

Helping Metaphors Take Root in the EFL Classroom

What do we mean when we say “Amy’s a busy-body” or “John’s eyes are too big for his stomach!”? Certainly we don’t mean to say that Amy’s body never stops moving, or that John’s eyes do not physically fit inside his stomach. Native speakers of English have a lifetime of exposure to English language and culture that helps them understand figurative speech and idioms like the expressions mentioned above, which are based on metaphor and indicate that Amy meddles in other people’s lives and that John puts more food on his plate than he can eat. But what about the learner of English as a foreign language (EFL)? How does he or she acquire the tools needed to unlock the puzzle of figurative speech in English?

In my experiences as an EFL educator, I have noticed that one of the most difficult areas for my students to master has been that of figurative speech. Students have found it difficult to understand and even more

difficult to use appropriately. The reason seems to lie in the fact that a vast amount of cultural and linguistic knowledge is needed to understand figurative speech.

Figurative speech relies heavily on metaphor to convey its message. Metaphor, in turn, often relies heavily on culture for its meaning (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The metaphors we use, and, more importantly, *how* we use them, depend on how we perceive and interact with our environment, which in many cases is culture specific. When I say to a native speaker of English, “I was pushing up Zs” or “I slept like a log,” that person knows—because of our shared culture and language—that I mean to say “I slept very well.” No mental leaps need to be made by the native-speaking listener in order to understand my message. A native speaker seems to have an intuition about what a given metaphor or figurative expression means but might not necessarily be able to explain that meaning

to another person. In short, if the person I am speaking to is also a native speaker, chances are I won't need to give a detailed explanation, even if the listener has never heard the expression before. That's because many figurative expressions are deeply embedded in our culture and the way our culture causes us to see the world. So, because we share a common culture, we are able to understand each other and make sense of these expressions.

But what happens when someone from outside our culture tries to make sense of our expressions? A person from a culture with a similar concept of the issue being talked about may be able to work out a figurative expression without much trouble. But someone from a culture where the subject being talked about is viewed differently probably won't understand much without a detailed explanation, and even then may leave the conversation feeling completely confused.

In this article I discuss reasons why metaphors are so challenging—and often perplexing—for foreign language learners and suggest effective ways of incorporating metaphors into EFL instruction.

Background on cognitive metaphor

In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson outline the theory of cognitive metaphor. The authors explain that we, as humans, use cognitive metaphors to understand the world around us.

We use cognitive metaphor to make sense of an abstract concept by thinking of it in terms of another concept that is more concrete. So the role of the cognitive metaphor is to make abstract things seem more concrete, paving the way for the mind to make better sense of things that would otherwise be difficult or even impossible to grasp. *Linguistic metaphor*, meanwhile, is simply the linguistic (spoken) manifestation of cognitive metaphor; in other words, linguistic metaphor relies on cognitive metaphor to give it meaning. Linguistic metaphor allows us to speak about abstract concepts using more concrete concepts to communicate those ideas. In this way, it is possible, and even easy, to speak about such abstract notions as love, life, feelings, and a whole host of other concepts.

Environmental metaphors

Cognitive metaphor is based primarily on two sources: (1) the environment in which we all live and (2) culture (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Environmental metaphors have to do with our physiological makeup or general truths present everywhere. Many environmental metaphors appear to be nearly universal; those things that are common to us all tend to be viewed in similar metaphorical terms. So if we want to make sense of an abstract concept like anger, we need to associate it with another, more concrete concept. One concept that we might choose to relate anger to is a heated liquid in a container. This conceptual (cognitive) metaphor appears to be present in some form in all cultures and languages (Kövecses 2002). The reason might be that we all have the same physiological makeup, and our bodies react similarly when we get angry. Our body temperature rises, giving us the sensation of heat. We may also feel the increase in blood pressure that equates with the pressure of hot liquid in a container. Because people's physiological reaction to anger is the same across cultures, we find linguistic manifestations of this same cognitive metaphor in languages around the world.

So, when we think about anger, we associate it with the sensation that we feel when we actually get angry. Thus, a cognitive metaphor is formed. The result of our mental association of anger as a hot liquid in a container is manifested in linguistic metaphors that reflect that association. We say such things as "He's just *blowing off steam*"; "Jenny was *boiling mad*"; or "John is so *hotheaded*." We also say, "If you are angry, take a moment to *cool down* before you react."

