

# Multi-modal Metaphor in College English Teaching: Insights from IKEA Advertising

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## Abstract

This study, framed within the context of cognitive linguistics, investigates the application of multi-modal metaphor theory in college English instruction. The research utilizes multi-modal metaphor strategies found in commercial advertisements (such as those by IKEA) as a reference point, analyzing how these strategies construct meaning through the interplay of language, imagery, and spatial elements. This approach aims to provide innovative methodologies for English teaching. Employing a combination of theoretical analysis and case studies, this research examines how IKEA advertisements effectively leverage visual, linguistic, and spatial metaphors to convey complex concepts. Based on these findings, it proposes instructional strategies that include thoughtfully designing text-image combinations and incorporating video resources along with interactive activities. These methods are intended to facilitate students' understanding of abstract language concepts more intuitively while enhancing their cross-cultural communication skills. The results indicate that multi-modal metaphor instruction not only aligns with the natural cognitive mechanisms inherent in human beings but also significantly enhances learners' engagement and memory retention. The conclusion emphasizes that adapting multi-modal metaphor strategies from commercial communication into English teaching offers an effective pathway for conveying abstract concepts and fostering cross-cultural competencies. Furthermore, it opens new avenues for integrating cognitive linguistics theory with practical teaching applications.

## Keywords

key word, multi-modal metaphor, college English teaching, IKEA advertising, cognitive linguistics, visual literacy

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## 1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics posits that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device; rather, it is a fundamental cognitive mechanism that molds human perception and communication. In recent years, with the ever-growing complexity of the consumer market, metaphor has emerged as a defining characteristic of commercial advertisements. It functions as a strategic instrument for capturing consumers' attention and swaying their purchasing decisions.

Against this backdrop, multi-modal metaphor, capable of constructing meaning through the synergistic interplay of diverse semiotic resources, including language, images, and space, has exhibited distinctive value in the realms of commercial communication. This multi-modal mode of cognitive construction is equally relevant to the field of education, particularly language teaching. When engaged in processing language information, learners instinctively integrate multiple sensory modalities, such as visual and auditory channels, to make sense of the input.

In English language teaching, educators can draw inspiration from the well-established multi-modal metaphor strategies employed in commercial advertisements. By meticulously designing combinations of text and visuals, incorporating video resources, and organizing interactive activities, teachers can assist students in developing a more intuitive understanding of abstract language concepts and improving their cross-cultural communicative competence. This instructional approach not only aligns with the natural cognitive processes of human beings but also leads to a notable enhancement in learners' engagement levels and memory retention.

This study explores the application of multi-modal metaphor theory in college English instruction by analyzing IKEA's advertising strategies. As a pioneer in multi-modal communication, IKEA's advertisements effectively combine visual, linguistic, and spatial metaphors to convey complex concepts, offering valuable implications for English language teaching (ELT). The research bridges cognitive linguistics, commercial communication, and pedagogical practice to develop innovative approaches for enhancing metaphor competence among college-level English learners.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Advertising Studies**

To enhance the examination of the inspirations derived from IKEA's advertisements, several perspectives related to advertising are presented below.

#### **2.1.1 Analytical Frameworks for Metaphor Deconstruction**

The study of multi-modal metaphors in advertising has been advanced through structured analytical frameworks. Li and Dai (2020) propose a three-level model (micro-, meso-, macro-) that systematically examines metaphors from individual elements to sociocultural contexts (p. 43). This framework aligns with broader semiotic traditions while addressing advertising-specific functions, such as persuasion (meso-level) and ideological alignment (macro-level).

#### **2.1.2 Modes of Metaphorical Representation: Text vs. Visual Dominance**

Scholars diverge on optimal modalities for metaphorical expression: Text-Image Hybrid Approaches: Pérez-Sobrino (2016) emphasizes advertisers' preference for textually anchored target domains (e.g., product descriptions) paired with visual source domains, arguing this reduces interpretive risks while maintaining clarity (p. 18).

Visual-Only Advocates: In contrast, Jeong (2008) contends that purely visual metaphors excel in global campaigns, transcending linguistic barriers and ensuring cross-cultural consistency (p. 71). This tension highlights a trade-off between precision (favored by hybrid modes) and universality (achieved through visuals).

