

# A Review of Studies on Conceptual Metaphor and English Idiom Teaching based on CNKI

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## Abstract

English idiom teaching and learning is an obstacle for both teachers and students. In recent year, a teaching method based on conceptual metaphor theory provides new insights for English idiom teaching. Based on CNKI, this paper aims to study the relevant literature on the application of conceptual metaphor on English idiom teaching from 2005 to 2022. It can be found that the research methods in these papers are mainly empirical research and theoretical research, and the perspective of research contents are diverse; while the long-term effect of CM-Based idiom teaching method is paid little attention. The study proposes some suggestions for further research with the purpose of contributing ideas to the domestic studies on the application of conceptual metaphor on English idiom teaching.

## Keywords

Conceptual Metaphor; English Idiom Teaching; CNKI; Metaphorical Competence.

## 1. Introduction

English idiom learning is a significant part in second language acquisition as they are the language forms formed by the cultural accumulation of English nations. A good command of English idioms demonstrates a high level of language proficiency. However, for Chinese EFL learners, English idiom teaching and learning has been the difficult point of English learning. Teachers only teach students the definition of English idioms, offer them some drills in order to make sure they will have a good command of English idioms by imitations, repeating exercises and memorizing. The mechanical teaching approach does not 'hit the nail into the point' that the English idioms are unpredictable and arbitrary. Fortunately, cognitive linguistics provides a new research perspective for English idiom teaching. It believes that idiom comes from human's cognitive structure. The key point of learning English idioms is to explore its essence especially the conceptual metaphor (CM) hiding in it. The conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) has influenced idiom teaching a lot.

Based on CNKI, this paper will start with introducing the data sources and research methods of the paper, list the number of papers published on CNKI between 2005-2022, and briefly summarize the characteristics of them. Then, the author will discuss these papers and conclude the characteristics of current studies on CM and English idiom teaching. Finally, the findings, pedagogical implications, limitations of the paper will be presented.

## 2. Relevant Literature on Conceptual Metaphor and English Idiom Teaching Published on CNKI

### 2.1. Data Sources and Research Method

The papers analyzed in this paper comes from CNKI, which are published between 2005 to 2022 on academic journals or theses & dissertations. The process of data collecting is presented as follows. First, the author uses 'Advanced Search' function on CNKI, selects the search fields

as needed. Then, in order to optimize the search results, the author inputs ‘conceptual metaphor’ and ‘English idiom teaching’ as the subject, sets the publication time as ‘2005-01-01’ to ‘2022-12-31’. Finally, forty-nine papers are found on the result page. With the help of visualization analysis in CNKI database, the structure, regularity and distribution of specific research literature can be presented, which is convenient for researchers to grasp the current researches. The author will analyze the publication year, main subject distributions and disciplines of these papers in the following sections of this chapter.

## 2.2. Data Analysis

### 2.2.1. The Analysis of Publication Year

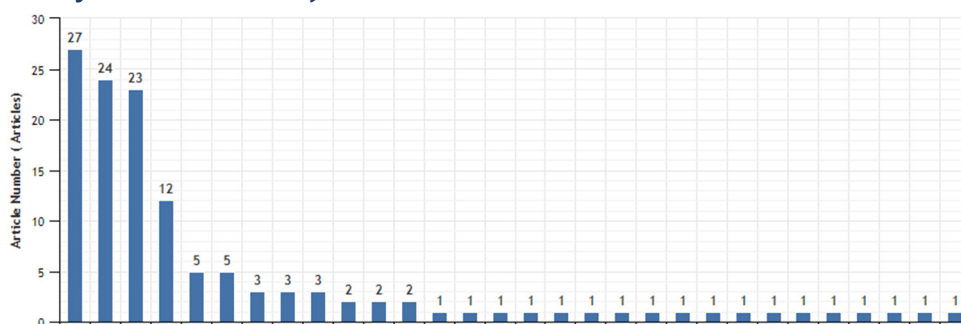
**Table 1.** The Number of Papers Published Between 2005 to 2022

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
No	1	1	1	4	4	2	3	7	4	4
Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022		
No	4	3	1	1	4	4	1	4		

