# USING CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN TEACHING ENGLISH IDIOMS TO EFL STUDENTS IN BAC LIEU PROVINCE

Trinh Hong Nhung and Huynh Ngoc Tai[*]

*School of Foreign Languages, Tra Vinh University, Tra Vinh province, Vietnam*
[*]Corresponding author: Huynh Ngoc Tai, e-mail: hntai@tvu.edu.vn

**Abstract.** English idioms pose persistent challenges for EFL learners due to their figurative meanings and cultural specificity. Conceptual metaphor theory has been proposed as a pedagogical approach to support students' idiom comprehension and retention. However, little research has explored the implication of conceptual metaphors in teaching English idioms to high school students in Vietnam. Therefore, this action research aims to investigate the use of conceptual metaphors in teaching English idioms to twenty-six 11th grade students in a high school located in Bac Lieu province. Questionnaires, observations, and semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from twenty-six 11th-grade students. The findings indicate students' perceived benefits and difficulties of learning English idioms by conceptual metaphors, along with their feelings and reactions towards this approach. They suggest that integrating conceptual metaphors into idiom teaching can be a pedagogical tool for enhancing learners' retention and comprehension of idiomatic expressions in EFL classrooms. This paper contributes to metaphor-based pedagogy in the context of Vietnam and pedagogical techniques in teaching figurative language and highlights the necessity of cultural factors in teaching idioms.

*Keywords:* cognitive approach, conceptual metaphors, EFL students, English idioms.

## 1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, English has emerged as an international medium of communication. As a global language [1], it serves as a promising tool for broadening individuals' perspectives of the world, creating more opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges, and inspiring the development of innovative ideas [2]. To participate effectively in this interconnected world, students are expected to develop not only grammatical accuracy but also communicative competence in English.

However, many students encounter difficulties in acquiring English idioms as one of the important figurative expressions. English idiomatic knowledge is frequently lacking or insufficient among teenage students in Vietnam, despite their awareness of the importance of idioms in English learning. As a result, they reluctantly use idioms in communication [3], which leads to a lack of idiomatic competence as a part of communicative competence. In Bac Lieu Province, several students struggle to understand idioms since they often learn them through rote memorization without understanding their underlying concepts or cultural background. Given the nature of idioms as expressions whose meanings cannot be inferred from their components [4], English learners, especially EFL students, frequently study idioms by rote-learning or striving to

memorize the idiomatic meaning [5]. Consequently, idiom learning has become a strenuous process with low levels of interest, motivation, and creativity.

Conceptual metaphor (CM) theory, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) [6], underscores the notion that some aspects of a language, including idioms, are derived from concepts delivered from human experience. From this perspective, the figurative meanings of idioms can be interpreted based on metaphors [7]. Understanding and using English idioms in communication not only require memorizing their forms and meanings but also demand recognizing and making connections between the idiomatic meaning and domains of knowledge that are embedded in the idioms.

Several studies have stated the effectiveness of using conceptual metaphors in teaching idioms [8]-[12]. However, few studies have been centered on the effect of conceptual metaphors on teaching idioms and EFL students' beliefs about learning idioms by CM-based approach in Bac Lieu province. Therefore, this action research aspires to fill in the gap. The current paper aims to answer the following questions:

*1. How does the use of conceptual metaphors impact the teaching of English idioms to EFL students?*

*2. What are students' attitudes towards the use of conceptual metaphors in learning English idioms?*

## 2. Content

### 2.1. Literature review

#### 2.1.1. Conceptual metaphor

Metaphors, traditionally, are deemed a matter of language rather than cognition. In the view of cognitive linguistics, however, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that metaphors are a tool to assist the understanding of an object of experience "in terms of another." [6]

The framework of conceptual metaphors first proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) [6] in *Metaphors We Live By* consists of understanding a concept in terms of another one or gaining comprehension of the target domain from the source domain. This theory of conceptual metaphors is based on the nature of human conceptual systems that organize human perceptions. Lakoff (1993, p. 207) [13] proposes a strategic approach for mapping two domains, which includes "TARGET-DOMAIN IS SOURCE-DOMAIN" or "TARGET-DOMAIN AS SOURCE-DOMAIN." According to the framework of Kövecses (2010, p. 4) [14], conceptual metaphors are defined as "CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (A) IS CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B)." This theory shares similarities with that of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) that there are two domains in which one is understood in terms of the other [6]. While the use of Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) has been applied in idiom teaching [6], there remain arguments over the cognitive demands for learners with lower English skills when sufficient scaffolding is lacking [15]. These critical perspectives highlight the need to explore how CM-based instruction can be effectively adapted to EFL contexts, especially where learners may face cultural or cognitive barriers.

