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How Literal are Non-Literal Expressions for Non-Native Speakers

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Abstract

This study is based on the premise that non-literal expressions play an important role in foreign language teaching as a part of gaining cultural knowledge, metaphorical understanding and communicative competence. The purpose of this study is to examine how literal are non-literal expressions for non-native speakers and readers.

The research was conducted for 60 students at the English Language Teaching Department, Erciyes University, Turkey. The investigation focused on the perception of the non-literal expressions provided with the questionnaire that included three types of non-literal expressions: a text with idiomatic expressions, a list of proverbs demanding either explanation or Turkish equivalents and a matching exercise of similes. To do this, descriptive method was used.

The result showed that students are able to apprehend the literal expressions and some of the non-literal ones that are similar or identical in L1. On the other hand, some of the non-literal expressions such as idioms and proverbs are difficult to comprehend and interpret as most of which are culture specific.

The conclusion of the result was that the knowledge of non-literal expressions has to increase among foreign language learners through various activities such as visualization, using in meaningful contexts, etc., so that they can gain adequate competence in the target language and use these expressions when necessary.

Key words: Literal, non-literal, competence, idioms, proverbs, similes.

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1. Introduction

In mutual interaction, people need to speak and while speaking it is inevitable to use literal expressions as well as non-literal ones. When literal expressions are used it is easy to get the gist of utterances, whereas it is not always possible to comprehend the expressions uttered non-literally or figuratively.

The non-literal expressions reflect certain features and characteristics of that language such as idioms, proverbs, metaphors which are most frequently uttered by the native speakers both in oral and written communication. Unquestionably, in most everyday conversations, speakers and listeners are not aware of the rules they obey, because more attention is paid to content than to organisation. What the listener and speaker wish to accomplish is a good communication. In almost all these circumstances it is highly possible to confront non-literal expressions of metaphors, idioms, proverbs, similes etc.

Expressed more precisely, in an effective communication it is essential for language learners to know non-literal expressions as well as the literal ones. However, it can be asserted that most of the learners often lack the ability to use language appropriately according to context. When speakers or listeners miss the key points that are being communicated in either written or oral language, their messages might be misunderstood. Such misunderstandings may lead to a total communication breakdown, which can be defined as pragmatic failure. To avoid such unexpected circumstances it is imperative to learn and teach the non-literal expressions such as similes, metaphors, proverbs and idioms as well as literal ones which all make a language pragmatic.

Even though they are frequently used by the speakers in order to express themselves effectively, teaching and learning such expressions is deemed to be not the easiest part of vocabulary instruction but rather a stumbling block (Laufer, 1997). Writing on similar theme, Kellerman (1978) states that non-literal expressions are difficult to understand and to learn even when the two languages are similar in the use and meaning. It is conceivable that even native speakers are unable to use them properly or comprehend what is uttered if they are not equipped with enough pragmatic linguistic background. Furthermore, it should be added that non-literal expressions beautify the language and establish the characteristic style of individual languages. Speech and writing flourished with proverbs, idioms, similes or metaphors are generally considered as flowery language. Accordingly, it is widely admitted that lack of knowledge or understanding of proverbs and idioms in a language prevents the learner from understanding the cultural niceties or peculiarities.

1.1. Problem

The students learning a foreign language have difficulty in understanding figures of speech either in written or in spoken language due to the fact that language learning is usually confined to literal expressions rather than the language involving literal and non-literal ones for the sake of understanding and teaching quickly and without spending any effort. For that reason, most non-native speakers lack understanding the target language and usually they face misinterpretation or communication breakdown when they come across such expressions.

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1.2. Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to find out how they are comprehensible for foreign language learners and how they can be used as a part of EFL teaching within ELT syllabus. The relevant questions are:

1. Are idiomatic expressions difficult to comprehend a text?
2. How much learners can interpret the proverbs in the target language?
3. How can learners interpret the similes?
4. How much students retain the non-literal expressions they have used in their writing activities?