Culture-based metaphors

Rather than being universal, some cognitive metaphors can be culturally motivated. In this case, factors prevalent in a particular culture, or cultures, inspire the unique use of such metaphors. These metaphors reflect the particular worldview of a given culture or subculture. As a result, members of that culture or subculture intuitively understand the linguistic manifestations of these metaphors (Kövecses 2005).

These metaphors may or may not be shared with other cultures and thus may or

may not be understood by those outside the given culture or subculture. One example of a cognitive metaphor domain that exists in North American culture but does not exist in most other cultures is the domain of *baseball*—a sport that is not a part of the dominant culture of most places outside the North American continent. American English is full of linguistic manifestations that require people to have at least a minimal knowledge of the game of baseball in order to make sense of what is being said. If someone were to ask a colleague how a meeting about the colleague's new proposal with his or her boss went, the colleague might answer, "I hit it out of the park," indicating that the meeting went very well. Or the colleague might say, "I struck out," indicating that the meeting was not successful. Either of the replies would be immediately understood by a native speaker of American English. However, to someone who wasn't familiar with the game of baseball, neither of these statements would make any sense at all.

Linguistic manifestations based on cultural metaphor are abundant in all languages, making it difficult for someone who is unfamiliar with a particular cultural reference to understand those expressions. Research has helped identify some of the difficulties encountered and given us clues as to how to deal with these difficulties in the classroom.

Literature related to cross-linguistic and cultural influences in metaphor

Since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) landmark work, which introduced the cognitive theory of conceptual metaphor, the body of research dealing with metaphor and how it affects L2 acquisition has steadily grown. The findings indicate that both cultural and cross-linguistic factors affect an English learner's ability to understand, use, and learn figurative expressions containing metaphor.

Deignan, Gabrys, and Solska (1997) suggest a cultural source as an explanation as to why idiomatic expressions (or figurative speech) are a special area of difficulty for a great number of students. Their study analyzed the levels of difficulty present in understanding expressions with shared conceptual metaphors in L1 and English. According to

the findings, if the same conceptual metaphor does not exist or is used differently in the L1 than in English, the learner will have difficulty making sense of it.

Boers and Demecheleer (2001) support these findings with a study comparing the use of idioms in French with like and unlike idioms in English. Their findings show that if an English expression or the way English speakers use or view a certain metaphoric source domain (a concrete idea used metaphorically to illustrate another idea) is different from the way that same source domain is used or viewed in the student's L1, the student will probably have problems understanding and using that English idiom.

In another study, Littlemore (2003) compared the L1's value system with that of the target language country (in this case, Great Britain). This study suggests that not only does a student's value system have an effect on whether he or she understands the meaning of figurative speech in the target language, but it also has an effect on whether the student interprets the attitude of the speaker as positive or negative.

Along these same lines, Charteris-Black (2001) examined the underlying connotations (positive, negative, and neutral) of expressions using *hand* in both English and Malay to determine if the connotations had an effect on how someone from another culture interpreted those expressions. In other words, does the connotation that the L1 culture places on certain words and expressions affect how the learner will interpret that word or expression in the target language? The answer seems to be that it does, contributing to the evidence that simply teaching literal meaning to L2 learners is not sufficient; cultural education is also needed.

Again, these studies underscore the importance of both cultural and cross-linguistic factors in an English learner's ability to develop command of figurative expressions containing metaphor. The studies also suggest that awareness of L1 and L2 cultures as they relate to targeted metaphors and in-depth instruction of the target language culture are helpful to students attempting to unravel the mysteries that enshroud figurative speech.

Implications for the EFL classroom

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the research on cognitive metaphor that is culture specific:

1. The less related a metaphoric concept used in English is to one used in the L1, the less likely a learner is to be able to understand, learn, internalize, and use expressions containing that metaphoric concept.
2. Difficulties in understanding metaphors from one language to another are not only due to linguistic differences between English and the L1, but are also due to the differences in the way each culture views the various components of the idioms being learned.

In the next section I offer six principles for translating this research and awareness of cognitive metaphor into better practices in the classroom.

