

**Understanding the Meaning of Analogies: A Potentially Active
Teaching and Communicative Phenomena.**

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Abstract

This paper aims to present some of the difficulties that encounter Libyan university students when studying English literature, and to examine methods and teaching strategies that might be used in the literature class to increase the students' level of awareness of literal and metaphoric language. It argues that metaphorical language plays an important role in language teaching as part of gaining cultural knowledge, metaphorical understanding and communicative competence. As educators, we frequently search for more effective methods of communicating information and helping students to learn. Mastery of the subject matter presented in the classroom is essential to the goal of education; however, the way that information is presented to the student can impact their learning. Several studies have found that a number of strategies can be used to help students better assimilate and retain information. Among those strategies are the effective use of analogy, and metaphor.

Key words: Metaphors, metaphorical language, images, analogies, communicative competence.

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Introduction

Analogy and metaphor are both figures of speech in which reference is made to one thing in order to convey another. They are perhaps the most intensely and variously studied instances of figurative language, and can be found in many forms in literature from every culture and era. An analogy is a literary device that creates a relationship based on parallels or connections between two ideas. It most often involves reference to something familiar or readily understood, in order to illustrate and explain something more complex and less readily understood. It essentially possesses the same properties and characteristics as the more complex thing it is being used to represent, but in a simplified manner that is easier to grasp. This is done in an effort to create similarities between the two subjects in order to create in the reader's mind an image and a point of comparison. Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle theorized about analogy, calling it a shared abstraction. The objects being compared shared a pattern, idea, philosophy, or effect, and the analogy helped clarify this mutual attribute. Authors use analogies in all types of literature for many reasons, such as to provide comparisons between like and unlike things, to create deeper significance in their works, and to help readers visualize characters and places.

To a certain extent, metaphor works the other way around. A metaphor is a part of the figures of speech list in which two unlike

entities are compared to convey some hidden message. It is a descriptive word or phrase used in place of another to which it bears no literal relationship. Unlike analogy, which involves a measure of deliberation and evaluation, metaphor tends to be a more spontaneous process which we employ all the time in everyday conversation. We sometimes compare the human eye to a camera. Love to a kind of game. Life to a journey, and so on. When you give someone information in the form of a metaphor, you process it for them, because you are coming about as close as you can to placing a thought directly into the mind(s) of your students.

Using metaphors and analogies is effective in communication as it enhances and enlivens descriptions, and expresses thoughts and ideas more clearly and precisely. James Geary (2011) explains,..."Metaphorical thinking—our instinct not just for describing but for comprehending one thing in terms of another—shapes our view of the world, and is essential to how we communicate, learn, discover and invent..... Metaphor is a way of thought long before it is a way of words ...(they) influence our attitudes, beliefs, and actions in surprising, hidden and often oddball ways". Robert B. Van Engen (2008), explains metaphor's analytic structure with greater precision, " a metaphor is a multifaceted literary device that assists in illustrating complexity and in expressing clarity. It helps to compare the value of variables and to expose creativity". Although many linguists (Searle, 1975) used to dismiss them as 'merely figurative', today they are accepted as a highly

accurate description of the speaker's perception, a powerful shortcuts to instant and memorable understanding because they evoke vivid images and allow us to "see" things from a new perspective, and so are useful tools to help explain complex ideas and create impact in the language classroom.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), who begins the Western tradition's systematic investigation of metaphor, is the first to address the trope's double nature. He calls metaphor "a kind of enigma" and claims that for the verbal artist "the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor", because, "this alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances" (Aristotle,1961, p.104). And again he states that: "Ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh". (Aristotle, 1961)

The use of analogies in language teaching

Certainly, no student can effectively understand a literary texts without having, at least, an intuitive sense for the different functions of literal and figurative language. Learning to appreciate and evaluate language of comparison is a key part of any student's task. Why, then, do so many students struggle to move beyond the most cursory understanding of these particular aspects of language? At our university, too often, some instructors teach these concepts in a basic manner, only assessing students' ability to define and identify figurative devices.