#### 2.1.2. Idioms

Idioms are an important part of a language and are frequently used in a wide range of situations, from daily conversations to more formal spoken and written discourse. It is also stated that the comprehension and application of idioms are considered crucial aspects of communication skills [15].

An idiom, in a traditional view, includes the combination of different types of words to create a particular set [4]. Similarly, it is also defined as a string of words that function as "a single

semantic unit," whose meaning cannot be interpreted by considering the literal meaning of its constituents [16]. Similarly, Simpson and Mendis (2003) describe idioms as compositional phrases established by words that are unpredictable in terms of meaning when interpreted in their individual parts [17]. In a cognitive-linguistic viewpoint, a majority of idioms derive from conceptual metaphors and are deemed to be motivated conceptually by metaphors [6, 18]. Kövecses and Szabco (1996) state that the nature of idioms is based on concepts instead of language [4]. Accordingly, it is more than just a set of words with a unique meaning; its meaning derives from a broader understanding of the universe. Given these semantic and structural characteristics, idioms are considered a challenge for English learners. EFL learners encounter different types of challenges in the process of learning English idiomatic expressions, which could be derived from the arbitrariness of idioms [19].

## 2.2. Research methodology

### 2.2.1. The scope of the research

The paper was conducted at Bac Lieu Boarding School for Ethnic Minority Students, where the students were taught using the textbook series *Global Success*, which follows the General Education English Curriculum promulgated by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training on December 26, 2018. Convenient sampling was used in the study [20]. Out of 101 eleventh-grade students, 26 students were chosen to participate in this paper. There were 10 females (38.46%) and 16 males (61.54%), all aged of 16. The participants were at the same level of English and had studied English for 9 years, starting in the 3rd grade.

### 2.2.2. Research design

The design of this paper was based on the four stages of conducting action research, as proposed by Sagor (2011) [21]. The teaching practice based on the CM-based approach was implemented in six weeks. Students took an extra-hour lesson every week. Each lesson lasted 45 minutes and included learning from 10 to 12 idioms of a concept. There were 70 idioms related to six concepts, including HAPPY IS UP and SAD IS DOWN, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, LIFE IS GAMBLING, ANGER IS HEAT, TIME IS MONEY, and BUSINESS IS WAR. The selection of idioms in this paper was based on both conceptual and pedagogical suitability. The chosen concepts represent some of the most pervasive concepts in the English language [22]. Students' activities were observed during the learning process in three lessons. After six weeks of the teaching practice, questionnaires were given to students, and five students were chosen to answer the questions in the semi-structured interviews within the following week.

In terms of the teaching process, the lessons encompassed five steps: brainstorming, introducing the target concept, guiding students to apply the conceptual metaphors to interpret the target idioms, controlled practice, and less controlled practice. The controlled practice stage included exercises designed to check their retention and comprehension of the learned idioms, while the less controlled practice stage involved productive tasks for students to apply the idioms learned in the lesson.

### 2.2.3. Instruments

First, the current action research implemented this instrument in exploring students' attitudes towards the use of conceptual metaphors in English idiom learning. The questionnaire in this paper, encompassing 27 items, was divided into three sections. The participants were required to give their opinions on the statements based on the format of a five-level Likert item ranging from Strongly agree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), to Strongly agree (5). Prior to the main study, the questionnaires were given to 30 students in grade 11 who weren't involved in the paper for the purpose of piloting and avoiding ambiguous questions.

Second, this research also includes participant observation which involves teachers engaging in giving instructions while observing students' understanding and use of idioms. Observations

were conducted in the first, third and last class of the project, each lasting 45 minutes per class. It focused on students' feelings and reactions in the progress of the lessons. While giving instructions, the teacher examined an observation checklist which drew upon Social Learning Theory and focused on behaviours related to students' attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation [23].