#### **2.1.3 Cognitive Processing and Audience-Centric Design**

The effectiveness of metaphors hinges on audience cognition. Foreman et al. (2019) identify imagination as a critical mediator in decoding metaphors, noting its role in bridging surface content and embedded messages (p. 180). However, demographic variability in imaginative capacity necessitates tailored designs. Advertisers must thus balance creative abstraction with accessibility, a challenge exacerbated in heterogeneous audiences.

#### **2.1.4 Future Directions in Multi-Modal Metaphor Research**

Liu and Li (2024) advocate for corpus expansion and domain-specific analyses (e.g., political discourse) to capture metaphors' socio-semiotic diversity (p. 17). This dual focus addresses current limitations in media coverage and contextual applicability.

### **2.2 Language Education Research**

While distinct in their respective focuses, research in language education exhibits conceptual parallels with advertising studies, particularly regarding their shared emphasis on audience alignment and modality optimization. Both fields acknowledge that effective communication—whether pedagogical or promotional—necessitates careful adaptation to the cognitive, cultural, and situational characteristics of the target audience.

### 2.2.1 Pedagogical Models: Refining Methods for Multimodal Communication

Liu and Xiao's (2011) longitudinal study of China's "English Enhancement Program" illustrates how iterative refinements in teaching methodologies can enhance learners' communication skills, including linguistic proficiency, pragmatic competence, and cross-cultural adaptability. This pedagogical approach mirrors advertising's meso-level functional analysis (Li & Dai, 2020), where metaphors are strategically structured to fulfill persuasive objectives. Just as advertisers optimize multimodal combinations (text, image, sound) to maximize engagement, language educators experiment with blended teaching modalities (e.g., digital tools, immersive simulations) to improve comprehension and retention. The parallel lies in their shared focus on systematic design—whether crafting an ad campaign or a language curriculum, success depends on aligning form (modality) with function (intended impact).

### 2.2.2 Learner-Centric Challenges: Bridging Gaps Between Goals and Competence

Wang et al. (2024) uncover a critical disconnect in academic English (EGAP) instruction: while students exhibit strong demand for advanced language skills, their self-efficacy remains disproportionately low, with variations across institutions and disciplines (p. 1). This finding resonates with advertisers' challenge of ensuring metaphorical messages are both creative and intelligible to diverse audiences (Foreman et al., 2019). In both contexts, misalignment arises when designers (teachers or advertisers) overestimate the audience's interpretive capacity. For instance: In advertising, overly abstract metaphors may confuse consumers with limited imaginative processing ability. In language education, overly complex instructional materials may demotivate learners with weaker self-efficacy. These parallels underscore a universal principle: effective communication demands adaptive design, where content is calibrated to the audience's cognitive and affective thresholds.

### 2.2.3 Future Cross-Disciplinary Insights

The synergies between these fields' present opportunities for reciprocal learning. For instance: Advertising's micro-macro analytical framework (Li & Dai, 2020) could enhance language pedagogy by encouraging educators to deconstruct lessons into distinct cognitive (micro), functional (meso), and sociocultural (macro) layers. Conversely, educational scaffolding techniques—such as the gradual increase in complexity—may assist advertisers in designing metaphor sequences that lead consumers toward deeper engagement. By exploring these interdisciplinary connections, researchers in both domains can develop more nuanced and audience-sensitive strategies for communication and instruction.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1 Theoretical Foundation

Theoretical Foundation Grounded in cognitive linguistics and multi-modal metaphor theory, this study examines how IKEA's advertisements (e.g., "Home as a container of emotions," "Light as atmosphere") construct meaning through multiple semiotic modes. These commercial examples demonstrate how abstract concepts can be made tangible through metaphorical mappings, providing a model for ELT.

Based on the literature review and supported by selected advertising cases from IKEA, this study examines visual metaphors as a critical interpretive tool and explores their potential implications for college English teaching.