Enhancing learners' understanding of figurative speech

The difficulties experienced by EFL learners in understanding figurative speech can be addressed in several ways. In terms of teaching strategies, it is important to consider knowledge of cultural background; linguistic equivalents across languages; natural, contextual use; repetition; and use of alternate methods of retention, such as mental imagery. Bearing all of the above in mind, teachers should consider the following recommendations for instruction:

1. Keep in mind the “*i + 1*” hypothesis of Krashen (1984) and always present new material that is just “a little more” than what the student already knows.

In other words, always present new material with enough comprehensible input (what the student already understands) so that the student can make sense of the new material being presented. If you present new idiomatic expressions filled with words and structures that the student does not know, then he or she will have trouble retaining them. Make sure that the new expressions you present contain vocabulary that is familiar to students and use grammatical structures that students already know. Remember, idiomatic expressions and

figurative speech require students to make a mental leap from concrete to abstract. If your students have to struggle with too much new vocabulary and new sentence structures, in addition to learning the non-literal meaning of a given expression, the chances of internalization are greatly reduced (Brown 2000).

When you introduce new expressions, it is also advisable to introduce only a few expressions at a time. You might also include a few related expressions that students already know. For example, if the new expression being learned is “hot under the collar,” and the students are already familiar with “hotheaded” or “boiling mad,” you would reintroduce those expressions along with the new “hot under the collar.” Not only will this technique help students to figure out the meaning of the new expression, but it will also instill confidence in their previously acquired knowledge.

2. Discuss the cultural background of figurative speech, allowing students to interject likenesses and differences between their native language and English.

This emphasis on the culture behind the expression is important for many reasons. First of all, if students understand the cultural origin of a given expression, they are not only more likely to understand that expression, but they will also be more likely to use it correctly. Secondly, drawing similarities between L1 and English helps students to remember and retain concepts. If students are able to associate the English concept with something they already know, it will give them something to draw on when using the expressions associated with this cultural information. Likewise, if they know that the difference between cultures exists with regard to the cognitive metaphor upon which an expression is based, they are more likely to be able to use not only that expression, but also others that are related to it. That leads to the third advantage of learning about the cultural background of an expression—the student will more likely be able to understand other expressions related to the cultural aspect that is learned. Here again, when learners have a cultural reference on which to base meaning of a particular expression, their understanding of that expression and others related to it is expanded. As a result, learners' knowledge is multiplied.

Before presenting idioms and figurative speech, the English language teacher must learn as much as possible about the culture of native speakers. Sometimes, that knowledge can be obtained simply by searching the Internet. With idiomatic expressions based on baseball metaphors, for example, there is more than enough information on both the game of baseball and the idioms associated with it to allow the language teacher to create culturally enriched and effective presentations on those idioms. With other culturally based metaphors, the educator may have to dig a bit deeper. Metaphors based on animals, for example, may vary from culture to culture depending on the culture's relationship with animals or with a particular species: "Food or pet?" "Dirty or clean?" "Pest or friend?" Attitudes towards animals can be radically different from culture to culture, and at the same time, not easily researched. For example, what is your culture's view of dogs? Are they seen as loyal, trustworthy friends? Would the expression "a dog is a man's best friend" make sense in your culture? Maybe not. For this reason, it is always a good idea to learn about the cultural basis of metaphors before teaching them in class.

3. Present new items in a natural setting. In other words, present expressions "in context." When a situation calls for the use of figurative speech, take that opportunity to introduce new items and explain why you used the expressions.

Never fail to take advantage of a "teachable moment" when it comes up naturally in class. That expression, "a teachable moment," refers to any of those times in class when a topic comes up naturally and the teacher takes the opportunity to expound on it. It occurs naturally and spontaneously. So, if you see an opportunity to use figurative language that is unfamiliar to students, use that opportunity to facilitate learning. These are the moments that will stay in the students' memories. This technique goes much further than simply following a list of vocabulary items. It is a natural way of learning that provides contexts in which the expression being learned might be used. These moments can turn into fun and relaxing times when students open up and take notice of the "bonus" information that is being presented.

4. Encourage the use of "mental imagery" or other methods that the student finds useful for retention of figurative speech. Use images in class to help explain meanings of new expressions.

