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## A Study for Identifying the Cases of Metaphorical Expressions with Inappropriate Phraseology in Argumentative Essays Written by Persian English Language Learners

Maryam Jafari, M.A. Student in TEFL  
Vahid Mirzaeean, Ph.D.

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### Abstract

This study mainly investigated the cases of linguistic metaphor in a contextualized learner corpus data, which gathered the argumentative essays written by the Iranian EFL learners in one of the English Language Institutes. Identified metaphors in this naturally-occurring data provided a good basis to find differences in applying metaphors across the assigned levels, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In order to answer the question, Is there any relationship between the amount of learners' incorrect metaphorical use and the amount of their strongly

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affected metaphorical expressions by their first language background?, a learner corpora was designed by the researcher which gathered the argumentative essays written by the selected English-learners. The learners were selected according to the information acquired from the questionnaire and their score in the CEFR criteria-based English Language proficiency test. The answer to this question indicates whether learners are able to use metaphorical expressions presenting their own perspectives with appropriate phraseology or not. The result of this study points to the use of metaphorical inaccurate materials at A2 and B1 levels. In general, the rate of first language-influenced errors and the metaphorical errors indicates the significant role of first language transfer in making such errors in this data.

**Key terms:** Figurative Language, Metaphor, Linguistic metaphor, Conceptual metaphor, Corpus linguistics, Learner corpora

## **Introduction**

In the area of Second/ Foreign Language teaching, still there are many under-researched areas which need to be explored, such as metaphor among figurative languages. Recently, with the development of cognitive science, artificial intelligence and the study of the brain and the mind, the study of metaphor and the application of metaphor mechanisms in language education have attracted more attention of interdisciplinary researchers. Cognitive linguistics regards metaphORIZATION as a natural feature of language, which results from conceptual metaphORIZATION, which is clearly and purposefully displayed in the formation of words, semantic changes of words, collocation of words as well as learning of cultures. Accordingly, this feature of language brings us a great deal of enlightenment in English Language Teaching domain.

In Second/Foreign language learning, emphasis is usually placed on grammatical competence as a formalist orientation or on communicative competence, a functionalist orientation, to improve learners' proficiency in the target Language (Danesi, 1988). After that, metaphorical competency, as Gardner & Winner, 1978; Low, 1988; Littlemore, 2001; Littlemore & Low, 2006 name it, function as a beneficial supplement. Therefore, the new notions of

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metaphorical competency, conceptual fluency (Danesi, 1995) and metaphoric intelligence are now in focus of Language researches.

Among second language researchers, Danesi (1992, 1995) and Johnson & Rosano (1993) are among the first who worked on figurative Language competence. Metaphorical competency is an umbrella term which has been applied to refer to an individual's ability in comprehension and production of metaphor (Danesi, 1993; Littlemore & Low, 2006). The increasing number of researchers in favour of introducing conceptual metaphor theory to second language area, producing Language learning materials, lesson plans and exercises aimed at raising learners' awareness of metaphor in general and the motivations behind particular sets of second language figurative phrases, indicates the prominent place of metaphorical competency studies in second language researches. Moreover some second language researchers interested in conceptual metaphor have examined formulaic expressions, phrasal verbs and idioms. Littlemore (2001) asserts that learners who have a holistic cognitive style have priority in metaphorical processing over those with an analytic cognitive style. It means that teachers should improve learners' analytic skills as well as their holistic cognitive skills. On the role of metaphor in second language productive knowledge of learners, Littlemore and her colleagues (2010) investigated the ways in which metaphor contributes to successful spoken interaction between native and non-native speakers of English. However, they (2012) investigate the development of learners' metaphorical use in their writing across different levels of second language proficiency.

Despite the broad span of research in favour of CS-style approach in L2 area, the CS proponents are generally silent on the challenge of helping learners develop fluency. One reason might be because of insufficient number of studies on this aspect of pedagogy. Even the empirical research about metaphorical competency is comparatively later and weaker. Another reason might be due to the general fact that, according to the complex and multifaceted nature of Language learning, any suggested pedagogical method will apply moderately within a Language curriculum.