Visual metaphors operate as a dynamic cognitive mechanism closely tied to language acquisition: creators encode meaning through imagery, while viewers decode and assimilate the intended message—a process analogous to second language comprehension and production. In this framework, visual elements function as the communicative medium, while metaphor serves as the conceptual bridge that translates abstract notions into concrete representations. This dual role makes visual metaphors a powerful pedagogical tool for teaching abstract vocabulary and fostering conceptual thinking in English courses. By facilitating thought expression and communication, they prove particularly effective in enhancing students' communicative competence, both in academic and professional settings.

This study employs Lakoff and Johnson's (2013) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as its analytical framework to systematically examine metaphors in advertisements. The theory's fundamental premise

structures metaphorical understanding through two interdependent domains: (1) the source domain, which serves as the concrete, familiar representation (metaphorical vehicle), and (2) the target domain, representing the abstract concept or meaning being conveyed. This binary framework enables a rigorous deconstruction of how visual metaphors operate cognitively and communicably in advertising contexts, providing a systematic approach to identify and interpret the conceptual mappings between tangible imagery and abstract ideas. CMT provides a robust analytical lens for examining how advertisers exploit this cognitive mapping to enhance message comprehension and persuasion.

This theoretical framework holds significant pedagogical value for tertiary-level English language instruction. By systematically deconstructing commercial metaphors through Lakoff and Johnson's (2013) model, educators can achieve three key learning objectives: (1) cultivating students' metaphoric competence for improved academic writing and professional presentations; (2) enhancing cross-cultural awareness through comparative analysis of metaphorical expressions across different cultural contexts; and (3) developing critical thinking skills via multi-modal interpretation tasks that bridge visual and linguistic meaning-making. These applications demonstrate how conceptual metaphor theory can transform abstract linguistic concepts into tangible, culturally relevant classroom practices that address both cognitive and communicative dimensions of language learning.

The cognitive process of metaphorical mapping serves dual pedagogical functions: it fundamentally shapes perception while simultaneously offering a systematic framework for vocabulary acquisition and conceptual development. This dual mechanism directly addresses two critical challenges in tertiary English education - abstract concept mastery and practical language application - while effectively bridging classroom learning with authentic communication demands. By revealing how conceptual mappings underlie both linguistic and visual communication, this approach equips students with transferable analytical skills applicable to academic, professional, and intercultural contexts.

### 3.2 Instructional Design

The paper proposes concrete classroom applications rooted in IKEA's advertising techniques for instructional design, including using IKEA's visual metaphors (e.g., furniture assembly instructions) to teach English prepositions and procedural language; analyzing bilingual ad copies to enhance students' cross-cultural metaphor awareness; and designing multimedia projects where students create their own multi-modal metaphors for abstract concepts.

IKEA's globally recognized print advertisements, featuring approximately 10,000 home furnishing products across functional categories, employ sophisticated visual metaphors that offer unique pedagogical value for university English instruction. These advertisements systematically transform concrete product features into abstract conceptual representations - such as modular storage systems framed as "space-expanding solutions" or minimalist designs presented as "visual tranquility" - providing an ideal platform for developing students' metaphorical competence through three key dimensions: (1) analytical deconstruction of source-target domain mappings in advertising discourse, (2) acquisition of domain-specific academic vocabulary through contextualized metaphor interpretation, and (3) cultivation of critical multi-modal literacy skills by examining image-text interactions. Grounded in conceptual metaphor theory, this approach focuses on universal cognitive processes of figurative thinking rather than cultural-specific interpretations, enabling learners to transfer metaphor decoding skills to academic scenarios such as analyzing persuasive texts, constructing analogies in writing ("essay structure as architectural blueprint"), and interpreting visual data across disciplines. The advertisements' clean visual aesthetics and clearly articulated metaphorical connections make them particularly effective for classroom-based metaphor identification exercises, creative adaptation tasks where students generate their own product metaphors, and comparative analyses of how different cultures employ similar conceptual mappings in commercial communication, all while maintaining focus on the cognitive-linguistic mechanisms underlying metaphorical thought rather than cultural comparison per se.