The third instrument of this paper is interviews. The interview questions in this paper were designed based on the literature review and the questionnaires. Six questions in the interview were sorted into four themes, including students' perceived benefits and drawbacks of learning idioms by conceptual metaphors, students' feelings and reactions towards the instructions. After gathering the questionnaires, five students selected to answer the interview questions were informed about the interview. The interview was carried out in Vietnamese, lasted from 12 to 15 minutes, and was recorded before being transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

## 2.3. Research findings and discussion

### 2.3.1. The impacts of using conceptual metaphors in teaching English idioms on EFL students

The results indicate that employing the conceptual metaphors (CM) approach in teaching English idioms is beneficial to students' attention and memorization. A majority of students were observed to maintain eye contact, pay attention, and take note actively when the teacher was explaining the concepts of CM. For instance, during instruction on the idiom "cross that bridge when you come to it," students actively mapped out the key features of a bridge and applied them to the source domain of life-related experiences, such as transition, challenge, and progression. After guided discussion, they reached the consensus that a bridge in that idiom could represent a challenge in life. As can be seen in Table 1, most students agreed that this approach supports their memorization of learned idioms (88.47%). Students' high level of retention of learned idioms is consistent with findings from several previous studies [10, 12], as this cognitive approach stimulates learners' visualization, thereby enhancing memorization [15]. In this paper, 88.46% of the participants admitted that learning idioms by CM facilitated their understanding of abstract ideas by activating their prior knowledge, and 84.62% of them acknowledged the benefit of idiom visualization. This finding aligns with Fatah and Karim (2023) [24] and Boers (2000) [15], as most of the participants agreed that conceptual metaphors supported visualizing idioms. However, this finding contradicts the study by Pham (2021) [9], as more than half of the students participating in the research disapproved of the benefit of CM in supporting visualization of idioms. A possible explanation for this is different cognitive patterns as several students who are low imagers still struggle to picture a number of complicated idioms in their minds. Therefore, to cope with the differences in the ability of forming mental images, teachers should provide more scaffolding, such as visual aids and contextualized explanations.

Furthermore, learning idioms with conceptual metaphors also benefits students' prediction of the meaning and insightful understanding of idioms, as most of the participants agreed that they were able to predict the underlying meaning of new idioms (84.61%). This finding is in line with other studies [9, 11, 24] and aligns closely with the notion that comprehension of conceptual metaphors is important in understanding the literal meaning of a large number of texts, including idioms [14]. In addition, the teaching approach inspired by conceptual metaphor introduced idioms in coherent themes and underlying concepts, which encouraged learners to perceive idioms as from a conceptual and systematic perspective rather than as a rigid and arbitrary part of the English language. This result is also compatible with the study by Boers (2000) [15], who emphasized that presenting figurative language in themes based on conceptual metaphors benefits students' awareness and memorization. Moreover, analyzing the underlying conceptual metaphors that form idioms also improves students' cognitive skills, as 92.31% of the students

believed that using CM could foster their critical thinking. This finding is in alignment with other papers [9, 11]. Indeed, the process of conceptual mapping is claimed to make a remarkable contribution to students' creativity [25]. Lennon (1998) also states that as students are encouraged to analyze and interpret idioms to predict their meanings, their thinking skills can be developed along with this cognitive process [26].

Despite these benefits, students experienced certain challenges when learning idioms through conceptual metaphors. The participants were observed to encounter initial challenges in the first lesson largely due to the novelty of the instructional approach. In the classes that followed, their confusion quickly subsided as they grew accustomed to the teaching approach. This finding is in line with several studies [9-12]. The results of this paper reveal that although the approach is novel and mentally demanding at first, the students quickly adapted to it and improved their confidence over time.

*Table 1. Students' perceived benefits and drawbacks of CM in learning English idioms*

| Item | Statements | SD | D | N | A | SA |
|------|-----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| | Using conceptual metaphors in teaching English idioms helps me to … | | | | | |
| 1 | activate prior knowledge to understand an abstract idea in terms of a familiar physical phenomenon. | 0.00% | 0.00% | 11.54% | 61.54% | 26.92% |
| 2 | mentally picture the idioms in my mind. | 0.00% | 7.69% | 7.69% | 61.54% | 23.08% |
| 3 | understand the relationship between idioms and the human mind. | 0.00% | 0.00% | 3.85% | 46.15% | 50.00% |
| 4 | predict the target idioms precisely | 3.85% | 3.85% | 7.69% | 46.15% | 38.46% |
| 5 | gain insights into the meaning of the target idioms | 0.00% | 0.00% | 7.69% | 34.62% | 57.69% |
| 6 | study idioms in a systematic way | 0.00% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 57.69% | 42.31% |
| 7 | increase the retention of the meaning of the target idioms | 0.00% | 0.00% | 11.54% | 53.85% | 34.62% |
| 8 | increase my critical thinking | 0.00% | 0.00% | 7.69% | 57.69% | 34.62% |
| 9 | improve knowledge about the culture of the English language. | 0.00% | 0.00% | 19.23% | 26.92% | 53.85% |
| | Using conceptual metaphors in teaching English idioms … | | | | | |
| 10 | presented some challenges at first | 23.08% | 26.92% | 15.38% | 30.77% | 3.85% |
| 11 | is complex | 30.77% | 30.77% | 19.23% | 19.23% | 0.00% |
| 12 | is a waste of time | 61.54% | 30.77% | 3.85% | 3.85% | 0.00% |
| 13 | is sometimes confusing because the metaphors referenced experiences or situations unfamiliar to Vietnamese culture. | 19.23% | 34.62% | 23.08% | 15.38% | 7.69% |