To control the multilateral effects of any Language learning method, including CS-informed instruction, the *Four Strand* framework which is proposed by Paul Nation (2001, 2007) is highly beneficial. As claimed by Nation, effective second language learning depends on four types of stimuli, which are in terms of Nation four strands.

The first strand is meaning focused input. It refers to high exposure to intelligible input, the importance of which was recognized by Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis.

The second strand is meaning-focused output. This is relevant to the desirability that learners experience gaps in their second language communicative abilities which they subsequently try to fill. The importance of this strand is accentuated by Swain's (1993) (Pushed) Output Hypothesis.

The third strand is fluency development .This apply to actions that improve the natural retrieval and effortless application of the Language elements the learners have been learning. This strand is highlighted by Dekeyser (2001, 2007).

The last (fourth) strand is Language-focused instruction. It is where teachers or materials writers try to draw learners' attention to specific Language features. In people's mind, this fourth strand is mostly associated with the term "teaching", since it may be proactive, which means that target materials are taught then put into practice (Ellis, et al., 2002). To put in a nutshell, Nation claimed that a balanced Language curriculum should pay attention equally to each of the four strands. It suggests that CS-style approach must apply in combination with other approaches within a relatively confined space of the curriculum. Therefore, according to Kecskes's (2006) conclusion, the persistence of the problem of non-native likeness in the production of second language learners at all levels of education even with a high level of grammatical proficiency do not attribute only to the lack of metaphorical competency and conceptual fluency in the target Language. The lack of pragmatic skills, such as effective factors, he claims, plays a crucial role in the selection and production of learners utterances.

At present, the debates over metaphorical competency approach have not reached to a convincing result about approaches for enrichment of metaphorical competency (MC). Tests for evaluation of learners' MC and many other issues in this regard as well are still under much controversy.

In general, theories of metaphors which found their place in different areas of knowledge by the impressive work of Lakoff & Johnson (1980), address metaphor both linguistically and communicatively and also conceptually and symbolically. Such works have highlighted that metaphor is not just a 'pleasing linguistic ornament' or 'a device of the poetic imagination', but a process of human thought and reasoning. So, figurative Language competence opens up a new field of research in the area of second language studies.

The cognitive developments in the process of studying metaphor proved that metaphor is a highly systematic process and is pervasive in various registers. By the shift toward the study of metaphor in empirical, naturally-occurring discourse data, the common Language used by people in particular, real-world context using empirical corpus data from different types of oral and written discourse has come into focus by the researchers.

This study mainly investigated the cases of linguistic metaphor in a contextualized learner corpus data, which gathered the argumentative essays written by the Iranian English Language learners in one of the English Language Institutes. Identified metaphors in this naturally-occurring data provided a good basis to find differences in applying metaphors across the assigned levels, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The following hypotheses were formulated in this study to highlight this important issue in the area of second language learning from a different perspective:

There will be a close relationship between the learners' incorrect metaphorical use with their strongly affected metaphorical expressions by their first language background.

## **Methodology**

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## Subjects

At first, 300 female English learners from the Iran Language Institute which is located in Arak were selected randomly to participate in this study. Regarding the goal of this research, the age of the participants ranged from 8 to 28 years old. The participants were selected from the pre-intermediate to advanced level of English proficiency. It is expected that the learners at these levels would accommodate the purpose of the study. The crucial factor in the current research was assigning the correct levels of English proficiency of the learners who will perform the allocated writing tasks. But, for minimizing the effects of other factors such as age, gender, social and educational status, the required questionnaire was used to classify the participants of each level as closely as possible in middle class. For achieving this aim, a background questionnaire was distributed among the learners to elicit the above mentioned information. After analyzing the data obtained from this questionnaire, the number of participants was reduced to 220 learners. The selected learners took part in an online placement test according to CEFR standards. Unfortunately the number of the learners who participated in this online test reduced to 180 learners. This may be due to various reasons such as difficulties faced in accessing the Internet and many other problems. After assigning their level of English proficiency in accordance with the criterion of this study, one writing task from 150 learners were collected.

## Materials

The following materials were used in this study:

**1. A Background questionnaire** which elicited demographic information relating to the subjects' socio-educational status.

