

Teaching Figures of Speech Learning Strategies

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Teaching Figures of Speech

- Figures of speech are frequently used in literacy texts.
- For English language learners (ELLs), this language is difficult to understand since it cannot be translated literally.
- How can we move students from literal interpretations in Level 1 to figurative expressions in Level 2?
- How does students' schemata and cultural contexts factor into their interpretation?

Frequently Used Figures of Speech

- **Analogy** - a comparison between two things that are similar in some way (e.g., *glove is to hand as paint is to wall*)
- **Allegory** - a symbolic expression of a deeper meaning of a story or scene acted out by human, animal, or mythical characters (e.g., *Aesop's Fables animals and their actions allegorically represent human beings and our way of living*)
- **Metaphor** - implicit comparison used to describe somebody or something with a word or phrase that is not meant literally (e.g., *All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...*)

Frequently Used Figures of Speech

- **Simile** - directly compares two different things (e.g., *Curley was flopping like a fish on a line*)
- **Idiom** - a fixed distinctive expression whose meaning cannot be assumed from the combined meanings of its actual words (e.g., *he took me to the cleaners*, meaning *he caused the person to lose a lot of money*)
- **Figurative language** - Use of nonliteral sense of a word or words; relating to or representing form in art by means of human or animal figures (e.g., *the poorest man is the richest, and the rich are poor*)

Importance of Explicit Instruction

- Figures of speech are commonly identified as figurative language or metaphorical expressions. These are present in all languages, and children of all cultures develop this “metaphorical awareness” at home.
- Explicit instruction, however, is needed for ELLs to transfer specific metaphorical expressions from a first language to a second (Palmer, Bilgili, Gungor, Taylor, & Leclere, 2008).
- Students need to be aware of the significance of metaphors in daily life, using different examples.

Interpreting Figurative Language

- According to Palmer and Brooks (2004), “figurative language interpretation is based on students’ schemata; therefore, direct, or explicit, instruction is often needed to provide the knowledge necessary to understand not only the figurative language expressions but the context surrounding them as well.”

Teaching Strategies

Problem-solving Approach

A three-step process for finding meaning in figurative language that focuses the reader on a problem-solving approach is suggested by Simmons & Palmer (1994).

1. Locate the figurative language (word or phrase) within the passage being read.
2. Decipher the literal meaning and determine if that is the message the author is actually trying to convey to the reader.
3. Use background knowledge about the word or phrase to decide what meaning the author intended.

Connecting to the Real World

- Students can capture and remember figurative language more easily in natural language settings as they relate the figurative language to their real life (Devet, 1988).
- Student-created and concrete tools, such as figurative language posters that illustrate the literal and figurative meanings of the sayings, are helpful for students to learn figurative language expressions (Tompkins, 2002).

In Context

- Palmer and Brooks (2004) suggest teachers discuss with students when and why figurative language is used and instruct students to use different types of figurative language.
- Students note not only the meaning of the metaphor, but also the context in which the metaphor is being used. Studying metaphors onsite allows students to learn and use metaphorical language in a meaningful and authentic context (Dong, 2004).

Modeling and Independent Practice

- The ability to understand figurative language depends on exposure and experience (Qualls & Harris, 1999).
- Bush (1993) advocated teacher modeling of figurative language interpretation through daily interactions with a variety of oral and written language is helpful when followed by opportunities for independent practice by students.

Visualization

- Fu (2003) argued the importance of drawing for ELLs (especially beginners) as a means to express their understanding of what they are learning.
- Evans and Gamble (1988) found that children relate more to visual imagery in figurative language than do adults.

Use of the Native Language

- Hammerberg (2004) recommends teachers help students identify what resources or knowledge they already possess to understand the figurative text.
- Boers and Demecheleer (2001) point out some figurative expressions share metaphoric themes across languages and cultures.
- Delpit (2006) supports using familiar metaphors, analogies, and experiences from students' own worlds to connect what they already know to the text at hand.

Use of the Native Language (cont'd)

- Research in transfer and contrastive analysis in second language acquisition has suggested the benefit of activating adolescents' metaphorical knowledge in their native language through comparison and contrast to help them transfer knowledge into English.
- However, teachers should be aware that while recognizing the metaphoric theme may enhance the positive transfer, it can also increase the risk of “negative L1 interference” (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001).