A number of students (23.07%) reported difficulties in learning idioms influenced by cultural factors, as idioms derived from a shared concept that exists in both English and Vietnamese are comprehended more rapidly and used more confidently by students than those derived from unfamiliar contexts. In the interview, a student expressed:

I think there are some idioms which are similar to those in Vietnamese. Those are easy to learn. For example, "add fuel to the fire". But if the idioms are totally different from Vietnamese, it takes time to predict their meanings. (Student 4)

When learning the idiom "add fuel to the fire," students in this paper were observed to make immediate connections with the Vietnamese idiom "thêm dầu vào lửa" as it was deeply rooted in their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Even though relating to the first language culture could facilitate students' understanding of English idioms, it also might result in mistakes and inaccuracy in terms of retention as there are certain differences, such as "fuel" and "oil" in the aforementioned example. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the selection of conceptual metaphors in a language is governed by its "underlying cultural models" [27]. Therefore, idioms, as metaphorical expressions, are sometimes deemed a problem for learners because there are no exact correlations between two target languages [26]. Explicit cross-cultural comparisons should be integrated to highlight the similarities and subtle differences between the target language and students' mother tongue.

Another challenge encountered by students was the cultural unfamiliarity of certain idioms that do not exist or have no equivalents in Vietnamese. This gap in cultural knowledge resulted in difficulties in interpreting the metaphorical meaning precisely. Similarly, in the study by Pham (2021) [9], students reported that they needed a lot of instruction and feedback from the teacher in class because the differences between cultures hindered their interpretation of the idioms. In this paper, when learning the idiom "all roads lead to Rome," a student expressed confusion because of the unfamiliar cultural context: "It took me a while to figure out the meaning of 'all roads lead to Rome.' I think it is because of the cultural aspects that I am not familiar with some of the idioms" (Student 5).

Indeed, the idiom has its origin in the fact that Rome was the point of intersection of all roads of the Roman Empire, appearing to be unfamiliar to Vietnamese students who were not exposed to the historical and cultural background of the idiom. Attempts were made to understand the idiom literally or associate it with a geographical explanation rather than the metaphorical meaning. This indicates that cultural factors could act as an obstruction that hinders prediction and comprehension of idioms and highlights the importance of providing cultural background information, especially in initial stages, in teaching English idioms with no direct equivalents in Vietnamese.

## 2.3.2. Students' attitudes towards the use of conceptual metaphors in learning English idioms

Positive findings regarding students' feelings towards using conceptual metaphors for learning English idioms are also revealed in this paper. Students reported high levels of engagement with the teaching approach, as most learners found the lessons interesting (84.61%) and felt comfortable during the learning process (80.77%). These findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting that CM-based instruction enhances learner engagement and classroom interaction [9], [10], [11], [26]. In addition to engagement, students reported increased confidence when learning and using idioms through conceptual metaphors. 61.54% of the participants admitted feeling confident in the learning process, as shown in Table 2. This finding is consistent with the study by Pham (2021), who found most students felt confident applying metaphorical knowledge and using idioms in producing the target idioms [9]. By comprehending the underlying conceptual structures, students experienced a shift in their confidence: moving from being afraid of being exposed to unfamiliar idioms to perceiving idioms as accessible. Furthermore, regarding students' comfort in the classroom, the metaphorical teaching approach provides students with less cognitively demanding content and a sense of relaxation during the instruction, which is in line with several studies [9], [10], [24]. These papers reported that most students felt at ease and comfortable and considered the learning approach less cognitively overwhelming after the first lessons.