The number of papers published each year can directly reflect the current trend on the application of CMT in English idiom teaching. Through collecting the number of published literatures and the systematic analysis of the publication year trend, the development of this field can be reflected to a certain extent, which is helpful for researchers to predict the dynamic changes in the future. After searching CNKI, a total of 49 papers on CM and English idioms teaching have been published in China during the past 20 years from 2005 to 2022, and the annual publication distribution is shown in Table 1. The overall annual trend can be divided into three stages. Between 2005 and 2007, when the topic was in its infancy, the average number of publications per year was just one. From 2008 to 2016, the number of literature on the application of CMT to English idiom teaching has increased. It was also a critical period for the ‘new curriculum reform’ in China. However, in 2017, the number of published literatures has been declining.

Among the research papers on CM and English idiom teaching, there are only 6 from core academic journals. The first paper, Conceptual Metaphors and the Teaching/ Learning of English Idioms: An Experimental Study, was published in 2008 by Wu Li et al on Heilongjiang Researches on Higher Education. It takes freshmen from a college’s English major as the research object to examine their metaphorical ability, which lays the foundation for further research. According to the data collection and literature analysis, in general, research in this field at Home is still at a stable stage, and the number of papers is not adequate with few articles from core journals. Therefore, there is a lot worth exploring.

### 2.2.2. The Analysis of Main Subject Distribution



**Figure 1.** Main Subject Distribution

According to the main subject distribution of CNKI (see Figure 1), a total of 30 topics are involved in 49 papers. As Figure 1 shows that, conceptual metaphor is the topic most popular in these papers, followed by idiom teaching. Meanwhile, empirical research and application in teaching are also popular topics, indicating that many scholars try to apply CMT to idiom teaching, and most of them pay more attention to empirical research, with less attention to theoretical research. Traditional teaching methods on English idioms are rigid and ignore the unanalyzability of idioms structure, hence the teaching of idioms is a big obstacle in English teaching. While cognitive linguistics scholars holds that the CMT introduced in the Chinese academic circle in the 1990s can be used to explain the connotation of idioms and to cultivate students' metaphorical thinking. The combination of CMT and English idiom teaching is significant.

