

Clean Language in the Classroom

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This paper explores how the questioning technique of Clean Language can be used in the ESL classroom to help students to explore and enrich their own metaphors in simple language.

1. Introduction

Much research in cognitive science has accumulated over the past few years about how human thought is fundamentally metaphoric in nature. This research was boosted in the 1980's by the work of Lakoff and Johnson, in particular in their book, *Metaphors We Live By*. In this volume, the authors provide extensive linguistic support for their premise that human cognition is primarily mediated through metaphor.

For example, when we consider the meaning of a word such as 'love', a dictionary definition will offer something along the lines of "to feel a deep or romantic attachment to someone." While there is no doubt that this dictionary definition does capture something of the essence of the concept of love, these words are unlikely to resonate strongly with a person. Instead, people understand the concept of love by comparing it to something else that they do understand at a deep level, for example utilizing a metaphoric equivalence such as:

LOVE ~ FIRE

Thus, we get related phrases such as "I don't want to get burned", "My heart's on fire", and "He's hot." Of course, we can have multiple metaphoric conceptualizations of a single word, especially one as core to human experience as "love". Another common metaphorical equivalence for love is:

LOVE ~ PHYSICAL FORCE

This leads to phrases such as "I feel pulled in two directions" and "I'm really

attracted to you.”

2. Utilizing Metaphoric Thinking

Since metaphoric thinking is so core to human experience, it makes sense to explore important issues in a metaphoric manner as well as the more common cognitive ways. As with any kind of thinking, it is often useful for a person to work with a good listener who also asks good questions. Below, I will refer to these two parties as the *Facilitator* and the *Explorer* respectively.

Any kind of question can be useful, but what kind of questions can the Facilitator ask which may allow the Explorer to examine his or her own thinking in a non-directive, open, and rich way? Because all human thinking is strongly influenced by metaphor, any question can bring the Facilitator’s own metaphors and biases into the Explorer’s thinking domain and hence distort or direct the Explorer’s thinking. While there are clearly many cases where this kind of direction is useful (e.g. in a case where the Facilitator knows a lot about the field and can be an appropriate advisor), there are also many cases where it would be more desirable for the Explorer to be able to explore freely without distortion or direction.

3. Clean Language

Clean Language is a tool designed for exactly this purpose, i.e., to allow the explorer to explore in a *clean* manner. Clean Language was developed by a New Zealand therapist, David Grove, who was attempting to help people to explore and overcome trauma.

David Grove noticed people naturally use metaphor to describe their painful emotions, traumatic memories, and deepest sense of who they were. These metaphors that people use are not random, but rather have an internal structure and logic which remains consistent over time. These metaphors become unique and personal to that person.

For example, a person who has passed through a trauma may describe their daily experience in something like the following manner:

“It is like being in a hole. It’s so dark and I just can’t seem to find any light. And there’s no way to go forward. Every direction that I go in, I seem to be blocked. I am stuck in this situation.”

David Grove noticed that when the metaphors that people use change, these people change too. So in this example, he might have explored how light could enter the “hole” or how the person might get out of the “hole”, or what was around the hole. Of course, there is not a real hole, but by exploring the trauma in a parallel system of meaning, the person may be able to discover resources and a solution within themselves. Clean Language can be seen as a set of non-directive questions, a process to encourage introspection, and a method to access inner “symbolic” business through metaphors.

Although it had its start in therapy, Clean Language has since been used as a valuable tool in a wide variety of contexts including business, health, and creativity. In this paper, I will briefly explain how I have used the Clean Language questions in an educational context and I will introduce a simple activity which I have carried out with students to help them to explore and clarify their own plans for the future.