The findings show that greater levels of concentration and participation were observed during lessons of intervention. After receiving conceptual metaphor-based instructions, students were motivated to learn idioms in a way that allowed them to use their prior knowledge and mapping strategies to comprehend the meaning of unfamiliar idioms. It is in line with the study by Pham (2021) [9], who found most of the participants reacted positively to the CM-based approach. Furthermore, there was an increase in the use of idioms in not only receptive skills but also productive skills [11]. As to the reproduction of the learned idioms, during the three observations, students steadily made attempts to apply conceptual metaphors in predicting unfamiliar idioms provided by teachers. There remained hesitation in the process of reproducing, especially in the producing stage when students were asked to use learned idioms to make conversations or write a short paragraph. However, the level of struggle decreased in the second and third observations as learners gained confidence in understanding and using idioms. This reaction could be explained by the growing level of self-confidence among students when they gained a deeper understanding of the learned idioms and were able to apply these idioms to express their ideas in speaking and writing. Moreover, they expressed desires for further learning after the intervention, inside and outside the classroom (84.61%). In the interview, five out of five students admitted their interests in continued learning:

> I really want to learn more idioms using conceptual metaphors. I want to apply the knowledge to the university entrance exam next year. I also want to use idioms to write content on social media. (Student 1)

These observations suggest that CM-inspired instructions should be accompanied with less controlled and communicative tasks, such as paragraph writing, conversation and story creation, as they encourage further application of CM in communication.

The use of the CM-based approach in teaching English idioms aligns well with the increase in the use of communicative approaches in English teaching in Vietnam. In Vietnamese classrooms, idioms are often overlooked due to time constraints, and English programs tend to prioritize grammatical knowledge, lexical items, and language skills, leaving little room for introducing idioms and instructions on idiom learning. Therefore, there is a lack of systematic exposure to English idioms, which leads to challenges in learning English idioms among Vietnamese students. This paper responds to the need for replacing rote memorization with an effective method of learning and teaching English idioms, which play a crucial role in achieving communicative English skills and improving English proficiency.

*Table 2. Students' attitudes towards the use of CM in learning English idioms*

| Item | Statements | SD | D | N | A | SA |
|------|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 14 | I find this teaching approach engaging | 0.00% | 0.00% | 15.38% | 57.69% | 26.92% |
| 15 | I feel at ease and comfortable when learning idioms by conceptual metaphors | 0.00% | 7.69% | 11.54% | 46.15% | 34.62% |
| 16 | I feel a sense of confidence in comprehending the idioms with the assistance of conceptual metaphors | 3.85% | 11.54% | 23.08% | 34.62% | 26.92% |
| 17 | I can use the target idioms confidently with the assistance of conceptual metaphors | 3.85% | 15.38% | 34.62% | 30.77% | 15.38% |
| 18 | I am highly concentrated in the lessons | 0.00% | 0.00% | 11.54% | 69.23% | 19.23% |

| 19 | I am active in taking part in the activities designed to teach English idioms by conceptual metaphors | 0.00% | 0.00% | 15.38% | 57.69% | 26.92% |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 20 | I attempt to use my understanding of conceptual metaphors to acquire the target idioms in the classroom | 3.85% | 0.00% | 11.54% | 61.54% | 23.08% |
| 21 | I attempt to use my understanding of conceptual metaphors outside of the classroom to study new idiomatic expressions from publications like books, newspapers, movies, etc. | 3.85% | 3.85% | 15.38% | 65.38% | 11.54% |
| 22 | I wish to take further idiom classes in the future with conceptual metaphor -inspired instructions | 0.00% | 0.00% | 15.38% | 46.15% | 38.46% |

## 3. Conclusions

The results of the research reveal that teaching English idioms by conceptual metaphors had positive impacts, despite a few limitations that need to be addressed. In addition, the findings show that students expressed positive attitudes towards this instructional approach. To address the problems, the implementation of conceptual metaphors should be carefully and judiciously conducted while making attempts to minimize the disadvantages. Effective instructions and raising students' cultural awareness are proposed to improve the effectiveness of this approach and tackle the potential issues.

Despite the efforts of the researcher, the current research has several limitations. Firstly, because of the constraints on resources, the number of students who took part in this project was limited. Second, the project was limited in time, so it probably did not last long enough to collect more data. Future research is therefore recommended to involve a larger and more diverse participant pool and to extend the instructional period. Such studies could provide deeper insights into the sustained effects of conceptual metaphor-based instruction on idiom learning and its applicability across different EFL contexts.

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