The Effect of Using Figurative Language on Enhancing Students' Skills in Iraqi Schools

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Abstract

The conducted research is a brief qualitative study on the process of figurative language teaching within schools of different levels. The purpose of the study is to validate to what extent figurative language is being taught during the Iraqi school system. Different approaches are explored for the purpose of successful mastery of figurative language. The results that has explained in previous studies in the conceptual, single unit, synonymic, relevance, contextual approaches are also provided, but also provide additional approaches in the constructional and exposal approaches. Mostly, the different approaches of teaching figurative language are described as being "multi-approaches" and are used in addition to other approaches. The results of the study are based on data collected from a survey questionnaires distributed among schools of different levels. The results indicate that figurative language teaching tends to be disregarded by English teachers working in elementary schools. English teachers in secondary schools differ in their intentions for teaching the subject, but do encounter figurative language and touch upon it anyway. In secondary schools, English teachers vary as to which aspects of figurative language they teach, but they actively involve figurative language in their teaching.

Keywords: figurative language nature, metaphor and idioms teaching, constructional approach, idiomatic expressions

1. Introduction

Figurative language is an aspect of language often receives inadequate attention in the process of teaching/ learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Abrams (1999, p. 96) affirm that "figurative language is a conspicuous departure from what users of a language apprehend as a standard meaning of words or the standard order of word, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect". Figurative language is one way by which "figures of speech" are described. Robert Eaglestone in "Doing English" describes a figure of speech as "the use of words or a phrase in a way that isn't strictly true; the words have been 'turned away' from their literal sense and don't mean what a dictionary might say they mean". It's very easy to recognize this type of language with a little bit of practice.

During the last years, specialists have focused on ways of organizing, presenting, and practicing new vocabulary to make it simple enough and memorable for students (see McCarthy and O'Dell 1994). Figurative idiomatic as a one kind of figurative language is discussed by Quynh Tran (2013). He explores the figurative idiomatic competence of language learners and their perception of idiom learning in an EFL context.

Figurative language importance is explored by Susan and Mallie (1998, p.1) as it occurs in the communication of emotional states. They claim that the nature of emotional experiences appears to lend itself to figurative expressions. They also say that most studies have focused on the comprehension of figurative language which enables student to produce expressions of different kinds.

Leclere, et al. (2006, p.259) discuss several approaches for teaching figurative language, in their study in an American high school of a second language learner. They affirm that it is very important that the learners of English language to be able to comprehend figurative language so as to cope with everyday written and spoken English.

2. The importance of this work
The importance of this work can be specified through the following objectives:
- To make clear definition of figurative language.

- To explain and define the nature of major kinds of figurative language (idioms and metaphors).

- To specify what do the English teachers in this study teach their students about figurative language?

- To what strategies, methods or approaches do English teachers use to teach figurative language?

3. Figurative language

Figurative language is represented by a single word or phrase that cannot be taken literally. To make description to a person, object or situation, writers or people use figurative language by comparing it to or with something else. For example, (1) "His garden is as beautiful as heaven" describes or compares a beautiful garden to a beautiful and fabulous heaven. Simply, figurative language is a way to add color and depth to unexciting or dull statement, "His garden is beautiful." Students who have disabilities in language learning may have problem of comparing things, items, or situations that have no real connection to each other (e.g., garden / heaven) and have never seen before. Some of these students may even challenge the statement and argue, "I have seen garden that is ugly. Heaven is also ugly!"

When figurative language is used for learning to make meaning, it can be a difficult idea for learning disabled students. Students who suffer from disabilities, especially those with language delays become easily confused when figurative language is used. Figurative language or figures of speech is very abstract for children. It's known that figurative language doesn't mean exactly what it says. Unfortunately, many students take figurative language literally. The teacher could say for example *this bag weighs a ton*, they might believe that a *ton* is something related or close to the weight of a *bag* or even other *bags*.

The process of understanding figurative language involves some kind of inference in one way or another. To understand figurative language as literary critics have pointed out, it requires an act of 'completion' from the reader, in which a 'linkage' is established between the two different elements being compared (Hawkes 1972, p. 72), and a series of linguistic inferences are made (Nowottny 1962, p. 59). It could be argued that, for the language learner, this process of decoding is applicable not only to poetic or literary language, but also to many other instances of figurative language. Thus, in Example (1) above, the learner needs to find the similarities between *garden* and *heaven* in order to make sense of the sentence. In this case the learner should infer the features of heaven (vast, beautiful, and fabulous) which are important for understanding the subject of the sentence. Through the following number of stages, decoding of figurative language would be involved:

- Comprehending that two things which do not normally collocate together are being compared or brought together.