### 2.2.3. The Analysis of Discipline

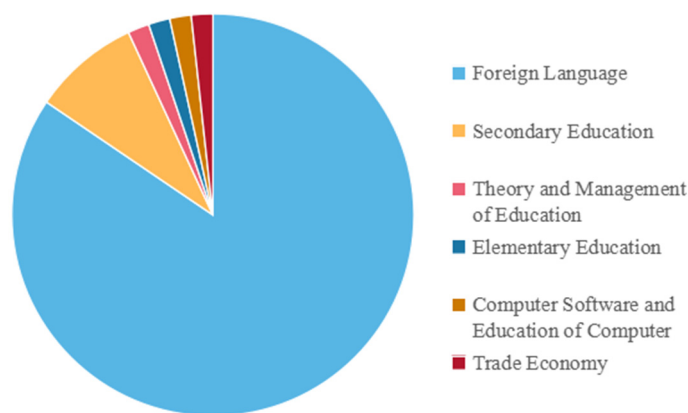


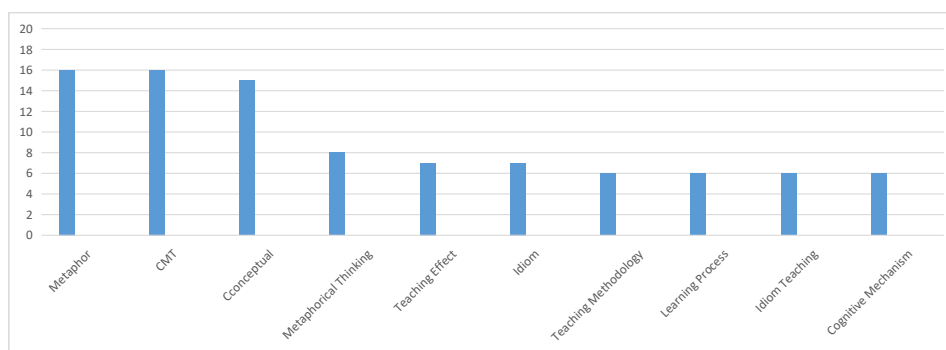
Figure 2. Discipline

The author counts the discipline distribution of 49 papers, among which 41 papers involve only 1 subject field, 7 paper involve 2 subject fields, and 1 paper involves 3 subject fields. As can be seen on Figure 2, most of the papers are related to the subject of foreign literature. There are 5 papers related to secondary education, and the rest are related to theory and management of education, elementary education, computer software and education of computer, and trade economy. Generally speaking, these literatures are mainly related to the field of linguistics as well as pedagogy. It is precisely because it needs to apply CM to idiom teaching that many scholars conduct educational research on this basis. Secondary education is a critical period of learning, so research on idiom teaching methods at this stage is of great help to improve students' learning competence and thinking ability. In the research process, some scholars will use multimedia teaching methods or apply computer technology for research, so it involves different subject fields.

### 2.2.4. The Analysis of Keywords

In a research paper, keywords can express the essential content of the full text and reflect the research focus of the author. The frequency of keywords in data analysis is positively correlated with the research trend, that is, the higher the frequency of keywords, the stronger the research popularity (Peng Zhuo, 2021). With the help of CNKI's Keyword Co-occur Network analysis, the author obtains the keyword data of 49 literatures. Due to the large number of keywords involved, the author only lists 10 keywords that appear more than 6 times. As seen from Figure 3, keywords with frequencies of 6 or more are respectively metaphors, conceptual metaphor theory, conceptual, metaphorical thinking, teaching effect, idiom, methodology, learning process, idiom teaching, cognitive mechanism. Among them, 'metaphors', 'CMT' and 'conceptual' appear more than 10 times which represents researchers focusing on conceptual metaphor

theory and attempt to use it to address problems in idiom teaching. The word ‘metaphorical thinking’ appears 8 times, representing researchers’ research purpose---to cultivate students’ metaphorical thinking competence. Besides, ‘cognitive mechanism’ is one of keywords in these papers. As cognitive linguists maintain that idiom is the fundamental empirical schema that people acquire through years of practice. The meaning of idioms is formed on at least three cognitive bases, namely conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy and conventional common sense. Revealing these deep cognitive mechanisms can help students understand and memorize idioms better (Kovecses, 2010; qtd in Wen Qiufang, 2013:131).



**Figure 3.** Keywords Analysis

### 3. Discussion

Based on the analysis above, it can be seen that since 2005, the number of papers published by researchers on conceptual metaphor and English idiom teaching in domestic journals is relatively small, and most of the papers are of poor quality. At the same time, it can be seen from the subject distribution that researchers attach importance to exploring the relationship between idioms and conceptual metaphor, and use experimental study to verify the efficacy of conceptual metaphor teaching method in idiom teaching. However, as the discipline distribution shows, the research in this field focuses more on idiom teaching in primary and secondary schools, less on college English teaching.

Although the number of papers published in this field is not beyond our expectation, there are many significant characteristics we can explore in these papers, and we can make use of them to do further research.

First of all, a noticeable trait of these papers is that the researchers not only elucidate the application of CMT on English idiom teaching from theoretical perspective, but also pay more attention to do empirical study so as to verify the hypothesis. Xia Jinyu (2007) employs an experimental approach to investigate the facilitating role that the CMT might play in English idiom teaching and learning by dividing 74 non-English major students into two group: experimental group and control group for the purpose of exploring a more effective idiom teaching method. However, other scholars have used different research instruments. For example, in Ren Junxiang's (2011) paper, which was also an empirical study, she uses idiom testing, questionnaire, interview and other research methods to explore learners' understanding of unfamiliar idioms. As a pre-test, the idiom test enables the researchers to have a preliminary understanding of the students' learning status. The design of questionnaire and the interview aim to investigate students' needs and difficulties in idiom learning, so as to improve the situation in further teaching and research. Liu Qin et al. (2016) conducted an empirical study on the correlation between English idiom teaching and idiom test scores from the perspective of CM. They first get to know the English learning status of research subjects through questionnaire, and then present an experimental research. In this way, researchers can

dig out the difficulties encountered by students in learning idioms, and improve the study of conceptual metaphor teaching method.