2. Review of Literature

Non-literal expressions (figurative explanations) are confronted on a daily basis in conversation and in written materials. The use of figurative language changes from one person to another depending on the person's cultural background (Suleiman and Moore, 1995). Considering the fact that non-literal expressions are the components of everyday language, we are typically unaware of the true extent of the metaphorical nature of language (Boers, 2000). Some popular proverbs, idioms, and metaphoric expressions are so deeply embedded into language that they can be comprehended easily. However, most of them are not so easy for foreign language learners to understand when they take place in a speech or text. This inability to interpret figurative language often leads foreign language learners to a breakdown in text or speech, which inevitably discourages them from reading the related text or listening to speaker.

Helping learners to progress from the literal to the non-literal language is a challenge for foreign language teachers. However, it should be kept in mind that most of these terms have sociocultural, historical, or political origins. Although many similar expressions can be found across languages, many more do not coincide exactly in their linguistic or semantic meaning and use. At the same time such expressions are often a stumbling block to second/foreign language and ESL students.

All in all, figurative language, or figures of speech, is the expressive, non-literal use of language for special effects, usually through images (Harris and Hodges, 1995:84). In other words, it is any type of expression that does not literally mean what it says; it provides a connotative rather than a denotative meaning.

2.1. Definitions of Terms

There are many types of figurative expressions found such as metaphors, idioms, proverbs and similes in every language.

a. Metaphor

Metaphor is an implied comparison between two objects that are usually considered dissimilar. An important characteristic of one thing is used to describe another in a metaphor. For example, in the statement "the child was a bolt of lightning" characteristics of lightning

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are associated with the child's quick movements. According to James (2002:26), "*metaphors* enable students to pun seemingly inexpressible thoughts and feelings into symbolic form" while making these ideas more accessible and aesthetically pleasing.

b. Similes

Similes are one of the figurative expressions that foreign language learners come across and need to use in the use of target language. They are generally used in written language, particularly in literature, and in regularly in spoken language. Similes can be recognized by the grammar patterns "as...as" or "like". "*The man smokes like a chimney*" can be interpreted easily to refer how much he smokes. The sentence "*He doesn't eat very much.*" can be illustrated using similes as "*He eats like a bird.*" Similes are more literal than proverbs, idioms, metaphors for foreign language learners.

c. Idioms

Idioms such as "on the tip of my tongue, to call a spade a spade, to fish in the troubled waters, etc." are expressions that do not mean what they literally say; the literal meaning of many idioms often is relevant only to a specific group within a language, though most speakers of the language understand the idiomatic meanings (Harris and Hodges, 1995). On the other hand, some idioms have no literal meanings at all. While it is not uncommon for different languages to express similar concepts idiomatically rather than literally, idioms are usually language specific and often lose their meanings in translation and, according to Tompkins (2001: 256-257), "they can be confusing to students because they must be interpreted figuratively rather than literally."

d. Proverbs

In *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Proverbs* (1998) it is defined as a traditional saying which offers advice or presents a moral in a short and pithy manner. Miguel de Cervantes asserts that a proverb is a short sentence based on long experience (cited in Munira Jamal, 2009). It is generally short and known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (Mieder 1993:5, 24.). That is, they are condensed memorable sayings embodying a culture's commonly accepted beliefs and values.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects

A total of 60 students from Erciyes University in the Department of English Language Teaching are the participants of this study. The subject groups from the first grade learners who take the courses entitled "Advanced Reading and Writing" and "Lexical Competence" mostly confront such expressions in written texts. The groups are divided into two: one group was used as a control group. All of the students have almost the same proficiency level in the target language as they have been admitted with the similar scores they have obtained from the standardized test administered by the center of student replacement, OSYM.