- Inferring which features of the one are important in the comparison.

- Reinterpreting how the meaning of the other is altered when these important features are applied to it.

In other words, the learner needs to make the covert connections in the utterance clearer through a process of inference in order to understand figurative language. Perhaps teachers can help their learners if they explicitly encourage them to work through the kind of stages just outlined. Figurative language can greatly improve your writing and speaking, if used correctly.

Meanings of figurative language are determined by culture. People use kinds of figurative language stem from the underlying values and assumptions of their culture or society: 'a well-understood metaphor in one culture may have entirely different meanings in another part of the world (Hayakawa 1974, p.105). For instance the figurative meaning of colors is different from one society to another (Bowers 1992: 34). Figurative language can greatly improve your writing and speaking, if used correctly.

3.1 Figurative Language Nature

Figurative language as language where the meaning does not correspond exactly with literal language´s meaning and points at metaphors and idioms as examples of it (Glucksberg, 2001). He also discusses that the meaning of figurative language can be understood depending on context.

The nature and constituents of figurative language could be attributed the different major categories of simile, metaphor and includes synecdoche and metonymy as important constituents (Brown and Hatch, 1995, pp. 88-89).

In reading comprehension, Brown and Palmer (2004) attempt to outline the constituents of figurative language. They illustrate the nature of figurative language to be related to figures of speech that carry non-literal meaning (p.370). Furthermore, the constituents of figurative language are numerous and very frequently found in the

English language, as stated by the authors (p.371). They illustrate the constituents as similes, metaphors, personification, allusions, proverbs, idioms and hyperbole.

In this study, Brown's and Hatch's definition will be used. This choice is made with considerations to the definition being highly specific. This, in turn, is planned to provide this small-scale study, with an appropriate range of aspects of figurative language.

3.2 Metaphor

3.2.1 The Nature of Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.5) illustrate the core notion of the metaphor to be "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another". The concepts of objects are thus described through an individual's experiences of the other objects, in this sense, new meaning is illustrated by the use of the metaphor (p.117). The language provided through such a metaphor involves entire systems of knowledge, rather than a concept which is an isolated. This system is based on individual's experiences of the concept in addition the character of the concept which provides a comprehension of the concept, how to handle and its function (p.116). For instance, we can conceptualize time through the metaphor of:

Time = Gold

In this case time is compared to something valuable or even something that we could waste or spare.

The objects of a metaphor are specified as "basic domains of experience" (p.117) and are organized as an entire image of coherent "natural kinds of experience" of the domain and visualized mentally as a collected image of the experiments in "experiential gestalts" (ibid).

These natural types of experiences are based on the interaction of human with their environment and add discussed aspects to the experimental gestalts described as "interactional properties" (p.121). The various experiences that are likely to be to a domain and the different interactional properties that will follow create multi-dimensional experimental gestalts, in the sense of different aspects or angles to explain them. The interactional properties as well as, are not solid sets of containers of concepts, but are rather to be considered as structured gestalts (p.122). Proposing that the concept of an object is made through individual experiences though implies that, when some properties might be universal, individual differences on ascribed properties to an object are likely to occur (p.118). If we look at the example above:

Time = Gold

The **basic domains, i**n this case, would be represented in time and gold. The **natural kinds of experiences** would be represented in our individual experiences of time and gold. The **experimental gestalt** would be embodied in the connected image of the full set of experiences of both time and gold. The **interactional properties** would be the aspects we attribute time and gold through our individual experiences, for instance time in this case could be: something that helps us control our day, and gold: something that is valuable.

3.3 Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions

3.3.1 The Nature of Idioms

Fernando (1996, p.3) illustrates purposes and features of idioms and idiomaticity, which she argues for being a commonly occurring feature of the English language. She also illustrates the topic as a highly complex area to be defined and divided. The definition which is used as a framework for her work, suggesting that idioms are commonly accepted conventionalized multi-word expressions in which semantic opacity provides an alternative non-literal meaning to its constituents, and work in different ways (ibid).

3.3.2 Defining Idioms

Idioms are defined as multiword expressions, Fernando (1996, p.33) explains many factors of Idiomatic characteristics. Idiomatic characteristics are used to describe whether units can be ascribed the status of idiom or to what extent, and into which subcategory, they might fit. The features of idioms or factors of idiomaticity involve several categories as following:

- ***The fixity of words*** in an expression correlates to the degree of possible variation in the aspects of lexical variation (ibid). This is illustrated in the fixed unit "spill the beans" or flexible phrase "catching a

bus/train/cold".