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Recognizing analogies and defining them is one thing, but constructing analogies is another way of helping students bridge the gap between the known and the unknown. Because analogies have proven to be effective learning tools for reinforcing thinking skills and conceptual understanding (Alvermann & Phelps, 1998), good teachers should use metaphors and analogies to make new and unfamiliar concepts more meaningful to students by connecting what they already know to what they are learning. Glynn, (1998) argues that helping students learn new knowledge is considered a basic principle of good teaching and is the foundation for the effective use of analogies.

In my experience as an English language instructor, I have noticed that students have difficulty understanding analogies and even more difficult to use appropriately, because of the differences in the way each culture views the various components of the analogies being compared, which rely heavily on culture for its meaning. As stated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) a vast amount of cultural and linguistic knowledge is needed to understand metaphorical language. In this kind of situation, an effective teaching strategy, would be to explain to students the cultural origin of a given expression. Discuss the cultural background of figurative speech, allow students to interject likenesses and differences between their native language and English. This will give them something to draw on when using the expressions associated with this cultural information. When student have a cultural reference

on which to base meaning of a particular expression, they can more accurately receive the information the writer is trying to convey. Sometimes the analogy may be somewhat ambiguous and students are left up to their own devices to determine the meaning, and may be able to draw and reflect on their own personal experiences or feelings to understand the meaning, and that is fine. However, it is important for the English instructor to choose appropriate metaphors so that students understand the concepts correctly, as inappropriate metaphors can lead students down conceptual pathways of misunderstanding.

One of the methods that can be used in the language class is brainstorming, that is bouncing ideas back and forth with your students. Introduce students to the new concept you are teaching. Select a familiar concept that has some of the same qualities of the new concept and review the familiar concept with students. Discuss the characteristics or qualities that are similar in the old and new concept, brainstorm how the concepts are different, or where the analogy breaks down. Brainstorming is great for getting the creative ideas flowing; it can open up a floodgate of ideas because by using metaphors you link the concept under study to something seemingly unrelated. Provide your students with examples from literature which contain unforgettable analogies, and encourage them, (through brainstorming) to provide analogy examples from what they have previously learned in their literature classes.

Shakespeare used analogy examples in all his works:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

Her beauty hangs upon the cheek of night,
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear.

In these three lines, from *Romeo and Juliet*, there are a few analogies. The “cheek of night” is an analogy, as the comparison between “her beauty” and “a rich jewel.” Even the idea that Juliet could “teach the torches to burn bright” is an analogy example in its comparison of her ability to brighten what is already characteristically bright. In the same play, Romeo famously compares Juliet to the sun, so that the qualities of the sun (radiance and warmth) are carried over to Juliet. In sonnet 18, Shakespeare/ the speaker compares the object of desire to a summer day, but then states that she is "more lovely and more temperate" than summer. This sets up the reader to understand that the beloved possesses qualities that extend beyond the literal, temporal world of nature's seasons: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade," the speaker states. It is this transfer of the literal description of nature to how the woman possesses spiritual beauty that resides in a dimension apart from temporal beauty. Examples such as these, will help student understand the beauty and power of metaphor; this allows their brains to see the issue from a completely different perspective – one that they may not even have known existed.

Analogies can successfully be used to Increase students' vocabulary.