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3.2. Instruments

Two different tests were given to different groups composed of 30 in each group. A test applied to a group involved ten reading comprehension questions accompanied by the paragraph flourished with the literal expressions whereas the other group responded the same questions for the same paragraph without non-literal expressions. The text was adapted from the book “Oxford Word Skills, Advanced” by Ruth Gairns and Stuart Redman, which is specifically designed to teach vocabulary. The text used for this research included idiomatic expressions such “to have second thoughts, to be tied up (busy), to be in two minds, to dawn on, to be thick (stupid), etc. The same text was given to the control group replacing the idiomatic expressions with their real meanings. Apart from the reading comprehension questions all of the students were required to explain 10 randomly selected proverbs. The other part of the survey includes the matching exercise of similes. Finally, the last part of the questionnaire learners to list the proverbs they learned in the previous lessons and used in student-created stories, which was a task they accomplished in pairs or individually outside the class. To analyze the test results, frequency and percent have been used with the help of the programme SPSS 16 for windows.

3.3. Procedure

The study was conducted for the first grade learners in the English Language Teaching Department at Faculty of Education, Erciyes University, Kayseri, Turkey. All of the subjects were given the questionnaire asking the related questions. To get the required data for the fourth part of the questionnaire, students were taught some of the commonly used proverbs throughout five weeks. At the end of each week they were asked to use them in meaningful contexts either in groups or pairs or individually. To evaluate how effective this activity was they were asked to list the ones they have learned and used in their studies they did out of the class. The results of the subjects have been given in tables in Data Analysis.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Findings

Research question 1: Are idiomatic expressions difficult to comprehend a text?

This part of the research was administered to two different groups. One group answered the questions of the text with literal expressions and the other group responded the one with non-literal expressions. The aim here was to reveal the level of difficulty of the texts of non-literal language. The participants were required to answer the same questions but the texts are presented in different forms; one with non-literal expressions, the other with literal expressions.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of the text with literal expressions.

GRADES	FREQUENCY	PERCENT (%)
50	2	6,7
60	2	6,7

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70	5	16,7
80	9	30,0
90	9	30,0
100	3	10,0
Total	30	100,0

Table 2. Minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of the text with literal expressions.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
The text with literal expressions	30	50	100	80	13,39068

As can be seen in the tables above, the comprehensibility of the reading passage without any non-literal expressions is quite high. It proves that learners do not need to have any specific ability or prior knowledge to analyze the text. Learners mostly can understand the language excluded from the non-literal expressions clearly, which is supported in this research with the mean of 80. So, the non-literal expressions were left out and their literal equivalents were replaced. Thus, the text turned out to be more comprehensible. For example the question “How could I be so **thick**?” in the original text is not clear as the word “thick” conveys different meaning apart from its literal meaning, which is “stupid”. When foreign language learners are not aware of the metaphoric usage of this word, it is hard to comprehend the text. When the word “thick” used in its literal meaning the result of the scores that learners give are higher. 21 of 30 students were able to get the scores over 80.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of the text with non-literal expressions.

GRADES	FREQUENCY	PERCENT (%)
30,00	6	20,0
40,00	10	33,3
50,00	6	20,0
60,00	6	20,0
70,00	2	6,7
Total	30	100,0

Table 4. Minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of the text with non-literal expressions.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
The text with non literal expressions	30	30	70	46,000	12,20514

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Unlike the table 1, the questions of the test with non-literal expressions reveal that students are not able to comprehend the text appropriately. The mean is 46 whereas it is 80 in the literal text as seen in Table 5. With the data obtained from the research it can be concluded that it is not an easy task for foreign language learners to comprehend the non-literal expressions without having prior knowledge related to those expressions.

Table 5. Minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of two texts.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
The text with literal expressions	30	50,00	100,00	80,0000	13,39068
The text with non-literal expressions	30	30,00	70,00	46,0000	12,20514

Research question 2: How much learners can interpret the proverbs in the target language?

This part of the survey demanded to find out how much foreign language learners can interpret the proverbs in the target language. The participants are asked to give the right explanations or Turkish equivalents for randomly chosen 10 proverbs. The number of the respondents is 60.

Table 6. Frequency and percentage of the responses to the proverbs.