This might be one of the most important elements that you can incorporate into your lessons, especially when it comes to figurative speech. It provokes multisensory input and gives the students yet another reference on which to rely. Using imagery also provides variation to the learning experience and provides visual learners with stimuli that can be easily absorbed. Many activities related to images can easily be incorporated into presenting idioms and figurative speech. One example is to match expressions first with pictures based on literal interpretations of the expressions and then with pictures based on the figurative meaning of the same expressions. For the expression "to have a big mouth," a picture of a person with an oversized mouth could be used to show the literal interpretation, and a picture of a person spreading rumors about another person, or telling someone else's secrets, would be used to show the figurative meaning. (One variation of this would be to have students draw both sets of pictures.) After students have seen the pictures, they can discuss ideas about how this expression might have come about. Even if the origin of the expression is not known, the discussion and brainstorming that take place in class will help students make sense of the expression.

5. Search for varying activities to repeat the use of figurative speech in order to multiply exposure.

As with any kind of instruction, using different kinds of activities to present material to students is important. As we know, people have different styles and preferences when it comes to learning. Some learn better through visual stimulus, while others learn better through physical movement. But in the language classroom, there is another reason for presenting material in a variety of ways. Repetition in hearing and using vocabulary, structures, grammar, and expressions in different contexts is key to gaining communicative competence in a language. So, by presenting the material in many different ways, we

increase our students' exposure to that material and thus increase their chances for achieving fluency.

Let's take the example of "to have a big mouth." We can present this expression by using the activity with the images described above. We can also introduce it in a variety of written texts in which the expression is used in different contexts. Using the Internet, we can find examples of the expression in short videos or in songs and play them in class. If we want our students to produce language using the expression, they can perform role plays, sing songs, and write poems or stories that contain it. These are just a few of the many ways you can help your students develop fluency in using figurative speech.

6. Group expressions into common themes or into groups of expressions using the same cultural reference.

By grouping expressions into themes or around a common cultural reference (e.g., baseball), we give our students yet another reference onto which they can link the newly acquired knowledge. Expressions can be grouped by function (e.g., express anger), by key words (e.g., *hot* as in "hotheaded" and "hot under the collar"), or any number of things. The important thing is that they are logically grouped together, thus making it easier for students to understand and remember them.

Conclusion

All languages rely heavily on metaphor because human beings use metaphor to make sense of abstract ideas. Some metaphors are universal—usually because they are based on experiences that are common to all humans. Other metaphors that are based on culture reflect attitudes and worldviews that might or might not be found in other cultures. If the metaphor on which a given expression is based is universal, its meaning will be more easily understood by non-native speakers. On the other hand, if the expression is based on cultural metaphor, its meaning may be more difficult for a non-native speaker to grasp. Because of this difficulty, educators must equip themselves with the tools and knowledge necessary to help their students understand and use language that is metaphorical in nature.

When teaching EFL students language based in metaphor, teachers should keep in mind a few basic principles of second language acquisition such as using images, presenting material frequently using a variety of delivery methods, presenting new material in a natural setting, presenting new material along with previously acquired material, and grouping new material by theme or function. But, perhaps most important, in the case of cultural metaphor, teachers should take the time to learn about and pass on information to their students about the cultural background of the new material. This approach will not only help students to better understand and use the figurative expressions; it will also make learning such expressions a more interesting and enriching experience.

References

- Boers, F., and Demecheleer, M. 2001. Measuring the impact of cross-cultural differences on learners' comprehension of imageable idioms. *ELT Journal* 55 (3): 255–62.
- Brown, H. D. 2000. *Principles of language learning and teaching*. White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Charteris-Black, J. 2001. Cultural resonance in English and Malay figurative phrases: The case of 'hand.' In *Language across boundaries*, ed. Janet Cotterill and Anne Ife, 151–70. London: Continuum.
- Deignan, A., D. Gabrys, and A. Solska. 1997. Teaching English metaphors using cross-linguistic awareness-raising activities. *ELT Journal* 51 (4): 352–60.
- Kövecses, Z. 2002. *Metaphor: A practical introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2005. *Metaphor in culture: Universality and variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krashen, S. 1984. *The input hypothesis*. London: Longman.
- Lakoff, G., and M. Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Littlemore, J. 2003. The effect of cultural background on metaphor interpretation. *Metaphor and Symbol* 18 (4): 273–88.

DENISE LOWERY is the Regional English Language Officer for Central and Southeastern Europe. She has taught and trained students and teachers of ESL/EFL in the United States and Europe. She is fascinated by figurative speech in any language.