4. Clean Language in the Classroom

I introduce the concept of Clean Language in the classroom by eliciting a personal metaphor from students. For example, I might ask the students to finish the sentence “Life is like...”. Some answers which often emerge include “Life is a game”, “Life is a problem”, “Life is an uphill struggle”, “Life is a journey”, or “Life is an adventure.” The different answers that people offer immediately begin to make it clear to everyone in the classroom that they each have their own metaphors for understanding the world. Simultaneously, the students usually realize that the metaphor that a person holds for “life” will probably be reflective of many more of their beliefs and experiences.

I follow this up by writing an old William Butler Yeats quotation on the blackboard, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but rather the

lighting of a fire.” I ask the students to think about these two different metaphors for the educational process and to think about which one they prefer. Japan’s education system with its Confucianist roots and hierarchical relationship structures naturally tends to fall into the “Education is the filling of a pail” metaphor. More individualistic societies such as the United States are often closer to the metaphor of “Education is the lighting of a fire.”

Having clarified the importance of metaphor in our thinking and how a metaphor can shape huge systems like education, we return to the examples elicited from the students and use them to begin exploring the *developing questions* of Clean Language. The six developing questions of Clean Language are given below.

Clean Language Developing Questions

1. And what kind of X is that X?
2. And where is that X?
3. And that’s X like what?
4. And is there a relationship between X and Y?
5. And when X, what happens to Y?

These questions can be used by substituting X with any word that the explorer has used. Here is a short example of a possible Facilitator/Explorer interaction.

Facilitator: And life is like what?

Explorer: Life is like an adventure.

Facilitator: And what kind of adventure is that adventure?

Explorer: It’s like an adventure in Africa.

Facilitator: And when it’s like an adventure in Africa, where in Africa is that adventure?

Explorer: It’s a journey along a huge river, and we are being attacked by the local people.

Facilitator: And where are the local people?

Explorer: The local people are on the banks of the river and we are on a small boat in the center of the river. They are throwing spears at us.

Facilitator: And is there a relationship between the spears and the boat?

Explorer: Yes, they are both made of the same kind of wood.

This kind of interaction can continue for as little as one minute or as long as one hour (or even longer). As can be seen, the Clean Language questions are used to help the Explorer to enrich the metaphor. While exploring the metaphor of an adventure in Africa, the Explorer is also unconsciously exploring the parallel isomorphic system of “life”. For example, the fact that the wood used to make the spear is the same wood as that used for creating the boat suggests a common factor that is also likely to exist in the “Life” system. For example, the Explorer might come to the realization that all people are fundamentally the same at a deep level.

Despite these kind of deep insights which often emerge through Clean Language, even low level students can enjoy being the Explorer and exploring their metaphors, and it can motivate them to express themselves clearly. The Facilitator role requires even less language since all of the questions are simple.

5. Clarifying Future Plans

I teach a third year university class and occasionally do the following exercise to help the students to clarify their future plans. The third year of university is obviously an important time of their lives when they are thinking about what kind of work they would like to do and how they can find a suitable company. This can be quite an emotional and difficult time for many students, and exploring it within a metaphoric framework can really help students to clarify their future image and a fun and useful way.

I begin the exercise by reminding students of the basic Clean Language questions and then asking them to finish the sentence, “My future is like ...”. Again, I elicit some sample answers and write them on the

blackboard. Then students work in pairs or small groups taking turns being the Explorer and the Facilitator.

Students have found the exercise to be very valuable as a way of clarifying their future plans. One student recently went through this process and his image for his future changed from a dark cold place into a bright valley in the mountains. This allowed the student to begin to be more positive about his research and job hunting, and led to very real results in planning for his future.

Below, I have given several more Clean Language questions which can be useful:

Clean Language Source & Sequence Questions

- Where could X have come from?
- What happens just before X?
- What happens after X?

Clean Language Intention Questions

- And what do you/does X want to have happen?
- And what needs to happen for X?
- And can X?

6. Conclusion

Clean Language questions have proven to be useful in exploring issues through simple language in the ESL classroom. In future lessons, I plan to explore the potential of Clean Language further in the classroom to see how it can be used to develop language and real-world skills as well as providing a valuable thinking skill.