**2. A General English Proficiency Test** which determined the proficiency level of the participants in English.

**3. The CEFR self-assessment grids for A2-C2 levels** which formed a series of descriptions of language abilities which can be applied to any language and can be used to set clear targets for achievements within language learning. Each of the six levels (A1,A2,...C2)

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contains a series of Can Do Statements that describe the various functions that one expects a language learner perform in reading, writing, listening and speaking, at each level. It has now become accepted as a way of benchmarking language ability all over the world. The Can Do statements for writing ability are provided in appendix IV.

**4. A learner corpora** which was the collection of authentic texts produced by Iranian EFL learners and stored in an electronic format.

**5. A Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU)** involves identifying as metaphor any lexical unit that has the potential to be processed metaphorically.

## **Procedures**

The following procedures had been taken by the researcher to meet the goals of this study:

- 1- Designed the required questionnaire.
- 2- Distributed the questionnaire and implemented the online English language proficiency test.
- 3-Analysed the collected data and grouped learners under different levels of English language proficiency.
- 4-Collected the written essays by these selected learners.
- 5-Prepared an electronic learner corpora based on the information gathered from the stage 4.
- 6-The corpora was divided into lexical units and entered into an Excel spreadsheet, with one lexical unit on each line.
- 7-All potentially metaphorically used lexical units in the corpora identified with the MIPVU Metaphor Identification Procedure (Steen, et al 2010).
- 8-The metaphors were categorized into open and close-class.
- 12-Described the learners' metaphorical use in qualitative terms.
- 13-Finally, the percentage of errors that involved metaphor and also the L1-influenced errors were identified in this real L data.

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## Results and Discussion

Another feature that describes the nature of linguistic metaphors in this learner corpus was the involvement of non-native-like cases in the use of linguistic metaphors. However it must be mentioned that all the misused items identified here are not necessarily caused by conceptual or cognitive transfer, “notably, errors could also result from other causes and thus cannot necessarily serve as proof of conceptual transfer; they may, however, be numbered among its manifestations” (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008, p. 142). Nevertheless the identification of non-native-like instances revealed the most salient difficulties of learners when producing linguistic metaphor consciously or unconsciously. In order to determine the extent of incorrect metaphorical use in these writings, the percentage of metaphors at each level that contained an error of some sort were calculated. Then the researcher analyzed all the errors for first language influence. After that the proportion of errors that contain metaphor and also the proportion of these errors that affected by first language-influence calculated.

Finding of such misused items represent the most salient difficulties faced by learners when producing (consciously or unconsciously) instances of linguistic metaphor. For dealing with the last research question, the percentage of metaphors containing general errors and also the percentage of metaphors containing types of first language-influenced errors were determined by the researcher.

**Table 4.2.9 Metaphors Containing Errors at Each Level**

Level	Total metaphors	Metaphors containing general errors	Metaphors containing L1-influenced errors	Percentages of metaphors containing general errors	Percentages of metaphors containing L1-influenced errors
A2	229	4	3	1.74 %	1.31 %



B1	259	5	4	1.93 %	1.54 %
B2	230	2	1	0.86 %	0.43 %
C1	317	0	0	0	0
C2	545	0	0	0	0

The identified metaphors containing types of first language-influenced errors were represented in the following table.

<b>A2</b>	<b>metaphors containing types of L1-influenced errors</b>
	In modern life air is <u>bad</u> ,
	Computer has a <u>up</u> speed, <u>up</u> accuracy,
	Modern music is a very <u>harsh</u> ,

<b>B1</b>	<b>metaphors containing types of L1-influenced errors</b>
	In past if someone get <u>hard</u> sick,
	<u>On</u> modern/ traditional life
	That can <u>make</u> cure all of illness,
	<u>Resolve</u> a question,

Such investigation provides useful teaching tips for Language instructors in a way that it informs us at which level learners are able to develop their metaphorical competency, at which level they try out new metaphorical expressions and subsequently make more errors, to what extent their metaphorical errors is related to first language-influence and whether their first language-influenced metaphorical errors decrease gradually across level as they get more competency in the target Language metaphorical concepts.