Examples of Teaching Figurative Language

Learning Log Entry

Figurative Language Learning Log

Figurative Language	Literal Meaning	Intended Meaning	Connection to Real Life
Beeline	Bees fly in a certain way when returning to their hive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a straight line• hurry from one place to another• go rapidly or directly toward	The “Beeline Expressway” in Orlando, Florida, is a highway that connects Orlando to the East Coast.

Activity #1 (ELLs Level 1)

Directions: Respond to literal questions that involve figures of speech from visually supported phrases.

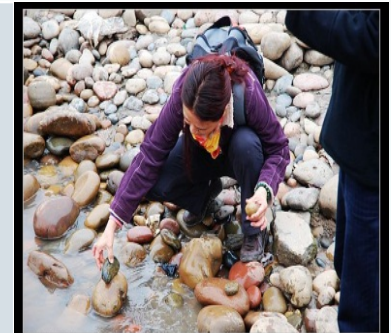
As easy as falling
off a log



Make mountains
out of molehills



Leaves no stone
unturned



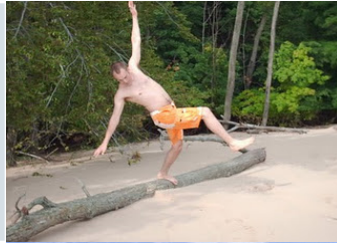
It tastes like a
trunk of stale air



Activity #2 (ELLs Level 2)

Directions: Identify words or phrases representing figures of speech in visually supported related sentences (e.g., like or as).

As easy as falling
off a log



Make mountains
out of molehills



Leaves no stone
unturned





It tastes like a
trunk of stale air



Activity #3 (ELLs Level 3)

Directions: Categorize or classify figures of speech in visually supported passages.

Figurative Language Chart

PHRASE	PICTURE	Idiom	Simile	MEANING
As easy as falling off a log				to be very easy to do
Make mountains out of molehills				to cause something simple to seem much more difficult or important
Leaves no stone unturned				to do everything possible to achieve or find something
It tastes like a trunk of stale air				to taste very bad or old

Activity #4 (ELLs Level 4)

Directions: Identify figures of speech in visually supported text and match to their meaning.

Figurative Language Chart

PHRASE	PICTURE	Idiom	Simile	MEANING
As easy as falling off a log				
Make mountains out of molehills				
Leaves no stone unturned				
It tastes like a trunk of stale air				

Activity #5 (ELLs Level 5)

Directions: Complete the chart below.

WORD OR PHRASE	PAGE IN BOOK	LITERAL MEANING	FIGURATIVE MEANING (Meaning in the story)
In the doldrums	22	An area near the equator where either strong winds or no winds come and go without warning	The place where you go to when you aren't thinking. You are not moving or doing anything here.
As easy as falling off a log			
Make mountains out of molehills			
Leaves no stone unturned			
It tastes like a trunk of stale air			

Benefits of Teaching Origins

- Tracing the origin of a metaphorical expression such as “pull your leg,” students, especially second-language learners, acquire not only the language, but also the culture and interrelatedness of conventional metaphors and imaginative or poetic metaphors.
- An explicit study of the evolution of conventional metaphors allows students to learn language and culture simultaneously.

(Dong, 2004)

Additional Resources

Palmer B. Shackelford V. Miller S., & Leclere J. (2006) Bridging Two Worlds: Reading Comprehension, Figurative Language Instruction, and the English-Language Learner, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, v50 n4 p258-267.

Dong Y. (2004) Don't Keep them in the Dark, Teaching Metaphors to English Language Learners, Available at http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/305_PDF/305_OpinionPaper/TeachingMetaphorsL2Learners_EJ_Mar04.pdf.

Palmer B. Bilgili E. Gungor A. Eylül D. Taylor S. & Leclere J. (2008) Reading Comprehension, Figurative Language Instruction, and the Turkish English Language Learner, Available at http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=reading_horizons.

Ovsepyan A. (2009) Helping ELLs Become Smart Cookies, Available at <http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol5/505-ovsepyan.aspx>.



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