in the teachers’ routine of work.

It was not a “Show lesson,” multimedia wise. She did not bring a movie to compare with the book, did not play, she actually worked the text, right? It was a very traditional class, the book is on the table type. However, she did it in a such way that I think the students must have left that lesson fully happy with it. As you have already mentioned, sometimes the “less is more.” (Prof. March – meeting 7).

Above, it can be observed the influence of the time dimension that the discussion group itself already has when the teacher literally mentions the expression “less is more” and emphasizes its recurrence in the discourse of the group.

Sometimes we exaggerate in the paraphernalia, we are so worried about the machinery that even the student is forgotten. How many times have I caught myself stressed out over a video or cd that I would like to use I class but couldn’t due top several reasons. That’s why the less is more. The most simple is the most efficient (Prof. Catarina Earnshaw – meeting 8).

Once again, the key expression (less is more) emerges in the discourse of another teacher when emphasizing the importance of the interaction dimension (student-teacher) over the relation (man-machine).

Elionora also mentioned this, in our school context, it seems that the simpler is the general characteristic. I do not know how to put it but I think we have to be “simpler” in the way we approach the linguistic themes. I carry with me, from the private school, the belief that each class is like a brain surgery, that is, to deliver an hour of class, you take five to prepare, because the philosophy that reigns in that context is the one of a “show lesson.” That’s weird!!! (Prof. Thurber – meeting 10).

“Less is more” not only applies to the diversity of materials, but also to the choice of methodological approach. In his narrative, the teacher emphasizes the interaction dimension, but not only in its social nuance, but also as personal interaction, that is, the teacher with himself, when reflecting on the methodological choices in the planning of his classes.

What good is it for you, in the classroom, to have all the technology if you do not know how to use it, or if you don't even need to use, I mean, there is no clear purpose for that. I do recognize the relevance and contribution of technology but if you have creativity and motivation, the less is more (Prof. Earnshaw – meeting 10).

Technology, creativity and motivation are, in the teacher's narrative, intrinsically linked to the teacher's practice. In this way, the place dimension of the narrative, the classroom as a privileged locus of analysis, is evidenced.

When I was doing my master's degree, I read a book, by Tardiff, and a maxim of it always stayed in my head, he said in the book: "The best technology of the teacher is his pedagogy." I think that at various moments in our meetings we put thoughts that are aligned with his speech (Prof. Thurber – meeting 16).

Temporality is the strongest dimension in this narrative, in which the teacher weaves his comments by using both the history of the discussion group as well as his own education.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As final considerations, it is worth mentioning that throughout the period in which the meetings were held, we endeavored to concretize the proposal of the systematization of a collaborative working group that had as the guiding axis of the meetings, the teacher as a producer of knowledge in its place of work.

The goal has been achieved. In the analysis phase of the narratives, it was possible to confirm the desire to discuss aspects related to the pedagogical practice and to contribute to the professional growth of all the four participants. A group in which all expressed themselves with total freedom and where there was not the domain of a single perspective that prescribes and directs the participation of its members. A group always open to the proposals of themes that emerged from the discussions that took place internally.

Another point to highlight is the willingness to participate. Voluntary participation was a key element in this work. It was indicative of the participants' commitment to building a collective identity for the subject they teach, especially in an institution that is not specialized in teaching foreign languages and where the language is just one of many other disciplines.

The group’s interaction created a favorable space for rethinking beliefs, values, and pedagogical practices based on the narratives of the other, emphasizing the work with the “teaching cases.”

In this way, this activity contributed to the research in two vital ways, both as a source of information about the teacher’s thinking, in trying to understand his place in a landscape of professional knowledge, and the group as a metaphor of that space.

The connection between narrative and metaphors becomes crystal clear when the subject of the discipline status in technological higher education emerges. The teachers’ discourse emphasizes the concern with the stability of the discipline itself in the context of budget constraints. The metaphor of the less is more, discussed in the collective, returned in the individual narratives with great force. Not only linked to a pedagogical-academic position, but also to the consequences that the lack of maintenance and investments in new resources (software, audio equipment) might bring about.

Despite the economic scenario, teacher’s usage of the metaphor less is more is evidence that the knowledge gained through experience stands out and they have not been overwhelmed, and are trying to carry out their professional projects.

In this study on the learning and professional development of English language teachers of a public institution of tertiary education, the metaphor helps to highlight the beauty in it through the narratives of four teachers. Each one with their experiences, practices, challenges, and their unique way of being. A group with extensive baggage but also a long vision of the future, all four committed to their work, their colleagues, students and their own personal and professional growth.

“Menos é mais”: Narrativas e metáforas de um grupo de discussão de professores de inglês como língua estrangeira

Resumo

Este artigo aborda a questão das narrativas e metáforas na formação de professores. Narrativas produzidas por um grupo de estudo colaborativo de quatro professores de inglês de uma universidade pública de São Paulo-Brasil são

analisadas. Os professores do grupo de estudo se reuniram duas vezes por mês, durante oito meses, para discutir e compartilhar suas experiências profissionais vividas. O referencial teórico é aquele que considera o discurso como *locus* privilegiado de metáforas, como Cameron e Deignan (2006), Steen *et al.* (2010), Musolff e Zeiken (2009), entre outros. O fechamento do artigo leva em consideração o papel da metáfora na promoção da construção de conhecimento aplicável aos envolvidos.

Palavras-chave

Pesquisa narrativa. Discurso. Formação docente.

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