Metaphors provide a handy and memorable way of gaining new vocabulary to be learned. Most teachers are familiar with the notion of a

lexical set, where vocabulary is grouped according to a topic area, such as 'food' or 'transport'. This idea can be extended to create 'metaphorical sets', where we group together the words and expressions that have a metaphorical, rather than a literal, meaning. Here are some examples of metaphors using body vocabulary: 'the heart of the city', 'the foot of the mountain/bed/stairs', 'to give a hand', 'to break somebody's heart', 'to give somebody a cold shoulder'. Other examples of metaphors using weather vocabulary are; 'a warm welcome', 'to freeze somebody out', 'to be snowed under', 'to storm out'. Not only literary English, but everyday English is full of these kinds of metaphors. For example, there are many fixed expressions found in dictionaries which can only be understood metaphorically, such as: 'a step in the right direction' or to 'sell like hot cakes', 'to give somebody the green light'. Encourage students to note these metaphorical expression down and memorize them, this will help students to remember and use them appropriately. Using English dictionaries, they could then research more metaphorical uses of language connected with the different parts of the 'body' , 'colour', 'time', 'people', and write them in the appropriate place on the poster.

Improving recall of information by creating visual metaphors

Creating visual metaphors may also be an extraordinarily potential strategy for improving recall of information as they can create vivid images in your reader's head, making it easier to understand and

remember your message. The use of mental imagery is likely to help students to engage in both associative fluency and analogical reasoning. Researchers have already suggested that mental imagery can serve as a powerful tool in language learning. For example, Arnold (1999) argues that, in second language learning, the generation of mental images results in deeper learning and longer retention times for new vocabulary. Paivio and Walsh (1993) argue that image generation serves as a powerful tool in metaphor comprehension. They believe that different pieces of information that are represented visually can be recalled simultaneously, whereas different pieces of information which are represented verbally can only be recalled sequentially (see also Paivio 1983).

Katz (1987) found a link between visual imagery and comprehension, implying that imagery can act as an aid to comprehension. Furthermore, Ernest and Paivio (1971) discovered that high imagery and word concreteness were both related to associative response speed, thus implying that imagery might help the associative aspect of metaphor comprehension. This suggests that, in order to help students understand the metaphorical meaning of new expressions, it may be beneficial to encourage them to form a mental image of those expressions. It also suggests that, an even more powerful strategy, would be to form an interactive image between the literal meaning of the term, and the context in which it appears.

Analogies and written communication

It is difficult to find the time to comprehensively teach students all the writing techniques that they could use in their writing. One of many techniques that should be considered is the use of analogies in writing. Analogies can enhance written communication; they add style to writing; they make writing interesting. Sometimes they are serious and move the reader to think deeply about an idea. Sometimes they are funny. From a professional writer's point of view they can add 'bulk' to the writing. Suggest to your students that metaphors work best when they're simple, unexpected, and concrete. Ask them to create a quick picture rather than a lengthy story. You lose your reader, if you need to do a lot of explaining. Present a fresh angle on an old topic. Try making metaphors sensory, so readers can experience the words. When readers can see, feel, smell, taste, or hear something, they're more likely to engage and remember. Use analogies as a lead-in or raw material for writing poetry or paragraphs that expand upon the analogy. Poetry stimulates visual imagery as well as feelings, whether through the writing of one's own poetry, or the reading of another's. No matter what topic students write about, they can find metaphors to make writing crisp, lively, and persuasive.

CONCLUSION

Metaphors can serve as an effective instructional teaching and communicative tool for understanding complex literary concepts, because of their ability to create an impact in the minds of students, and to convey a thought more forcefully than a plain statement would. They

are useful because they communicate a lot of information in a sentence or two. They squeeze complex ideas and mental pictures into a few words. This, in essence, is what metaphors are about. They are exaggerated expressions no doubt, but they are exaggerated because they are supposed to paint a vivid picture, or become a profound statement or saying. Metaphors can and should be used in the language classroom as an effective teaching strategy to augment and enhance interpersonal and communication skills for a better understanding of complex, abstract literary concepts. They can be a means through which to see the good, the bad, the positive, the negative, the myths that limit growth, and the ideas that expand possibilities. “Metaphors put forward proposals for another way of looking at things and of grasping inchoate intimations of possibilities. They help us to strive better towards grasping the visions and truths and attempting to share in them” (Aspin, 1984).

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