GRADES	FREQUENCY	PERCENT (%)
0,00	1	1,7
10,00	6	10,0
20,00	10	16,7
30,00	17	28,3
40,00	9	15,0
50,00	5	8,3
60,00	6	10,0
70,00	4	6,7
80,00	2	3,3
Total	60	100,0

Table 7. Minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of the responses to the proverbs.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Proverbs	60	0,00	80,00	36,3333	19,13083

The responses obtained from the subject group show that students couldn't interpret the proverbs properly. The mean of the result is 36. Six students answered just one of ten proverbs; ten students answered two of the proverbs; 17 of the students gave explanations for three of the proverbs. Conversely, only 28.3 % of the students were able to explain more than five proverbs (5 students 5 proverbs; 6 students six proverbs; 4 students seven proverbs, and

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2 students 8 proverbs). The reason for this case can be considered as that the proverbs are, to a great extent, culture specific and it is not always possible to get the meaning out of the words literally. Simply put, non-literal expressions are highly difficult to comprehend in foreign language learning. Some of the proverbs that students were able to get the meaning out of the words are “Make hay while the sun shines, A rolling stone gathers no moss, People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones, All that glitters is not gold.” Those that got the least responses are: “Blood is thicker than water, Let your hair down, Birds of feather flock together.” Generally speaking, in interpreting the proverbs or idiomatic expressions learners or non-native speakers pay attention to the ones that exist in their native language. When they notice that non-literal expressions of this type are the same or similar they can undoubtedly capture the meaning.

Research question 3: How can learners interpret the similes?

Table 8. Frequency and percentage of the responses to the similes.

GRADES	FREQUENCY	PERCENT (%)
60,00	1	1,7
70,00	1	1,7
80,00	7	11,7
90,00	9	15,0
100,00	42	70,0
Total	60	100,0

Table 9. Minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of the responses to the similes.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Similes	60	60,00	100,00	95,0000	8,92530

The data obtained from the similes exercises reveals that students can interpret them without having any difficulty. Of four types of non-literal expressions similes are the easiest ones that can be comprehended in majority by non-native speakers or foreign language learners. As can clearly be seen in the table above, almost 95 % of the respondents succeeded in replying this section. The main reason for this case is that similar expressions exist in every language and they are the most comprehensible ones among non-literal expressions comparing to proverbs, idioms or metaphors.

Research question 4: How much can students retain the non-literal expressions they have used in their writing activities?

Table 10. Frequency and percentage of the proverbs used in the student-created stories.

GRADES	FREQUENCY	PERCENT (%)
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30,00	6	10,0
70,00	25	41,7
90,00	7	11,7
100,00	22	36,7
Total	60	100,0

Table 11. Minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of the proverbs used in the student-created stories.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Student-created stories with proverbs	60	60,00	100,00	95,0000	8,92530

The aim of this part of the research is to find out how effective using the non-literal expressions, particularly proverbs, in meaningful contexts created by learners is. After teaching some basic idioms and proverbs, five weeks after, students were required to list the proverbs, idioms and some vocabulary they used in their created-scenarios. To do this, they worked either in pairs or in groups and brainstormed and created meaningful contexts. According to data obtained almost 80 % of the students remembered the proverbs and idioms they have used. Some of the proverbs and idioms practiced in meaningful student-created contexts are as follows: Two many cooks spoil the broth, two heads are better than one, don't put off for tomorrow what you can do today, don't bite the hand that feeds you, no pain, no gain, you are never old to learn, don't look at the mouth of the gift horse, etc. The purpose of this activity was to encourage students to develop their creativity and imagination along with developing writing skill, which is supported with the study conducted by Cain et al., (2005). To them, there are three factors in comprehending idiomatic expressions: familiarity, transparency and context. Non-literal expressions such as idioms, proverbs or metaphors become more comprehensible when learned and practiced in meaningful contexts than in isolation.