Secondly, apart from the differences the research instrument used in these empirical study papers, the dichotomy of research contents among these papers also merits attention. Different researchers study CM and English idiom teaching from distinctive perspective, which helps CM as a methodology of idiom teaching and learning. Jiang Ximei (2005) is the first scholar to study the relationship between CMT and English teaching. She claims that metaphors are considered universal, cognitive and systematic, therefore it can be introduced into English idiom teaching to better serve the second language teaching. She also gives a large number of examples to illustrate the metaphorical connotations of non-analyzable, normally-analyzable and non-normally-analyzable idioms. Zeng Xiaoyan (2008) focuses on the experimental approach to verify the effect of CM in English idiom teaching, and to explore whether context and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation have an impact on idiom learning. This study focuses on the implementation of metaphorical teaching method from the perspective of idiom learners.

In exploring conceptual metaphor teaching method, some scholars conduct teaching experiments and propose new teaching models to help students understand CM better. For example, based on the CMT, Gao Li's study explores the approach to teach English idioms and proposes a teaching model: displaying-discussing-explaining-expanding-sharing (2009). In addition, other scholars have also studied the status quo of English idiom teaching. Li Manyu (2011) gives examples of the combination of idiom teaching and three cognitive mechanisms (conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, and conventional). She emphasizes that proper attention should be paid to the input of these three cognitive mechanisms in English idiom teaching. What's more, Zhu Xiuzhi et al. (2012) analyzes the existing problems in idiom teaching and the causes based on the CMT.

Finally, as for the application of CMT to the teaching of English idioms, three of the 49 papers study the effect of CMT on the long-term and short-term memory of EFL learners in learning idioms. Among them, Xu Lei (2011) conducts a study which aims at figuring out whether English idiom teaching with the application of CM has positive effects on short-term and long-term memory of idioms. And it proves that idiom learning and teaching with CMT can be more effective in facilitating short-term and long-term memory than the traditional approach. However, Tang Ling (2014) conducts a comparative experiment on the explicit and implicit conceptual metaphor teaching of English idioms. She compares the influence of explicit and implicit conceptual metaphor teaching models on the comprehension and memory of English idioms. It turns out that explicit teaching model can promote EFL learners' understanding and short-term memory of idioms, while implicit teaching model can promote learners' long-term memory. Likewise, Dong Feng et al. (2011) conclude the phonetic features of idioms in their research. They conduct an empirical study on the combination of alliteration and CM in idioms, only to find out that it helps to strengthen students' short-term memory of idiom forms and meanings than the traditional idiom teaching method.

Above all, the application of CMT in English idiom teaching is effective for students to learn idioms and developing their metaphorical competence. As English teachers, it is urgent to realize that the cultivation of metaphorical competence, language competence and communicative competence will become the highest goal of English teaching (Wang Yin et al., 2004). The scholars mention above have studied CM and idiom teaching theoretically and empirically, explored the impacts of context, motivation and language transfer on idiom teaching and learning, and investigated the influence of CM teaching methodology on students' long-term memory and short-term memory. However, we should not completely abandon the traditional idiom teaching method while implementing the CM teaching method.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the CNKI, this paper studies the literature from 2005 to 2022, and analyzes the research trends and subject distribution of the application of CM in English idiom teaching. The research on CM and its application in the teaching of English idioms has achieved positive outcome, but we should also recognize its shortcomings. Through the analysis of these papers, we can conclude that although there are few papers in this field, most scholars verify the feasibility and effectiveness of CM teaching method through empirical studies. Most of them make contrastive studies on the comprehension of idioms between traditional teaching method and CM-based teaching method, while little attention is paid to idiom production. Besides, in empirical study among these papers, college students are often chosen as the research subjects while middle/senior high school students get less attention. Therefore, more effort should be taken to examine the feasibility of CM teaching method on idiom learning of middle/senior high school students. In terms of the cultivation of metaphorical competence and English idiom learning, based on the relevant literature at home, more efforts should be exerted to explored in further study. For example, how and when should EFL learners transform metaphorical awareness into an idiom learning strategy? How to ensure the long-term effect of CM-based teaching method?

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