According to the third research question, to see whether the percentage of errors involving metaphor increases across levels, the results indicate no significant increase in metaphors containing both general and first language-influenced errors in the data. Through the

obtained results, it is difficult to determine which level would be an experimental stage for metaphorical use among these learners. In the previous section we observed that the learners at C1 and C2 levels apply open-class metaphors, and as it would be expected naturally, the rate of errors must increase at the levels in which the learners use new metaphorical concepts but in this data, at C1 and C2 levels, no case of metaphorical errors produced by the learners is found.

In relation to first language -influenced errors, it is generally accepted that non-proficient learners greatly depend on their native Language knowledge to express their opinions in the target Language. As they develop their target Language knowledge, it is expected that this reliance decreases gradually. In the area of metaphorical use, Language learners must be aware that to some extent the concepts of the target Language differ from their native Language and also in the ways they are coded according to the structure of target Language. In this data we do not come across any type of metaphorical inaccurate use or the cases of first language-influenced errors at A2 and B1 levels and in upper level. But the lack of such errors in the two upper level (C1, C2) does not prove that these learners are very proficient in applying metaphor, because this analysis was done on a restricted amount of data which certainly does not reveal all of the aspect of the learners' knowledge. It was also noticed that the learners faced difficulties entering into the new domain of metaphorical use. All these demand further investigation and collection of related data in this regard. Such limitations restrict the generalizability of the results.

The overall results may be summarized as follows:

- The frequency of metaphorical use by learner does not increase significantly across the levels.
- No cases of open-class metaphors found until the C1 level and its use does not overtake the use of close-class ones.
- Rate of first language-influenced errors and the metaphorical errors indicate the significant role of first language transfer in making such errors in this data.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

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The last result of this study point to the metaphorical inaccurate us at A2 and B1 levels. The rate of metaphors containing general errors is correlated with the rate of first language-influenced metaphorical errors in these two levels. It might be due to the fact that beginner learners strongly rely on their first language for expressing their views in second language. But lack of such errors in other levels by no means indicate the high ability of learners on these levels in applying metaphorical Language, because the Language data of this study was collected in a very restricted domain both from the view of the variety of essay subjects and genres. This study only tried to get a general view about the Persian EFL learners' metaphorical competence at the Linguistic level. The comparison of the obtained results with similar studies suggested that the performance of these learners on the subject of metaphorical competency was not fine at all and it needs further investigations by the English Language researchers and teachers.

There have been various difficulties and obstacles in the route of second language learning. Numerous factors affect the process of mastery in many aspects of second language learning. This study was an attempt to shed light on the aspect of conventional Language metaphorical ability which was used by these learners. It is hoped that this study offers some help to Language pedagogy for improving metaphoric competency among EFL learners. The identification of the skills involved in second language metaphor production on behalf of the teachers would be very beneficial as it assists them to further expand the metaphorical comprehension and production ability among their learners.

Figurative expressions, including idioms, proverbs and daily expressions in figurative use are ubiquitous; teachers as well as learners cannot avoid dealing with them. Enhancing learners' figurative thinking should be an important part of teaching. It is imperative that teachers design and implement instruction for figurative-language interpretation to increase student comprehension. Furthermore, communication across cultures will be clarified and enhanced as ELLs gain a better understanding of the depth and richness of another language.

There is hope that the findings of this research provided useful recommendations for teachers, text book writers, and syllabus designers to consider these important and subtle changes

in the process of second language development, to adopt their goals and assign the expected performance of English learners in conformity with the goals. The results of such studies would show which level of proficiency is suitable for introducing metaphor. The results would also inform the teachers about the onset of metaphorical use in a specific level, their errors and the time that they will have most difficulty with first language influence, so the teacher must tolerate the learners' errors. Such studies would also help Language teachers to identify the skills involved in second language metaphor production, so they can foster this ability more widely among their learners.

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Maryam Jafari, M.A. student in TEFL  
Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch Arak  
Iran

Vahid Mirzaeean, Ph.D.  
Department of English  
University of Science and Research, Markazi Branch  
Iran