### 3.3 Pedagogical Experimentation

A semester-long intervention study was conducted with two groups of non-English majors (N=120), comparing an experimental group that received metaphor-focused instruction using IKEA ad materials with a

control group that followed traditional textbook-based instruction. The study assessed learning outcomes through metaphor identification tests, creative writing samples, and intercultural communication scenarios.

The pedagogical experimentation was designed as a semester-long intervention study to evaluate the effectiveness of integrating multi-modal metaphors into college English teaching, using IKEA advertising campaigns as instructional materials. The study involved 120 non-English major students, who were randomly assigned to either an experimental group (N=60) or a control group (N=60).

### **3.3.1 Study Design**

**Experimental Group:** This group received metaphor-focused instruction, where IKEA advertisements were used as primary teaching materials. The lessons incorporated multi-modal metaphor analysis, creative tasks, and interactive activities aligned with the BOPPPS lesson plan outlined in the document. For example, students analyzed visual-textual metaphors in IKEA ads (e.g., “Home as a container of emotions”), practiced using prepositions and procedural language through assembly instructions, and created their own multi-modal metaphors for abstract concepts.

**Control Group:** This group followed traditional textbook-based instruction, focusing on grammar drills, vocabulary memorization, and standardized reading comprehension exercises without explicit emphasis on metaphor or multi-modal learning.

### **3.3.2 Assessment Methods**

To measure learning outcomes, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, including quantitative and qualitative assessments:

**Metaphor Identification Tests:** Students were shown a series of IKEA and non-IKEA advertisements and asked to identify the source and target domains of the metaphors. Scoring criteria included accuracy in metaphor recognition, explanation of conceptual mappings, and cross-cultural interpretation.

**Creative Writing Samples:** Students completed writing tasks requiring them to use metaphors in descriptive essays, persuasive texts, or intercultural comparisons. Rubrics assessed creativity, linguistic fluency, and the ability to apply metaphorical thinking in written communication.

### **3.3.3 Intercultural Communication Scenarios**

Role-playing activities were conducted where students simulated cross-cultural interactions (e.g., explaining a product metaphor to someone from a different cultural background). Evaluations focused on students' ability to adapt metaphors for diverse audiences and their awareness of cultural nuances in communication.

### **3.3.4 Findings**

Preliminary results indicated significant differences between the two groups: The experimental group demonstrated higher metaphor comprehension and greater creativity in applying metaphors to language tasks. Students in the experimental group showed improved retention of vocabulary, particularly abstract terms, due to the visual and contextual reinforcement provided by the ads. The multi-modal approach enhanced engagement, with students reporting higher motivation and interest in the lessons compared to the control group. However, cultural differences in metaphor interpretation were observed, highlighting the need for explicit guidance in classrooms with diverse student backgrounds.

### **3.3.5 Implications**

The study underscores the pedagogical value of multi-modal metaphors in college English teaching, particularly for:

**Conceptual Learning:** Making abstract language concepts tangible through visual and linguistic mappings.

**Cross-Cultural Competence:** Developing students' ability to navigate and adapt metaphors in intercultural contexts; **Student Engagement:** Leveraging authentic, real-world materials (e.g., advertisements) to create dynamic and interactive learning experiences.

### 3.3.6 Reflective Practice

Classroom observations in the college English teaching context yielded several significant pedagogical insights. The use of visual metaphors in instruction demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing students' ability to articulate abstract concepts and develop conceptual fluency. The multi-modal approach combining imagery with linguistic elements proved particularly beneficial for vocabulary acquisition and retention. However, the study revealed that students' varying cultural backgrounds led to different interpretations of metaphorical content, necessitating explicit guidance in the classroom. These findings suggest that while visual metaphors offer valuable instructional potential for university English courses, their implementation requires careful consideration of students' diverse cultural perspectives and appropriate instructional scaffolding.

## 4. Results

The semester-long intervention study comparing metaphor-focused instruction using IKEA advertisements with traditional textbook-based teaching yielded several important findings. The observed outcomes demonstrate clear trends and pedagogical insights based on qualitative and comparative analysis.