5. Discussion

In this study, the perception level of non-literal expressions by non-native speakers, foreign language learners, has been searched with the help of the instrument of questionnaire. Based on the research conducted for the students at the department of English Language Teaching, it can be concluded that foreign language learners cannot easily interpret the non-literal expressions as their interpretation is highly dependent on students' schemata, which can be defined as the prior knowledge in the related topic, like culture, conversational transitions, etc. Therefore, they need to be handled carefully in foreign language teaching considering the fact that they play an important role as language tools because they present the authentic language apart from providing cultural knowledge of the target language. Moreover, they are mostly found either in written or oral language of the native speaker. In order to familiarize learners with these expressions, they need to be assisted so that they develop the necessary schemata for interpreting them (Tompkins, 2001).

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Considering figurative language as challenging, particularly for EFL students, Tompkins suggests using concrete, student-made tools, such as idiom posters that illustrate figurative and literal meanings of idioms, as part of the instructional process for teaching figurative language. Teachers can further encourage figurative language use by contextualizing learning tasks and activities and by using language functions to effectively maintain meaningful interactions (Suleiman and Moore, 1995). Such encouragement increases student's comprehension of figurative language in English. Furthermore, some researchers also support the idea that non-literal expressions such as idioms and proverbs are easier to understand when there is a close relationship between their literal and figurative senses (Levorato & Cacciari, 1999; Nippold & Taylor, 1995, 2002).

The results reveal that, of all four non-literal expressions, similes are the easiest one that students can comprehend. The reason behind this result can be that learners can get the meanings out of the words when they read it as in the examples "He eats like a pig", which is matched with the statement "He is such a sloppy eater." The other simile that "She eats like a bird" can be interpreted as "She doesn't eat very much". On the other hand, proverbs are not so easy to interpret for foreign language learners, due to the fact that they are mostly culture specific. However, foreign learners' schemata should include them. Otherwise the result is failure. Some similar and identical ones such as "Where there is fire, there is smoke. Two heads are better than one," etc., can be guessed by Turkish students as the same or similar ones exist in Turkish. However, some proverbs such as "Curiosity killed the cat", or "It is raining cats and dogs", etc. do not exactly correspond to expressions in Turkish.

It needs to be stressed that non-literal expressions are part of a language and it is not possible to get rid of them, and native speakers frequently use them in their communication.

In line with the conclusions of this study, the following can be suggested. To omit, to ignore or to give less importance is not the way that a foreign language teacher can apply. Yet, they need to be included in foreign language teaching syllabus and learners should be exposed to them as much as possible. Firstly, as Palmer and Brooks (2004:375) suggest, direct and explicit instruction need to be presented for foreign language learners, who are mostly not aware of the presence of figurative language in the text, especially EFL students who often lack the background knowledge to distinguish figurative language. Secondly, they should be provided with the real world connection. Figurative language may be better understood in more natural settings where students can capture and remember them more easily as they relate the figurative language to their real life. It is recommended that teachers use student-created and concrete tools, such as figurative language posters that illustrate the literal and figurative meanings of the sayings. They can also be presented through dialogues through which teachers would define the various forms of figurative language and provide examples of each in the context of a sentence or paragraph. Suleiman and Moore (1995) emphasized the importance of teaching figurative language in context by saying teachers must "contextualize" what they teach through the use of context clues.

In EFL classes the activity of visualization for non-literal expressions is a great help for learners to practice and interpret. Apart from the techniques previously mentioned native language can also be used when needed to enhance understanding the figurative expressions.

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Teachers must assume that all students are capable of learning English given the proper support, appropriate instruction, and adequate time.

In brief, to interpret non-literal expressions greatly depends on a person's schemata; so, explicit instruction is often needed for an ELL student to understand not only the figurative expressions, but also their cultural context. Students who develop the ability to interpret figurative language not only expand their capabilities for creative thought and communication, but also acquire insight to expressive forms of language, allowing them to comprehend both text and speech on a deeper and more meaningful level (Palmer & Brooks, 2004).

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