- ***The factors of conformity towards grammatical patterns and rules*** refer to syntactic and componential patterns and the structure of grammar of the expressions, which components are more frequently used and in what way grammatical aspects might vary (ibid).

- ***Semantic opacity factor of the expressions*** refers to the meanings which is non-literal of the components of expressions and the combining of semantic meaning to the expression as a single unit of meaning (ibid). For example, "kick the bucket" an individual components both as a unit convey to the combined meaning of "to die".

- ***The culturally embedded encodings*** of expressions are denoted to as factors that refer to cultural effects of reference (p.35). This is done by the culturally embedded associations to expressions affecting the meaning of the unit (ibid). "Blue blood" Spanish example of the idiom is used by Fernando, which was initially ascribed as an idiom and referred to lighter color of skin for separation of ethnicity. However, by time, the expression came to signify social class because cultural aspects (ibid).

4. Teaching Figurative Language

Coady and Huckin (1997, p.161) argue for the need of special attention in the process of teaching towards the aspects of figurative language (metaphor and idiomatic expressions) because of their complex nature, they are characterized as very important features of advanced learning of language for native-like competence. This distinctive attention is proposed to consist of great vocabulary expansion strategies and work for learners to cope with the several aspects. These strategies are suggested to involve elements of ability to determine these aspects of language, the categories and nature of the subjects and in which way they function in discourse (p.168).

To master figurative language successfully, different approaches are used to teach the specific student comprehension of figurative language (Leclere, et al. 2006, p. 263). These approaches are described as interrelated and all serving the purpose of unveiling the concept of figurative language. These approaches include the following:

Explicit instruction is described as direct interpretation of the idea of figurative language aspects and its related aspects. This aspect of teaching is considered to be important for students so as to recognize language as figurative (ibid).

Connecting the language to the real world, this approach includes several ways of connecting students' language learning to their own natural environment. This is claimed to be aided by the use of "student concrete and created tools" that could be seen as tools firmly related to themselves (ibid).

Providing contextual hints, giving a specific hints within the context will increase students' comprehension to specify which meaning is appropriate for the situations including figurative language (p. 264).

Exposal Approach: Frequently, the teacher exposes students to figurative language through specific way of presentations and everyday communication in the classroom. This will help students to acquire language and this exposure leading up to opportunities for learning and explanation.

Independent practice and supporting students with ***strategies*** and ***models*** of interpretation is considered to be important for the students' acquisition of mastery (ibid).

Constructional approach: in this case, students attempt to create their own examples of new figurative language. This means that students use their knowledge to form similar examples or structures of the figurative language.

Visualization approaches is introduced as comprising several ways for students to "image" the language (ibid). Art in the form of sketching and drawing is used in this specific study, but it could be explained to involve other means of imaging as well, including, dramatizations, pictures, etc.

The use of native language is a way of widening the understanding for language learners by aiding primary skills involving figurative language for developing similar skills in the process of learning their new language (pp. 264- 65).

4.1 Teaching Metaphor

Ravelli reasons for metaphor to be an extremely difficult, however important, aspect to teach (Ravelli, et al. 2003, p. 47). She also affirms that learners need to understand the forms, nature and function of the metaphor so as to

achieve mastery in usage. In this matter, she illustrates that this understanding need for further research to effectively accomplished (ibid).

The learner acquisition of metaphor as suggested by Brown and Hatch (1995, p. 99) is largely connected with the teacher's position towards learning metaphors. They argue that ability for acquisition of metaphor is possible amongst young learners if teachers attempt to promote the subject to be of great importance and relevance (ibid).

Furthermore, they introduce suggestions for teaching, involving teaching the concept of metaphor, categorization / analysis of provided metaphors in texts and constructing a vocabulary base of metaphoric synonyms (pp.110- 11). In applying these approaches, they encourage teachers to be frequently provides feedback and to have their students think upon the subject during the process, regardless which approach is being used (ibid).

4.2 Teaching Idiomatic Expressions

Colvin and Ross (1992) reveals that Deaton demonstrates several ways to teach idioms. She argue for multi-approaches for teaching. These approaches are identified as formal teaching of the subject, student practice using idioms, idiomatic synonyms by imaging of language using art (p.473). Formal teaching is characterized to include several aspects of idioms such as purpose, function, origin, background and meaning of specific idioms. The practice of idiomatic use is illustrated as students using idioms in both written and spoken language in several forms (ibid). Students are encouraged to practice their own synonyms to a specific meaning of idioms. This is represented by extensive vocabulary lists introduced by the teacher, then student practice their own vocabulary of synonymic idioms supported by teacher supervision and feedback (ibid).

