Corpus-informed integration of metaphor in materials for the English language classroom

In the past decade, several small-scale controlled experiments have shown that raising students’ awareness of metaphor can be beneficial for vocabulary learning (e.g. Boers 2000; 2004). To benefit from this observation, it will be necessary to develop instructional materials that incorporate metaphor in the language classroom.

However, how can course designers and material writers decide (a) what figuratively used words and phrases invite prioritized targeting and (b) what metaphor themes (or conceptual metaphors) best serve the purpose of grouping and elucidating these words and phrases? If such decisions are made in a haphazard way, students may become skeptical of both the relevance and the validity of metaphor instruction as part of their proficiency training.

We argue that instructional materials that incorporate metaphor could usefully be informed by corpus-based research into the presence and distribution of metaphors in the type of discourse the students are aiming to master. We set up a classroom experiment in which students of business English responded very positively to vocabulary teaching that was aided by their appreciation of metaphor themes attested in such corpus-based research.