### 4.1 Comparative Learning Outcomes

#### 4.1.1 Metaphor Comprehension and Application

The experimental group showed markedly stronger performance in identifying and interpreting multi-modal metaphors compared to the control group. In creative writing tasks, experimental group students incorporated metaphors more naturally and frequently, particularly when describing abstract concepts. The control group tended to use more literal language in their writing samples.

#### 4.1.2 Vocabulary Retention and Abstract Concept Grasp

Students exposed to ad-based metaphor instruction demonstrated better retention of abstract vocabulary (e.g., "belonging," "identity") compared to those in the traditional instruction group. The visual-textual reinforcement in IKEA ads appeared to facilitate deeper cognitive processing of these terms.

#### 4.1.3 Intercultural Communication Adaptability

During role-play scenarios, experimental group students adjusted metaphorical explanations more flexibly when addressing cross-cultural differences. Some students initially struggled with culturally specific metaphors (e.g., Swedish domestic concepts in IKEA ads), but scaffolded instruction improved their interpretive skills over time.

### 4.2 Student Engagement and Motivation

Classroom observations indicated higher participation and interest in the experimental group. Students responded positively to ad-based materials, finding them more relatable and engaging than textbook exercises. Several experimental group students voluntarily created their own metaphor-rich advertisements for class projects, indicating strong knowledge transfer.

### 4.3 Challenges and Limitations

**Cultural Interpretation Barriers:** Some students needed additional guidance to decode culture-specific metaphors (e.g., Scandinavian design symbolism). **Varied Prior Knowledge:** Students with stronger visual literacy skills benefited more initially, suggesting the need for differentiated instruction. **Instructor Adaptation:** Teachers reported a learning curve in effectively facilitating metaphor-based discussions but noted improvement with practice.

### 4.4 Pedagogical Implications

The study supports three key directions for enhancing college English instruction:

**Multi-Modal Metaphor Integration:** Authentic advertisements (like IKEA's) can bridge abstract concepts and real-world communication. Visual-textual analysis helps students develop both linguistic and cognitive

flexibility. Intercultural Metaphor Training: Explicit instruction on cultural context in metaphors improves students' ability to adapt language for diverse audiences. Role-playing and comparative ad analysis (e.g., Western vs. Eastern advertisements) could further refine this skill. Teacher Professional Development: Educators need training in metaphor deconstruction techniques (micro/meso/macro levels). Workshops on scaffolding metaphor interpretation for varied student backgrounds would enhance classroom implementation.

#### 4.5 Contributions to ELT Research

This study provides evidence for: The effectiveness of ad-based materials in teaching metaphorical thinking; the role of multi-modal literacy in improving abstract language comprehension; the need for adaptive instruction when dealing with culturally diverse classrooms.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that multi-modal metaphors from commercial advertisements (e.g., IKEA) offer valuable cognitive and pedagogical tools for college English instruction. By integrating visual, textual, and spatial elements, such metaphors help learners grasp abstract concepts intuitively while improving cross-cultural communication skills. The findings challenge text-dominant teaching models, advocating for multi-modal communication as central to language education.

Key theoretical contributions include: (1) a framework for incorporating authentic multi-modal materials into teaching; (2) validation of commercial metaphors' role in conceptual learning; and (3) strategies to enhance multi-modal literacy (e.g., metaphor analysis, visual narratives). These advances align with contemporary needs for visual-centric, cross-cultural communication.

Future research can focus on expanding in three directions: Firstly, conduct longitudinal tracking studies to examine the sustainability of the teaching effect of metaphor, analyze the long-term development trajectory of students' metaphorical ability and its transfer effect on comprehensive language ability. Secondly, explore metaphor teaching in subject-specific English, compare the metaphorical features of different professional fields, and develop targeted teaching methods. Finally, a cross-cultural comparative study was conducted to analyze the differences in the interpretation of the same advertising metaphor by learners from different cultural backgrounds, providing a basis for designing culturally inclusive teaching materials. These three directions will deepen the theoretical understanding of multimodal metaphor teaching and provide scientific guidance for English teaching practices in different disciplines and cultural contexts. The research results are expected to optimize the English teaching mode in colleges and universities and enhance students' multimodal communication ability and cross-cultural metaphor understanding level.

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