Karlsson (2012, p.154) argues that it is important to integrate idioms in teaching for every course dealing with vocabulary expansion, because idioms are natural parts within the native speakers language use. For teaching idioms, she identifies advantages for approaching it in several ways, actualizing the reality of idioms being a major feature of the English language (pp.154- 55).

For teaching idioms, Karlsson claims that it is recommended to remove complexities, such as student misperceptions of idioms being uncommon aspect of the language. By introducing students to new areas of both idiomatic importance and close relations to the students such as comic drama and stand-up comedy, the students' interest for learning idioms should improve (p.154).

Karlsson argues for the importance of students' first language on the process of decoding and understanding English idioms. She discusses the possibility of the first language being a shortcut to understanding the concept of idioms. This will, in turn, serve students well in their new language acquisition of idioms as well (ibid).

She also addresses the issue of ambiguity of idioms and illustrates how the idioms which possess more vague meanings are more difficult for students to understand. She thereby recommends an initial approach to idioms of using idioms that are of a less ambiguous nature as a way of easing the students into the subject (p. 155).

5. Methodology

5.1 Design of the Study

The study is designed to describe and interpret the objectives of the study, the data is collected form a specific technique of questionnaires, and these questionnaires are distributed among sixty schools in Babylon city to the participants, who are all English teachers within the Iraqi school system, but teach at different levels of education. The schools are of three kinds or levels i.e. primary schools (six stages of learning, in this study, just the 5th and 6th primary are involved due to regarded as advanced stages of primary learning), the intermediate schools (three stages) and secondary schools (three stages). Those participants are asked to answer the questions of the questionnaire about the figurative language (see table 1).

5.2 Results and Discussion

The results reveal that English figurative language is partially taught in Iraqi schools. The aspect of figurative language is described by the participants as a particularly difficult to teach. During the performed questions of this study, the participants describe the mastery of figurative language as demanding process and needs to learn more basic skills in order to master it. The emphasis on teaching this aspect is notable in the process of teaching younger students seem to be taught less than the older students. In the primary schools (years 1- 6), the aspect of figurative language is not really involved at all by teachers into their practices, reasoning that their students

initially need to learn the basic skills required and the instructions for teaching figurative language are not provided in the syllabus explicitly. One of the intermediate school teachers admits to avoiding it and one of the secondary school teachers simply claims that, it's intentionally avoided because of its difficult nature. On the other hand, all of teachers stress the need for students to learn figurative language.

Intermediate school teachers (years 7-9) are partially involved in the aspect of teaching figurative language, they argue for the importance of it to enhance their students skills, but they do not greatly use it in classroom to avoid confusion due to its complexity.

Secondary school teachers (years10- 12) demonstrate a more emphasis and aptitude to teach and involving this aspect of language in their teaching system, revealing that students are interested in by the instructions of the teacher and use it in their everyday communication in classroom.

6. Conclusion

It is concluded that the use of figurative language of great importance to increase students' vocabulary and enable them to communicate or produce different kinds of expressions. Figurative language can greatly improve your writing and speaking, if used correctly. Despite of its complexity, figures of speech can be easily comprehended or understood by regular practice and involving it in every course of study. The approaches towards creating meaning and interest towards learning might arguably also be beneficial. The use of figurative language within the native language is viably used in far less extent than the English language. This, in turn, might leave English learners to think of figurative language as an unnecessary aspect to learn.

All the approaches mentioned in this study might be corresponded with teacher creativity. These approaches are simple examples of several approaches that could be used, and should be considered the only ways to approach teaching figurative language.

Regarding to what mentioned, it is recommended that English teachers teach figurative language in several aspects to a great extent to their students. The recommendations to mastery these subjects are to use multi-approaches that deal with conceptual aspects, individual practice, relating the subject to the students' world and stressing the importance of learning them. It could also be recommended to use different approaches which deal with individual practice and relating the subject to the students' world of English.

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Table 1. Questionnaires Sample

Questions	Response	
Do you know figurative language?	Yes	No
Have you ever used it in classroom? Do you use it in classroom?	Yes	No
If yes, do you find it of great importance to your students?	Yes	No
Is figurative language taught in several aspects by you?	Yes	No
Do students use it in their everyday communication?	Yes	No
If yes, do they find it understandable and interesting?	Yes	No
Do you find it difficult aspect of language?	Yes	No